



Beijing's Great Game: Understanding Chinese Strategy in Central Eurasia

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Introduction

This past summer, largely ignored by Western media focused on the G8 Summit in Scotland that began a day later (an event that was itself subsequently crowded out of the news cycle by the terrorist attacks on the London transit system), another summit took place on the faraway steppes of Central Asia, one whose long-term geostrategic significance may well supersede both the pious promises of the Gleneagles meeting concerning African development and the political ramifications of the bombings in the British capital. On July 5, 2005, the heads of government of six Central Eurasian states—China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan—gathered in the Kazakh capital of Astana and took the first steps to transform their nearly decade-old grouping into an effective force in regional and international affairs. In terms of grand strategy, the Astana meeting represented another milestone in Beijing's patient diplomacy that heralds the advent of a new era in the region regardless of whether the particular agenda items of the postsummit communiqué are ever actualized.

While discussions of relations between the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC) tend to focus, not unreasonably, on such perennial flashpoints as the status of Taiwan, the military situation on the Korea Peninsula, and the balance of bilateral trade, the discourse on this side of the Pacific Ocean

has largely ignored Central Asia as a geopolitical theater, much less as a potential bone of contention.¹ However, given the prominent place that the region has historically played and continues to enjoy in Chinese political, economic, and military calculations as well as present-day Central Eurasia's significance to overall American policy—with its combination of weak states, proven energy resources, radical Islamist movements, and unrivaled geopolitical position between America's former cold war rival and the rising power of the PRC—it is important that policymakers understand the Middle Kingdom's strategic interests there and how they might affect U.S. global power and influence.

A Long History

Although much has been made of the "great game" that was played out in Central Asia during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as Russia and Britain competed for diplomatic and military advantage in the Eurasian heartland,² comparatively little attention has been paid to imperial China's contemporaneous expansion into the region³—no little irony when one considers that the Chinese presence has endured while both European empires have faded into memory.

In order to appreciate the Chinese state's historic interest in the areas immediately beyond its northwest, it is necessary to debunk

the classic Western myth about the “Great Wall” (or, to translate more accurately the Chinese *changcheng*, the “Long Walls”) that successive imperial dynasties built along that frontier. As Owen Lattimore once noted, contrary to the conventional explanation, the barrier was not so much to keep the barbarians out as to keep the Chinese in, an “attempt to establish a permanent cultural demarcation between the lands of nomad tribes and the lands held by settled people.”⁴ Lattimore observed, “From early times the Chinese, when they penetrated too deeply into the steppe environment, were likely to break away from the main body of the nation.”⁵ Thus for the empire’s rulers the objective of the walls was to “put an end to the ebb and flow of frontier history and maintain the civilization of China in the closed world that was its ideal”⁶—or, in more modern parlance, to secure national unity and territorial integrity.

By the time the Han Ming dynasty replaced its Mongol Yuan predecessor in the late fourteenth century, however, the futility of demarcating a stable frontier along the boundless steppes and deserts of Central Asia was recognized by Beijing. If the walls could not provide the desired buffer, then the vast lands beyond them would.⁷ As a result of this realization, the policy shifted under the Ming (1368–1644), eventually alternating between aggressive military campaigns against the Mongol and Turkic tribes as well as ambitious government-sponsored commercial efforts—the latter aimed primarily at exchanging a relatively abundant Chinese commodity, tea, for a much-needed natural resource that China historically proved incapable of producing internally, cavalry horses—both of which were attempts to impose order along the border areas. In addition, the Ming rulers, especially the Yongle emperor (1402–1424), set about systematically to ward off the threat of any unified Mongol resurgence or other encroachment from the steppes against the security of their empire by carefully balancing the forces of the various

tribes against one another in a rather sophisticated framework.

The Manchu Qing dynasty (1644–1911) that took the place of the Ming perfected these tactics of economic exchange, diplomatic bonds, and military force. Recognizing that the peoples of the steppes used licenses to trade with the Middle Kingdom to increase the resources of their own nascent states, Qing officials artfully used the commercial ties to weaken potential threats like the Zunghar Mongols under Galdan Tseren (1727–1745) and to bind potential allies to China by offering them goods in exchange for peaceful relations. It is not surprising, for example, that the value of the northwest frontier trade passing through Suzhou went from 41,000 taels⁸ of silver in 1743–1744 to more than 186,200 in 1750—years that not so coincidentally marked the period immediately before the Qing army put an end to the by then isolated Zunghar state.⁹ In fact, when the Zunghar leader Dawaci (1753–1755) tried to revive Mongol power, the Qing shut down all trade, cutting off access to what had become the material basis for his realm. Thus as Huang Tinggui, who served two terms in the 1750s as governor general of the Qing’s new northwestern provinces argued, frontier trade was a “national security affair” (*guojia gongshi*) because tying the peoples of the steppes to the Chinese empire through trading links rendered them less able—as well as less inclined—to disturb the stability of the border regions.¹⁰

Nor was the economic strategy strictly externally oriented. All parts of the empire contributed to commerce with the steppes; for example, government officials offered subsidies to encourage merchants to take up the border trade, including no-interest loans, payment for transport costs, and the use of military carts. Even if the economic returns were slight, officials believed that the increased communication strengthened their hand in the region by binding it closer to the rest of the empire. Likewise, Qing officials adopted a tactic that

is not unfamiliar to observers of contemporary Chinese policies in the same areas: Huang Tinggui, for example, urged officials in Zhili, Henan, Shandong, and Shanxi to encourage a migration of Han from those provinces that even then were much more densely populated than the northwestern regions “at the back of beyond” (*tianmo zhi qiongbian*).

