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China, Russia, India Intensify Role in Afghanistan to Fight Homegrown Militants

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A decision by the BRICS nations to name and denounce specific terrorist organizations in Afghanistan, Pakistan and elsewhere is sparking debate among academics and analysts in China.

Earlier this month, the group, comprised of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, extended their support to Kabul's counterterrorism efforts during a meeting in China. The move caused some nervousness in Islamabad, forcing Foreign Minister Khawaja Asif to first visit Beijing and then fly to Tehran, canvassing support for his country.

This was the first time China had publicly denounced Pakistan-based terror groups, Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammad, which had earlier been censured by the United Nations Security Council. Islamabad had reasons to worry about a possible change in Beijing's attitude, particularly at a time when U.S. President Donald Trump had threatened to cut off aid if Pakistan did not change its approach to terrorism.

Analysts: Beijing public posturing

At least in the public domain, Asif's visit proved fruitful, with Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi praising Pakistan's efforts to curb terrorism.

"When it comes to the issue of counterterrorism, Pakistan has done its best with a clear conscience. In comparison, some countries need to give Pakistan the full credit that it deserves," Wang said at a joint news conference with Asif this month.

But analysts said this was just Beijing's public posturing, adding China was seriously worried about Islamabad's inability to curb terrorists residing in Pakistan, including the top leaders of East Turkmenistan Islamic Movement, which Beijing has accused of causing widespread terror in China's western region of Xinjiang, home to the country's Muslim minority Uighur population.

Beijing is also worried that rising terrorism might pose serious obstacles to the safety of Chinese citizens engaged in the construction of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor. The recent killing of two Chinese citizens by terrorists in the Baluchistan province of Pakistan has shaken some of Beijing's faith in Islamabad's ability to keep terrorism under check.

Costly to China?

Within China, the decision to condemn two Pakistan-based groups at the behest of India has played out in a controversial manner, with experts associated with government think tanks openly criticizing the country's leadership.

"This is too costly to China. Pakistan will be very upset," said Hu Shisheng, director of the official China Institute of Contemporary International Relations. "I think it is a strange decision."

But Hu Zhiyong, a research fellow at the Institute of International Relations of the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, said the BRICS organization has undergone significant changes.

"Stressing counterterrorism shows that the BRICS summit, which started from business cooperation, has expanded its cooperation to a more comprehensive level," he said.

Hu tried to explain why Beijing agreed to join the BRICS declaration in an interview with the Beijing-based Global Times.

"China is also a victim of terrorism and is firmly against any kind of terrorism, and that's the main reason that the organizations are named in the declaration," he said.

Chinese experts split

Chinese experts are divided on this issue ahead of a crucial Communist Party Congress in October, which will determine the next set of leaders after 2017.

"There are analysts in China who are starting to realize that there are only two allies, North Korea and Pakistan, and both are major international diplomatic liabilities," Ramesh Thakur, professor at the Australian National University said. "They think it might be better if China somehow accommodates India, which is a bigger player, and forgets all about Pakistan, which is a liability," he added.

While Pakistan appeared unhappy with the BRICS declaration, Afghanistan seemed please.

"Afghanistan has welcomed it because it is aligned with Afghanistan's regional outreach program," Ahmad Bilal Khalil, researcher at the Center for Strategic and Regional Studies in Kabul told VOA.

"Afghanistan believes that in the current situation in Afghanistan, it is not an internal Afghan war because we believe that it has original linkages (with other countries)," Ahmad said, explaining that Afghanistan is the breeding ground for militants who have come in from other countries for training and logistic support. "For example, those fighting in Afghanistan are

Uzbeks, they are Uighurs, they are Chechens. Pakistanis are also fighting. So, it is a somehow original war and in order to curb it, regional outreach and consensus is a must,” he said.

Intelligence on terrorists needed

Analysts say China, Russia and India desperately need ground intelligence in Afghanistan as well as the tribal areas of Pakistan because their homegrown terrorists are closely linked to the Taliban and other militant groups in these areas. The BRICS declaration also condemned two Pakistan-based terror groups who have been accused by India of conducting attacks in its cities, and the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, which is active in China’s Xinjiang region.

“Russia, China and India have all had issues with terrorist groups that claim to be acting in the name of Islam,” Lee Branstetter, an associate professor of economics at Carnegie Mellon University’s Heinz School of Policy and Management told VOA.

An important question is whether the BRICS effort will compliment or compete with the efforts of the United States in the battle against terrorism.

Branstetter said, “All these countries have a common interest in acting against Islamic terrorism, all these countries have cooperated with the United States in efforts to deal with this problem in the past. So, it is not all that surprising that these nations would have made statements they have made in countering terrorism.”