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Taliban force a China switch

By Peter Lee

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Because of its deep strategic and economic relationship with Pakistan, the inviolability of Chinese interests has been largely accepted by all the major political players inside Pakistan and its sphere of influence in western Afghanistan.

However, in a development that Beijing undoubtedly finds very disturbing, China is getting sucked into the security crisis in the Pashtun border areas of Pakistan.

Two Chinese hostages, engineers working on a cell phone project in North-West Frontier Province (NWFP), were captured by the Pakistan Taliban in August 2008. One escaped; the other was released "in a goodwill gesture" by the Taliban after the President Asif Ali Zardari administration acquiesced to the imposition of sharia law in the Swat Valley in February.

It is not inconceivable that Zardari approved the sharia decision - which has appalled just about everybody - so that the Chinese man would be freed and Zardari's second state visit to China in February would not fall under the same hostage cloud that overshadowed his first state visit, in October 2008.

Shoring up Chinese support would be very important to Zardari, given the implementation last week of his long-brewing and risky plan to curb former president Nawaz Sharif and his brother Shahbaz Sharif's political fortunes by the High Court banning them from elected office over a hijacking in 1999. Shahbaz Sharif was the chief minister of Punjab province and after he was forced to step down Islamabad asserting federal control over the Pakistan heartland province (and Sharif stronghold).

China regards security issues in the Muslim lands of Central and South Asia through the lens of its fraught relations with the Uyghur Muslim population of its northwestern province of Xinjiang. Chinese rule over Xinjiang is not popular, there is a Xinjiang independence movement, and Uyghur militants have claimed responsibility for several bloody actions, both in the province and in the Han areas of China.

China is very concerned that Xinjiang separatism enjoys a favorable regional environment thanks to the collapse of political order in Afghanistan and western Pakistan - a collapse that China accelerated by pouring arms, training and some fighters into the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan in the 1980s.

After September 11, 2001, China aggressively played the Islamic terrorism card in stigmatizing the Uyghur self-determination movement and conflating it with the activities of the violently militant East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM). In 2002, the George W Bush administration acceded in listing ETIM as a terrorist organization, thus largely foreclosing to Uyghur activists the international affection and support that has accrued to the Tibetan independence movement.

However, with the retreat of the central government from Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) bordering NWFP and the resurgence of militancy throughout the Pashtun homeland from the opium fields of Helmand in Afghanistan's west all the way to the Swat Valley, 160 kilometers from Pakistan's capital of Islamabad, an enormous haven for Islamic militants is coming into being.

And the local allies, especially Pakistan, that China has traditionally relied on to police Uyghur militants on its behalf, are in danger of being marginalized by a powerful and assertive Taliban movement apparently less willing to defer to China.

Prior to 9/11, elements within the Taliban were eager to deal with China and display the same consideration for Beijing's interests that characterized their Pakistani sponsors. "No troublemaking in Xinjiang" has been the repeated refrain of virtually every Islamist group seeking to curry favor with China.

The People's Liberation Army (PLA) (not the Chinese government) concluded an agreement at the end of 1998, soon after the Taliban took power and while the Chinese were wrestling with blowback inside Xinjiang from the participation of Uyghur fighters in the anti-Soviet jihad. In return for training assistance, the Taliban promised not to "provide any training to Chinese Muslims in China's Xinjiang province and that it will assist the Chinese authorities maintain places of worship and *madrassas* as in China".

In 2000, Stratfor reported: [T]he Afghan ambassador to Pakistan guaranteed a Chinese delegation that no groups would be allowed to operate against China from Afghanistan.

When the Taliban became international pariahs after 9/11, their opportunities for engagement with China diminished. However, on the occasion of one of the bloodier

attacks against foreign interests - the massacre of 11 Chinese workers laboring on a World Bank road project in Afghanistan in 2004 - the traditional deference toward China required of current and hopeful clients of Pakistan and its Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) was on full display.

The Taliban, who had no qualms about claiming responsibility for the brutal concurrent massacre of five Medicien Sans Frontiers staff, quickly disclaimed responsibility and made their pro-Chinese feelings known with alacrity:

The Taliban militia has denied responsibility for the killings ... "We deny the accusation of killing the Chinese workers in Kunduz province of Afghanistan," Abdul Latif Hakimi, who claims to represent the ousted militia, told AFP by telephone from an undisclosed location. Hakimi said the deaths "should not have happened".

