

## Al-Qaeda and the Rise of China: Jihadi Geopolitics in a Post-Hegemonic World

P rognosticating about China's economic, political, and military rise has become a favorite conversation for Western politicians and policy wonks. But Western observers are not the only strategists debating the impact of increased Chinese power. A parallel conversation has been taking place among al-Qaeda affiliated jihadi thinkers for much of the last decade. That discussion ranges from debate about how best to support rebellion among Muslim Uyghurs in China's Xinjiang province to more abstract disagreements over how a transnational militant network such as al-Qaeda should adapt when a traditional state upends the U.S.-led system that has been its primary boogeyman for nearly 15 years.

Although the Uyghur question tends to receive more attention, it is the latter issue that will be more important for both jihadi groups and China over the long run. China's growing economy and subsequent search for resources will increasingly tie it to regimes that al-Qaeda and its allies believe to be fundamentally corrupt, a fact that leaves jihadis conflicted about how to direct their energy today and questioning who will be their enemy tomorrow. Some jihadis enjoy the fact that the United States faces increased economic and political competition from China, but others argue that replacing the denomination of currency from dollars to yuan propping up hated Arab governments will not advance al-Qaeda's ultimate political and ideological goals. In the wake of Osama bin Laden's death, his successors are likely to reassess the global geopolitical picture and al-Qaeda's role in it. China will undoubtedly

---

Brian Fishman is a Counterterrorism Research Fellow at the New America Foundation and Research Fellow at the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point. He may be reached at [Fishman@newamerica.net](mailto:Fishman@newamerica.net).

---

Copyright © 2011 Center for Strategic and International Studies

*The Washington Quarterly* • 34:3 pp. 47–62

DOI: 10.1080/0163660X.2011.588091

**Al-Qaeda affiliated jihadi thinkers have been discussing China's rise for much of the last decade.**

---

play a larger role in that conversation than it did when al-Qaeda was founded in 1988 or when the group focused its energy squarely on the United States in 1998. Indeed, al-Qaeda and its adherents will likely shift some of their focus away from the United States as the geopolitical playing field levels, but those jihadis are more likely to focus on attacking local regimes before embracing the Sino-centric analysis of the jihadi movement's most farsighted strategic analysts.

As al-Qaeda wrestles with an old-fashioned shift in the global distribution of state power, China must determine how to evolve its traditional foreign policy memes in response to the transnational problems posed by al-Qaeda and its allies. China's traditional policy of non-intervention in the internal affairs of other countries has served it reasonably well for 60 years and continues to create certain advantages in negotiations with less-than-humanitarian regimes in the Middle East and Africa. But sub-national and transnational threats will challenge the doctrine of non-interventionism, which is grounded in a decidedly Westphalian understanding of the world. China has already grown somewhat more forward-leaning in dealing with some transnational threats, including pirates off of East Africa, but jihadi groups represent a challenge that is both broader and potentially more disruptive. To date, China has responded to a potential threat from al-Qaeda by minimizing rhetorical confrontation and hoping that al-Qaeda's operators remain focused elsewhere. But 10 years after 9/11, global jihadis such as al-Qaeda view China's economic and political support for "apostate" regimes a terrible offense. That, coupled with the increasing prominence of the Uyghurs in jihadi propaganda, suggests China will not be able to avoid al-Qaeda forever.

### **Jihadi Strategic Thinking about China**

---

Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda have been singularly focused on attacking the United States as a way to produce revolution in the Middle East since 1998, and paid relatively little attention to China during the period of Taliban rule in Afghanistan. That is not to say that China did not have a problem with militants during that period. Like Islamic revolutionaries around the globe, Uyghur groups committed to revolution in China's Xinjiang province established camps alongside al-Qaeda in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. But despite their freedom to train in Afghanistan, the Taliban banned fighters from the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) from attacking China from their territory.

The Taliban's prohibition on attacking China reflected its inherent caution about attacks on great powers (a prudence that extended to the United States) but also reflected its broader geopolitical analysis of China's role in the international system. In his opus, *The Call to Global Islamic Resistance*, the prominent jihadi strategist Abu Mus'ab al-Suri explained Taliban policy toward ETIM and China during the 1990s:

**C**hina's growing economy will increasingly tie it to regimes that al-Qaeda believes are corrupt.

The jihadists of Eastern Turkistan went back to their homeland and recruited mujahidin who were brought back to Afghanistan and trained in military tactics, which were to be used against the Chinese government... This group recognized Mullah Omar as the official imam. Facing strong American pressure, the Taliban ordered the East Turkistan group to cease their attacks against China. The Taliban wanted friendly relations with China as a way to counter the American threat.<sup>1</sup>

