

**Conflict Studies Research Centre**



**Tensions in Sino-Central Asian Relations  
and their Implications for  
Regional Security**

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## **Key Points**

- \* Despite the current friendliness in relations with China, the states of Central Asia nourish an enduring distrust of Beijing, and even a sense of profound pessimism in the face of China's growing power.
- \* On China's side, the aim is to ensure stability on its western border and in Xinjiang.
- \* Problems in the relations between China and the countries of Central Asia require immediate responses from both sides. These include: border disputes, environmental hazards and water supplies as well as smuggling and ethnic and economic problems.
- \* The future of China's relationships with the Central Asian Republics is far from clear, given the pressure of other major players in the region. The current harmony maybe the preface to a period of prolonged tension and suspicion.

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# Tensions in Sino-Central Asian Relations and their Implications for Regional Security

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## Introduction

The break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the emergence of five new independent states in Central Asia, namely Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, have forced many countries to redefine their approach to this important geopolitical region. Once a backwater of the Soviet Empire, Central Asia has attracted attention during the last decade from leading international players such as China, USA, Russia, Turkey, Iran and India. The main purpose of this study is to concentrate on the analysis of China's relations with the countries of Central Asia since the dissolution of the USSR, its vision and policy in the region, and to analyze the problems that can hamper the development of good relations between two sides, with particular emphasis on the tensions between China and countries of Central Asia that might endanger the stability and security of the region.

## China and Central Asia<sup>1</sup>



It is widely accepted that relationships between China and the Central Asian republics have improved steadily since the Soviet Union collapsed. Along a border once marked by military tension, China and its neighbouring countries now foster increased trade and political cooperation in the framework of the Shanghai

Cooperation Organization. Central Asia is poised to become a major supplier of energy to China's rapidly growing economy.

However, the future of China's relationships with the Central Asian Republics is far from clear. The current harmony in Sino-Central Asian relations may be merely the prelude to a period of prolonged tension and suspicion. Notwithstanding the superficial cordiality in relations with China, the states of Central Asia nourish an abiding distrust of Beijing, and even a sense of profound pessimism in the face of China's growing power.

It is worthwhile to examine the roots of the Sino-Central Asian relationship, which are still visible and important today and which will also help to understand the present situation and possible development of Sino-Central Asian relations.

### **The Roots of the Sino-Central Asia relationship**

The relationship between China and Central Asia dates back to ancient times, when the Great Silk Route<sup>2</sup> linking China and the West passed through the territory of Central Asia.

A myriad of international contacts leading to intercultural enrichment took place. During the last two millennia the Chinese rulers repeatedly tried to conquer Central Asia, because of its important strategic place at the crossroads of trade routes. "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>3</sup> The first such an attempt happened during the Han dynasty (221 B.C.-A.D. 220), when military expeditions were launched against the Huns in 60 BC, and a Chinese viceroy installed himself in Xinjiang, which was part of Central Asia at that time and until then largely free of 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) did the Tang emperors make 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 in one of the most important turning points in world history. After this historic 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 from Central Asia.

The next attempt to re-establish Chinese influence happened only in the middle of the eighteenth century, when Emperor Qian Long in 1755-59 dispatched a new military expedition to Central Asia. As a result, 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 in the Ili Valley north of the Tian Shan mountains in order to weaken the influence of Kazakh and Mongol nomads.<sup>4</sup>

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 and Great Britain, with China trying to retain some influence in the region.

Manchu authority in Central Asia began to decline. Particularly dangerous were the expansion from tsarist Russia and from independence-seeking Uighurs. In Central Asia Russia managed to strengthen its position, conquering the khanates of Khiva and Kokand and the emirate of Bukhara in the middle of the nineteenth century and annexed 440,000 square kilometres of land, thus pushing the border of the tsarist empire 250 to 600 kilometres 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 for Afghanistan and Eastern Turkistan. 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, though in the long run neither united Turkestan nor strong nationalist movements would be allowed to flourish.

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 special Sino-Soviet relationship was renegotiated, and in 1955 the Chinese finally proclaimed the Xinjiang Uigur autonomous region as an integral part of the PRC.<sup>5</sup>

The above illustrations show that China always had its own image of Central Asia and plans for it as a crucial frontier region of great strategic importance. The balance of power which was reached in Central Asia between Russia and China in the 20th century was suddenly disrupted after the break up of the Soviet Union and pushed China to rethink its image of Central Asia and redefine its strategy and policy in the region.

### **The Break-up of the Soviet Union and China's New Strategy Towards Central Asia**

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the emergence of five new independent states in Central Asia have formed a new situation for China, the long-standing results of which are still unpredictable. China surprisingly finds itself surrounded by a new Central Asia, considered a backwater during the Soviet era, which could now play a significant role in Asian and world politics in the years to come.

Inheriting all the troubles of the post-Soviet transition, plus the renaissance 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 numerous concerns to China. Growing activities of other players in the Central Asian arena – the US, Turkey, Iran, Pakistan and India, also magnified Chinese concerns. China could not neglect an opportunity to further weaken the traditionally strong position of Russia in the region as well, though this was moderated by improved relations with Moscow in later years.