When commercial integration failed to tie the barbarian tribes to the Son of Heaven, the latter did not hesitate to use force to induce recognition of his supremacy. The Kangxi emperor (1662–1722), for example, personally led three major campaigns against the peoples of the steppes. His grandson, the Qianlong emperor (1735–1796), succeeded in incorporating what is today known as Xinjiang (“the New Frontier”) into his empire by destroying the remnants of the Zunghar khanate in a series of campaigns that constituted some of the largest military operations ever mobilized anywhere in the world until the advent of the twentieth century.

The economic and military pressures exerted by the Qing on the polities of Central Asia would have been for naught if the Zunghars and other nomadic peoples had had truly boundless space into which they could have retreated from the encroaching power. However, the Sino–Russian accords of the period, especially the treaties of Nerchinsk (1689) and Kiakhta (1727), which were the first such agreements signed by China with a Western power, essentially closed the frontier by establishing borders that squeezed the tribes between the two empires, designating their members as subjects of either the Qing emperor or the Romanov tsar.¹¹ A significant provision of these Sino–Russian treaties obligated the two empires to surrender to each other such dissidents as might seek refuge across the newly demarcated frontiers.

In summary, China’s interest in the Central Asia region, going back to the very beginnings of modern state building, represents an evolving frontier stabilization-cum-imperial project

involving economic, military, and diplomatic components that continue to the present day.

Three Bases for Contemporary Policy

Surveying contemporary Chinese strategy in Eurasia, one finds confirmation of the veracity of the dictum that *plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose*. Three of the four fundamental bases of the PRC’s policies toward the Russian Federation and the five Central Asian republics since the collapse of the Soviet Union would have been familiar to the mandarins of the Ming and Qing dynasties as would the economic, military, and diplomatic tools Beijing uses to further those objectives.

Stability Along the Northwest Frontier

Although the states of Central Asia do not present a threat to China in the conventional military sense—or at least no more than the Zunghars and other nomadic peoples threatened the survival of the Chinese empire after the overthrow of Mongol Yuan—their ethnic ties to peoples of the PRC’s Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR) are a perennial source of concern to the Chinese leadership. One authoritative Chinese commentator has even noted: “China considers its relations with the Central Asia states from the point of view of the stability and development of Xinjiang.”¹² Sharing borders with eight nations and comprising more than one-sixth of China’s land area, Xinjiang is the largest political subdivision in the PRC—and the only one where the Han Chinese population does not predominate. According to the official figures published following China’s 2000 census, a majority of Xinjiang’s 19 million inhabitants hail from ethnic minorities. The largest group, the Uighurs,

consists of ethnic Turks whose 8,345,622 members make up 45 percent of the region's population, more than the 7,489,919 Han Chinese. There are also 1,245,023 Kazakhs as well as significant numbers of Kyrgyz, Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Mongols.¹³ Although the numbers represent a considerable proportional decline for ethnic minorities as a result of the PRC's policy of encouraging the migration of Han Chinese into the region—Uighurs once made up 93 percent of Xinjiang's population—they still present a potential demographic challenge to Beijing's control.¹⁴

Although most members of the minority groups submit peacefully to Beijing's rule, in recent years, talk of demonstrations, bombings, executions, and an air of general menace have filled reports on Xinjiang in the popular media as well as official documents and scholarly literature.¹⁵ While Muslim separatist sentiment has simmered among the Uighur since the PRC took over the government of Xinjiang from the defeated Nationalist regime—and before that since Qing incorporated the territories that now make up the XUAR into the Chinese state—three clusters of events in the 1990s brought tensions boiling to the surface. The first was an armed uprising that took place in Baren (near Kashgar) in April 1990 and was characterized by the rebels' use of religious rhetoric as well as mosques. Then, from late 1992 through 1993, a series of bombings and attempted bombings, mostly unclaimed, took place; they were aimed at civilian targets, including businesses and public transportation. Finally, from early 1996 through early 1997, attacks targeted officials and culminated in the February 1997 riots in Yining during which members of the Uighur majority attacked Han Chinese officials and civilians. The seriousness of these events is attested to by the January 21, 2002, release by the Information Office of the PRC State Council of a document entitled "East Turkistan' Terrorist Forces Cannot Get Away with Impunity" listing more than 200 violent acts

allegedly committed by separatist groups in Xinjiang between 1999 and 2001 that it claimed resulted in the deaths of 162 people and the wounding of 440 others—Beijing's first public acknowledgement of organized antiregime activity in the region.¹⁶

Just as there is no doubt that a certain diplomatic opportunism in Beijing's post-9/11 linkage of the separatists with broader Islamist terrorist organizations enables it to position itself as an ally in America's "global war on terror," there is no denying that significant elements of the local populations in Xinjiang and other regions on China's northwest frontier identify more closely with Muslim Central Asia than with the Han culture of the East. The long dormant religious issue became increasingly prominent between the late 1970s and the mid-1980s to a certain extent as a response to the excesses of the Cultural Revolution in China as well as part of the global phenomenon of the rise of political Islam. By the mid-1980s, Muslims in the XUAR had more mosques per capita than their coreligious anywhere in the world, an astounding ratio of one mosque for every 150 people—and this in an atheist state. During the 1990s, the Taliban in Afghanistan trained militant Muslims from Xinjiang to fight the Chinese "occupation" of what they considered part of the *dar al-islam*, including some Uighurs who eventually landed in Guantánamo as "unlawful combatants" after the United States overthrew the Mullah Omar's would-be caliphate. Furthermore, according to the 2002 report by the PRC State Council, the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) sent "scores of terrorists" into China, where they established a dozen bases and trained more than 150 terrorists. Independently, U.S. officials, including then Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage, have linked ETIM with Al Qaeda and the Taliban, a not particularly surprising conclusion considering that its leader, Hasan Mahsum, was killed during a Pakistani government raid on an Al Qaeda hideout on the Pakistani border with Afghanistan. Another

Uighur group, the East Turkistan Liberation Organization (ETLO), has been linked to Afghan and Chechen Islamists.