Although the Taliban ordered Osama bin Laden not to attack the United States, they did accept his assessment that the United States was a central threat to the Taliban regime and, according to al-Suri, established a foreign policy that responded to that threat. Bin Laden ultimately ignored Mullah Omar's admonition not to attack the United States, but he followed the Taliban's China policy closely.<sup>2</sup> Bin Laden even referred to China publicly to bolster his case that the United States was an illegitimate and aggressive hegemon, accusing the United States of preventing Beijing's rise to global prominence rather than offering support to the largely-Muslim Uyghurs. In 1997, after a series of bombings in Beijing that most ascribed to Uyghur separatists, bin Laden blamed the CIA, saying, "The United States wants to incite conflict between China and the Muslims. The Muslims of Xinjiang are being blamed for the bomb blasts in Beijing. But I think these explosions were sponsored by the American CIA. If Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran and China get united, the United States and India will become ineffective."<sup>3</sup>

Bin Laden was so intent on ascribing evil to the United States that he disregarded information about a Uyghur rebellion and explained that China was really a natural enemy of the United States:

I often hear about Chinese Muslims, but since we have no direct connection with people in China and no member of our organization comes from China, I don't have any detailed knowledge about them. The Chinese government is not fully aware of the intentions of the United States and Israel. These two countries also want to usurp the resources of China... So I suggest the Chinese government be more careful of the U.S. and the West.<sup>4</sup>

**T**ransnational threats will challenge the Chinese doctrine of non-intervention in others' internal affairs.

Perhaps to the frustration of Uyghur activists at the time, the Taliban and al-Qaeda both sought to avoid conflict with China, a point that the ETIM amir, Hassan Mahsum, made in a 2002 interview with *Radio Free Asia*.<sup>5</sup> True or not, according to Mahsum, ETIM had “absolutely no relationship with Usama Bin Ladin, and we have never received any help from him. All our activities are entirely directed at liberating

East Turkistan territory from Chinese invaders, to drive the Chinese invaders out of that land.”<sup>6</sup>

Although circumstances have changed tremendously, the strategic questions facing the Taliban and al-Qaeda regarding China in the late 1990s presaged contemporary jihadi disagreements over how to deal with China. Whereas some jihadis today view growing Chinese political and economic strength as an opportunity to weaken the United States, others view it as another infidel power that will persecute Muslims by using economic support to prop up regimes that jihadis aim to destroy.

Even after 9/11, al-Suri debated with himself about the appropriate jihadi policy toward China. He dabbled with the idea that China could be attracted as an ally in a war focused on the United States, but concluded that was only possible if jihadi movements could achieve a degree of international legitimacy and “escape this terrorist accusation.”<sup>7</sup> Al-Suri recognized that geopolitical tension was likely to grow between the United States and China, but worried that if the jihadis were to “overcome America” then “in all likelihood [China] will conspire against us at the appropriate time and circumstances.”<sup>8</sup>

Some jihadis have since disagreed with al-Suri’s conclusion that China was likely to be an enemy over the long run. Hamid al-Ali, a prominent Kuwaiti activist and religious adviser well known among jihadis around the globe, has argued that competition between the United States and China for allies and resources creates opportunities for jihadis to reduce U.S. global influence, which he said was the heart of the al-Qaeda project. In a series of essays written from late 2007 through 2008, al-Ali developed the idea that patterns of global power were shifting and brought a “return to the Cold War” that jihadis should aim to exploit.<sup>9</sup> In the post-9/11 world, al-Ali argued, the United States had been weakened because its economy and military had been over-extended, while China, Iran, and Russia were strengthened as a result.<sup>10</sup>

With the important exception of increased Iranian power, which he disavowed because of the Iranian regime’s Shia theology, al-Ali deemed these developments positive and argued that Arab regimes in particular were missing

an opportunity “to get rid of the slavery to American imperialism.”<sup>11</sup> Echoing a host of Western analysts, al-Ali interpreted China’s increased political and economic prominence in Africa as a major setback for U.S. goals in the region because it offered governments the ability to ignore U.S. demands about governance. Increasing Arab relations with China, he argued, would produce a similar result, “with the biggest loser being the Zionists.”<sup>12</sup>

Putting aside al-Ali’s ignorance of the relatively constructive relations between Israel and China, his argument is important because of the way he conceptualized jihadi victory over the United States.<sup>13</sup> Maintaining bin Laden’s focus on the United States as puppet master for corrupt regimes in the Middle East, al-Ali imagines victory over the United States resulting from geopolitical power shifts, not just jihadi war. It would be a win for al-Qaeda, he argued, to facilitate global power shifts headlined by China so that the U.S. relationship with Arab governments in the Middle East is less cooperative. Implicit in al-Ali’s argument is the idea that at least some Arab regimes are salvageable, and that certain sources of external support for such regimes are not objectionable. For him, the jihadis’ real problem is the United States.