The Taliban also worked the phones with the Associated Press, with another spokesman "pointing the finger" at Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the independent insurgent leader who operates in Kunduz, as the most likely author of the massacre. Then the Taliban went the extra mile and organized a demonstration of 3,000 people "to show their support for the Chinese".

The defiantly anti-foreign Hekmatyar, who counts Russia, the United States and Iran as his enemies, also denied responsibility in an interview with Sikh Spectrum:

Question: Are you behind the recent killing of the Chinese?

Hekmatyar: I have no idea about it. The Taliban have split now. The other faction is led by Mullah Soban. It could be his brainchild. I have expelled some miscreants from my party. It could be their handiwork. I really have no idea. [The interviewer also had the praiseworthy temerity to challenge Hekmatyar on his version of events.]

Question: But the Afghan government strongly suspects that you have masterminded it. They have good reasons to believe this. In fact, you have admitted it off-the-record while talking to some journalists.

Hekmatyar: It is not true. I cannot accept the responsibility if some miscreants have masterminded it at the US's behest. I believe it is the handiwork of the Americans. They have used some greedy mujahideen for this inhuman act to defame the true mujahideen. I suspect that the Americans have also masterminded the killing of Chinese in Gwador, Balochistan. The US agenda is to malign jihad and jihadis.

A kidnapping of two Chinese engineers inside Pakistan in the same year by renegade Taliban leader Abdullah Mehsud elicited a storm of criticism.

The constituent parties of Pakistan's Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal six-party Islamist alliance made demands that the hostages be released, and it was made known that the Pakistan Taliban itself suspected that Mehsud - a jihadi who had been detained at Guantanamo for 25 months and then rather mysteriously released - was a US double agent intent on sabotaging Sino-Pakistani relations.

Although one hostage died and one was rescued in a botched rescue by Pakistani special forces, the understanding across the political spectrum that Chinese interests were a

protected class was reconfirmed.

Nevertheless, Taliban and Pakistani relations with China have always been complicated by the presence of a few hundred Uyghur militants who trained and fought with some combination of the Taliban, al-Qaeda and the ISI.

As early as 1992, almost two dozen Uyghurs died in an armed clash near Kashgar in Xinjiang and the Chinese government shut down its road links with Pakistan, including the legendary Karakorum Highway, for several months to stop the destabilizing flow of fighters, drugs, and AIDS.

Before 9/11, a special training camp for Uyghurs was reportedly operated at Tora Bora under al-Qaeda and Taliban auspices near the Pakistan border, and a safe house maintained in the Afghan provincial town of Jalalabad. According to one report, the Chinese claim 1,000 Uyghur militants trained in al-Qaeda camps.

After the US-led invasion of Afghanistan, 22 Uyghurs were captured and delivered to the United States for incarceration at Guantanamo. Although some of the captives may have been innocents snared in the web of bounty hunters (five were released to Albania), most of them did confess to receiving training on firing an AK-47 at the ETIM training camp at Tora Bora, according to a study of the publicly available court documents by Long War Journal.

The Uyghur detainees' advocates exploited the fact that the prosecution was unable to demonstrate unambiguous links between ETIM and al-Qaeda or the Taliban and made the argument that these young men should be released since had never displayed any intention of committing terrorist attacks against the United States, the implication being that they had sought military training solely for the purpose of the independence struggle against the Chinese in Xinjiang.

The Chinese were appalled at the possibility that the legitimacy of the Uyghur struggle might receive explicit or implicit international endorsement, or that independent militants or their sympathizers will find a political haven anywhere.

Beijing has exerted considerable political pressure on the United States not to release 17 of the detainees into the custody of avowedly non-violent pro-independence Uyghur emigres in the Washington, DC area, and was also able to prevail on the Australian government in January 2009 to refuse to take any Guantanamo Uyghur detainees, either.

The Chinese government has always been extremely aggressive in its efforts to ensure that Uyghur militants seeking independence for Xinjiang do not find welcome anywhere, especially in Pakistan.