Consequently, in an effort to secure stability along its Central Asian borders, Beijing has sought the cooperation of Russia and other regional states facing the same challenges from Islamist as well as ethnic separatists. The latter factor, perhaps even more than commercial considerations, led to the creation, during a 1996 summit in Shanghai, of a regional association mandated to delimit state boundaries and encourage military-political cooperation as well as treat more economic issues. The interests of the Central Eurasian states all converge in the same nexus: If any of them disintegrates, all will be engulfed in the ensuing chaos.

Access to Natural Resources

Although Xinjiang represents considerable demographic and political challenges to the government in Beijing, the region is a major source of natural resources: Some 115 of the 147 minerals to be found in the PRC are located in the northwestern region.¹⁷ The region also holds out the promise of significant petroleum resources, as then Premier Li Peng noted in a 1997 article in which he singled out three oil basins in the northwestern region's borders, Turpan, Jungar, and Tarim.¹⁸ They become of increasing importance when one considers that the growing Chinese economy has been a net importer of oil since 1993 and that by 2010 its oil deficit is estimated to be more than 100 million tons per annum and its gas deficit around 30 billion tons.¹⁹ If China's long-term grand strategy of "peaceful rise" (*heping jueqi*) is to have any chance of succeeding, the country must overcome the scarcity of natural resources available to support both its huge population and its growing economy.²⁰

As the PRC continues its exploration of the possible reserves within its borders, it is turning to Central Asian states. Even though it is not in

the same class as the Persian Gulf region, the Caspian Sea Basin has more than enough hydrocarbon reserves to play a significant role in the global political economy of the twenty-first century. Total accessible reserves across the latter region are estimated to amount to 28 billion barrels of oil and 243 trillion cubic feet of gas (equivalent to 50 billion barrels of oil).²¹ In 1997 the state-owned China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) acquired the Uzen oilfield in western Kazakhstan. This was followed by Chinese entrance into the Zhanazhol, Kenjiyake, and Wujing fields. Over time the nature of these enterprises has diversified from sole ownership to joint ventures.

To facilitate its access to the proved energy sources in Central Eurasia, the PRC has invested billions of dollars since a May 2004 accord in a 1,000-kilometer-long pipeline that will link Kazakhstan to Xinjiang. Eventually this pipeline will be connected to the Kenqiyaq oil field currently being modernized by a joint Sino-Kazakh venture as well as to ports on the Caspian Sea via another Sino-Kazakh pipeline completed in 2003. Another, shorter pipeline to the Turkmen border is also under construction. Furthermore, just last fall, still smarting from the squelched attempt by the government-owned Chinese National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) to acquire U.S. oil producer Unocal Corporation, Beijing's China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) consummated a \$4.18 billion deal to buy Canadian-owned PetroKazakhstan, a company in the Central Asian state that possesses estimated total reserves of 502.9 million barrels of oil, 32.1 million barrels of oil equivalent in natural gas liquids, and 88.4 billion cubic feet of natural gas.²²

Economic Development and Consolidation of the Interior

From Beijing's point of view, increased trade with Central Asia serves two distinct

but closely related goals. Chinese leaders count on commerce spurring economic development that will strengthen the hands of the generally secular governments of the Central Asian republics against Islamist groups who have ties with separatists in Xinjiang. At the same time, the Chinese leadership hopes that greater economic growth will also dampen secessionist sentiments on their own side of the border. In short, Central Eurasia is a paradigm for Beijing's declared foreign policy principle of promoting "peace and development" (*hepingti yu fazhan*).

The Central Asian republics, although rich in natural resources that the PRC has been quick to exploit, are saddled with relatively underdeveloped industrial sectors—another legacy of the Soviet-era central planners. In their own development programs as independent states, they have largely relied on the energy sector to drive their economies and have generally neglected their light industries. As a result, all five states rely on the import sector for consumer goods. In response, China has invested in light industry in its XUAR and other northwest areas where historically its own industrial base is weaker and the quality of human resources is poorer than in its eastern and maritime provinces. Thus Chinese policymakers see the economic integration of northwest China and Central Asia as complementary to the interests of both the PRC and its neighbors. Although the latter's markets stand to benefit from a steady supply of consumer goods produced relatively close by, the former gets economic development that it recognizes as a central component of long-term stability in an otherwise volatile region.

To facilitate trade, China has made concessionary yuan-denominated loans to Central Asian states for the purchase of PRC-manufactured goods. It has also invested in the building of rail links with Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan and has explored similar opportunities with the other states in the region. Beijing's concerted effort has recently begun to pay off.

According to data published by the Central Intelligence Agency, the PRC is now Kazakhstan's fourth largest export market (9.9 percent) and its second largest source of imports (15.4 percent). Similarly, China is Kyrgyzstan's third largest export market (12 percent) and its largest source of imports (26.3 percent) and Uzbekistan's second largest export market (14.7 percent) and its sixth largest source of imports (5.8 percent).²³ These figures, incidentally, reflect only formal trade. If informal markets were factored in, it is likely that commerce with China would be the most important trade partnership for the Central Asian states.