Al-Ali’s analysis is striking because it is so traditional. This global jihadi, a champion of Internet communications who seems the very embodiment of a 21st-century transnational threat, sees opportunity in decidedly 20th- (or even 19th-) century geopolitical analysis. What’s good for China is bad for the United States. And what is bad for the United States is good for jihadis.

Other jihadis argue that such an approach reflects too narrow a focus on the United States as the root of global infidelity. Akram Hijazi, a Jordanian professor who has become a major intellectual figure for jihadi strategists, wrote a three-part assessment of China in mid-2007 that concluded China may replace the United States as the world’s dominant economic and military force, but that in the process of doing so, it will simply take the place of the United States as the “head of the snake.”<sup>14</sup>

Hijazi argued that the United States is indeed in decline as a result of increasing Chinese economic competition (an assertion he backed with an impressive array of statistics) but fretted that an ascendant China would not actually improve the position of jihadi groups. In May 2010, citing agreements between China and Israel as well as China’s suppression of Uyghur riots, he concluded that such concerns were justified, and went on to mourn a weak Arab response to China’s crackdown on the Uyghurs. Using sarcasm to echo the

**Some argue what is bad for the U.S. is good for jihadis; others think that’s too narrow a focus on the U.S.**

typical jihadi critique of Arab governments responding to perceived offensives from the United States, Hijazi lamented that:

[China] committed no wrong against Muslims except for being a brutal and colonizing power. . . . It has committed no wrong against humanity except for being a deceiving country. . . . [that] drained the resources of the weak countries. As for the real culprits, it is us, Arabs and Muslims who no more have dignity and honor. It is us who bet on miserable ideological stances through which we forget ourselves for decades and decades.<sup>15</sup>

Not surprisingly, Hijazi's arguments have been collected and redistributed by jihadi propagandists highlighting the Uyghur cause. Since 2008, a new and decidedly more jihadi brand of Uyghur activism has begun to draw on global jihadi networks to publicize its cause, and in doing so may increase the likelihood of conflict between jihadi groups and China. The ETIM went quiet in 2003 after Mahsum, its amir, was killed by Pakistani forces. But in early 2008, a new group calling itself the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) announced itself as ETIM's successor and began distributing propaganda that was increasingly religious, produced in Arabic and distributed on Arabic-language jihadi forums.<sup>16</sup> The TIP made a series of threats to the Beijing Olympics, and in July 2008 released a video claiming responsibility for bus bombings in Shanghai and China's Yunnan Province.<sup>17</sup> Six months later, the TIP's propaganda began to be released through the al-Fajr Media Center, a clearinghouse for jihadi media that distributes propaganda for al-Qaeda central and several affiliates.<sup>18</sup>

But the Uyghur cause did not hit the jihadi mainstream until July 2009 when the Chinese government violently suppressed riots in Xinjiang between Uyghurs and Han Chinese. In the wake of those clashes, the amir of the TIP, Abd-al-Haqq Turkistani, called for violence not just inside China but against Chinese interests around the globe. Speaking in Uyghur, but accompanied by an Arabic transcript, Turkistani said, "The Chinese must be targeted inside and outside the country. Their embassies, consulates, headquarters and gatherings must be targeted, and their men and families must be killed to redeem our brothers who are detained in East Turkistan. All these acts are a support to our brothers in East Turkistan."<sup>19</sup>

At least some of Turkistani's audience was eager to hear his message. Two weeks beforehand, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) threatened to respond to the violence in Xinjiang by attacking Chinese interests in Algeria.<sup>20</sup> In classic al-Qaeda fashion, China's local insurrection was being linked to global events and used to promote violent activism around the world. In October 2009, the senior jihadi ideologue Abu Yahya al-Libi urged solidarity with the Uyghurs and compared China's policy in Xinjiang to Israeli policy in the West Bank, but notably stopped short of calling for violence against Chinese interests globally.<sup>21</sup> He also refrained from explicitly supporting the TIP as an organization.<sup>22</sup>

Even as Arab elements of al-Qaeda have increased their focus on militancy in Xinjiang, a group reportedly tied to the TIP has dabbled in operations outside of China and expanded its list of targets beyond Chinese infrastructure. In July 2010, three men linked to the TIP were arrested in Norway and accused of plotting to attack the Chinese embassy there as well as offices of the *Jyllands Posten* newspaper, which in 2005 had published cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad.<sup>23</sup> If those accusations are accurate, the plot reflects a synthesis of jihadi global ideological concepts and more traditional insurrection against China.<sup>24</sup> For all the debate among jihadis about whether the rise of China is good or bad, the trend line of jihadi thinking is clear: it leads toward confrontation with the Chinese state.

