

# *China's Image of Central Asia and It's Policy in the Region.*

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## Summary

Following the break up of the Soviet Union and fundamental changes in China's domestic and foreign politics. Central Asia has become an increasingly important focus for its southeastern neighbor. During this process, China was pushed to rethink its image of Central Asia and to redefine its policy in the region in order to meet the demands of the present conditions.

After reviewing the roots of the relationship between China and Central Asia since the ancient times, the study offers a wide range of problems expressed in the last decade between two sides. Reference is made to the proposed ground rules for promoting ties between China and Central Asia: peaceful coexistence, economic prosperity, non-interference in internal affairs, respecting territorial integrity and sovereignty.

The biggest concerns for China seem to arise out of fear of ethnic nationalism and revival of Islam in the Newly-Independent States of Central Asia and the possible impact of these trends for the security both in the region and in China itself. However, recent years have witnessed a period of dialogue and cooperation, rather than the uncertainty and fear commonly found in other post-Soviet regions.

## 1. Introduction

At the turn of the century China can be considered as a significant international player. A lot of factors have contributed to China's present role on the international arena. Scholars usually emphasize the phenomenal growth of China's economy, its military capabilities, its size, and the opening up of China.<sup>1</sup> Not unexpectedly after the end of the Cold-War period and crucial changes in China, China's view of the world and foreign policy approach become more varied.

Although the cornerstone of China's foreign policy is relations with great powers, the fundamental changes occurred in the direct vicinity of China's border. Specifically,

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<sup>1</sup> For example, see Flemming Christiansen, Shirin Rai "Chinese Politics and Society. An Introduction", (Prentice hall, Harvest Wheatsheaf, 1996), p. -181.

the break-up of the Soviet Union and the emergence of Kazakstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have forced the Chinese authorities with its global interests and aspirations to redefine its policy and strategy towards Central Asia.

Before outlining the main constituents of this policy and strategy, and illustrating them, it is worth going back to the roots of the Chinese-Central Asia relationship. These roots are still viable and visible today, due to the distinctive emphasis that China places on tradition.

## **2. The roots of Chinese-Central Asian relationship.**

Both China and Central Asia have long and rich history. The roots of interrelations between two regions go back to the beginning of the world. From ancient times, the Great Silk Route linked China and West through the territory of Central Asia. A myriad of international contacts leading to the intercultural enrichment took place. During the last two millennia the Chinese rulers many times tried to conquer Central Asia, because of its important strategic location at the crossroads of trade roads. “But there have only been about 425 years of Chinese control in Central Asia and the present Chinese rule in Xinjiang is the fifth episode”.<sup>2</sup>

The first such an attempt happened during the Han dynasty (221 B.C.-A.D. 220), the military expeditions were launched against the Huns in 60 BC, and a Chinese viceroy installed himself in Xinjian, which was part of Central Asia at that time – free of the Chinese influence. The main task for the Chinese was to establish the silk trade with the Eastern Roman Empire. But soon Chinese rule over the present-day Xinjiang was undermined by Kushans, Huns, Turkic, and Mongol tribes starting in AD 140. For a long period the Chinese were not able to reestablish their authority over Central Asia. Only during the Tang dynasty (618-906), the Tang emperors made another attempt to conquer the region. In an ambitious plan, the Chinese rulers wanted to subjugate all of Central Asia. However, at the battle on the Talas River in 751 the Chinese troops were crushed by the Arabic tribes, one of the most important turning points in world history.

After this historical battle Chinese domination almost completely collapsed and the strong cultural ties were broken. Islam spread across the entire Central Asian region, and Buddhist kingdoms disappeared for good, except in Tibet.

The next attempt to come back to Central Asia and establish its influence happened only in the middle of the eighteenth century, when Emperor Qian Long in 1755-59 dispatched new military expeditions to Central Asia. As a result of this expedition Qian Long managed to establish indirect rule, appointing a governor-general in Kuldja (Yining) and vice-governors in Tihua (Urumqi) and Kashgar/Yarkand with the objective of guaranteeing Manchu influence without incorporating the territory into the Chinese provincial structure. Uighur peasants were encouraged to settle down in the Ili Valley north of the Tian Shan in order to weaken the influence of Kazakh and Mongol nomads.

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<sup>2</sup> Owen Lattimore, “Inner Asian Frontiers of China”. (Oxford, 1988), p. -171.

The first half of the nineteenth century showed the beginning of the period known as “Great Game” for Central Asia. Central Asia became the arena of competition among great powers of that time, especially Russia, Great Britain and China for the influence in the region.

Manchu authority in Central Asia began to decline. Particularly dangerous for Manchu were the expansion from tsarist Russia and from independence-seeking Uighurs.

In Central Asia Russia managed to strengthen its positions conquering the khanates of Khiva and Kokand and the emirate of Bukhara in the mid of the nineteenth century and annexed 440, 000 square kilometers of land, thus pushing the border of the tsarist empire 250 to 600 kilometers eastward.

