



SADF COMMENT

Double Standards? Understanding China's Diplomatic Support for Pakistan's Cross-Border Terrorists

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On [December 30, 2016](#), [China once again blocked](#) India's attempt to get the United Nations (UN) to list Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) chief Masood Azhar as a terrorist. The move took place despite clear indications that the Pakistan-based JeM under the leadership of Azhar is responsible for [several attacks](#) on Indian soil, like the [Parliament terror attack](#) (2001) or the [Pathankot airbase attack](#). In this context, it is remarkable that JeM has already been blacklisted by the 15 members of the UN Security Council (UNSC), [but not the terrorist leader himself](#). Due to the persistent 'technical holds' enforced by China, Azhar did not get listed as a designated terrorist under the 1267/1989/2253 ISIL (Da'esh, the militant Islamic State/IS group) and Al Qaida Sanctions Committee' of the UNSC. All individuals and entities listed by this UN Committee are subject to international sanctions. Subsequently, a listening of Mr Azhar as terrorist would pressure Pakistan to impose an [asset freeze and travel ban](#) on him. In this context, it is significant to point out that China was the [only member](#) of the UNSC which blocked India's application, [all others supported New Delhi's bid](#). These persistent extensions of the 'technical

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hold' on India's listening application, flimsily arguing that there are "[different views](#)" in this matter and the extensions "[will allow more time for the committee to deliberate on the matter and for relevant parties to have further consultations](#)", are not merely a "[hidden veto](#)" but show Beijing's clear [support](#) for certain Pakistani based terrorists.

Consequently, many observers are describing this 'diplomatic drive' as a reflection of the [prevalence of double standards](#) in China's fight against terrorism. However, it is doubtless surprising as China has been greatly affected by the threats of terrorism and has [declared opposition to all forms of terrorism](#). As such, Chinese diplomatic protection for Masood Azhar is rising severe questions: Why is Beijing shielding Pakistani-based terrorists?

The Larger Context of China's diplomatic drive for Pakistan

The rationale of China's ongoing diplomatic support for Pakistani based [cross-border terrorists](#) has many facets. Therefore, one must see Beijing's latest 'block' at the UN to name Masood Azhar as terrorist in the larger picture: China has emerged as the principal supporter of Pakistan's longstanding policy of sponsoring militant groups, and has continuously shows it is [willing to use its diplomatic resources](#) to defend that policy at the international level. Against this background, Beijing's protection for Mr Azhar is only one element of a major Chinese strategic campaign to provide Islamabad with diplomatic patronage. This includes (among other things) informal 'lobbying work' to prevent that Pakistan gets listed by individual governments as state-sponsor of terrorism, especially in the US or in Europe. For example, [Pakistan almost faced UN charges](#) under the George H.W. Bush presidency, and in 1993, Clinton's administration put Pakistan on a watch list of state sponsors of terrorism due to the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) open involvement in training Kashmiri terrorists. In order to appease Washington, the army moved some militant training camps out of Pakistan-controlled Kashmir, leading Washington to withdraw its name from the list of state-sponsors of terrorism suspects. Later on, their [dependence on Pakistan's collaboration](#) in the context of the NATO/US engagement in Afghanistan assured that Pakistan did not get re-added to the list, at least for the following two decades. However, last year there were again [serious attempts](#) to declare Pakistan as "[state sponsor of terrorism](#)" by some US lawmakers, attempting (unsuccessfully) to pass a bill called,

[Pakistan State Sponsor of Terrorism Designation Act](#). This would not only have political and economic consequences for Pakistan (f. ex. the EU could reassess the granting of the [GSP-Plus Status](#) that gives special benefits in Trade while the US might question financial, technical and military assistance) but also give a severe blow to China's international image and its claim to be a trustworthy and 'responsible world power'. This is gaining significance, since Pakistan must be seen as a '[quasi-ally](#)' of China. Furthermore, like already indicated above, China tries to undermine all attempts by India to officially name Pakistan a state-sponsor of terrorism in international forums like [BRICS](#) or the [Heart of Asia conference](#). In this context, Beijing is successfully using its improved relationship with Moscow. Subsequently, [Russia increasingly supports China's diplomatic backing of Pakistan](#) on the international stage. In this regard, China is also increasingly involving Pakistan in trilateral and multilateral dialogues (f. ex. [China-Russia-Pakistan talks](#)) regarding regional cooperation and security in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region and Central Asia in order to end Islamabad's isolation. Besides cross-border terrorism, another example of Chinese support for Pakistan's stand vis-à-vis India within international organizations is [China's blocking of India's application](#) to join the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG).

Securing Chinese Interests in Pakistan

Another dimension of China's blocking of naming Azhar a terrorist, is the threat that anti-Indian terror groups like JeM turn against the Pakistani state. This would have dangerous implications for China too, especially for Chinese investments and development initiatives in the South Asian country, first and foremost its projects related to the [China-Pakistan Economic Corridor \(CPEC\)](#). As China is not only Pakistan's 'all-weather-friend', but has also been named a target of global Jihad by international terror groups like al-Qaeda, Islamic State, or the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), allegedly as a reprisal for anti-Muslim (Uighur) policies in its [western Xinjiang province](#). Overall, China is not interested in additional confrontation with militant Islamist groups. Consequently, Beijing is not only supporting but most likely also encouraging Islamabad to act only against elements which are perceived as an immediate threat to Pakistani state interests. In brief, Pakistan and China are trying to appease and not to provoke cross-border

terrorists. Having said this, it also becomes apparent that China is expecting for its [diplomatic support some trade-offs/rewards from Pakistan](#), namely successful measures to undermine any attempt of terrorists operating from Pakistani soil challenging China's internal security, territorial integrity and other national interests, or political support for Beijing's 'One China Policy'.