**The trend line of jihadi thinking is clear: it leads toward confrontation with the Chinese state.**

### **Chinese Strategy toward Global Jihadis**

Chinese security policy was not upended like the United States' on 9/11, but it has evolved as a result of both non-state militants and the behavioral shifts they have prompted from the United States and other Western powers. Although the most important impact of 9/11 for Chinese security policy was to bring U.S. troops into Central Asia in large numbers, the global focus on al-Qaeda offered China the opportunity to justify its suppression of Uyghur political and separatist movements in Xinjiang.<sup>25</sup>

China's initial strategy was, rather predictably, to focus on acquiring international support for its efforts to maintain domestic stability, which it did by accepting U.S. intervention in Afghanistan (which shares a very short border with China) while linking Uyghur separatists to al-Qaeda in order to pressure the United States to label such groups as terrorist organizations. The United States ultimately labeled ETIM a terrorist organization, but did not designate other groups as such.

But Beijing's calculation to link its domestic security challenges to the global jihadi threat has grown far more complex in the decade since 9/11. China's economic interests have grown exponentially around the world, including with regimes that jihadis aim to overthrow, and at least some Uyghurs have embraced the linkage to jihadi groups. Those shifts have, for the first time, raised the possibility that ideologically-motivated jihadis far from China will be compelled to attack Chinese interests in much the same way that they have the United States. In response, China has begun to revert to its pre-9/11 tendency of

downplaying the threat from Uyghur groups such as the jihadi-linked TIP and generally framing such groups as an internal problem disconnected from al-Qaeda.

Modern Uyghur rebellion against Chinese rule in Xinjiang goes back to at least 1962, when tens of thousands of Uyghurs fled Xinjiang for the Soviet Kazakh Republic.<sup>26</sup> As the Sino–Soviet split deepened, some of these émigrés even appealed to Moscow for assistance, which responded by supporting the exiles and sponsoring Uyghur-language propaganda in Central Asia.<sup>27</sup> But China successfully countered the internationalization of its domestic security problem. The Soviets ultimately did little to support Uyghur nationalism (likely because of concerns it could spur separatism in their own Central Asian territories) despite appeals from Uyghur groups as late as 1990.<sup>28</sup> The fact that Uyghur groups appealed to the Soviet Union illustrates how far outside the jihadi mainstream Uyghur groups were in 1990—appealing for help from the failing superpower that had just been defeated in Afghanistan by local mujahideen and a global coalition of Muslim fighters drawn by the religious imperative of resisting an infidel invader.

Following the Soviet collapse, China’s burgeoning political and economic power was a compelling reason for the new Central Asian states to avoid supporting the Uyghur groups. When the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) was formed in 1996 (the original members were China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan; Uzbekistan became a member in 2001), the Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Kazakhs all increased pressure on Uyghur organizations to reduce separatist activism.<sup>29</sup> China’s appeal to these and other states, including those in the Middle East and Africa, has been to dramatically increase economic ties and to remove the domestic political issues of either state from discussion.

Jihadi thinkers like Akram Hijazi complain that Arab and Muslim states have not supported Muslim Uyghur separatists, and indeed, China has rarely demonstrated concern that foreign Islamic militants would support Uyghur separatists. Like the United States, China gave aid and weapons to Afghan mujahideen fighting Soviet forces in Afghanistan during the 1980s, and it built strong ties with Pakistan even as the Pakistani state supported the Taliban’s rise in Kabul during the mid-1990s.<sup>30</sup> China’s support for Pakistan and Pakistan’s support for the Taliban paid some dividends for Beijing—China became the first non-Islamic country to gain an ambassadorial meeting with Mullah Omar in 2000.<sup>31</sup> Like the authorities in other Central Asian states, Mullah Omar assured the ambassador that he had no desire to interfere in Chinese affairs and would not allow “any group to use its territory to conduct any such operations.”<sup>32</sup>

China, which was never close to the Taliban regime, distanced itself further after 9/11, falling back on the idea of non-intervention in the affairs of other countries, explaining that it would “never interfere in Afghanistan’s internal



affairs.”<sup>33</sup> But shortly thereafter, China began to reframe its internal struggle with Uyghur groups for a global audience newly energized to confront terrorist groups. During the 1990s, Chinese official media referred to Uyghur nationalist movements as “splittists” (*fenliezhuyizhe*), but in the years following 9/11 increasingly referred to them as “terrorists” (*kongbufenzi*).<sup>34</sup> The shift in terminology was codified in a January 2002 white paper “opposing the application of double standards concerning the anti-terrorism issue” and calling for an international crackdown on Uyghur groups as part of the broader war on terrorism.<sup>35</sup> In contrast to earlier Chinese efforts to downplay Uyghur violence in Xinjiang, the document included a long list of supposed terrorist attacks and argued that ETIM had been directly trained by bin Laden’s forces in Afghanistan.<sup>36</sup>