B Raman reported in the South Asia Analysis Group:

Talking to a group of senior Pakistani newspaper editors after a visit to China in 2003, [President General Pervez] Musharraf was reported to have stated that he was shocked by

the strong language used by the Chinese leaders while talking of the activities of the Uyghur jihadi terrorists from Pakistani territory. However, except for the killing of ETIM head Hahsan Mahsum in FATA in 2003 by Pakistani forces, Chinese efforts to get Pakistan to hand over East Turkestan fighters have been unsuccessful.

In October 2008, on the occasion of Zardari's first official visit to China, the Chinese media pointedly published a detailed bill of the particulars of the eight most-wanted ETIM terrorists, presumably so that the Pakistani government could not excuse continued inaction with any pretended confusion as to who Beijing was after and why.

To be fair, Pakistan's dilatory response to Chinese demands may have reflected recognition that attempts to repatriate Uyghur militants to China for incarceration or worse would probably have provoked the biggest headache for Sino-Pakistan relations: retaliation against Chinese interests and individuals inside Pakistan.

However, in 2007, the issues of Islamic radicalism, Uyghur separatists and Chinese interests collided catastrophically in the matter of the fundamentalist Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) in Islamabad. The mosque, avowedly pro-Taliban and linked to al-Qaeda, was a large and provocative bastion of fundamentalist Islamist power inside Pakistan's capital and committed to the imposition of sharia law.

Lal Masjid's creeping attempts to extend and deepen its reach beyond its walls through Islamic vigilantism elicited the same dilatory response from the Pakistan government that it subsequently displayed in mishandling the growing crisis in FATA and NWFP.

Abduction of Chinese managers and employees of a massage parlor by the female members of a *madrassa* associated with the mosque as punishment for allegedly immoral activities provoked the anger of the Chinese government and prompted a cautious, protracted siege of the mosque by the Pakistani army.

Later, when declaring a state of emergency, Musharraf highlighted the Lal Masjid situation as the primary example of Pakistan's problems with Islamist extremism: Now. We saw the event of Lal Masjid in Islamabad where extremists took law into their own hands ... The Chinese, who are such great friends of ours - they took the Chinese hostage and tortured them. Because of this, I was personally embarrassed. I had to go apologize to the Chinese leaders, "I am ashamed that you are such great friends and this happened to you."

After a round of humiliating kow-towing by Pakistan government officials, the hostages were clad in burkas supplied by the mosque and released, and another successful interaction in the "hands off" China tradition of Pakistani security politics was apparently chalked up.

The mosque's leaders ostentatiously advertised their friendship towards China, as Dawn reported:

We released [the hostages] in view of Pakistan-China friendship and after an assurance by the local administration that all such health clinics and massage centers, where "objectionable activities" are carried out, would be closed in Islamabad," said Maulana Abdul Rashid Ghazi, the deputy chief of Lal Masjid.

Despite this happy ending, the Chinese government was still very disturbed that Uyghurs were associated with the mosque and that they had accused the masseuses of being Chinese agents sent to spy on them to forestall disruption of the Beijing Summer Olympic Games by Xinjiang militants. Subsequently, three Chinese were murdered in an attack on a rickshaw factory in NWFP in apparent retaliation for the ongoing siege.

The Chinese government apparently decided that the escalating violence against Chinese and the disturbing presence of Uyghur separatists had to be dealt with firmly - by Pakistan. Beijing splashed gory pictures of the Peshawar attack across the media and on the websites of Chinese consulates around the world and demanded action from the Musharraf government.

In what is now recognized as a watershed moment symbolizing the rupture between the Pakistani government and the fundamentalist Islam infrastructure it had nurtured, Musharraf ordered an assault on the mosque on July 10 by 15,000 troops personally loyal to him that cost upward of 100 lives (perhaps even 1,000) and the death of several of the mosque's key leaders.

In the wake of the traumatic assault, the Chinese government took the remarkable step of having its ambassador, Luo Zhaohui, deny Chinese involvement in the decision to attack the mosque, something that would be unlikely to convince or mollify the Taliban: "We enjoy very cordial relations with the ruling party here and likewise we maintain friendly ties with other segments of the society, including the political parties of the opposition."