However, the first Chinese response to the unfolding situation was astonishingly cautious. The first official Chinese response 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.<sup>6</sup> Notwithstanding the official line, the Chinese leaders understood quite obviously the main threats to its security. The first trouble for China was the rise of ethnic nationalism and Islamic revival in the Central Asian republics. The potential impact of these events on Chinese Muslim outreach to Xinjiang was a significant factor for the Chinese in building a new approach towards newly independent states of Central Asia. In this situation, the Chinese authorities felt they had to take a tough line towards any separatist or Islamic activism in Xinjiang. China appeared to send a powerful message to its Central Asian neighbours, which were in favour of the Uighur movement towards independence, that China would not stand any interference in what it defined as its own internal affairs. Indeed, one can say that China's policies in Central Asia represent an outward projection of its own fears for its internal security. The governments of Central Asian states deferred to China on this point very quickly. They have promised not to provide any support or sanctuary for the Uighurs. Nevertheless, the threat of ethno-nationalism and Islamic resurgence in Central Asia remains a core component of Chinese policy in the region.<sup>7</sup>

On the diplomatic stage, China recognized the sovereignty of Central Asian states in December 1991. In January 1992 China signed separate communiqués on the establishment of diplomatic relations with the five states. In the same year, three presidents of Central Asian states: Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and 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 noticeably. 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>8</sup> Beijing was also 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 oppose any attempt to create "two Chinas", or "one China, one Taiwan", and reaffirm that Central Asian states will not establish any form of official relationship with Taiwan.

Slowly but surely, a new image of Central Asia has been drawn for China. Beijing wanted to see a stable and economically prospering Central Asia. In this case alone could the authorities in Beijing put their hearts at ease and not worry about the potential threats. The Chinese strategy towards Central Asia was therefore to maintain stability through economic development.

### **China's Goals in Central Asia**

Overall, China's engagement with Central Asia can be broken into four broad and overlapping categories. First, China recognizes the strategic importance of Central Asia and its potential impact on global events. Second, on the economic side, China understands the important role Central Asia can play in its future economic development, especially as a supplier of vital energy resources. Third, China has a security and political interest in making sure the individual nations of Central Asia develop in a way that does not threaten China, such as through the establishment of radical governments. Lastly, China recognizes that a multilateral approach to cooperation, in addition to stable bilateral relations, can help both China and the region as a whole achieve their shared interests.<sup>9</sup>

China clearly considers the region of Central Asia in the wider context of Eurasia. In the opinion of many of China's analysts, the region acts as a transcontinental link,



not only in a geographical sense, but also in a political and cultural sense. Central Asia is the bridge between East and West, and China is very much interested in the stability and prosperity of the region, especially as China's engagement with the European Union continues to develop. However, taking a lesson from the rise of the Taliban, Al Qaeda, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, and developments in the Middle East and Chechnya, Beijing recognizes that if Central Asia destabilizes, it will undermine the security of both the continent and China's frontier area. Thus, China also considers its relations with Central Asia in the context of the stability and development of Xinjiang. China keeps a close eye on Central Asia to make sure developments there do not upset the current situation in Xinjiang.

Although the growth of China's influence in the region is evident, official Chinese sources emphasize that the basic priorities of China's policy in Central Asia are to support regional stability, obtain access to Central Asian energy resources on a mutually beneficial basis, and further develop economic relations with the region.<sup>10</sup> China officially disavows any belief that it is seeking hegemony in the region. However, it is possible that with the growth of the political, economic and military power of China, Chinese priorities in Central Asia might change.

### **Economic Influence**

The growth of economic ties with Central Asia will provide China with the necessary financial resources to spread its influence through the region, particularly in the energy sphere. As made clear by the June 2003 visit of Chinese President Hu Jintao to Kazakhstan, China aims to protect its economic and national security by guaranteeing the delivery of energy from Kazakhstan through a pipeline currently under construction. Energy sources and other raw materials remain one of the most important products for China in its trade with countries of Central Asia. For example, in 2003 over 80% of Kazakhstan's exports to China were attributable to raw materials (sources of energy 58%, ferrous and non-ferrous metals 24%).<sup>11</sup>

Despite this active diplomatic effort, though, it is doubtful that China can significantly exert its influence over the Central Asian region. For China to exert any form of control over Central Asia or to succeed in any potential balance of power games with other outside powers, China must first dominate the region economically. China can only accomplish this by satisfying all the economic needs of any nation in the region, a near impossible task. While China represents the dynamic and accessible market for the export of goods free of Russian control, volume of trade between China and the region still accounts for less than 1% of China's foreign trade and only 10% of Central Asia's foreign trade, most of which is limited to the energy sector.

