

Seen as US' successor in Afghanistan, China can take any stand it wants on Masood Azhar

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Both Afghanistan and Pakistan see China as the power to which the Americans will hand over the keys when the last US soldier leaves.

C. CHRISTINE FAIR Updated: 15 March, 2019 9:47 am IST



File photo of a meeting between Chinese and Pakistani leaders in Beijing in 2014 (representational image) | Adrian Bradshaw-Pool/Getty Images

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For the fourth time in ten years, China placed a technical hold on a proposal to designate Masood Azhar, the leader of the Jaish-e-Mohammed, under the United Nations' Security Council ISIL (Da'esh) and Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee ([1267](#)). The hold, for which no justification is required, lasts three months and can be extended for another six. After nine months, China can use its veto power to formally kill the proposal.

This time, [France led the initiative](#) with support from the United Kingdom and the United States. The renewed effort to designate Masood Azhar was motivated by the organisation's February 14, 2019 [suicide attack](#) on a convoy of Central Research Police Force (CRPF) killing 44 at Pulwama (in Kashmir). In response, [India attacked a facility at Balakot](#), purportedly associated with the Jaish-e-Mohammad, in Pakistan's Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province. In retaliation, Pakistan scrambled several fighter aircraft to which India responded by dispatching several MiG 21 Bisons.

This resulted in a dogfight in which an Indian pilot, Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman, was shot down and taken into Pakistani custody. Varthaman claims he locked onto a Pakistani F-16 and shot it down, although no evidence of the downed aircraft or its pilot has surfaced to date. The international community was on tenterhooks fearing a war. The crises de-escalated when Pakistan returned the Indian pilot after numerous gratuitous delays.

Given the gravity of the crisis, many Indian observers were optimistic that *this time* China would agree to the move to designate Masood Azhar. After all, in 2008, shortly after the Lashkar-e-Taiba's simultaneous attacks in November that year on multiple, high-value civilian targets in Mumbai, China permitted the Lashkar leader, Hafiz Saeed, to be listed under this mechanism. Such optimism was never warranted because the two attacks are not comparable. Whereas the Lashkar-e-Taiba's 26/11 assault on Mumbai killed 166 civilians, including Israelis and Americans, and included a multi-day siege of the iconic Taj hotel; Pulwama's 44 victims were all Indian security personnel drawing from the CRPF.

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Moreover, Pulwama is firmly within Kashmir, which China and Pakistan recognise as disputed. Because of the location and nature of the victims, some scholars have tediously observed that Pulwama was an “insurgent” rather than a “terrorist” attack, whereas the 2008 Mumbai attacks was without question a terror attack. That India responded to Pulwama but not Mumbai can be chocked up to an “Indian over-reaction.” In a point of fact, and largely due to the associated nature of seeing soldiers with reverence, Indians have

arguably responded more angrily to the fatalities of security forces than when the casualties have involved only the civilians.

China has long sought to prop up Pakistan such that it can challenge India. To encourage Pakistan's pugnacity, China has provided Pakistan military assistance inclusive of nuclear and conventional assistance as well as sustaining a permissive environment for Pakistan's terrorist assets such as Jaish-e-Mohammed as well as Lashkar-e-Taiba. However, China has no interest in Pakistan actually going to war with India because, in such an eventuality, China would be forced to show the limits of its support to its "all-weather ally" by not actually supporting it. After all, China has never provided material support to Pakistan during any of its wars with India. During the most recent war at Kargil in 1999, China took the same line as India and the United States — namely that Pakistan needs to respect the sanctity of the Line of Control.

China's dedication to supporting Pakistan's terror camps may seem counter-intuitive given that China is confronting Uigher Muslim insurgents in Xinxiang. Should China not fear that groups like Jaish-e-Mohammed and Lashkar-e-Taiba may give a fillip to their own restive Muslims? The answer is no, because both Jaish-e-Mohammad and Lashkar-e-Taiba are loyal proxies of Pakistan's deep state.

While factions of Jaish-e-Mohammad broke with Masood Azhar to target the state from late December 2001, Azhar himself has remained loyal to his patrons who have dedicated numerous resources to rebuild his organisation over the last decade.

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As for Lashkar-e-Taiba, it has never attacked any target within Pakistan. In fact, Lashkar-e-Taiba is vociferously opposed to the Deobandi groups targeting the Pakistani state, has rejected the practice of *takfir* (of declaring Muslims to be a *kaffir* and thus *wajib-ul-qatil*, worthy of being killed), and denounced any violent protestations of the state.

Jaish-e-Mohammed, along with the Afghan Taliban, are also critical means of redeploying fighters and commanders of the Pakistani Taliban to theatres of “legitimate” jihad in Afghanistan and India. In this way, Jaish-e-Mohammed along with the Afghan Taliban are “ghar vapasi” programmes for wayward Pakistani terrorists. Given that Pakistan’s domestic stability and encouraging Pakistani pluck against India remain Chinese objectives, groups like Jaish-e-Mohammed and Lashkar-e-Taiba are also important Chinese assets by extension.

Unlike the situation that obtained in November 2008, both China and Pakistan have more leverage vis-à-vis the United States. During the November attacks, George W. Bush was a lame-duck president and Barrack Obama, who had won the US election on 4 November, would not take office until January of 2009. Bush had viewed the Pakistanis as an important ally in Afghanistan; however, Obama viewed Pakistan as a problem. President George W. Bush, wary of China, courted India as a partner in managing China’s rise in the region and beyond. Presidential candidate Obama said very little about China during his campaign, leaving few clues about how he would view China.

Beijing may have seen the acquiescence to designate Hafiz Saeed as a down payment on a better relationship with the United States and could use the international outrage over the civilian carnage as a convenient hook on which to hang this decision. In contrast, today

China and Pakistan are viewed as important actors in Afghanistan, which President Donald Trump is anxious to abandon.

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Trump, who fetishistically seeks to fulfil campaign promises irrespective of how foolhardy they may be, wants to make good on his pre-election promise to withdraw from Afghanistan. And when the last American soldier leaves, who will pick up the tab to pay for Afghanistan's bills? Again, China is seen as critical to filling this vacuum. Thus, even if China is seen as a source of insecurity in the Indo-Pacific, it is increasingly viewed in Afghanistan and Pakistan as the power to which the Americans will hand over the keys to the jalopies that they are anxious to abandon.

Unless there is a Jaish-e-Mohammed terror attack in a major city like Mumbai or Delhi, which murders civilians on the scale of the 26/11 Mumbai slaughter, one should not expect that China will permit a valued terrorist organisation to be designated — particularly at a time when it has the upper hand over the United States.

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