The precise extent of links between al-Qaeda and ETIM prior to 9/11 remains unclear, but the shift in China’s framing of the Uyghur issue following 9/11 is not. And from China’s perspective, the shift in tone helped garner international acquiescence for its efforts to suppress Uyghur separatism. On August 19, 2002, the U.S. State Department designated ETIM as an official terrorist organization and subsequently petitioned the United Nations to add the group to its list of terrorist organizations, which it did on September 11, 2002.<sup>37</sup> Although China did not get everything that it wanted from these designations (Uyghur groups that had not had a presence in Afghanistan under the Taliban regime were not listed), the U.S. and UN actions offered public validation of Chinese policy.<sup>38</sup>

International designation of ETIM as a terrorist organization has not meant that all Uyghurs in Afghanistan have been treated as jihadi-linked militants. A number of Uyghur activists in Afghanistan captured and imprisoned in Guantanamo were found to have little relation to al-Qaeda. Some of those activists have nonetheless found themselves in political and legal limbo.<sup>39</sup> The United States has slowly released Uyghur detainees to third countries rather than repatriate them to China, which has prompted China to accuse the United States of maintaining a double-standard regarding terrorism.<sup>40</sup>

But if China has not been able to compel the United States to turn over Uyghur activists, it has generally succeeded at deflecting global attention from crackdowns on Uyghur groups in China itself. As noted by Akram Hijazi, even Arab and Muslim states have generally sidestepped the issue, even as it grew more prominent in 2009 when the major riots in Xinjiang between Uyghurs and Han Chinese provoked a widespread security crackdown. The explanation seems to be the growing Chinese economic relationships with a wide range of countries, but especially those in the Mideast and Africa. Trade between China and the Arab world leaped from \$36.4 billion in 2004 to \$107.4 billion in 2010,<sup>41</sup> while Chinese trade with African countries erupted over the last decade, rising tenfold to more than \$100 billion in 2010.<sup>42</sup>

The silence from Muslim governments is grounded in growing economic relations but it is also bolstered by China's policy of non-intervention in the internal affairs of its trading partners.<sup>43</sup> Indeed the policy of non-intervention that was praised by jihadi thinker Hamid al-Ali has meant that Muslim governments are less disposed to confront China on its internal challenges.<sup>44</sup> China remains relatively popular among Arab populations, not just its governing elite. A 2010 poll found that China (16 percent) is second only to France (35 percent) among Arabs when asked which country they would prefer to be the world's only superpower. When asked which two countries posed the biggest threat to them, only three percent answered China compared to 77 percent that mentioned the United States (Israel ranked highest with 88 percent).<sup>45</sup>

But if China came through the 2009 riots relatively unscathed diplomatically (the only strong protest to Chinese action in the Muslim world came from Turkey, which shares historical and linguistic ties with the Uyghurs), the incident illustrated the limitations and risks to China of a policy linking the internal Uyghur threat to global militant movements.<sup>46</sup> Linking Uyghur activism to al-Qaeda or similar movements implicitly draws attention to these groups' commonalities and might highlight aspects of the Uyghur rebellion that could garner wider sympathy among populations in the Middle East and Africa.

The further challenge for China is that linking Uyghur activism to global jihadis risks globalizing the Uyghur separatist movement into a cause célèbre for jihadi supporters everywhere. As China's international economic interests grow, the danger posed by jihadi activism to critical Chinese economic infrastructure outside its borders has grown substantially. The acquisition of raw materials from abroad is now a critical element of China's economic strategy, which in turn is fundamental to domestic stability. Even considering the intensity of Uyghur-Han rioting in Xinjiang in 2009, such upheavals are occurring on China's periphery and are controllable by China's increasingly competent domestic security forces.

China's economic growth is not just critical for its existing regime. China is increasingly a critical economic partner for governments around the world, including many that jihadi groups linked to al-Qaeda consider worthy of overthrowing. For example, in response to international pressure to decrease imports from Iran, China has steadily increased oil imports from Saudi Arabia.<sup>47</sup> In 2009, China imported nearly as much oil from Saudi Arabia as the United States did (839,000 barrels/day to 980,000 barrels/day) and relied on Saudi Arabia for a much larger percentage of its overall imports (20.5 percent compared to 8.5 percent).<sup>48</sup> Such numbers may be somewhat anomalous as a result of China's short-term efforts to apply pressure on Iran by resourcing oil imports, but they nonetheless illustrate a shift in global demand that will

increasingly make China a key economic powerhouse providing economic support to regimes that are the ultimate target of al-Qaeda's ire.<sup>49</sup>

That al-Qaeda aims to target Western economic interests as a means of severing Arab and Muslim regimes from their foreign suitors is well-known, but the strategy begs the question of whether that energy will be redirected toward Chinese interests as it becomes an increasingly important market for Middle Eastern governments. AQIM's threat to attack Chinese workers in Algeria, where China has important energy interests, suggests that it will at some point.<sup>50</sup>

Such threats are not likely to substantially change China's approach to domestic, "separatist, terrorist, or extremist" groups, but they may impact China's diplomatic and rhetorical approach. With the exception of specific forums where raising the specter of terrorism remains useful, such as the United Nations or in bilateral talks with the United States, China is less likely to link its domestic challenges in Xinjiang with jihadist groups like al-Qaeda. Such connections proved useful in the wake of 9/11, but international approval or disapproval has not appreciably changed China's ability or willingness to use force in Xinjiang. Linking China's confrontation with the Uyghurs to jihadis does have a definite downside however, drawing jihadi attention to the issue which increasingly carries the potential to threaten China's ever more far-flung economic empire.