However, according to official Chinese statistics, the trade volume between China and the five Central Asian countries is growing rapidly. It reached 27 billion US dollars in 2004, 1.5 times more than the figure for 2000. The bilateral trade volume in the first nine months of 2005 equalled the previous year's figures, and was 4% higher than that for the same period in 2004.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, recently, the Chinese leadership told a meeting of regional leaders in Tashkent that it will invest about 4,000 million dollars in the Central Asian countries. For example, Chinese leaders spoke openly about their intention to pay the full cost of about \$1.5 billion for the construction of a highway from China to Central Asia, via Kyrgyzstan.<sup>13</sup>

The unofficial or shuttle trade, which is not included in the official statistics, is also growing rapidly. According to some estimates, it is comparable in scale to the official bilateral trade of China with countries of Central Asia.<sup>14</sup>

Therefore, it seems those countries that border China - Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan - are most susceptible to gradually falling under Beijing's influence, at least in economic terms. For example, as of 1994, China was already the biggest official market for export and the second largest market for import for Kyrgyzstan.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, the Kyrgyz-Chinese Commission on Trade and Economic Cooperation has developed a programme for large-scale and long-term partnership that includes more than five hundred projects. The recent renaming of Lenin Square as the Square of Deng Xiaoping in Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan, indicates that Chinese influence is clearly on the rise.

The economic relations of China with Kazakhstan will also continue to expand. Kazakhstan is already the largest trading partner of China in Central Asia and the second in the CIS with a trade turnover of more than \$3.3 billion.<sup>16</sup> The ethnic ties of Kazakhs of Kazakhstan and Kazakhs in China also serve to strengthen these connections. The opening of a railway route between Almaty and Urumchi gave Kazakhstan access to seaports in the Chinese province of Liaoning for conducting trade with the rest of the world. Chinese investment in the oil projects in the west of Kazakhstan also strengthens its economic presence in Kazakhstan. Two major factors constrain Chinese economic influence on Kazakhstan, however. First, Kazakhstan still maintains deep ties with Russia; ties that are perpetuated by the large Russian minority still living in Kazakhstan. Secondly, Kazakhstan's energy supplies have attracted global attention, with multinational Western corporations already controlling some of the best prospects for oil and gas development. Although China's investments in the Kazakhstan energy sphere are rather essential - 9 billion dollars in development of Uzen oil deposits and construction of an oil pipeline - it is not the biggest investment. The 20 billion dollar investment by Chevron in the development of the Tengiz oil deposits for Kazakhstan are considerably more essential. Besides, other international companies, such as British Gas, Mobil, Total, Agip, British Petroleum and others have signed with Kazakhstan agreements on developing various oil deposits. Therefore, as long as the world hungers for energy, China will have to compete with others for influence in Astana.

However, China is not afraid to compete with other great powers in Central Asia. It is already engaged in a number of important projects with the modern nations of Central Asia under the idea of reviving the "Great Silk Road". Today a new Silk Road is based on oil politics, opening of transport corridors, and regional cooperation, as well as on renewed political, tourist and cultural contacts. For China, a new Silk Road is a major strategy in stabilizing western borders as well as aiding an economic development strategy for the multi-ethnic region of Xinjiang. There are also key benefits for the newly independent states of the region in cooperation with China, especially in balancing Russian influence along a new silk route.<sup>17</sup> The future development of Central Asia depends on its ability to deepen infrastructure and communications linking it into east-west and centre-south flows of goods and information. Some positive steps have already been taken in this direction. One of the most impressive is the attempt to create a Asia-Europe Continental Bridge that connects 10 provinces and autonomous regions in China with countries of Central Asia and Western Europe, with a new southern branch linking China, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, and then westward into Europe.<sup>18</sup> Along with the Qinghai-Tibet Railway, this is part of China's effort to reduce development disparities between eastern and western zones of China.

China and the countries of Central Asia are all engaged in another major transport project aiming to connect Europe, the Caucasus Region and Asia. Called the

Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia (TRACECA), it has received serious support from the European Union in an effort to rebuild sea, road and railway links. From the point of view of the regions of Europe, South Asia and North-East Asia, Central Asia is a crucial linkage area of interregional contact, which can either result in division and conflict, as in the Cold War and the hot conflicts in Afghanistan, or in a new series of connections which allow more positive relationships.

Promoting its new strategy in Central Asia, China understands that this is not a simple task. There are some problems and misunderstandings in today's Sino-Central Asia relations. In the next sections, we shall concentrate on the analysis of these problems.

### **Threat Perceptions of China in Central Asia**

China's quick economic and political growth is raising fears in Central Asia that Beijing will in due course dominate the region both economically and militarily. These fears come irrespective of the friendly relations that have developed between regional governments over the past decade. China has persistently stressed that it wants to offer cooperation, not domination. But such assurances have not kept Central Asians from worrying about the long-term consequences of a Chinese superpower.