Pakistan's security apparatus, including Hamid Gul, ex-chief of the ISI and the "Godfather of the Taliban", made heroic efforts to plant stories that the outrages against the Chinese had been carried out by double agents inside the Taliban trying to drive a wedge between Islamabad and Beijing on behalf of Washington and/or New Delhi.

However, the abduction of two Chinese telecommunications engineers, Zhang Guo and Long Xiaowei, in NWFP by the Pakistani Taliban on August 29 of last year apparently marked the crossing of a new threshold. The Taliban reportedly demanded the release of 136 hostages and ransom in return for the release of the Chinese.

Prime Minister Syed Yusuf Raza Gilani's exasperated comment in parliament in the aftermath of the seizure of Zhang and Long revealed the traditional conceptions about Chinese immunity from these outrages, as well as exposing the gulf between Pakistani attitudes towards China and the United States: "You are always going on about America being your enemy. So why did you kidnap our Chinese friends?"

However, it appears that China may have lost the privileged status that it previously

enjoyed in Pakistan and Pashtun Afghanistan thanks to its alliance with Pakistan and the good offices of the ISI.

A quote in a study by security expert B Raman provides an interesting contrast between the deferential handkissing by the Taliban and Hekmatyar in the case of the massacred Chinese road workers in 2004 at Kunduz and the casual defiance of the kidnappers of the two Chinese engineers in 2008:

Muslim Khan, who described himself as a spokesman of the TTP [Tehreek-e Taliban Pakistan] in the Swat Valley, claimed that the Chinese engineers were in the custody of the TTP, which would be shortly announcing its demands for their release. Initially he said: "Our aim is to hit the government's interests wherever they are. *We kidnap everyone irrespective of whether he's Pakistani or Chinese* and we'll continue to do this until they stop killing our people." (Emphasis added.)

It also appears that the Taliban were deliberately putting the China factor into play by seizing the hostages.

Shortly after the kidnapping, The News reported:

"*We are getting angry at the lack of interests of the governments of China and Pakistan and will close doors for negotiation, if they do not hold serious talks for solution to the issue,*" a top militant commander told The News. (Emphasis added.)

A few weeks later, The News followed up:

The sources said they had not reached any deal for the Chinese so far, though they had been holding negotiations for the release of the engineer. *The talks were, according to the sources, being held between the central leadership of the TTP and the Chinese authorities.* The sources denied any contact with the government despite the latter's claim to be making hectic efforts to secure the release of Long. (Emphasis added.)

This gives the appearance that the Taliban wished to use the hostages to establish direct contact with Beijing, exploit the vulnerability of Chinese interests in the region to intimidate China, discredit the Zardari government by demonstrating its inability to protect them, and encourage the Chinese to involve themselves in Taliban matters to help pressure Pakistan's civilian government.

Zardari acknowledged as much in an op-ed published under his name in the China Daily on February 23, 2009: "[T]errorists have specifically targeted some of our Chinese friends who were working in Pakistan to drive a wedge between the two countries and peoples."

Aware of the weakness and instability of the Zardari government - and unhappy with its marked pro-US tilt - China appears to be reaching out to other stakeholders in the Taliban mess. A commentary in the People's Daily on February 23 contained a clear statement of China's desire that the threat of Islamic militancy be neutralized through concerted multilateralism instead of by a quixotic US-led military campaign of extermination.

It warned the President Barack Obama administration not to rely solely on a unilateral hard power surge to solve the Afghan problem, and urged the United States to stabilize Pakistan, conciliate Russia, and be realistic in defining acceptable outcomes for Afghanistan.

Chinese President Hu Jintao's recent overseas trip included a high-profile swing into Saudi Arabia, which is working to mediate a deal that would have the Taliban repudiate al-Qaeda and enter the Kabul government.

Closer to home, the Chinese Communist Party hosted a delegation from Pakistan's leading Islamic political party, the Jamaati-i-Islami (JI) in Beijing, Xi'an and Shanghai in February.