Over the long term, China stands to reap considerable benefits strategically as well as economically from these commercial ties, especially if it can position itself as the bridge connecting the vast Central Asian oil resources with key Asian consumers, including Japan and Korea, in addition to the PRC itself. The pipeline to Kazakhstan, for example, will go a long way to solving the infrastructure gaps in China's domestic energy system, especially if it induces Asian and Pacific consumers of Central Asian crude to invest in Chinese pipelines to link the oil and gas in the west to the country's eastern and maritime provinces. The latter are not only the PRC's main energy consumers but could also serve as a refining link for the Pacific region and perhaps even beyond.

While Beijing's ambitions will be fulfilled in the distant future, if at all, its strategy with regard to energy-related foreign policy in Central Asia likewise represents a commitment for the long haul. To cite just one example, on December 26, 2002, China signed an agreement with Pakistan that allowed Islamabad to borrow \$118 million at concessionary rates from Beijing's export-import bank. The proceeds of the loan are to be used to construct new port facilities in Gawadar, a city in Pakistan's Western Balochistan Province. The day before this deal, Iranian President Mohammad Khatami concluded a three-day visit to Pakistan during which he discussed a proposed gas pipeline

from Iran to India via Pakistan. The day after the loan arrangement, Pakistani Prime Minister Zafarullah Khan Jamali initialed a deal with Turkmen President Saparmurat Niyazov and Afghan President Hamid Karzai to proceed with planning for a trans-Afghanistan gas line linking their three countries. If—and one must cautiously reiterate that what is being considered is a long-term future scenario with many political and economic “ifs” along the way—these plans bear fruition, China eventually stands to gain invaluable strategic access to the Middle East via Central Asian networks to which it is presently connecting.

The Dragon and the Bear

Although many of the same motivations that drive its policies toward the Central Asian republics also condition its relations with Russia, perhaps even more significant are the concerns that Beijing and Moscow share about Washington's global power, the fourth pillar of China's foreign policy in Eurasia. Even before the advent of the George W. Bush administration, which entered into office concerned about the challenge that the PRC posed to America in the new century, Chinese policymakers had been preoccupied with the implications of America's status as the postcold-war world's leading political, economic, and military power. Throughout the 1990s, the United States took or threatened to take action on a host of issues, ranging from human rights to trade access to the status of Taiwan, which, at least by its lights, adversely affected Beijing. As a consequence, many Chinese policymakers and academicians came to view American actions through a certain hermeneutic of suspicion that was preoccupied with their own nation's security and domestic stability. Great attention is paid in Beijing's policy circles—often considerably more than in those of Washington and New York—when scholars like the University of Chicago's John Mearsheimer publish works

calling for the United States to “reverse course and do what it can to slow the rise of China.”²⁴

One of Beijing's principal responses to what it perceived to be the danger of U.S. hegemony was to forge the “strategic partnership” with Russia that was announced in Shanghai in April 1996. A joint statement released a year later during Chinese President Jiang Zemin's visit to Moscow pledged both countries to “promote the multipolarization of the world and the establishment of a new international order” and to “reject hegemonism and power politics.”²⁵ A decade later, Jiang's successor, Hu Jintao, met in Moscow with Russian President Vladimir Putin before the Astana summit. The two leaders issued a “Joint Statement Regarding the International Order of the 21st Century” and, invoking the 1997 communiqué, repudiated unnamed states that “pursue the right to monopolize or dominate world affairs” by seeking to “divide countries into a leading camp and a subordinate camp” and “impos[ing] models of social development.”²⁶ In response, China and Russia pledged themselves to pursue “good neighborly, friendly, and cooperative relations.”²⁷

Despite the differences that some observers have tried to discern between the foreign policies of Jiang and Hu, there has been remarkable continuity. Complementing its grand strategy of “peaceful rise,” Beijing has consistently advocated a theory of “democracy of international relations” (*guoji guanxi minzhuhua*), democracy being understood as a multipolar system protective of national prerogatives and requiring an institutionalized multilateral approach to global concerns. The postcold-war Sino-Russian rapprochement certainly had its origins in a common interest in curbing U.S. power.

In any event, even if the initial incentive was external, internal dynamics have driven the bilateral relationship. Russia can—and, in fact, needs to—export what the PRC requires, military hardware as well as energy resources. The most concrete manifestation of the

Sino–Russian partnership has been Russia’s arms sales to China. Over the course of the last decade, this relationship has been gradually transformed from one based primarily on sales to increasingly sophisticated technology transfers. A 1996 memorandum between the two governments, for example, committed Russia to assist China’s development of new weapons systems. The following year, a \$2.5 billion licensing agreement granted China the right to produce up to 200 Su-27 fighters at a plant in Shenyang.²⁸ Since then, a significant number of Russian scientists have been recruited to work on the Chinese defense industry’s research and development programs.

Even aside from technology transfers and joint development, Russian arms sales to China have been prodigious. A partial list culled from various sources would include 20 Su-27SK fighters and 6 Su-27UBKs delivered to the Chinese Air Force in 1992 (subsequently followed by 50 Su-27s as well as 76 Su-30MKKs); 2 Project 956EM *Sovremenny*-class destroyers delivered to the Chinese Navy in 2000, followed by 2 Project 877EKM diesel-powered submarines and 2 Project 636 (an upgrade of the 877EKM) submarines the following year (8 additional Project 636 submarines were ordered in 2002); 8 regiments of the S-300PMU1 long-range anti-aircraft missile systems and 27 short-range Tor-M1 systems delivered to the Chinese Army, with 4 regiments of the more modern S-300PMU-2 to follow. Reports are that Beijing continues to pressure Moscow to make more equipment available through the Russian arms export monopoly Rosoboronexport. Although these acquisitions by themselves have not altered the Central Eurasian military balance of power, they have enhanced the PRC’s capability to project its power relative to its capacity were it left reliant exclusively on indigenous weapons systems and technologies.