Beijing's intensified diplomatic activity in the region was highlighted when Chinese President Hu Jintao visited Kazakhstan in 2003 as part of his first foreign trip as head of state. After talks with Hu, President Nursultan Nazarbaev told reporters, "There are no unsolved social, economic or political issues between Kazakhstan and China today".<sup>19</sup> Central Asian officials are welcoming Beijing's higher regional profile, especially in Kazakhstan, where China offers an export alternative to the uncertain Caspian Basin development. But Central Asian governments are still suspicious of Beijing even as their ties with China grow. There has always been this fear that one day there may be some sort of Chinese military intervention in the region. This is a very unlikely scenario. Some people do not think that it is feasible, but it exists in the perception of the policymakers in the Central Asian capitals, and in the perception of the political scientists.<sup>20</sup> So their policy is always guided toward the need for conciliation with the Chinese. Most regional fear of China is general, and hardly ever focuses on a specific threat. Apart from Beijing's determination to raise the Chinese flag over Taiwan, China is not behaving in an expansionist way. Chinese authorities are committed to projecting themselves as a peace-loving nation, and stressing that everyone can benefit from China's economic growth.

The Chinese government and Chinese officials are extremely worried about the perception in the wider world that China poses any kind of threat. Diplomatically, the Chinese are always keen to project an image of international cooperation rather than confrontation. And they're very keen to be seen as good neighbours within the Asia-Pacific region, e.g. cooperation with ASEAN, cooperation over North Korea, etc.

Territorial disputes had been a painful spot in Chinese relations with Central Asia. But Beijing made significant concessions following the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991. It kept just 20% of the land disputed with Kazakhstan; with Kyrgyzstan, it kept 30%. In the case of Tajikistan, China dropped most of its claim to the Pamir Mountains. But the ratification by the Kyrgyz parliament in 2003 of a 1999 agreement to cede some 95,000 hectares of land to China prompted thousands of

Kyrgyz across the country to protest. Bishkek had previously transferred 30,000 hectares to Beijing under a 1996 border accord.

Central Asia's fears about China are rooted both in history and concerns about future jobs and regional influence. But for some Central Asians, the cooperation within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is a guarantee against any kind of regional aggression from Beijing.

### **The Main Problems between China and Central Asia: Implications for Regional Security**

Although the cooperation between China and the Central Asian states is growing and the Central Asian region is quite stable at the moment, several Chinese military and political analysts have asserted that the next likely theatre for a major war that will threaten, if not involve, China will take place in Central Asia.<sup>21</sup> Certainly China feels itself threatened by terrorists operating out of Central Asia and by elements in Xinjiang. Even if many statements are self-serving, this perception is quite real and should be given due consideration. It is not a secret that economic growth, energy and strategic interests are in fact tied together for China. But the main precondition for realizing China's strategic and energy objectives in Central Asia is founded on the premise of internal stability in Xinjiang. Thus China's Central Asian policies as a whole are fundamentally strategically conceived and grow out of a preoccupation with internal stability in Xinjiang.

Therefore, the first main problem for China in its policy towards post-Soviet Central Asia is its concern with the situation in Xinjiang. The Central Asian states quite clearly understand those concerns of China and acknowledge that unrest in one of the countries in the region can have negative effects on Xinjiang as well. The bombings in Uzbekistan in 2004 and the events in Andijan in June 2005, a Central Asia neighbour which does not border Xinjiang, has concerned Beijing, which was quick to label them as the work of "terrorists", though the exact motive for violence is not known yet. Beijing also has been quick to blame dissent among the Muslim Uighurs on "terrorists", and in December 2003 it issued a list of what it called terrorist organizations and individuals.

The imperfect border control between Xinjiang and Central Asia, especially Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, in spite of cooperation within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, is another side of the Xinjiang problem. The main concern for China here lies in preventing border infiltration into Xinjiang of radical Islamic elements, where many Uighurs are dissatisfied with China's governance and seek genuine autonomy. However, it seems that whatever policies China adopts, it is likely to face continuing and long-term unrest, including possible violence in Xinjiang and related violence elsewhere.

As for the Central Asian states, the imperfect border control has also some negative consequences. The main danger for the countries of the region in connection with the rise of China is to believe in the reality of a "yellow peril" in the form of uncontrolled penetration of Chinese population into Central Asia, who are unwilling to go back to China and prefer to settle in Central Asia, especially in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. In the opinion of many Central Asian analysts, if this continues on such a scale, politics, economics, and the informational sphere in the countries of Central Asia will be so distorted that the damage to national interests will be irreparable, irrespective of China's reaction to such a turn of events. But in the opinions of many Western and Chinese analysts the factor of a "yellow peril" for

Central Asia is over-exaggerated. This is certainly true for the scarcely populated Russian Far East, but less so for the region of Central Asia.