In 1865 Yakub Beg became, with help from the Ottoman Empire and British India, the ruler of a newly proclaimed state, Kashgaria. Two years later the Chinese defeated Yakub Beg and destroyed his kingdom.

Throughout the next several decades Russians established direct rule over almost all of Central Asia, except of Afghanistan and Eastern Turkestan.

After the October Revolution in Russia and the formation of the Soviet Union, Central Asia became an integral part of the Communist state under its Marxist-Leninist ideology.

Meanwhile, Eastern Turkestan continued to be a region of competition between Russia and China until the death of Stalin in 1953. Twice, in 1933 and 1944, the independent republic of Eastern Turkestan was proclaimed, the first time inspired by Muslim fanatics, the second time supported by Stalin. After the death of Stalin in 1953, the whole special Sino-Soviet relationship was renegotiated, and in 1955 the Chinese finally proclaimed the Xinjiang Uigur autonomous region.

The above-mentioned illustrations from the history of China-Central Asia interrelations show that China always had its own image of Central Asia and plans for it. The balance of powers which was reached in Central Asia between Russia and China in the 20-th century was suddenly disrupted after the break up of the Soviet Union and pushed China to rethink it’s image of Central Asia and redefine its strategy and policy in the region.

### **3. The break-up of the Soviet Union and China’s new strategy towards Central Asia**

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the emergence of five new independent states in Central Asia have created a new situation for China, the long-term results of which are still unpredictable. Once considered a backwater during the Soviet era, China suddenly finds itself bordered by new Central Asia, which could play a significant role in Asian and world politics in the years to come.

Inheriting all the problems of the post-Soviet transition, plus the resurgence of Islam, environmental problems, and the rise of ethnic nationalism along the border with Chinese Central Asia (Xinjiang), a new situation in the region has brought a lot of

concerns to China. Growing activities of other players on Central Asian arena – the USA, Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, and India, also magnified the Chinese concerns.

China could not miss an opportunity to further weaken traditionally strong positions of Russia in the region as well.

However, the first Chinese reaction to the unfolding situation was surprisingly cautious. The first official Chinese reaction described the developments in Central Asia, as well as in other former Soviet republics, as “internal affairs”. The officials in Beijing confirmed that they would “respect” the choice made by the people in these countries. Notwithstanding the official line, the Chinese leaders understood quite clearly the main threats to its security. The first problem for China was the rise of ethnic nationalism and Islamic revival in the Central Asian republics. The possible impact of these events in Central Asia on Chinese Muslim outreach – Xinjiang was a significant factor for the Chinese in building a new strategy towards newly independent states of Central Asia. Suffice it to say that Xinjiang has strong ethnic ties with Central Asia. “Around a million Kazakhs lived in the Xinjiang region at the time of the Soviet collapse as well as over 7 million Turkic-speaking Uighurs. For their part, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan provided a home to around a quarter of a million Uighurs, often with family ties across the border.”<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the newly independent states of Central Asia could provide an example for Uighurs in their fight for independence. In this situation, the Chinese authorities had to take the tough line towards any separatist or Islamic activism in Xinjiang. China appeared to send a powerful message to its Central Asian neighbours, which supported Uighurs, that China would not tolerate any interference in what it defined as its own internal affairs. The governments of Central Asian states have deferred to China on this point very quickly. They have promised not to provide any support or sanctuary for the Uyghurs. Nevertheless, the threat of ethno-nationalism and Islamic resurgence in Central Asia remains a core element of Chinese policy in the region.<sup>4</sup>

On the diplomatic level, China recognized the independence of Central Asian States in December 1991. In January 1992 China signed separate communiqués on the establishment of diplomatic relations with five states. At the same year three presidents of Central Asian states: Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan visited China. In 1993 the president of Tajikistan also paid a visit to Beijing. As a result of these visits ties between China and Central Asia deepened considerably. During Li Peng’s visit to four Central Asian republics in 1994, Beijing proposed four principles as ground rules for promoting ties between them. These included: promoting peaceful coexistence; promoting economic prosperity; non-interference in their internal affairs; and respecting territorial integrity and sovereignty.<sup>5</sup> Beijing also was successful in promoting its one China policy. Central Asian states reiterated that the government of the People’s Republic of China is the sole legal government of China, and Taiwan is an inalienable part of the Chinese territories adding that the governments of Central Asia opposes any attempt to create “two Chinas”, or “one China, one Taiwan”, and reaffirms that Central Asian states will not establish any form of official relationship with Taiwan.

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<sup>3</sup> John Anderson, “The International politics of Central Asia”. (Manchester University Press, 1997), p. - 196.

<sup>4</sup> Dianne L. Smith, “Central Asia: A new Great Game?” Part V (<http://www.milnet.com>).

<sup>5</sup> P.Stoban, “China’s Central Asia Dilemma”

Gradually, a new image of Central Asia has been drawn carefully for China. Beijing wanted to see stable and economically prosper Central Asia. Only in this case, the authorities in Beijing could put their hearts at ease and not to worry about the potential threats. Accordingly, the Chinese strategy towards Central Asia was to maintain stability through economic development.