On the other hand, Beijing’s current policy vis-à-vis Moscow should not be taken for some sort of resurrection of the Sino–Soviet alliance

during the early cold war. The “strategic partnership” carries neither mutual defense obligations nor even explicit political commitments to oppose U.S. interests regionally, much less globally. Although Beijing provides Moscow with the industrial products and foreign exchange that the Russians need and the nations share mutual concerns about Central Asia and Islamist movements, Chinese leaders recognize that continued economic growth is even more vital to their regime’s stability and that, at least for the foreseeable future, America will be their preeminent source for requisite technological innovations and foreign direct investment, as well as the largest market for their exports. As former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger put it succinctly in an op-ed article, because “neither China nor Russia can afford to jettison its relationship with the United States,” their partnership is “not so much a break with the United States (at least not yet) as a rebalancing.”²⁹

It should not be forgotten that significant obstacles stand in the way of any potential Sino–Russian alliance. There is widespread dissatisfaction among Russian nationalists with the border arrangement reached between Beijing and Moscow in 1991. Over the long term, issues over boundary lines will pale in comparison with demographic challenges. The approximately 8 million Russian citizens living in the Russian Far East face more than 100 million Chinese in the neighboring PRC provinces of Heilongjiang, Jilin, and Liaoning. Despite the fact that up-to-date numbers are virtually nonexistent, both current anecdotal accounts and demographic evidence that was compiled in the 1990s indicate that the Russian population’s steady migration out of the region is being balanced by a large influx of illegal Chinese immigrants.³⁰ Finally, if China maintains its present rate of economic growth while Russia fails to alter its own decline, it will be increasingly difficult to sustain a “strategic partnership” based on the relative parity of national power.

Strategic Prospects for China in Central Asia

As Russian power declines and Chinese economic, political, and military strength grows, Beijing's relationships with the countries of Central Eurasia have necessarily changed and will continue to evolve to reflect the new reality.

The primary vehicle that has given institutional structure to the pursuit by China of its strategic objectives in Central Asia has been the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Established in 1996 as the "Shanghai Five" (China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan) with a mandate to resolve border disputes and reduce armed tensions along the frontiers—among other provisions, a 1997 accord among members of the association agreed to limit their force strength within 100 kilometers of each side of the former Sino-Soviet border and to establish monitoring regimes—the group evolved and cooperation increased in the members' fight against Islamist extremism.

Because each member has a significant stake in it, the SCO's potential for institutional and operational growth should not be underestimated. To cite just one example relating to Chinese interests, at the June 2001 meeting in Shanghai of the regional group, the presidents of the original five states, now joined by their Uzbek colleague, signed a declaration establishing the SCO and pledging to work together to combat international terrorism, national separatism, and religious extremism. The accord was a victory for the PRC, which gained the endorsement of the Central Asian regimes for (or, at the very least, their neutrality in) its campaign to squelch separatism among the Turkic-speaking Muslim Uighurs in Xinjiang who have grown increasingly restive under Han rule. This is particularly important from Beijing's perspective because the separatist activity is not located in some

isolated pocket but in a strategically and economically important region that borders a vast Muslim world that could potentially provide extensive moral and material support for the dissidents. For example, not long after the signing of the foundational accord for the SCO, Kyrgyzstan, whose press, especially the independent newspaper *Res Publica*, had been critical of China's treatment of Uighurs, extradited to China two Uighurs, both alleged to be members of ETIM, who were accused of planning attacks in Xinjiang from their sanctuary in the Kyrgyz capital of Bishkek.

Over time it can be expected that China will use the SCO as both a carrot and a stick. On the one hand, China will exert its superior power vis-à-vis the Central Asian republics, especially Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, to get them both to crack down on Uighur nationalism and to maintain official silence in the event of the further repression of dissidents in Xinjiang if they wish to maintain friendly relations and increasingly significant economic ties with the PRC. On the other hand, Chinese leaders recognize the inescapable linkage between Xinjiang and Central Asia, the stability and prosperity of the northwestern province being closely tied to the overall stability and prosperity of Central Asia.

Consequently, Beijing will continue to promote regional economic cooperation and integration, recognizing that economic prospects will attract an increasingly wider circle of Eurasian countries into its orbit through the mechanism of the SCO, including countries that do not directly border Central Asia—thus also serving to increase China's global influence. The July 2005 summit in Astana, for example, granted India (albeit at Russia's request), Pakistan, and Iran observer status in the SCO alongside Mongolia—bringing the regional grouping to represent nearly 50 percent of the world's population. If anything, the fact that India sought an association with the SCO at a meeting where the regional bloc became the first in the world to

come out, at Beijing's insistence, in opposition to the bid by Brazil, Germany, India, and Japan to acquire permanent seats on the United Nations Security Council is an acknowledgment of the organization's growing geopolitical significance in Central Eurasian security and economic affairs and, by implication, in those of the PRC as well.