In general, the problems of borders between China and some Central Asian countries remain a sensitive issue. One need only recall that, in the 19th century, a significant part of Central Asian territory belonged to the Chinese Empire. Thus, in the early 1990s Guofang ("National Defence"), a publication of the People's Liberation Army, published an article that listed, as part of the historical boundaries of China, "the region to the west of Xinjiang" [manifestly a reference to the eastern part of Kazakhstan] and Lake Balkhash" (likewise located in central Kazakhstan).<sup>22</sup> Indeed, according to some scholars, Beijing still regards the fertile Ferghana Valley as Chinese territory: "although Beijing has been careful to avoid public mention of these territorial controversies, it has not forgotten the Chinese past of these Central Asian territories, and it sees the breakup of the Soviet Union to expand [SIC] China's Central Asian leadership".<sup>23</sup>

The past public statements of Chinese irredentists, while unofficial and less explicit than the claims expressed in Central Asian publications, nevertheless have attracted a predictable response in Central Asia capitals, above all in Kazakhstan. As a result, there is a prevailing sense that good relations with China are temporary, a sentiment grounded in deep distrust of the true intentions of Beijing.

Both Central Asian states and Beijing attempt to keep their mutual disputes hidden from public view and try to resolve them through the mechanisms of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Notwithstanding the frequent declarations about friendship and good relations, in fact the relations between two sides are far from pleasant. For example, some newspapers in Kazakhstan are very critical of an agreement on state borders that their country's parliament confirmed in spring 1999. The problem of disputed territories is an old one, not a product of the last decade: when the Soviet Union still existed, China laid claims to a significant part of the territory of Kazakhstan. In the post-Soviet era, the dispute has concerned a relatively small area of land. The two sides did reach an agreement to divide this disputed territory into equal parts.<sup>24</sup> However, a number of Kazakh experts do not think that this agreement has put an end to the territorial disputes.<sup>25</sup> Likewise, Beijing continues to reiterate its view that the territorial issue had not been completely resolved.

The social and economic changes in the countries of Central Asia are having severe environmental consequences as well, with the potential for adverse impacts on relations with neighbouring countries. This region has several critical environmental issues - the Aral Sea disaster, Caspian Sea pollution, rising scarcity of fresh water, and desertification, which extend beyond national boundaries and threaten regional security. Air, water and soil pollution, desertification, biodiversity loss, toxic and radioactive waste disposal are largely a legacy of Soviet development practices, whereby this region was transformed into a natural resource base to support rapid industrialization and economic growth, to the detriment of the environment. One of the most salient issues remains water scarcity. Water is the most precious resource in Central Asia and its scarcity makes it a constant source of tension both between and within states. The allocation of water among various users and uses has been an issue in Ferghana Valley, which spans parts of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan and which had experienced outbreaks of violence throughout the 1980s and 90s.<sup>26</sup> The Aral Sea catastrophe hardly requires additional explanation. Four-fifths of the water that fed what used to be the world's fourth largest lake had been diverted to support the region's cotton monoculture, predominantly in Uzbekistan. The result became the Aral desert. Another zone of

potential water dispute involves Black Irtysh, tributary of the Irtysh-Ob river basin, the fifth largest in the world. The dispute had arisen between Kazakhstan and China, when the latter initiated diversion of 5-15% of Black Irtysh river flow for developments in its Northwestern and Xinjiang provinces, thus further decreasing the river flow to eastern and central Kazakhstan and worsening economic and environmental conditions in those regions. The issue is further complicated by the ethnic tensions between Uighurs and the Chinese government in Xinjiang. At the moment, the respective governments have concluded an agreement on joint collaborative management of the Irtysh river, which does not specify protective measures or safety principles. Many unresolved questions remain, as no provisions exist about decreasing pollution levels or addressing outstanding environmental impacts, in adherence to transboundary international law practices. If not resolved properly in the near future, it could lead to prolonged tensions between the two sides.

Another problem for China in its policy towards Central Asia and indeed for Central Asia itself is the growing number of outside players which want to dominate or influence the region. The Central Asian states are indisputably subject to some adverse influences from external powers. The interests of these powers are contradictory. At the moment, the following groups of powers can be identified: (a) Russia; (b) the 'West', led by the US; (c) the Islamic world; and (d) China. As for China, the main problem here concerns the growing activities in the region of the United States. The Russian presence in the region is welcomed by Beijing, but in spite of the fact that the interests of Russia and China in the region are similar, it does not mean that China and Russia consider the Central Asian region from one point of view. In general, China regards Russia as a guarantee of the stability of the Central Asian states, and perhaps also of the surrounding areas. Although there are some complaints against Russia, the Central Asian states cannot manage without it. They prefer to be protected within Russia's defensive area and for most of the 1990s relied on Russian border troops in protecting their own outer – former Soviet – borders. In this respect Tajikistan is the most dependent. On the other hand, Russia is also helping them to build up their own armies, to train officers, and even to handle ecological crises. In their strategic approaches to Central Asia, both China and Russia seek peace and stability, are opposed to great-power influence in the region, and support regional cooperation. There are some contradictions between them. Russia traditionally views the Central Asian states as being within its sphere of influence and does not wish to see China become deeply involved there; China is opposed to Russia considering the Central Asia states as its exclusive sphere of influence, and supports their sovereignty and independence and their cooperation with all other countries. Nevertheless, China expresses understanding of Russia's strong role in the region and acknowledges that its military cooperation with the Central Asian states is helpful for stability there. The possibility cannot be excluded that this cooperation could be directed at a third country. Russia's role in Central Asia can be contained and stimulated. If, for example, the US expands its influence in the region, cooperation with the Central Asia states might become more urgent for both China and Russia.

