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China announced (Oct 01) that it has extended by another three months the “technical hold” on India’s listing of Jaish-e-Mohammad (JEM) chief, Masood Azhar as an international terrorist in the 1267 Committee of the United Nations.

China had first put a technical hold on this issue in April this year, which was to expire on October 3. The explanation from the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman, Eng Shuang was that there were still different views on India’s listing of the application, and that the new technical hold would allow more time for the Committee to deliberate on the matter and for relevant parties to have further consultations. No other party in the Committee has openly stated any apprehension over the Indian application.

Even if China was considering lifting the technical hold on Masood Azhar, it cannot do so at this critical moment. Pakistan stands globally exposed on the terrorism issue. India’s political and diplomatic offensive over the Uri attack, which is part of a chain of terror attacks, from the 26/11 Mumbai attack in 2008 onwards, has opened the eyes of the global community, especially those states who have suffered such attacks in recent years. Footprints of such attackers somehow lead to Pakistan. Loud calls are emanating from people in the USA and UK to declare Pakistan a terrorist state. Russia, which has strategic relations with China, has strongly supported the surgical strike by the Indian forces to take out Pak-backed terrorists preparing to cross into India.

The international community has noticed the qualitative shift in the Indian government addressing Pakistan sponsored terrorism. Although similar surgical strikes by the Indian forces have taken place in the past, they were kept within the confines of the army and leaders in relevant ministries. This time, however, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, pressured by the country's outrage and demand for action, decided to take the ownership and give political legitimacy to the army action.

Although Mr. Modi tried to bring down the temperature in his speech in Kozhikode, appealing to the people of Pakistan to jointly fight poverty and to work for development, the rage among the people in India at the horrific act of 19 of their soldiers at their post being burnt to death, was enormous. They had had enough and were holding the government responsible for not taking effective action.

Pakistan's terrorist action resulted in the boycott of the SAARC summit in Islamabad, by all members. China, which has an observer status in the SAARC, did not appear to try hard, if at all, to persuade its friends in the SAARC not to take this line against Pakistan. Terrorism is the largest threat to the international community today, as China knows. Though China understands this very well, its diplomatic, security and strategic focus has been only one – what serves China. This is one of the reasons why it has protected rogue states.

Notwithstanding the fact that Pakistan can be considered to be nearing rogue state status, it is China's only close friend and ally. In recent years Pakistan has become virtually a vassal state of China and proudly so. When interacting with Indian interlocutors on television talk shows, the Pakistani representatives "bring out" and hold up China as their friend and ally, who will stand by them in all eventualities. China is not willing to go that far, as a Chinese foreign ministry spokesman politely said so recently.

But as of now, Beijing cannot let down a desperate "all weather" friend, especially Pakistan's military and ISI.

China has its own interest and equation with Islamic terrorists. As early as 1992, Chinese Premier Li Peng had told Pak Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto that the Chinese knew that Muslim Uighur separatists were being indoctrinated and trained in Pakistan by Islamic tanzims and the ISI, and they also knew that there was nothing Bhutto could do about it.

Beijing then decided on a new track. They tried and befriended the Pakistani Islamists involved, particularly the Jamaat-e-Islami. A delegation of the Jamaat visited China. The ISI was also worked on and praised. China has to keep these two constituencies assuaged although Chinese workers in Pakistan still get killed.

The fact remains that till last year there were Uighur separatists in Pakistan. This was openly stated by an angry Party Secretary of Xinjiang-Uighur Autonomous Region. The Uighur separatists were supported not only by entities in Pakistan, but by the Taliban and Uzbek terrorists in Pakistan's hilly regions like Waziristan. However, these activities have decreased as the Pak security forces have cracked down on them; some Uighur leaders were apprehended and deported to China.

The only terrorist /separatist organization that is of great importance to China, is the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), an Uighur separatist group and internationally designated terrorist organization. The ETIM is maintaining a very low profile, but they have some moral and financial support from Uighurs outside and inside China. A month ago the Chinese Embassy in Kazakhstan was attacked by suspected Uighur separatists. China has been conducting a scorched earth policy in Xinjiang, bringing Muslims and their religious practices under iron-fisted control. In Xinjiang Muslims were prohibited from fasting during the holy month of Ramadan. Muslim religious leaders were forced to dance to discotheque music. Muslim clothes are strongly discouraged as also growing of beards by Muslims. The State and the Party control religion in China. Beijing is aware that its actions against Muslims and Islam is not going unnoticed by Islamic extremist and terrorist groups. They remember Al-Qaeda leader Ayman-al -Zawahiri's call to strike at Chinese assets overseas. Chinese officials in embassies in some countries have expressed concern about their safety.

The policy to support an Islamic terrorist leader like Masood Azhar serves China well for a short time. (The Chinese had also resisted terrorist listing of Lashkar-e-Toiba (LET) and Hafiz Saeed). This helps them, apparently, buy peace with these religious extremists. It helps Pakistan. And finally, it keeps India troubled.

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