

DID CHINA ABANDON ITS ‘ALL-WEATHER FRIEND’?

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Masood Azhar

After years of resistance to listing Masood Azhar, founder of the Pakistan-based terrorist group Jaish-e-Mohammad, as a global terrorist, China has finally changed its position. Earlier attempts to add Azhar to the UN blacklist, under the 1267 Committee, failed as China had put a hold, calling for a solution through consultations. After the February 14 Pulwama attack, France, the U.K. and the U.S. had co-sponsored a new listing application, which was also blocked by China. However, when its hold expired, China raised no fresh opposition.

The main reason for China’s opposition to Azhar’s terror designation was the Pakistan factor. Pakistan has robust economic and strategic ties with China, which is also investing billions of dollars in Pakistan to build an ambitious economic corridor. So why did China change its position now?

First, both India and China have manifested their desire to deepen bilateral ties despite the structural problems they face. Prime Minister Narendra Modi went to Wuhan in April last year for an informal summit with Chinese President Xi Jinping even when bilateral ties were not at their best. The shadows of the Doklam stand-off between the Indian and Chinese Armies and Beijing’s repeated hold on Azhar and its opposition to India’s Nuclear Suppliers Group membership continued to impinge on the bilateral ties. Still India preferred to stay engaged with China as the Wuhan summit suggested. China had shown in recent past that it was ready to do business with India even overlooking Pakistan’s sensitivities. Last year, China dropped its opposition to adding Pakistan on the Financial Action Task Force grey list, which allowed the listing to go through smoothly.

The U.S. factor

Second, the Azhar issue has cast shadows on China’s commitment to fighting terrorism. Jaish has been an internationally designated terrorist outfit. And its role in multiple terrorist attacks in India has been well established. China’s continued hold on Azhar’s listing has weakened internationally its position against terror. The “deradicalisation” camps it is running in Xinjiang has triggered international criticism, particularly from U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo who slammed China’s “shameful hypocrisy”, saying it’s abusing over a million Muslims at home while protecting “violent Islamic terrorist groups from sanctions at the UN”. After it used its hold on Azhar following the Pulwama attack, the U.S. had distributed a draft resolution at the UN Security Council (outside the 1267 Committee) to ban Azhar. Had the resolution been put to vote, China would have been left with an awkward choice — either to back it or use its veto by further isolating itself among global peers.

No Pulwama reference

Third, in allowing the listing to go on, China could save its face and remove a thorny issue from India-China ties. But it didn’t want to abandon Pakistan, its “all-weather friend”. The original listing application which France, the U.K. and the U.S. had moved had a reference to the Pulwama attack. But it was removed from the application that went through on Wednesday, at China’s insistence. This is in line with Pakistan’s narrative that terror activities in the Valley are an indigenous uprising. Responding to the listing, the Chinese Foreign Ministry batted for international community’s support for Pakistan, re-emphasising its view on Islamabad.

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