



'THE EMERGING US-CHINA ACCOMODATION'

Jayadeva Ranade

Distinguished Fellow, Centre for Air Power Studies, New Delhi

The unusually lengthy 4,228-word joint statement issued on November 17, at the conclusion of US President Barack Obama's four day visit to the People's Republic of China, reflects the changing global geopolitical balance of power. It is an acknowledgement of China's rise as a major world power and an attempt by the US to co-opt it into accepting greater responsibility in international affairs. Its objective is to enmesh China in a web of international obligations and agreements in the hope that it would not behave as an aggressive power. The US President's visit to China so early in his term and broad scope of the joint statement, however, also confirm the importance of this bilateral relationship to both countries and, that China will be a locus of power in the emerging new world order.

Soon after installation of the Obama Administration, Washington began signalling that it was contemplating recasting its China policy. In addition to the preferential treatment accorded to China at international gatherings during the past couple of years because of its economic strength, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's visit to Beijing in February 2009, clarified the new US Administration's changed tack on China.

Other suggestions of heightened US sensitivity were the move to curtail funding for Radio Free Asia and Voice of America transmissions to China, which were successfully resisted by the US Congress, and President Obama's failure to meet the Dalai Lama during his visit to Washington in October. After an interval of three years Washington received Xu Caihou, Vice Chairman of China's Central Military Commission, in late October just prior to Obama's visit to Beijing, marking the resumption of high level military exchanges. Seven agreements were signed

during the visit, when Cu Xaihou reportedly agreed that China will undertake landmine clearing operations in Afghanistan and train Afghan police and military personnel. Finally, Obama avoided mentioning Tibet and Human Rights issues during meetings with Chinese leaders in Beijing recently, though he urged resumption of a dialogue with the Dalai Lama.

Also pertinent to the Joint Statement was the exchange between US President Obama and Chinese President Hu Jintao, at their second Summit meeting in Pittsburg on September 22. China's official news agency 'Xinhua' reported that Hu Jintao urged Obama, in the context of the China-US bilateral relationship, that 'the two countries should push for a proper resolution to the regional issues relating to the Korean Peninsula, Iran and South Asia'. He mentioned Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang. Obama responded to Hu Jintao's remarks on all these, but refrained from commenting on South Asia. Though China's ambitions are not new and were

first publicly outlined during Clinton's visit to China in mid-1998, Hu Jintao's remarks represented a push at the highest level for recognition of China's influence in the region of its perceived strategic interest.

The US-China Joint Statement suggests that in coming months India will face pressure on three issues, namely Kashmir, Afghanistan and the NPT and CTBT. Kashmir and Afghanistan are interlinked and developments relating to them will directly impact on India.

The recent rapid pace of developments centering on Kashmir suggests the subject has figured earlier in discussions between Washington and Beijing. Just days prior to the Hu-Obama Summit on September 22, Chinese Vice Foreign Minister He Zhengyue

The US President's visit to China so early in his term and broad scope of the joint statement, however, confirm the importance of this bilateral relationship to both countries and, that China will be a locus of power in the emerging new world order.

publicised China's willingness to mediate between India and Pakistan if requested and the offer was repeated twice soon after the Summit. Hurriyat 'leader' Mirwaiz Umar Farooq's assertion, made promptly after issue of the Joint Statement, that China has a role in settlement of the Kashmir issue, and disclosure that he will be travelling to Beijing—the first time any Hurriyat member would go there—reinforces suspicion that Washington and Beijing have discussed the Kashmir issue possibly keeping Islamabad in the loop. Hurriyat leaders have, in any case, invariably been received at the US State Department during their visits to the US when they also separately meet personnel of the Pakistan Embassy. China's altered tougher stance on Kashmir is evident in its decision to issue loose leaf visas to residents of Jammu and Kashmir, thereby designating the status of the entire state as disputed. The opacity added to its policy very recently by affixing a visa on the Passport in a select case, could be an insidious prelude to drawing definitive religious divisions in the state. China's close comprehensive ties with Pakistan have dictated its ambiguity on the Kashmir issue over the years, but Beijing now seems to be preparing for a proactive role.

The emerging situation in Afghanistan and apparent accommodation of China's interests by the US, coinciding with the altered US policy towards China, is again of direct and strategic relevance to India. Afghanistan continues to be of strategic interest for major powers, but the players are different now with conflicting interests and different stakes. Influence over Central Asia and the region's energy resources are the main allurements. The players this time are the US and the West, Russia, China, Pakistan and India. Their competition for energy resources is best described as: 'China needs them, Russia wants to control their distribution, and the Western powers want to ensure they are not monopolized by Moscow or Beijing'. But this is only part of the story. Short term interests could well see the emergence of a grouping motivated by immediate self-interest. This is likely to result in the US, West, China and Pakistan being arrayed opposite the forces of the Taliban and Al Qaeda. Over the longer term, however, their interests will collide. The US and West, backed by the NATO member-countries, will be unwilling to see Afghanistan and Central Asia slide under the dominant influence of either Russia or China. All the powers are preparing for such a future scenario and the definitive contours of a potentially new Sino-

Pakistan strategic collusion in this strategically important region are becoming discernible. In time this could lead to NATO and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) forces opposing each other and the emergence of contention.