China was certainly pleased with JI's unambiguous endorsement of China's Xinjiang policy and the two parties signed a memorandum of understanding and the JI's office advised:

Both parties have agreed upon four principles including independence, equality, and mutual respect and not to interfere in the internal matters of each country ... Both sides assured full support to China's national and geographical unity, and fully backed China's stance on Taiwan, Tibet and Xin Jiang issues.

Back in the NWFP, Qazi Hussain Ahmad, the head of JI, heaped praise on China while skating over the awkward issue of an alliance between an Islamic party and a godless communist state (like the one JI had conducted jihad against in Afghanistan).

Qazi said the JI respected China's independence and geographical authority and that China had to be assured that bilateral friendly relations would not be affected if the JI came to power as the JI could prove to be a more dependable friend since it was not under control of any foreign power.

CBS reported the spin on the meeting:

A senior JI leader speaking from Mansoor, the party's headquarters in Pakistan's Punjab region, told CBS News that the agreement which was signed this month "makes us accept finally and formally that China's internal affairs are not our business". While confirming the JI's agreement with the Chinese Communist Party, one senior Pakistani intelligence official who spoke to CBS News on condition of anonymity said, "This is a major event for Pakistan and for China. It formally ends what I consider a very bad chapter in Pakistan's relations with China."

It is unlikely that the motivation for the agreement, perhaps midwifed by the ISI, was to obtain protection for China's interests in Pakistan and Afghanistan and Xinjiang.

If the Pakistan Taliban are rescinding China's traditional immunity to attack, the JI - whose brief from the ISI excludes the Taliban, and whose modernist Islamicism is far removed from the Taliban's theological obscurantism - is not the go-to party for China.

The significance of the agreement - and the involvement of "one senior intelligence official" - probably indicates that China anticipates a festering crisis in the Taliban-controlled Pashtun areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan and doesn't expect that the Zardari administration will be especially responsive or effective in helping China with its security issues.

Therefore, instead of relying on Pakistan's central government, Beijing is upgrading its direct contacts with the non-Taliban sectors of Pakistan's civilian polity, Islamist political parties, and intelligence apparatus.

It may also mean that China is considering placing a cautious bet with one of the most important non-Taliban Pashtun insurgent commanders in Afghanistan, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.

At the political level, the JI is allied with Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League. The other major Islamic party, the Jamiat-i-Ulama-i-Islam, has joined the Zardari government. If Zardari falls, the JI would be the main Islamic partner in the new ruling coalition.

Beyond this implicit endorsement of the anti-Zardari coalition, China's pact with the JI revives the historic link between China, the ISI, the JI and Hekmatyar.

During the anti-Soviet jihad, Hekmatyar was strongly favored by the ISI and received the lion's share of aid Pakistan funneled to the mujahideen - perhaps US\$600 million worth.

When the flow of secret dollars became a flood and the demand for arms and ammunition became so great that the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) could not satisfy it from the usual clandestine sources, China became Hekmatyar's primary supplier of everything from bullets to AK-47s to mules.

The Soviet-backed government in Kabul estimated that Afghanistan was flooded with \$400 million worth of weapons provided by China. The Chinese government also provided 300 advisors and trainers for the mujahideen in camps run by the ISI on the Pakistan side of the border. Purportedly, 55,000 fighters passed through these camps.

Today, the unpredictable Hekmatyar, who has survived the jihad, the civil war, defeat at the hands of the Taliban, exile in Iraq, an assassination attempt by the CIA, and return to Afghanistan as an insurgent leader, is the great hope of all parties as the only Pashtun strongman untainted by al-Qaeda and possibly capable of taking on the Taliban.

As a result, despite his status as a declared terrorist with a \$25 million price on his head, Hekmatyar has been wooed by the President Hamid Karzai government in Kabul, the Saudis, the Pakistanis, the ISI, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the United Kingdom, the US and, perhaps now, through its JI link, by China.

By appearing to take sides in the Pakistan and Afghanistan mess, China is taking a considerable risk, not just to its reputation as the universal friend of all factions, but to its interests and the lives of its citizens inside Pakistan and Afghanistan.

If China persists in tilting away from the Zardari administration and from the Taliban to a nascent third force in regional security, it will be an indication of how dangerous it believes the current crisis to be.