Of course, not all of that empire is so far-flung. China has invested seriously in Pakistan and cultivated the state as an ally against the more pressing geopolitical threat of India.<sup>51</sup> It has also invested substantially in Afghanistan's mineral deposits, including a \$3.2 billion investment in the Aynak copper mine. Such commitments inevitably invest China in the stability of both countries, though China may be heartened by its long and deep relations with the Pakistani military and intelligence establishment, which still has important influence over militant groups in the region.<sup>52</sup> Nonetheless, al-Qaeda and other militants in the region have grown increasingly opposed to the Pakistani state, and they may perceive Chinese support for it as illegitimate and worthy of disrupting. That has had repercussions for Chinese interests in Pakistan, including the kidnapping of Chinese engineers in the country and attacks on Chinese masseuses prior to the 2007 Red Mosque incident.<sup>53</sup> Like the rest of the world, China must come to terms with a Pakistan that cannot control the militants it helped create.

**M**ilitants may perceive Chinese support for the Pakistani state as illegitimate and worthy of disrupting.

## Geostrategic Implications

---

The evolving relationship between jihadis and China has implications for the United States. Since 1998, al-Qaeda has justified its existence on the grounds of a particular geopolitical circumstance: one in which U.S. economic and military power has been supreme globally and has provided critical backing for Arab regimes. Those conditions have now changed and, like other actors evolving to deal with new geopolitical realities, al-Qaeda will as well. China's increased economic, military, and political power will create tension with the United States in many areas, but it also will create opportunities for cooperation.

It will not be easy, however, for the United States to utilize these developments to generate greater cooperation with the Chinese. The threat from jihadi groups to China—no matter their intentions—is simply not large enough to dramatically change Beijing's outlook in the short run, and China knows that it can continue to rely on U.S. efforts to suppress al-Qaeda's most virulent elements and secure the global commons. Indeed, China is likely to be most aggressive supporting security forces and bolstering stability where the United States has the least presence—in Africa and parts of the Middle East. China will accept the costs of global leadership only when the United States will not.

Al-Qaeda, meanwhile, has a minimal ability to attack China directly and it is unlikely to redirect substantial resources to support jihadi-leaning Uyghur factions in the near term. Al-Qaeda has long willingly ignored the Uyghur separatist movement in China, and it is hard to escape the conclusion that is in part a response to a core geopolitical analysis and unwillingness to anger both the United States and China simultaneously. It is no wonder that jihadis have championed the Uyghur cause more loudly as the relationship between al-Qaeda and former Taliban rulers in Kabul has frayed.

Certainly, coordinated U.S. and Chinese pressure on the Pakistani intelligence establishment could make al-Qaeda and its allies more insecure. More likely are attacks against Chinese economic and diplomatic targets farther afield in areas where Chinese economic and political support is particularly important for the local regime, especially in North Africa where Chinese infrastructure is increasingly prominent. Jihadi-supported attacks on Chinese interests in Southeast Asia are possible as well, and could be designed to exploit existing ethnic tension involving ethnic Chinese populations on the Malay Peninsula or in Indonesia. Jihadi pressure on Chinese interests in Pakistan is also possible, but most likely from relatively marginalized groups trying to differentiate themselves and provoke interest from the Pakistani state, which values its relationship with China highly.

In spite of the arguments of Hamid al-Ali and others that Chinese investment is less onerous than U.S. engagement with Arab or Muslim governments, jihadis

are likely to view China as an enemy in the coming years. Al-Qaeda will quietly cheer competition between the United States and China, and is unlikely to redirect resources to attack China in the short run, but it also is unlikely to embrace Chinese influence in the Muslim world if Beijing tacitly supports existing governments. Nonetheless, al-Qaeda's ideological dogmatism has taken on a life of its own—and much of that vitriol is framed around opposition to the United States specifically. Even if intellectual leaders of the al-Qaeda movement shift their geostrategic analysis, the more visceral ideas motivating operational cells are likely to change more slowly.