Furthermore, although the declarations of the SCO summits, including the most recent one, have been careful to stress the "eternal friendship" between China and Russia (as well as the smaller states in Central Eurasia), there is no denying that the relationship is increasingly asymmetric in favor of the PRC's growing strength. The SCO permits Beijing to become more involved in a region that, until very recently, was part of Moscow's empire, avoiding open confrontation with the Russians. As one analyst summarized it succinctly, the PRC "demonstrates great tact and, in every way possible, underscores the equality in its relations with Russia as it takes into account the hidden, but fully justified inferiority complex of its Russian counterpart."³¹

In fact, that the balance of power has already tipped in Beijing's favor can be seen in the delineation of the Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and Tajik borders with China that have come about under the aegis of the SCO. With agreements made in 1996 and 1999, China has received substantial transfers of land that would have been inconceivable under the Soviet regime or even its tsarist predecessor, including much of the disputed Uzeng-Kuush drainage area along the 758-kilometer border with Kyrgyzstan. Similar results were achieved in the 1994, 1997, and 1998 accords with Kazakhstan and the 1999 treaty with Tajikistan. One of the foremost American scholars of the region, Martha Brill Olcott, has noted that "the concession of territory by the Central Asian states was a recognition of China's potential for hegemonic power in the region, and all of the region's leaders were eager to ingratiate themselves with leaders in Beijing."³²

Washington's Interests and Beijing's Great Game

It would be overly simplistic to view China's growing influence in the Central Asian republics as *prima facie* evidence of Beijing's hostile intentions toward Washington. As noted earlier, it would probably be more accurate to see it as the current manifestation of a centuries-old strategic interest whose economic, security, and diplomatic foundations are just as likely to have no direct linkage to Sino-American relations. In fact, there are potential complementarities between Chinese interests in the region and American policy objectives. For example, China's opposition to Islamist movements and its support for the stability of secular regimes in the region dovetail nicely with the broader interests of the United States in Central Eurasia. Likewise, China's commercial interests in the five Central Asian republics are essential for their economic development and contribute to their long-term viability as independent nation-states liberated from quasi-colonial dependence on Russia.

In contrast to China's long-term stake in the region, Central Asia is virtually *terra incognita* for U.S. foreign policy. Even after the breakup of the Soviet Union, the American footprint was barely noticeable there. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, however, moved Central Asia from the outer reaches of the consciousness of American strategists and policymakers to its center, with the United States deploying all instruments of power, including military, to establish itself as a major actor in the region. As then Secretary of State Colin Powell remarked during a December 2001 visit to the Uzbek capital of Tashkent, U.S. interests in the region "go far beyond" the conflict in Afghanistan.³³ Relations between Washington and Tashkent have cooled considerably since the halcyon days when Operation Enduring Freedom depended heavily on the use of the

Karshi-Khanabad (K2) air base in southern Uzbekistan (as well as refueling and flyover rights throughout Central Asia)—to say nothing of the Bush administration's reliance on the Uzbeks' accommodating reception of the terrorist suspects shipped to it via the practice of "extraordinary rendition"—and the U.S. government reciprocated with considerable military and economic largesse as well as turning a blind eye to President Islam Karimov's excesses.

Matters nonetheless came to a head last year when Uzbek security forces attacked demonstrators in Andijon, killing an estimated 700 and driving others to take refuge in Kyrgyzstan.³⁴ In July 2005, after the Astana summit of the SCO issued a call for a withdrawal timetable when the United States backed a UN airlift of the refugees out of the region, Uzbekistan invoked a termination clause and ordered the closure of the K2 base within six months. Despite the fact that the Karimov regime's expulsion of the U.S. military was done for domestic political reasons, it also ingratiated itself with Moscow and Beijing, both of which had viewed the American presence in a region they considered their own with not inconsiderable unease. Less than two months after Tashkent asked the U.S. military to leave, Russia and Uzbekistan conducted joint "antiterrorist" military exercises on Uzbek territories—the first such maneuvers since the breakup of the Soviet Empire. As the Russians hold out the prospect of increased military ties, the Chinese offer an even more potentially attractive bid of access to their expanding market without any demands for economic or democratic reforms—a point not lost on Karimov when, shunned by the West, he was given a warm welcome during a state visit to Beijing the same month his troops were suppressing dissidents at home.

Next door to Uzbekistan, the U.S. encouragement of democratization enjoyed better success when the March 2005 "Tulip Revolution" ended the increasingly authoritarian 14-year

rule of President Askar Akayev of Kyrgyzstan. Unfortunately for great power relations, the deposed ruler was a close ally of China, and his country shares a common border with Xinjiang. Worse still, one of the grievances that the opposition had with Akayev was his cessation of Kyrgyz territory to the PRC. Chinese Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing lamented the sudden nature of Akayev's fall and leading cadres were quick to label the change of regime "an instance of U.S. mischief making."³⁵

To be fair, at least with respect to Central Asia, democracy promotion as foreign policy predates the promulgation of the much debated "Bush Doctrine." In a 1997 speech given at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies that constituted one of the few pre-9/11 articulations of American policy in Central Eurasia, then Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott argued that the democratization of the region was not only consonant with American values but that it would serve U.S. interests.

If reform in the nations of the Caucasus and Central Asia continues and ultimately succeeds, it will encourage similar progress in the other New Independent States of the former Soviet Union, including in Russia and Ukraine. It will contribute to stability in a strategically vital region that borders China, Turkey, Iran, and Afghanistan and that has growing economic and social ties with Pakistan and India. The consolidation of free societies, at peace with themselves and with each other, stretching from the Black Sea to the Pamir Mountains, will open up a valuable trade and transport corridor along the old Silk Road between Europe with Asia. The ominous converse is also true. If economic and political reform in the countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia does not

succeed—if internal and cross-border conflicts simmer and flare—the region could become a breeding ground of terrorism, a hotbed of religious and political extremism, and a battleground for outright war. It would matter profoundly to the United States if that were to happen in an area that sits on as much as 200 billion barrels of oil.³⁶

Throughout the Clinton administration and the subsequent Bush presidency, the record of America's support of political democratization and economic liberalization in the region has been mixed and during the latter period heavily conditioned by the exigencies of the "global war on terror." Although there have been repeated denials of competition aimed at China (and Russia) coupled with reiterations of a "win-win" solution for all parties in Central Asia, Beijing cannot help wondering whether Washington's support for democratic values is necessarily above suspicion, given the inevitable corollary about access to energy in statements like Talbott's.