The US activities in Central Asia remain a preoccupation for both China and Russia. The United States perceives the Central Asian region from the perspectives of its own strategic interests in the broadest sense, stimulated both by energy politics but more urgently by the challenge of international terrorism. By means of strong political, economic and military influence in Central Asia it intends to contain both Russia and China.

China is opposed to any US scheme to build military bases in the Central Asian states, carry out joint military manoeuvres there or use the Central Asian states as a tool to contain China because it considers this as endangering the safety of its own north-west regions. The US is encouraging NATO to expand eastwards and compete with Russia in Central Asia. In late 2001 the US launched an unauthorized military attack on Afghanistan, threatening security in the region around China. It is strengthening its security cooperation with Japan and considers itself a protector of Taiwan. Part of the purpose of its military cooperation with the Central Asian states is to threaten China's security.

Therefore, the clashes of great powers in Central Asia, which can happen in the future, constitute the main security threat to the whole Central Asian region and China. In this situation, China will neither seek to obtain a sphere of influence among Central Asian states nor force its will and ideas on these states. It does not, however, allow activities to take place in the Central Asian states that harm its own sovereignty or are directed at breaking up China. Here, it seems to have accepted the urgency of the US's need to intervene in Afghanistan, while at the same time turning this to its advantage in proclaiming its own long term efforts against those it deems 'terrorists' in this wider region.

There are some other issues in Central Asia which are of great concern to China and which can lead to the instability in the whole Central Asian region and therefore threaten the security of China. The economic situation in Central Asia is one of them. The crucial questions here are how Central Asia overcomes the post-independence crisis, chooses a policy for economic growth and reform, exploits its inner potential to tackle this crisis and bring about prosperity and revival. The question of the "economy" in Central Asia is not only of concern to China and Central Asia itself. It concerns all surrounding countries and the international community in general. According to one western analyst "the situation in post-Soviet Central Asia has become increasingly unstable. After less than a decade of independent development, the countries of this region are inexorably descending into the category of failed countries. Their economies, oriented toward the exportation and export of natural resources, are now mired in profound and protracted crisis."<sup>27</sup>

The ethnic tensions in Central Asia constitute another problem for the region. There are two levels of this issue in Central Asia: the friction between local people and the Russians, which led to many Russians migrating to the Russian Federation, and the tensions between the different local nationalities. There are attempts to control ethnic tensions by the governments of Central Asia states. Although the ability to restrain ethnic violence and prevent negative forms of ethnic or religious nationalism is important,<sup>28</sup> it must also be balanced by the effort to support the genuine needs of different nationalities and ethnic groups.

The countries of Central Asia can also potentially affect the ethnic situation within China in a direct and dangerous manner. This potential stems from the demographic similarities between the Central Asian states and China's Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region. Roughly 60% of Xinjiang's 16.6 million population is composed of ethnic minorities, who typically have far more cultural and ethnic affinity for the Islamic Turkic populations in Central Asia than they do for ethnic Han Chinese. The region's largest single ethnic group, the Uighurs, are ethnic Turks and number just over 7 million. Han Chinese are Xinjiang's second largest ethnic group, with a population of approximately 6 million. The autonomous region is also home to over one million Kazakhs and smaller numbers of Kyrgyz, Tajiks and Mongols. Because of the heavy concentration of ethnic minority populations,

the Chinese leadership views Xingjiang as particularly susceptible to foreign, anti-Chinese influences. Following the Soviet Union's collapse, Chinese leaders worried that transnational Islamic or ethnic Turkic forces operating out of the newly independent Central Asian Republics would actively encourage and support the separatist activities of minority groups within Xinjiang.

Relations among the Central Asian states also worsened through the early 1990s, which created a real problem for the security of this region. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the union of the five newly independent states of Central Asia at first appeared to be entirely natural and realistic. Indeed, many regarded unity as the most important precondition for political stability and economic development in the region. This belief in the possibility of economic integration and political solidarity tended to emphasize several factors: shared Islamic faith, a common Turkic language (except for Tajikistan), territorial unity and integrated infrastructure. These new states also had a similar leadership: namely, Russified indigenous ethnic elites, who were formerly members of the upper ranks of the republic "partocracy" and who, in principle, should serve as a unifying factor (with the partial exception of Kyrgyzstan). However, the hopes of any kind of unity had receded into oblivion, because of many contradictions between states and because of the fact that to a certain degree all five Central Asian countries were the artificial creation of Stalin. Relations between the Central Asian countries are worsening at the moment, which also can lead to threats to the security of the region.

Additionally, there is a need to tackle the problems of illegal drug flows,<sup>29</sup> smuggling (arms and people) and illicit financial flows. Health problems in the region, seeing the re-emergence of old diseases such as tuberculosis and the spread of new diseases such as AIDS, will need strong regional health programmes and attention as well.