In the short term, reports filtering out of Afghanistan reveal that the US has begun choreographing a sequence of moves designed to draw China into accepting greater responsibility in Afghanistan. They appear to have reached some informal understanding on security issues in the effort to develop and rebuild Afghanistan. US forces deployed since February 2009 as part of ISAF in Wardak province, long known as a haven for the Taliban, began protecting Chinese workers engaged in construction of a two-lane highway. A platoon of US troops are bivouacked on a hillock overlooking the camp of the Chinese workers employed by the state-owned China Railway Shisiju Group Corporation, which has been awarded a US\$ 50 million contract from Italian aid funds, to construct the thirty three mile highway past Momaki village.

An engineer for the China Railway Shisiju Group Corporation said: 'if there's fighting we cannot work' on the road building project, which started in 2006. In an interesting coincidence, the US troops were deployed to protect Chinese construction workers engaged on

the road construction project in the same month that US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited Beijing.

Another indicator of US-China cooperation in the security sector is the recent US\$ 3.5 billion deal, concluded by China's Jiangxi Copper Group and the China Metallurgical Group, to develop the huge twenty eight square kilometer Aynak copper deposit in Logar province south of Kabul. The Aynak copper deposit is reputed to be the largest undeveloped field in the world and has been virtually untouched since the Soviet invasion in 1979. The deal, the biggest yet between China and Afghanistan, includes agreement to build schools, clinics, markets, mosques and a US\$ 500 million 400mw coal-fired power plant. This area presently has no electricity and the coal-fired power plant proposed to be constructed will cater to the power requirements of the copper mine and the inhabitants of the area. It will have surplus electricity which will go to Kabul. The Chinese companies also plan to build a railway to link Afghanistan with China through Tajikistan and to Pakistan and open a rail route to the north from the mine. It will be the first long distance rail link in Afghanistan. An interesting sidelight is that the Aynak Valley is where the Al Qaeda planned and trained for the 2001 attacks on

The emerging situation in Afghanistan and apparent accommodation of China's interests by the US, coinciding with the altered US policy towards China, is again of direct and strategic relevance to India.

USA. Afghan officials support the project, which they claim will generate over 6000 jobs.

Security has been a serious concern for Chinese companies working in Afghanistan. Since 2004, at least eleven Chinese aid and commercial workers have been killed frightening away some Chinese companies. In June 2008, a Chinese engineer on the road project at Momaki was kidnapped and freed after a month by Afghan forces. The Chinese government, however, is unlikely to

allow security considerations to come in the way of achieving national strategic objectives. A number of the projects being taken up by China are in disturbed areas infested by the Taliban, but China would expect assistance from Pakistan, which retains links with a wide spectrum of forces in Afghanistan, including the Taliban. This will supplement the tentative cooperation between US troops and Chinese commercial entities to safeguard Chinese interests.

By the end of 2008, Chinese companies had thirty three infrastructure projects valued at US\$ 480 million. The Afghan Ministry of Mines has now announced it will seek bidders to explore for oil and natural gas in northern Afghanistan and exploit an 1.8 billion ton iron ore deposit in the Hajigak mountains west of Momaki along the road now under construction. A US geological survey estimated that Afghanistan's oil reserves were 1,596 million barrels and natural gas reserves were approximately 15,687 trillion cubic feet (Tcf). Afghanistan also has large iron ore deposits between Herat and the Panjsher Valley and gold reserves in the northern provinces of Badakhshan, Takhar and Ghazni.

There are major copper fields in Jawkhar and Darband, all within about 30 km of south east Kabul. These resource-rich areas are situated in the relatively stable north and northwestern regions of Afghanistan. Afghanistan's Foreign Minister, who visited Beijing in June 2009, canvassed investment for these projects and Chinese companies are expected to bid for more contracts in Afghanistan.

As in the case of other countries where it has strategic interests, China is ensuring that its

The Chinese government, however, is unlikely to allow security considerations to come in the way of achieving national strategic objectives. A number of the projects being taken up by China are in disturbed areas infested by the Taliban, but China would expect assistance from Pakistan, which retains links with a wide spectrum of forces in Afghanistan, including the Taliban.

investments in Afghanistan have a high degree of permanence and it acquires influence in Afghanistan's political and governmental structure. This includes Chinese companies entering the fledgling telecommunications sector. The Chinese Telecommunications companies, ZTE and Huawei, partnered Afghanistan's Ministry of Communications and have set up digital telephone services in the country, providing almost 200,000 subscriber lines. ZTE and Huawei are

both affiliated to the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) and are, pertinently, major partners in Pakistan's telecommunications infrastructure.