In short, although China has generally supported the U.S.-led campaign against Islamist terrorists in Central Asia—then Chinese President Jiang telephoned U.S. President Bush at the outset of air strikes in Afghanistan to express his backing—it remains wary of a longer term American presence, especially military, along its western periphery—the U.S. airbase at Manas in Kyrgyzstan is only 300 kilometers from the border with restive Xinjiang. Xing Guangcheng, director of the Institute of East European, Russian, and Central Asian Studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, has summarized the PRC's reasons for opposing NATO—and, by implication, American—military penetration of the region.

First, NATO's increased presence will generate an arms race. Second, closer military ties between NATO and the

Central Asian states will not promote the elimination of "hot spots" in the region, but rather aggravate military confrontation. Third, NATO's constant military exercises cannot help but cause concern and alarm in China. Fourth, some NATO members have provided secret support to nationalist separatist activities in the Chinese region of Xinjiang, which directly threatens China's security and stability.³⁷

In response to what it views as U.S.–NATO encroachment through programs like the Partnership for Peace (PfP) program, which all five Central Asian republics have joined, China has, under the aegis of the SCO, held a series of increasingly sophisticated joint military maneuvers with its regional partners. The first part of "Cooperation 2003," for example, entailed a command post exercise in eastern Kazakhstan featuring staff officers from China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia, as well as a joint maneuver by Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and Russian forces. The second part of "Cooperation 2003," situated in Xinjiang, entailed a joint Sino-Kyrgyz counterterrorism exercise. In June of the following year, the SCO opened a regional counterterrorism center in Tashkent. During the July SCO summit in Astana, Chinese President Hu Jintao got his Russian and Kazakh counterparts to join him in calling for the United States to provide a timetable for the withdrawal of American forces from Central Asia. One month later, "Peace Mission 2005," an unprecedented Sino–Russian joint military exercise involving 10,000 army, naval, and air personnel, was held near Vladivostok and China's Shandong Peninsula. Moscow's *Pravda* made no secret of the motivation for the maneuvers, announcing that "the reconciliation between China and Russia has been driven in part by mutual unease at U.S. power and a fear of Islamic extremism in Central Asia."³⁸

In the future the PRC can be expected to continue fostering regional efforts designed at least in part to keep to a minimum the influence in the region of the United States and its allies—especially ethnic “big brother” Turkey, which has, since the end of the Soviet Union, signed various cooperation accords with all of the Central Asian states. It is not surprising that the thinly veiled pre-Astana summit Sino–Russian statement on international order highlighted regional integration on both economic and security issues as “important” in a global environment that the two signatories viewed as threatened by unipolarity. Of course, China’s strategy runs the risk of fomenting tension and provoking the very danger that it is meant to prevent. U.S. policy in the region has suffered from a lack of consistency, being either conditioned by domestic American constituencies or focused almost exclusively on counterterrorism efforts—perhaps playing well at home but contrasting poorly in the region with China’s more long-term approach.³⁹ For both the People’s Republic of China and the United States, striking the right balance and avoiding a cold-warlike zero-sum game in Central Asia will require both careful discernment and prudent statecraft.

Conclusions

Like its historical antecedents, the “great game” being played out in Central Eurasia by China is as much a defensive measure as it is about expanding Chinese influence. Beijing is very interested in getting the Central Asian states along its western frontier to act against Islamist and pan-Turkic extremists who have been linked to disturbances among the ethnic Turkic minorities in Xinjiang. At the same time, the PRC wants to advance its interests in the region and benefit from regional economic, political, and military exchanges, especially the exploitation of Central Asia’s vast reserve of oil and other natural resources.

How the United States responds to this Chinese grand strategy—one that might be described as “ever ancient, ever new,” to borrow Augustine’s phrase—may ultimately prove to be the prime determinant not only in relative American and Chinese influence across the region but in relations between the two powers themselves.

About the Author

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Notes

1. A notable exception in this regard is the comprehensive May 2005 report prepared for the National Committee on American Foreign Policy by the director of its Russia and Central Asia Project, Professor Michael Rywkin. See Michael Rywkin, *Stability in Central Asia: Engaging Kazakhstan. A Report (with Policy Recommendations) on U.S. Interests in Central Asia and U.S.–Kazakh Relations* (New York, 2005).

2. See, *inter alia*, Peter Hopkirk, *The Great Game: The Struggle for Empire in Central Asia* (1990; New York, 1992); Karl E. Meyer and Shareen Blair Brysac, *Tournament of Shadows: The Great Game and the Race for Empire in Central Asia* (New York, 1999).

3. One exception to this rule is a recently published 725-page volume—the first full-length study of the subject in English—by

Professor Peter C. Perdue of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, *China Marches West: The Qing Conquest of Central Eurasia* (Cambridge, Mass., 2005).

4. Owen Lattimore, *Studies in Frontier History: Collected Papers, 1928–1958* (New York, 1962), 58.

5. *Ibid.*, 23.

6. *Ibid.*, 117.