Reshuffling of International Relations

China's diplomatic support for Azhar must also be seen in the context of an ongoing [shift in international relations](#), which relates to the end of the post-World War II bipolar world order, but also in recent failures and lacking 'problem-solving capabilities' of major multi-lateral regimes. This has caused states to increasingly rely on bilateral relations and China's foreign policy towards Pakistan reflects this current trend. Several instances of this can be identified:

- The redefinition of [China's role in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region](#) from a bystander to a stakeholder;
- Beijing moving from hidden support to openly supporting Pakistan, including the [departure from its 'neutrality'](#) on the 'Kashmir dispute' by officially siding with Islamabad against New Delhi's claim over disputed territory (namely areas which are under Islamabad's control but claimed by India like Pakistan-administered Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan)

Between Cause and Consequence: India-China Rivalry

Finally, there is no doubt that the [India-China rivalry](#) might also be a factor as China chooses to support Pakistan based terrorists. In this context, Beijing's major development projects, like '[One Belt, One Road](#)' to link China with Europe, the Middle East, and via numerous physical infrastructure projects and other connectivity projects (pipelines, communications), makes it clear that China increasingly identifies Afghanistan as part of an area of its [economic, security and geopolitical interest](#). As such, an Indian engagement in the region is perceived as a disrupting factor in securing its own and Pakistan's interests.

India's rationale

New Delhi wants the international community to designate Pakistan as a state-sponsor of terrorism in general and recognise its involvement in the support of several terrorist activities on its soil in particular. This would not only help to create awareness of the problem of [cross-border terrorism](#) and Pakistan's role in it, but also it would help ending the 'impunity' regarding its respective sponsorship. In this context, New Delhi would most likely expect international sanctions and other forms of pressure. Furthermore, branding Pakistan as state-sponsor of terrorism would help to justify Indian military action against terrorists on Pakistan soil, and/or in areas under Pakistani administration. In other words, it would legitimate cross-border military action and the use of force. Besides this, it would also create a certain sense of justice among the victims of Pakistani's based terrorists in India.

India and China: No common ground in counter-terrorism

By observing the origin and development of terrorism in China and India, it is astonishing that - despite the fact that both countries face foreign supported Islamist militancy - New Delhi and Beijing are unable or unwilling to develop a comprehensive joint-anti terror policy. Traditionally, due to its policies of non-interference, China is following its [own, unilateral way in counter-terrorism](#). However, in early 2016, Beijing enacted a [new anti-terror law](#) which empowers Chinese security forces to take part in counter-terrorism activities abroad. This might finally promote a more cooperative, international approach to counter-terrorism among Beijing's security circles. In this context, first steps are initiated with Pakistan, Russia and Central Asian nations towards closer security and anti-terror collaboration. However, we should expect cooperation with India to counter Islamist terrorism will remain limited in the near future. The main reason for this is the increasing potential [confrontation between Beijing and Washington](#) on one side and [growing India-US ties](#) on the other side. Here, the recent anti-US stand of [Philippines President Duterte](#) and call to align with China, or the China-US diplomatic row in the aftermath of a [phone call](#) of Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen with US-President Elect Trump, are not only pointing to an ongoing tectonic shifts in Asia's great power relations but also at an increased polarisation and formation of new hostile 'camps' within the extended

region. With this in mind, it appears unlikely that Chinese counter-terrorist concepts would include the US or India in the near future. In contrast, all recent Chinese initiatives in counter-terrorism, especially in Afghanistan and Central Asia, are appearing [to sideline the US](#) (including NATO member states, besides Turkey). Beijing increasingly perceives the US as a geopolitical rival, it seems that it prefers not to cooperate with New Delhi, and in some cases even acts against Indian interests in counter-terrorism. Other than the limited economic cooperation, infrastructure connectivity, and the current mutual distrust between China and Russia, in 2016 it has become obvious that Moscow and Beijing are willing to deepen cooperation, which would also include Central Asia and to a certain degree Iran and Turkey. Currently it looks like China is trying to build a new parallel [security system in Asia](#) (alongside the Asian part of OBOR), which will differ significantly from the formal alliance of NATO, rather it will be a “quasi-alliance” system, mainly based on bilateral or trilateral arrangements. Such a new defence and security arrangement could have similar features like the decade-old US security system in the Asia-Pacific region. However, for obvious reason it will not help to work towards more Sino-Indian security cooperation.

Final Thoughts

In sum, one should address the puzzle of whether Beijing’s diplomatic support for Pakistan-based jihadists functions as a catalyst for cross-border terrorism. While China is not directly encouraging Pakistan to continue their sponsorship of cross-border terrorism, it also supports Pakistan’s policy to fight against militants that target its interests, especially groups perceived as a threat for Chinese investments and CPEC. This will also include, at least the endorsement of Pakistan policy not ‘to touch’ cross-border militant groups. Furthermore, Beijing will most likely not intervene in Pakistan’s sponsorship of terrorists operating in Afghanistan and India. Any measures against such groups or the withdrawal of support will be perceived as hostile act by these jihadists. In this context, it is remarkable that the latest trilateral cooperation initiatives of Russia, China, and Pakistan on how to bring stability and peace to Afghanistan [identifying IS](#) as the major threat and not the pro-Pakistan Taliban and other militant groups like the Haqqani Network.