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China's New Role as U.S. Ally Greeted With Relief and Dismay

Diplomacy: Cooperation with U.S. could pose problems regarding Central Asia.

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BEIJING -- As Americans gear up for a war on terrorism, many Chinese are relieved that the U.S. has discovered a new enemy, a role they feel China has been unfairly saddled with since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Better yet, say optimists here, the Sept. 11 attacks on the United States could provide an opening for Washington and Beijing to improve ties by joining forces against a problem--organized terror--that menaces both governments.

"The attack has fully proved that China is a friend of the U.S. and neither a threat nor an enemy," said an essay posted on the Web site of the People's Daily, the Communist Party mouthpiece.

"The biggest threat to the U.S. is from within, not from without," wrote author Jiao Baohua, a professor at the University of International Business and Economics in Beijing. "Terrorism is the common enemy of the Chinese and American peoples."

New Alignment Could Prove Awkward

To show its support, Beijing has pledged to cooperate with the Bush administration in attempting to choke off the financial pipelines that carry funds to terrorists across the globe. Officials from both nations met in Washington on Tuesday to discuss ways of sharing counter-terrorism intelligence, which China gathers in its far west, where Muslim separatists chafe under Beijing's rule.

But beyond such behind-the-scenes measures, Beijing faces an awkward conundrum of how far to go to maintain this new alignment of interests, especially if it finds the U.S. increasingly involved--perhaps militarily--in Central Asia, China's own backyard.

While leaders such as President Jiang Zemin are known to want closer ties with the U.S., others in China remain deeply suspicious of the superpower often referred to as the great hegemon.

A U.S. military campaign against Afghanistan, which shares a 47-mile border with China, would enlarge the American presence off China's western flank. To the east, Chinese leaders have long cast a wary eye on American forces based in Japan and South Korea.

For some Chinese strategists, the scenario uncomfortably recalls an old adage that warns of danger on every side: "A wolf at the door and a tiger out back."

"That's a good description of the situation my country is in," said Zhu Feng, an expert in international relations and security at Beijing University. "Some in China are voicing worry . . . that the U.S. would end up tightening its circle around China."

Indeed, a posted critique of the People's Daily web site essay warned that Washington now has an "excuse" to further "surround and contain China. The U.S. will absolutely not give up such a good opportunity."

Chinese analysts also fear that a strike on Afghanistan could destabilize neighboring states such as Tajikistan, leaving China vulnerable to conflicts that may spill across its borders.

Beijing has worked hard in recent years to cultivate better relations with Central Asian nations, settling border disputes and enhancing trade to foster economic development at home and project Chinese power abroad.

Heightened U.S. engagement in Central Asia would be particularly galling at the moment because China just formed its own anti-terrorism working group with Russia, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, neighbors also concerned about violent Islamic fundamentalism. The working group held its first premier-level meeting, which participants labeled a success, the weekend after the attacks on New York and the Pentagon. But now the U.S. is poised to steal the thunder of the group--and China.

"The role China has been trying to play in the region has been replaced by the United States and the international coalition, which has given China a big shock," said Zhu.

Still, he and others counsel Beijing to work with the U.S. and other countries rather than risk isolation or criticism that China missed the boat, shirking its responsibility as an aspiring major power.

"The Chinese government should offer practical help to the U.S., not just verbal support," said Jin Canrong, an expert on Sino-U.S. relations at the Chinese Academy of Social Science.

The question is what form such help would take.

Beijing Likely to Offer Influence, Not Access

The Communist regime almost certainly would not offer air or land access to U.S.-led troops. Such a move would be politically impossible barely six months after a bilateral showdown triggered when a damaged American spy plane landed on a southern Chinese island.

But Beijing could bring its influence to bear on longtime ally Pakistan, experts say, and could extend humanitarian aid. The Chinese government also could collaborate with other nations to ensure that terrorism suspect Osama bin Laden and his followers do not escape Afghanistan through neighboring countries following any U.S. retaliation.

Such strategic cooperation with America is not unprecedented. In some ways, the Sino-U.S. relationship today has echoes of the Cold War, when both China and the U.S. were allied in their opposition to the Soviet Union.

At that time, the two countries shared intelligence, as they have promised to do now. After the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Washington and Beijing worked together to arm, via Pakistan, the mujahedeen rebels who eventually helped drive out the Soviets.

Whether the new war on terrorism can form a lasting basis for strong ties between the U.S. and China is unclear. But analysts say it can at least provide a temporary new footing for a relationship that has fluctuated wildly in the last few years.

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