7. In discussing China's imperial expansion, it is useful to keep in mind a distinction made in Ross Terrill, *The New Chinese Empire and What It Means for the United States* (New York, 2004), 230: "The Chinese empire was never quite *seen* as an empire by Beijing. Because it was not 'overseas,' it could (and can) be seen as the buffer zone of China, just as Siberia and Manchuria [were] intended to be Russia's buffer zone. In such circumstances, there is a frontier, but few rational boundaries."

8. A Chinese unit equivalent to approximately 1.2 troy ounces.

9. See *Collected Materials on the Zunghars* (Beijing, 1985), 134–137.

10. For an overview of the role of trade in inducing Central Asian peoples to accommodate themselves to Chinese imperial dominion, see Sechin Jagchid and Van Jay Symons, *Peace, War, and Trade along the Great Wall: Nomadic-Chinese Interactions through Two Millennia* (Bloomington, Indiana, 1989).

11. The treaties were negotiated in Latin by a French Jesuit missionary who accompanied the Kangxi emperor on his campaigns, Jean-François Gerbillon, and a Polish civil servant working for the Russians, Andrei Belobotsky.

12. Xing Guangcheng, "China and Central Asia," edited by Roy Allison and Lena Johnson, *Central Asian Security: The New International Context* (London and Washington, 2001): 153.

13. See Department of Population, Social, Science and Technology Statistics, National Bureau of Statistics, and Department of Economic...Development, State Ethnic Affairs Commission, *Tabulation on Nationalities of*

2000 Population Census of China (Beijing, 2003).

14. See John Pomfret, "Asian Leaders Target Muslim Extremists," *The Washington Post*, (July 16, 2001): A15.

15. For a useful survey of this material, see James Millward, *Violent Separatism in Xinjiang: A Critical Assessment*, Policy Studies 6 (Washington, 2004).

16. See People's Republic of China State Council, Information Office, "'East Turkistan' Terrorist Forces Cannot Get Away with Impunity" (January 21, 2002); available at <http://www.china-un.ch/eng/xwdt/t88226.htm> (last accessed November 10, 2005).

17. See Gaye Christoffersen, "Xinjiang and the Great Islamic Circle: The Impact of Transnational Forces on Chinese Regional Economic Planning," *China Quarterly* 133, (March 1993): 137.

18. Li Peng, "China's Policy on Energy Resources," *Xinhua* (May 28, 1997); available through FBIS, China (July 15, 1997).

19. Xing Guangcheng, "China's Foreign Policy Toward Kazakhstan," edited by Robert Legvold, *Thinking Strategically: The Major Powers, Kazakhstan, and the Central Asian Nexus*, American Academy Studies in Global Security (Cambridge, Mass., 2003): 126.

20. See Zheng Bijian, "China's Peaceful Rise to Great Power Status," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 84, no. 5 (September/October 2005): 18–24.

21. See Zanny Minton Beddoes, "Energy Industry to Transform in Next Decade," *Economist* (February 7, 1998): 7–12.

22. See Jason Singer, "CNPC Nears Kazakh Deal," *Wall Street Journal Europe*, (October 14–16, 2005): M1, M5.

23. See *World Factbook 2005*, available at <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/index.html> (last accessed November 10, 2005).

24. John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York, 2001): 402.

25. "Sino-Russian Joint Statement" (April 23, 1997); available at <http://www.nti.org/db/>

china/engdocs/chru0497.htm (last accessed November 10, 2005).

26. "Joint Statement of the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation Regarding the International Order of the 21st Century" (July 1, 2005); available at <http://www.politicalaffairs.net/article/view/1455/1/108> (last accessed November 10, 2005).

27. Ibid.

28. See "Country Briefing: China," *Jane's Defence Weekly* (December 10, 1997): 28.

29. Henry Kissinger, "Moscow and Beijing: A Declaration of Independence," *The Washington Post* (May 14, 1997): A15.

30. See Sherman Garnett, "The Russian Far East as a Factor in Russian-Chinese Relations," *SAIS Review*, vol. 16, no. 2 (summer-fall 1996): 6-8.

31. Boris Rumer, "The Powers in Central Asia," *Survival*, vol. 44, no. 3 (autumn 2002): 62.

32. Martha Brill Olcott, "Taking Stock of Central Asia," *Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 56, no. 2 (spring 2003): 7.

33. Colin L. Powell, "Remarks at Joint Press Conference with President Islam Karimov" (December 8, 2001), available at

<http://www.state.gov/secretary/former/powell/remarks/2001/dec/6749.htm> (last accessed November 10, 2005).

34. See International Crisis Group, *Uzbekistan: The Andijon Uprising* (Asia Briefing 38, May 25, 2005).

35. See Willy Lam, "Hu's Central Asian Gamble," *China Brief*, vol. 5, no. 15 (July 5, 2005): 7-8.

36. Strobe Talbott, "A Farewell to Flashman: American Policy in the Caucasus and Central Asia" (July 21, 1997); available at <http://www.treemedia.com/cfrlibrary/library/policy/talbott.html> (last accessed November 10, 2005).

37. Xing Guangcheng, "China's Foreign Policy Toward Kazakhstan," 110-111.

38. "Chinese, Russian First Joint Military Maneuvers Scheduled on Aug. 18-25," *Pravda*, August 2, 2005, available at <http://www.newsfromrussia.com/world/2005/08/02/60899.html> (last accessed November 15, 2005).

39. See Svante E. Cornell, "The United States and Central Asia: In the Steppes to Stay?" *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, vol. 17, no. 2 (July 2004): 239-254.