Al-Qaeda after Osama bin Laden is likely to lose some of its global perspective and refocus on targeting local regimes for jihadi revolution. Although bin Laden was uniquely obsessed with the United States, his successors are more likely to focus their energy on vulnerable local regimes rather than the “next” superpower. Bin Laden, after all, has been the symbol of jihadi unity since 9/11, but that coalition is an inherently fractious one. In the near term, a confrontation with China is more likely to stem from jihadi activism in a state where China has built and utilizes critical infrastructure than from a concerted global strategy to identify and target Chinese interests specifically.

Finally for Beijing, al-Qaeda's reaction is but one factor that may force China to reconsider its longstanding policy of non-interference in the affairs of other states. To jihadi enemies of various Arab and Muslim autocracies, economic investment and political support for a leading clique constitutes meddling and may provoke a violent backlash. Although non-intervention is cited by some jihadis as a reason why China would be a better partner for various governments than the United States, the larger lesson of al-Qaeda's global prominence is that strategic concepts based on the immutability of nation-states and unchallenged authority of governments are increasingly suspect. Even if the Uyghur issue does not bring China into conflict with jihadi groups, Beijing's role in economically sustaining targeted governments ultimately will.

## Notes

---

1. Abu Mus'ab al-Suri, *The Call to Global Islamic Resistance*, p. 727.
2. Al-Suri's general assessment of the Taliban's reasoning was echoed by Abdul Salam Zaeef, the Taliban ambassador to Pakistan before 9/11. See Abdul Salam Zaeef, *My Life With the Taliban*, eds. Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p. 135.
3. Hamid Mir, “Interview with Usama bin Laden,” *Pakistan*, March 18, 1997.
4. Abu Shiraz, “May 1998 Interview with Bin Laden,” *Pakistan*, February 20, 1999. See also Rahimullah Yusufzai, “In the Way of Allah,” *The News*, June 15, 1998.
5. Interview with Hassan Mahsum, *Radio Free Asia*, January 22, 2002.

6. Ibid.
7. Al-Suri, p. 1113.
8. Ibid., p. 714.
9. Hamid al-Ali, "Return to the Cold War," October 19, 2007, [www.h-alali.com](http://www.h-alali.com).
10. Hamid al-Ali, "Post 9/11 World," *Ana al-Muslim*, September 11, 2008.
11. Hamid al-Ali, "What is Behind the Growth of China?" March 21, 2008, [www.h-alali.com](http://www.h-alali.com).
12. Ibid.
13. Degang Sun, "China and the Global Jihad Network," *The Journal of the Middle East and Africa* 1, no. 2, pp. 196–207.
14. Akram Hijazi, "China Under the Microscope of the Salafi Jihad," August 15, 2007, [www.drakramhijazi.maktooblog.com](http://www.drakramhijazi.maktooblog.com).
15. Akram Hijazi, "Chinese Slaps," Tahadi Islamic Network, May 18, 2010.
16. Kirk Sowell, "Promoting Jihad Against China: The Turkistani Islamic Party in Arabic Jihadist Media," An Independent Report Commissioned by Sky News, August 1, 2010, <http://www.kirksowell.com/Content/Documents/TIP%20Special%20Report.pdf>.
17. "Our Blessed Jihad," Turkistan Islamic Party Voice of Islam Information Center, July 23, 2008.
18. "Turkistan Islamic Party Statement," released by *al-Fajr Media Center*, February 26, 2009.
19. Abd-al-Haqq Turkistani, "China's Massacres and Barbarism Will Not Go Unpunished," *al-Fajr Media Center*, July 31, 2009.
20. Chris Zambelis, "Uighur Dissent and Militancy in China's Xinjiang Province," *CTC Sentinel* 3, no. 1 (January 2010).
21. Abu Yahya al-Libi, "East Turkistan: The Forgotten Wound," *As-Sahab Media Center*, October 6, 2009.
22. Sowell, "Promoting Jihad Against China."
23. Edward Wong, "Chinese Separatists Tied to Norway Bomb," *The New York Times*, July 9, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/10/world/asia/10uighur.html>; Walter Gibbs and John Acher, "Suspects Admit Bomb Plots in Denmark, Norway: Police," *Reuters*, September 28, 2010, <http://af.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idAFTRE68R5AR20100928>.
24. For more discussion of these trends, see: Thomas Hegghammer, "The Ideological Hybridization of Jihadi Groups," *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, vol. 9, November 18, 2009, <http://www.currenttrends.org/research/detail/the-ideological-hybridization-of-jihadi-groups>.
25. For an excellent discussion of Chinese policy in South Asia since 2001, see Andrew Small, "China's Caution on Afghanistan-Pakistan," *The Washington Quarterly* 33, no. 3 (July 2010): pp. 81-97, [http://twq.com/10july/docs/10jul\\_Small.pdf](http://twq.com/10july/docs/10jul_Small.pdf).
26. Gardner Bovingdon, *The Uyghurs: Strangers in their Own Land* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p. 141.
27. Ibid., p. 143.
28. Ibid., p. 143.
29. Ibid., p. 145.
30. Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), p. 66; Small, "China's Caution on Afghanistan-Pakistan."
31. At the meeting, Mullah Omar reportedly assured the Chinese ambassador that ETIM would not be allowed to attack China from Afghanistan. See: Syed Saleem Shahzad, "Secrets of the Taliban's Success," *The Asia Times*, September 11, 2008, [http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South\\_Asia/JI11Df01.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/JI11Df01.html).

