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Banning of JeM Chief: China's Quandary



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On March 13, 2019, China for the fourth time, blocked the bid in the UN Security Council to designate Pakistan-based Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) chief Masood Azhar, as a global terrorist, by putting a technical hold on the proposal. The Chinese move has been termed “disappointing” by India. This UN motion, under the 1267 Sanctions Committee of the UN Security Council, was moved by France, UK and the US, in the wake of the Pulwama terror attack in which 40 CRPF personnel were killed.

Not to be cowed down by Beijing’s “yet again” stance, the US has pushed for a UNSC resolution which would be debated and voted upon openly, in dissimilitude to the confidential decision-making process of the Council’s Sanctions Committee, that deals with listing requests. If this happens then it would be phenomenal and dramatic as the proceedings of UNSC’s 1267 Sanctions Committee (1267 is the number of the resolution passed by the body to set up this committee in 1999) are confidential, giving member nations an opportunity to act under the cover of anonymity, and without the burden of explaining themselves.

Key Points

1. China for the fourth time, blocked the bid in the UNSC to designate JeM chief Masood Azhar, as a global terrorist.
2. The US, in response, pushed for a UNSC resolution to be debated and voted upon openly. China has vehemently opposed this move.
3. China’s “forked tongue” policy reflects their disingenuous stance on terrorism.
4. What could be the quandary of China? It could be due to strategic reasons; economic reasons; internal turmoil in Pakistan; or due to their tacit understanding with terror organisations.
5. India needs to realise its strength and exercise available leverages to counter China on the strategic, economic and diplomatic front.
6. Global isolation of China or it agreeing to the UN resolution—“ONLY” after toning down or changes in its language—seem two plausible options as of now.

The Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS), New Delhi, is an independent think-tank dealing with national security and conceptual aspects of land warfare, including conventional and sub-conventional conflict and terrorism. CLAWS conducts research that is futuristic in outlook and policy-oriented in approach.

Banning of JeM Chief ...

But now, with this US proposed UNSC resolution, it will be deliberated in an open meeting and aired live as all open sessions. It would be riveting to see China defending a terrorist under the gaze of the world.¹

However on March 28, China opposing this move of the US, vehemently asserted that the US has complicated the issue since it is working hard on speedy settlement of this issue. China also warned the US for pushing its own draft resolution, bypassing the anti-terror committee in the UN itself.²

It is bewildering as to why China has been a hurdle in this issue for so long. It has further baffled the World that China terminated this latest UN resolution, on the grounds that “there is no consensus” in the UN, when China itself was the only nation to oppose the proposal having the approval of all the other 14 members of the Security Council.³

How can there be a consensus if one country (read, China) continues with its unprincipled stand on a terrorist? Needless to say, China has been misusing its veto power.

Undoubtedly, on this issue, China has emerged as a country which flagrantly supports and defends terrorists who attack India, and then, concomitantly speaks of ushering peace and friendly relations with India. This “forked tongue” policy of China reflects their disingenuous stance on terrorism. On the one hand, they impound over a million Muslims solely on how they look, what they wear, whether or not they pray and what they say, and in the same breath they demand more discussions and evidence for sanctioning Azhar, who is a self-confessed terrorist.⁴

It is further confounding that China is signatory to the Xiamen Declaration, which had committed to fight terrorism. Signed in September 2017 at the 9th BRICS summit in the Chinese city of Xiamen, this Declaration had called upon the international community to establish a “genuinely broad” international counterterrorism coalition and for

decisive action against militant groups based in Pakistan terming them as a security concern in the region. Some of the groups mentioned in the declaration included Taliban, Al-Qaeda, Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammad.⁵

Interestingly, as per Richard Bernstein, who recently described in *The Atlantic*, that a few years back, Beijing went so far as to convince the US to detain 22 Uyghurs in Guantánamo Bay, in spite of their no apparent links to terror.⁶ And yet when it comes to Masood Azhar, who has links to Al-Qaeda with regional reach and heads a UN banned terror outfit, China goes “all out” refusing to have him officially designated as a global terrorist. Beijing’s direct talks with Baloch terrorists in February 2018, who are not under the influence of the JeM and are considered “bad terrorists,” also expose its double standards on terrorism.⁷

So, the moot question which arises is, what could be the quandary of a country like China, which on one side has terror concerns in its own backyard and is openly and flagrantly sheltering a global terrorist like Azhar on the other? What are the possible compulsions of China—a potential “superpower” of future—to incongruously, consider JeM as an outlawed organisation, but not its leader?

Prognosis of this riddle brings forth many tangible and intangible reasons, which are discussed below.