All these issues generate quite negative effects on the relations between China and the countries of Central Asia, which could grow into real tensions in the future.

### **Hegemon-in-Waiting?**

China's influence in Central Asia wanes the further it moves from China's borders. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan both are geographically separated from China and have attempted to chart their own independent course of development. Uzbekistan has its own regional ambitions and has consistently bucked any attempts by Russia to impose any new forms of control over the region. Any similar attempts by China will be equally unwelcome.<sup>30</sup> This sense of regional independence has also allowed for growing ties with Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia, all of which have established minor levels of influence. More importantly, the United States, which does not share any common territory with the region, has become an influencing force on a par, if not greater than Russia, due to the ongoing realities of the War on Terrorism. Thus, China represents only one of several possible partners for the Central Asian states, limiting Beijing's ability to play an essential or irreplaceable role.

Moreover, it seems rather doubtful that China will use its full political and military might to achieve its interests in Central Asia. Presently, China achieves all it needs through political and economic diplomacy; and Central Asia is still not a top priority for decision makers in Beijing. As to any future scenarios, it is as yet unclear if China could even exert strong military pressure in the region, given the limits of China's armed forces and the current focus in China on modernizing those forces needed for a Taiwan invasion before any interior ground forces modernization. Additionally, Russian forces still present in the region act as a continuing deterrent



to any unauthorized Chinese military advance. For example, possible military conflict with Kyrgyzstan or Tajikistan would risk involving China in military conflict with Russia. The strategic interests of China at present do not allow it to risk military confrontations with Russia. While the strategic interests of Russia and China coincide to constrain the US hegemony in the world, any real conflict between the two sides is not foreseen. Besides, China pays great attention to the development of good-neighbourly and mutually beneficial relations with Russia. The Chinese government many times emphasized that it supported the traditional Russian influence in Central Asia and did not intend to fill any vacuum created after the disintegration of the Soviet Union.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, some Moscow analysts predict a possible Russia - China collision in Central Asia and suggest protecting the territorial unity of the CIS countries with the help of the Russian nuclear umbrella.<sup>32</sup> However, the present security situation in Central Asia is characterized by reduced military opportunities for Russia and the intentions of the Central Asian states to end the dominating role of Moscow in respect of military protection.<sup>33</sup> As a result, the possible instability in Central Asia in the future and the aspiration of local states to provide their own safety may lead to China's revision of the Russian - Chinese "division of labour" in Central Asia.<sup>34</sup>

The US military presence in Central Asia also limits China's options. Chinese analysts are practically sure that the campaign against Afghanistan and the military presence of the US in Central Asia (Kyrgyzstan) are not the real answer to the terrorist attacks on the US, but a part of a long-term strategy for achieving global domination. In this respect, China's analysts are of the opinion that the underlying reasons for the US strategic aspiration in Central Asia are to control the Caspian oil and to threaten China, Iran and Russia.<sup>35</sup> Behind all US activities in the region lies the intention not to allow China to transform into a great power. Nevertheless, China sees the opportunity to improve its relations with the USA in the light of its campaign against international terrorism by revival of "the common enemy" absent since 1991. At the beginning of the twenty first century China's analysts believe that the US hegemony will stay, even up to the middle of this century. That implies that China needs to adapt to this hegemony. It is necessary to emphasize that now the strategic partnership of China and the US is stronger than during the Clinton administration, although the internal political realities do not allow the Bush administration to declare it loudly.

As with Russia, it is not worthwhile for China to upset the overall Sino-American relationship by actively challenging American forces in Central Asia now. Only in the direst situation, such as intense conflict over worldwide energy resources, will China be inclined to engage US regional forces. It is impossible, though, to exclude the possibility that China could use its armed forces in Central Asia in the future.

China's behaviour since the Americans' arrival in Central Asia will remain open for a long time. For a moment it could be summarized by the words of China's expert Tuhn Gahn: "the relations between world and regional powers in Central Asia today are passing a transition stage, the situation in the region remains unclear".<sup>36</sup>

### **The Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Guarantor of Regional Security?**

The launch of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in June 2001 marked a new era in relations between China and the countries of Central Asia. From a forum (Shanghai Five)<sup>37</sup> created to demarcate and demilitarize the common border between China, Russia and three Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan), a new organization was established to combat international

terrorism and develop economic, political and cultural ties, in addition to continuing work on existing border disputes. The inclusion of Uzbekistan, one of the key states in Central Asia, gave new stimulus to the development of SCO and to further development of relations between China and the countries of Central Asia.

The creation of the SCO was a logical outcome of a dialogue which dates back to the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The member states see the SCO as an organization with very concrete aims to provide regional security and border control. The countries of the SCO are aiming, first of all, to combat the “three evil forces” of terrorism, extremism and separatism, a thinly disguised reference to violent Islamic radicalism.<sup>38</sup> The member states also see the SCO as a promising framework for building tighter trade, investment, cultural, environmental and technological relations; the SCO would accordingly become “the region’s authoritative voice”.<sup>39</sup> But would the creation of the SCO solve the problems between China and the Central Asian states? The answer to this question seems not so simple. There are no doubts that in the short term, while the interests of member states coincide, the SCO could succeed in solving the problems of the region.