32. Zaef, p. 135.
33. "Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson on the Reported Relations Between China and Taliban," September 15, 2001, <http://www.china-un.org/eng/chinaandun/securitycouncil/thematicissues/counterterrorism/t26904.htm>.
34. Arienne M. Dwyer, "The Xinjiang Conflict: Uyghur Identity, Language Policy, and Political Discourse," East-West Center Washington, Policy Studies 15 (2005), <http://www.eastwestcenter.org/fileadmin/stored/pdfs/PS015.pdf>; Chinese officials often use the construction of the "three evils," meaning "terrorism, separatism, and extremism."
35. Information Office of the State Council, "'East Turkistan' Terrorist Forces Cannot Get Away with Impunity," *Xinhua*, January 21, 2002, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2002-01/21/content\\_247082.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2002-01/21/content_247082.htm).
36. Ibid.
37. For designation, see Shirley A. Kan, "U.S.-China Counterterrorism Cooperation: Issues for U.S. Policy," CRS Report for Congress, renowned RL33001, updated September 11, 2008, <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/110764.pdf>; "Press Statement on the UN Designation of the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement," U.S. Department of the Treasury Press Release, September 12, 2002.
38. Bovingdon, pp. 135–136.
39. Warren Richey, "Innocent, but in limbo at Guantanamo," *The Christian Science Monitor*, February 13, 2006, <http://www.csmonitor.com/2006/0213/p03s03-usju.html>.
40. Anthony Kuhn, "U.S., China Debate Over Uighur Guantanamo Detainees," NPR, February 20, 2009, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=100790460>.
41. "Chinese Premier Urges Upgrading China-Arab Cooperation," *Xinhua*, May 14, 2010, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/china/2010-05/14/c\\_13293384.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/china/2010-05/14/c_13293384.htm).
42. William Wallis and Tom Burgis, "Continent Drives a Harder Bargain," *Financial Times*, June 14, 2010, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/85632536-74ed-11df-aed7-00144feabdc0.html>.
43. See Abigail Hauslohner, "In the Middle East, Little Outcry Over China's Uighurs," *Time*, July 17, 2009, <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1911002,00.html>.
44. For more on Arab and Chinese ties, see Chris Zambelis and Brandon Gentry, "China through Arab Eyes: American Influence in the Middle East," *Parameters* 38, no. 1 (Spring 2008): pp. 60–72.
45. Shibley Telhami, "2010 Arab Public Opinion Poll," *Brookings Institute*, August 5, 2010, [http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/rc/reports/2010/08\\_arab\\_opinion\\_poll\\_telhami/08\\_arab\\_opinion\\_poll\\_telhami.pdf](http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/rc/reports/2010/08_arab_opinion_poll_telhami/08_arab_opinion_poll_telhami.pdf).
46. For more on Chinese relations with the Arab world and the impact of China's conflict with the Uyghurs, see Charles Horner and Eric Brown, "Beijing's Islamic Complex," *The American Interest*, May-June 2010, <http://www.the-american-interest.com/article-bd.cfm?piece=805>.
47. Rowena Mason, "How the U.S. Aims to Reduce Iran's Oil-Barter Power," *The Daily Telegraph*, December 6, 2010, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/newsbysector/energy/oilandgas/8182532/How-the-US-aims-to-reduce-Irans-oil-barter-power.html>.
48. For U.S. numbers, see [http://www.eia.doe.gov/dnav/pet/pet\\_move\\_impus\\_d\\_nus\\_NSA\\_mbbldpd\\_a.htm](http://www.eia.doe.gov/dnav/pet/pet_move_impus_d_nus_NSA_mbbldpd_a.htm). For Chinese numbers, see <http://www.eia.doe.gov/cabs/china/pdf.pdf>.
49. Jad Mouawad, "China's Growth Shifts the Geopolitics of Oil," *The New York Times*, March 19, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/20/business/energy-environment/20saudi.html>.
50. Jane Macartney, "Al-Qaeda Vows Revenge on China After Riots," *The Times*, July 15, 2009, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/asia/article6704812.ece>.

51. Small, "China's Caution on Afghanistan-Pakistan."
52. "Mullen: Pakistan's ISI Spy Agency has 'Militant Links,'" *BBC News*, April 21, 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-13153538>.
53. Small, "China's Caution on Afghanistan-Pakistan."