The Chinese economic and commercial penetration to Central Asia surpassed all expectations. The trade ties deepened considerably as traders from both sides started to travel extensively. On the official level, the Chinese central authorities signed several agreements on Chinese credits to these countries. Moreover, the Chinese economic reforms and model of development attracted the attention of Central Asian leaders, who started to talk about adopting China's model of market economics for their own.

The proximity of Central Asia and economic boom in Xinjiang depended upon stability in the whole region of Central Asia and developed transportation links. The opening-up of the Trans-Eurasian railroad through Central Asia in 1990 and linking of Almaty and Urumchi by railroad in 1992 ensured a long-term role for China in Central Asia. A joint Central Asian-Chinese initiative of reviving the Silk Road and steps in this direction has also brought in a dramatic change in the Sino-Central Asian frontiers. The most ambitious plan of cooperation between China and Central Asia is a proposed construction of pipeline that would carry central Asian oil to China. "If the Chinese build a pipeline, Central Asia's importance to China will shift immeasurably in the 21-st century, as will Chinese military attitudes towards safeguarding their strategic oil reserves."<sup>6</sup>

Implementing their new strategy of 'political stability through economic cooperation and development', the Chinese authorities have been quick to assure Russia that they have no intention of threatening Moscow's interests in the region. China considers Russia as a significant player in Central Asia. Russia and China share a common interest in deterring ethno-nationalism and resurgent Islam in Central Asia.

At a 1992 meeting between Russian and Chinese Foreign Ministers, the Russian Foreign Minister noted, "Central Asia should remain a CIS sphere of influence, and not a sphere of extremist forces, and in particularly, of Islamic fundamentalism." The Chinese Foreign Minister replied that Russia and China "have common interests in preserving stability in the Central Asian region", that Chinese policy towards Central Asia would take into account the close ties that had been established between Russia and the region."<sup>7</sup> The recognition of Russia's 'natural' interests in the region was also evident in discussions in Shanghai during April 1996 following which Russia, China and those Central Asian states bordering China signed a confidence building treaty involving the demilitarization of their frontiers.<sup>8</sup> From the Chinese view, the treaty has transformed this long-contested area into what a Chinese scholar has called "a region of peace, friendship and cooperation."<sup>9</sup>

The Shanghai Five Forum organized by Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan became the principal organ of discussions on mutual cooperation and an

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<sup>6</sup> Dianne L. Smith, "Central Asia: A New Great Game?" Part V (<http://www.milnet.com>).

<sup>7</sup> ITARR-TASS World Service, in Russian, November 25, 1992, FBIS-SOV-229-95, November 27, 1992, p. -9

<sup>8</sup> BBC Summary of World Broadcast, SU/2598 G1, 29 April 1996.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Yahuda, "China's search for a Global Role", *Current History*, Sep., 1999, p-269.

active mechanism of coordinating mutual actions against the threats coming from international terrorism and how to combat it.

Promoting its new strategy in Central Asia, China understands that it is not easy task. There are some problems and misunderstandings in today's Sino-Central Asia relations. Central Asian leaders, especially those of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, have been extremely unhappy with continued Chinese nuclear testing carried out at Lop Nor to the east of the Kazkh border.<sup>10</sup>

Water rights and environmental issues also exist. For example, in January 1993 Kazakhstan and China agreed to build a water conservancy works over the Horgos River along their border, to address hydropower, flood control, and navigation interest. Alteration of the river flow affects both signatories and Uzbekistan, located downstream on the river.<sup>11</sup>

On China's part, the authorities in Beijing continue to worry about the ethnic issue, "with fears that Xinjiang's restive Muslims might link up with their fellows in the former Soviet Union".<sup>12</sup> The pressure from China has forced Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan to ban parties and activists fighting for an independent Uihuristan.

#### **4. Conclusion**

For China, the biggest concerns seem to arise out of fear of ethnic nationalism and revival of Islam and the possible impact of these trends for the security both in the region and in China itself.

However, recent years have witnessed a period of dialogue and cooperation, rather than the uncertainty and fear commonly found in the first years after the break-up of the Soviet Union.

At the turn of the century, Central Asia represents to China both a potential market for its growing economy, and a source of strategically important raw materials. China has actively established ties with the new republics. New railway links have appeared.

In spite of all problems existing between China and Central Asia today, China's strategy towards Central Asia remains to influence in the developing economic life of the region and maintain political stability through mutual cooperation.

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<sup>10</sup> Open Media Research Institute, 113, 11 June 1996 on Kazakh reaction to the test carried out three days earlier.

<sup>11</sup> Ross H. Monro, "China's Waxing Spheres of Influence" *Orbis*, Fall 1994, p. -602.

<sup>12</sup> John Anderson, "The International Politics of Central Asia" (Manchester University Press), 1997, p-197.