Strategic Reasons

China’s dubious stand on terror presumably owes primarily to its strong strategic interests. China, in order to protect its assets and interests, firmly believes that any change in its policy vis-à-vis Masood Azhar would be perilous to its strategic projects.

Beijing also considers Masood Azhar’s terror group as a fulcrum for security and stability in its restive Xinjiang province. He has in fact emerged as Beijing’s “man-Friday” when it comes to ensuring security of China’s geostrategic investments under CPEC.

Another reason could be the “India factor.” China has always seen India as a competitor and a potential threat to its strategic aspirations. India has further irked Beijing by being part of a list of economic giants who have refused to participate in China’s prestigious BRI. Therefore, by supporting terror proxies and terrorists like Azhar, China aims to kilter India so that it remains “boxed in” by its problems in South Asia, especially Pakistan, leaving her with no leeway to concentrate on issues beyond its immediate neighbourhood. In this low-cost, high returns surreptitious game being played by China, Azhar seems to be an important cog. China by needling and frustrating India, also intends to send out a message to the US, which seeks to build a relationship with India, to contain China in the Indo-Pacific.

Actually, “cosying up” of India with the US, especially after the signing of LEMOA, has verily and determinedly increased China’s resolve on supporting Azhar. Substantiating this belief, *Global Times*⁸ editorial of August 2016, quoting Chinese media, stated: “if India hastily joins the US alliance system, it may irritate China, Pakistan and even Russia. It may not make India safer, but will bring strategic troubles to itself and make itself a centre of geopolitical rivalries in Asia.”⁹

China’s desire to court the Taliban for strategic dominance and to check the US in Af-Pak region could be another determinant for China’s appeasement of Azhar.

Apparently, China is also not happy with India’s close relationship with the Afghan government. Thus, China is covertly using Azhar’s clout, with the implicit support of Pakistan, to strengthen the Taliban who are averse to Indian interests in Afghanistan as well as in Kashmir.

Analysts also reckon that growing economic and strategic Sino-US rivalry is also a distinct factor for China’s irrational stand. China postulates that Washington’s latest push in the UN should not be

viewed in isolation of its deepening differences with China and Russia on several issues, particularly in Syria and Venezuela. If this narrative is to be believed, then in this geopolitical game of chess, the US and China are maybe using India and Pakistan as “pawns” to test each other’s reactions and capabilities. It could also be that, the sole purpose of the US move is to appease India and embarrass China while China’s stubborn stand is to counter the US at any cost.

Tacit Understanding with Terror Groups

The real truth of China’s “double game” on an issue like terror can also be attributed to its tacit understanding with the Afghan Taliban from the days of their predecessors in the 1970s. China has been selfish and clandestine in cajoling the terrorist groups to counter terror at home, but has professed double standards on terror in the World order.

According to Prof. Srikanth Kondapalli of Centre for East Asian Studies at JNU, the Chinese military had trained the Mujahedeen against the Soviets, and China subsequently made a deal with the Taliban that “as long as they don’t support the Uighurs in Xinjiang, they won’t harm them.” This deal, Prof Kondapalli said, is still on.

Remarkably, 10 years ago, a top leader of the Islamist Uighur East Turkestan Islamic Movement, allegedly involved in a bombing in Xinjiang, was tracked to Pakistan, which handed him over to Beijing.¹⁰

The bottom line therefore is that China’s “couldn’t care less” attitude of “as long as you don’t disturb me, we will not penalise you” and “any terror must not be at my expense,” drives its global standing on terror which fluctuates depending only on its own interests.

Economic Reasons

China’s economic interests in Pakistan need no elaboration. China, for its energy imports, would get ready access to West Asia and Africa through CPEC’s infrastructure projects connecting Kashgar in Xinjiang to Baluchistan’s Gwadar port.

With so much at stake, Beijing seems sceptical of Islamabad's capability in fighting all terror groups constituting the crowded terror landscape in Af-Pak region.¹¹ The BRI needs stability to succeed, and China is clear that terror groups like JeM can be inherently destabilising. Thus, brandishing such terror outfits has become an imperative for China to survive. Though most JeM attacks have been in India but the group has previously been implicated in at least one attack in Pakistan.

Pakistan's Internal Turmoil

Pakistan is the only "true friend" of China and Pakistan's current predicament is its internal turmoil and instability which China is trying to guard. Listing Azhar as a global terrorist would compel Imran Khan Government to arrest him and seize his assets which he can't afford, fearing violence by an army of militants prepared by Azhar.