However, a lot depends on the relations between two main players – China and Russia. Their dominance of the group allows them to control its stance on many issues, such as its general anti-US slant as well as its zero-tolerance approach to Islamist and separatist movements. At the moment, the relations between the two countries are rather stable. But with its rapid economic growth and possible changing of its international interests, China could reconsider its overall approach towards Russia and start acting in Central Asia in a different way. These concerns, whether merely the hallucination of a paranoid populace or real, long-standing plans of Beijing, are raising some fears in the capitals of Central Asian countries. So far, however, it seems that the SCO could play the role of security guarantor in the region.

## **Conclusion**

China’s relationships with the Central Asian republics have improved dramatically since the break-up of Soviet Union in 1991. Today China and its neighbours in Central Asia promote increased trade and political cooperation. The Central Asian countries are predicted to become major suppliers of energy to China’s rapidly growing economy in the near future. With the declaration of a new “strategic partnership” in 1996 and later the creation of the SCO the strategic aspect of Beijing’s relationship with Central Asia attained a prominence not seen since the Sino-Soviet alliance of the 1950s.

But the current harmony in Sino-Central Asian relations may be merely a preface to a period of severe tension and suspicion as China’s growing power comes to be seen as a threat by leaders in the capitals of Central Asia. China and the republics of Central Asia are in the midst of difficult economic and political transitions. Policies that reduce security tensions, enhance economic cooperation, and develop Central Asian energy resources for the Chinese market could benefit the successful completion of these transitions. As such, Sino-Central Asian relations primarily reflect domestic economic and political considerations. At the moment China is pursuing a policy to develop a broad array of secure relationships with countries that could provide it with valuable trade, technology, investment, and international political support and thereby reduce its vulnerability to outside powers.

However, tensions in Sino-Central Asian relations are likely to become more pronounced over time. China’s dramatic economic growth and the economic turmoil

in the republics of Central Asia in recent years underlie a dramatic imbalance and conflict of interests. In the next ten to twenty years, the leaders of Central Asia are likely to become more concerned about the potential threat of China's growing power. It seems, however, that the analysts in Beijing quite clearly understand these concerns and pursue a strategic policy towards Central Asia very cautiously. In Central Asia, China's open economic policies are playing a significant role in the emergence of independent and viable states in the region. China provides the Central Asian states with vital non-Russian transport routes through which the states can interact with international markets.

China opposes the spread of Islamic extremism in Central Asia and supports the region's existing secular regimes. Beijing's primary motivation for doing so is to minimize the potential for instability emerging in the region that might threaten its own domestic stability and economic development.

While China may develop a dominant influence in areas of Central Asia near its border, there is little threat of China dominating the whole region. There are simply too many other actors in the oil- and gas-rich regions of Central Asia.

There are, however, some aspects of China's relationship with the Central Asian states that might become problematic. In particular, land-based links through Central Asia to the Middle East may facilitate greater economic, political and military cooperation between Beijing and regimes in the Middle East, which may lead to the greater instability of the whole Central Asian region. Some other problems mentioned above remain acute in relations between Central Asia and China, such as water issues, ethnic problems and economic disparities. All those problems, if not adequately addressed, can lead the relations between Central Asian states and China into a period of prolonged tensions. However, the two sides acknowledge the existing problems and have started cooperating both on bilateral and multilateral levels. It seems that the most effective mechanism so far in dialogue between the Central Asian countries and China remains the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Its significance and importance is growing from year to year. It is hoped by all members that such a mechanism can provide stability and security for Central Asia and serve the interests of the wider region in the long term.

## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Courtesy of UZONLINE.COM MAPS – [www.uzonline.com/maps](http://www.uzonline.com/maps), accessed May 23 2005

<sup>2</sup> It is important to mention that the historic Silk Route was not actually the name of any transnational highway in any current sense of the term. If anything, it symbolized a series of trading networks that facilitated the transfer of goods between Western markets in the Middle East and Europe and the Eastern markets primarily in China. In ancient times this extended from the modern day city of Xi'an in northwest China to the Mediterranean Sea and was the most active route across Eurasia.

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<sup>37</sup> “Shanghai Five” is not the formal name of the forum. Actually, the forum had no formal name. On 26 April 1996 the presidents of five states, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and China, gathered in Shanghai, China, to sign the Agreement on Confidence Building in the Military Field in the Border Area. The five presidents then decided to continue meeting together once a year in the five counties in turn. This summit had been widely reported in the West as the “Shanghai Five” because the location of the summit was Shanghai and the participants of the summit were the presidents of the five participating states. On 15 June, 2001, again in Shanghai, the “Shanghai Five” announced that they would change from a forum to an Organization. It was formally named the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Its six initiating state members are Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and China. Its headquarters and Secretariat are located in Beijing.

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