Afghanistan is at a geo-strategically sensitive location. Apart from being sited atop immense reserves of oil, gas and precious and rare metals, it sits astride important trade routes that inter-link Central and South Asia. Afghanistan and Central Asia are today not under the dominance of a single major power and neither are any of the countries in this region under the influence of a specific power. It has accordingly become the scene of major power competition. The US, Western powers and countries under the NATO umbrella, are trying to strengthen their presence in the region. Their objectives include preventing Russia from resuming its preponderant influence over the region, preventing Russia and China from monopolizing the region's natural resources, and containing the growing influence of Russia and China in the region. Russia is keen on retrieving its economic and political dominance over the countries in Central Asia and getting a share of their natural resources, or at least having a say in their

distribution. China has a multiplicity of interests. It is intent on insulating its sensitive north-western border from the spread of extremist Islamic ideas and putting a stop to the trans-border support that separatist Uyghur outfits receive from Central Asian countries. It sees expansion of its influence in the region as a buffer against problems arising from any future deterioration of relations with Russia and as a preventive against possible inimical plans by the US and West to step up support to Tibetans and Uyghur 'separatists' and encourage them to undertake adventures into Tibet and Xinjiang.

China has a multiplicity of interests. It is intent on insulating its sensitive north-western border from the spread of extremist Islamic ideas and putting a stop to the trans-border support that separatist Uyghur outfits receive from Central Asian countries. It sees expansion of its influence in the region as a buffer against problems arising from any future deterioration of relations with Russia and as a preventive against possible inimical plans by the US and West to step up support to Tibetans and Uyghur 'separatists'.

The region's huge reserves of natural resources are an important factor. China sees their exploitation and overland transportation to China as enhancing its energy security. China views development of a transport network across the region as opening new economic opportunities and markets for its land-locked hinterland provinces. It is a matter of time before the China-dominated Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) is used to reinforce the efforts of Russia and China.

India needs to adopt a more assertive foreign policy in this region to preserve its national security interests. It needs to draw the 'red line' for the agenda in bilateral discussions on Kashmir and isolate secessionist groups like the Hurriyat. India could profitably contemplate closer coordination with the US in restoring stability to Afghanistan, but while confining itself to non-combat areas.

The railway line from western China through Tajikistan into Afghanistan and on to Pakistan is a major venture with immense strategic implications for China and the region. It will bring Afghanistan into the orbit of the largely Islamic Central Asian Republics. The railway line will ensure China's ability to transport cargo and passengers from western China to Gwadar in Pakistan. It will automatically upgrade China's military logistics capability, accelerating and facilitating movement of troops to the borders with Russia as well as into Afghanistan, if necessary, and to Pakistan. It will enhance China's influence in Tajikistan as the latter will get an alternate trade route instead of the solitary route through Russia as at present. Its investments in Afghanistan, and particularly the railway line, will give China a dominant influence in Central Asia and the Persian Gulf. China's involvement in Afghanistan's development will ensure it a place on the high table when Afghan issues are being discussed and settled by the Western powers. Pakistan will automatically acquire a powerful supporter. China's actions in

Afghanistan will be coloured by Pakistan's concerns, including of acquiring 'strategic depth' against India.

India needs to adopt a more assertive foreign policy in this region to preserve its national security interests. It needs to draw the 'red line' for the agenda in bilateral discussions on Kashmir and isolate secessionist groups like the Hurriyat. On the wider region including Afghanistan, India could profitably

contemplate closer coordination with the US in restoring stability to Afghanistan, but while confining itself to non-combat areas like logistics and training Afghan military and police personnel. It should enhance involvement in developmental projects. Such steps would ease pressure on the US, thereby contributing tangibly to the Indo-US relationship, and add profile to India's role in the international effort to bring stability to Afghanistan. India should simultaneously broad-base contact with the younger Afghans by offering large numbers of scholarships in different disciplines. Indian business and public sector enterprises should be encouraged to aggressively enter Afghanistan's economy. These measures should be supplemented by cultivating Afghan politicians across the political spectrum, and expanding operational 'reach' by acquiring a presence additional to the Farkhor Air Base in Tajikistan. India should simultaneously strive to quickly reach an understanding with Afghanistan by which it denies a third country's armed forces access or transit through Afghanistan.



The Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS) is an independent, non-profit think tank that undertakes and promotes policy related research, study and discussion on defence and military issues, trends, and development in air power and space for civil and military purposes, as also related issues of national security. The Centre is headed by Air Cmde Jasjit Singh, AVSM, VrC, VM (Retd) Centre for Air Power Studies.

P-284, Arjan Path, Subroto Park, New Delhi 110010
Tel: +91 11 25699130/32, Fax: +91 11 25682533

Editor: Ms Shalini Chawla e-mail: shaluchawla@yahoo.com

The views expressed in this brief are those of the author and not necessarily of the Centre or any other organisation.