Besides, Azhar has deep roots in the rural pockets of Pakistan. His high popularity soared when his seminaries provided financial and medical assistance during the devastating earthquake in 2005, while the government agencies were found lacking in evacuation and rehabilitation works. Most importantly, he enjoys the backing of the Pakistani army.

Hence, will Imran Khan, who himself has been propelled to the national scene by the army, dare to go after Azhar?

Consequently, China, driven through its economic and strategic agenda, would ensure false stability in Pakistan. China would push for saving Azhar, fully knowing that "danger of this lurking snake," would have long-term ramifications on Pakistan, more than the other threats which it faces today.

Flaws in the UN Charter

A serious flaw in the original charter of the UN, which gave special powers to the P-5 countries, is also indirectly responsible for China's irrational stand which it is exploiting to its advantage. To obviate

this, it would be ideal to have the rule of majority introduced.¹²

Leveraging Options to Counter China

The present geopolitical dispensation appears to be the most opportune for India to push for banning Azhar as well as for India's candidature for a permanent seat in the UNSC. This can be attributable to four factors: India's growing economic clout and diplomatic stature in the world; growing US-China rivalry; slowing down of China's economy; and World searching for a rationale alternative to hegemonic US and expansionist China.

The time has come for India to realise its strength and exercise available leverages to counter China on the strategic, economic and diplomatic front. India has to make China perceive that antagonising India would be at the expense of China's economic and strategic cost.

The biggest leverage that India has is the importance of Indian market to China vis-à-vis benefits it derives from its economic and strategic relationship with Pakistan. India is one of the biggest trading partners of China and the total trade between India and China is over five times the trade between China and Pakistan.¹³ India also needs to exhort the economic benefit that Beijing accrues owing to its trade surplus with India, which astonishingly surpasses the total investment it seeks to make in the CPEC. Would it be worth for China to lose the Indian market? It is thus an opportune time for India because US-China trade war is underway and with Chinese economy slowing down fast, the last thing that China can afford is losing the Indian market.

Beijing should also realise that, Pakistan is not just militarily but is also dependent on China for economic bailouts which would preclude Pakistan riling China. Therefore, allowing the resolution on Azhar to pass would literally benefit Beijing in winning international goodwill and improving its image in the World.

Strategically, Uri and Pulwama have changed India, but this change is yet to be seen in India's China policy. Soft-peddalling should no longer be an option for India with China. India should gear up to take some hard decisions and until India does this, it is quite pointless to expect China to deliver on India's concerns.

India needs to give up its traditional caution and reluctance. Why can't India rethink its stand on the "Quad" and take the lead to energise and formalise this into something substantial? What stops India from keeping the Chinese company Huawei out of the 5G trials, on security grounds, especially when most Western countries have virtually banned the Chinese telecom giant from entering the 5G space?¹⁴ Similarly, many other Chinese companies linked to the Chinese state can be eased out from a variety of contracts on security or other grounds?

Diplomatically, in spite of Indian PM's fabled bonhomie with his Chinese counterpart and the diplomatic victory of Wuhan Summit, India is yet to win China over when it comes to taking effective steps against terrorism. Perhaps it is time for the Indian diplomatic establishment to reassess the dimensions of its China policy.

Politically, India should deepen its engagement with ASEAN and Taiwan as most of these nations have concerns in SCS and are affected by unfair, restrictive and predatory trade practices of China. The time has also come to start voicing concerns over the treatment of Muslims in China.

Is there any other way out? Former diplomat Gautam Bambawale—who has the unique distinction of being India's High Commissioner to Pakistan and Ambassador to China—feels New Delhi needs to be transactional with Beijing to get desired results. The give-and-take approach has worked in the not too recent past in the proceedings of the FATF, where China worked with India to put Pakistan on the grey list, in return for New Delhi supporting China's candidature for chairmanship of the intergovernmental body whose purpose is the development and promotion of policies, both at national and international levels, to combat money laundering and terrorist financing.¹⁵

These leverages are not to fight or cut ties with China, they are to make China realise the inevitable stature of India, forcing them to transmute their stand towards India from "Dominance to Equality." Thus, these leverages need to be used smartly while protecting our "core interests." India needs to prepare well before exercising them as these actions certainly would come at a certain cost as there are no costless options in the World today.

Conclusion

Anyone familiar with Terrorism 101 would know that China's present approach is unsustainable.¹⁶ You can only bribe your way out of terror for so long. Considering Beijing's "straiten approach," its volte face on Masood Azhar, seems unlikely. Probably a global isolation of China or it agreeing to the UN resolution—"ONLY" after toning down or changes in its language—seem the two plausible options as of now.

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