

**The New Silk Road Diplomacy: The Making of China's Central Asian Foreign  
Policy in the Post-Cold War Era**

**Introduction:** The dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991 led to the emergence of the sovereign republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan in Central Asia. These republics emerged adjacent to China's own Turkic, Muslim-majority Central Asian domain, the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR). My book, *The New Silk Road Diplomacy: The Making of China's Central Asian Foreign Policy in the Post-Cold War Era* explores the development of China's foreign policy towards Central Asia after 1991, specifically addressing the following questions:

1. What variables have shaped China's policy towards the independent Central Asian republics?
2. How did the development of China's relations with Central Asia reflect its perceptions of the new challenges and opportunities in primarily a regional, but also a global context? Conversely, how did China's understanding of the global balance of power affect its relations with Central Asia?

*The New Silk Road Diplomacy* argues that China's policies towards independent Central Asia were determined primarily by Beijing's security and economic imperatives in Xinjiang. Beijing correctly feared that the independence of Central Asia from Moscow's tutelage would provide a fresh impetus for Xinjiang to defy Beijing's control. Since the mid-eighteenth century conquest of the region under the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), Xinjiang had resisted Beijing's attempts at assimilation. This ongoing challenge to central rule in Xinjiang was compounded after 1991.

My book also argues that China's relations with Central Asia were influenced by China's growing ties with the Russian Federation through the 1990s. Beijing now envisioned Central Asia as an arena where China, Russia, and the independent republics could build international cooperation, foremost amongst which was jointly addressing the economic and political challenges to regional stability. The development of Central Asia's energy sector, expansion of trade, and resolving the disputed borders were also high priorities. China's regional diplomacy has yielded important results since 1991. Some noteworthy developments include the complete demarcation of Sino-Central Asian borders, a fifteen-fold increase in trade (valued at six billion dollars in 2006), and China's financing of a multi-billion dollar oil pipeline from Kazakhstan to Xinjiang.

In its regional engagement, China repeatedly disavowed suggestions that it was seeking regional hegemony or that its Central Asian diplomacy was detrimental to the interests of India, Iran, Pakistan, Russia, Turkey, or the United States. All of these countries had sought close diplomatic and commercial ties with Central Asia after 1991. While these states repeatedly denied seeking to draw the Central Asian republics into binding strategic relationships, fierce international rivalry for regional influence characterized post-Soviet Central Asia. This competition was due to the region's location at the crossroads between Afghanistan, East Asia, Iran, South Asia, and Russia that gave it immense geostrategic importance. In addition, Central Asia also had substantial oil and gas reserves that had hitherto been untapped, and largely unexplored.

In addition to increasing trade, demarcating the borders, and cooperating in the energy sector, beginning in 1996, heads of state from China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Russia started convening annually to jointly address regional concerns.

This marked a shift from bilateral to multilateral cooperation, and was in keeping with Beijing's view that multilateral diplomacy was essential for building a just and open international order in the post-Cold War world. In 2001, the five countries, along with Uzbekistan, institutionalized their multilateral partnership through the formation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

Foreign policy commentators in the Western world, and in particular the United States, were initially skeptical whether the SCO would play a prominent role in Central Asia. In the following years, however, this view was replaced by an apprehension amongst some that the SCO had become a vehicle for Beijing's regional engagement. Beijing's growing influence was seen to be detrimental to American regional interests. Since the end of the Cold War, the United States had sought influence in Central Asia through investments in the energy sector, foreign aid, and bilateral military cooperation. In addition, following the attacks on New York and Washington on September 11, 2001, the greater Central Asian region – that also includes Afghanistan, and North and South Waziristan in Pakistan – became a pivotal theatre in the US-led “war on terror.” Besides Afghanistan, the United States also established military bases in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan following the September 11 attacks.

Chinese regional diplomacy was deemed threatening to American regional engagement, particularly after 2005 when the SCO asked the United States for a timetable for withdrawal of its military from Central Asia. This reinforced American views that the SCO was a front for Chinese, and to a lesser extent, Russian interests. Conversely, American military deployment just beyond China's Central Asian frontiers

was a source of consternation for Beijing, and was seen by some Chinese analysts as a means to further American power in this energy-rich, pivotal region.

*The New Silk Road Diplomacy* examines not only how Beijing negotiated strategic challenges in Central Asia after September 11 (and also considers how it responded to American regional presence), but also presents a detailed overview of China's regional engagement in the decade between the independence of the Central Asian republics and the attacks on New York and Washington. In doing so, my book explores how China dealt with security challenges in its own Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, instability in post-Soviet Central Asia, the burgeoning illicit economy in narcotics and small arms, the rise of the Taliban in adjacent Afghanistan, in addition to examining China's regional diplomacy, and commercial and energy cooperation.

**Competing Titles:** Studies on Chinese foreign policy have tended to focus on the Asia Pacific region, or relations with the United States and Russia. *The New Silk Road Diplomacy* is the first focused study of Sino-Central Asian relations in the English language. Although there has been growing interest in China's role in Central Asia in Western academic circles and policymaking lobbies, there is no single-volume scholarly study on the topic to date. Recent studies on Xinjiang, such as Michael Dillon's *Xinjiang: China's Muslim Far Northwest* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), and Frederick Starr's (ed.) *Xinjiang: China's Muslim Borderland* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2004), have

only briefly addressed the role of Central Asia in relation to the economic and security situation in Xinjiang.<sup>1</sup>

Monographs produced by the American policymaking establishment, such as the ninety-five page study by Mark Burles, *Chinese Foreign Policy Towards Russia and the Central Asian Republics* (Washington, DC: RAND Corporation, 1999), and the sixty-four page study by Bates Gill and Mathew Oresman, *China's New Journey to the West* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2003) have also discussed China's role in Central Asia. But these are short policy monographs that only provide a cursory overview of Sino-Central Asian relations. In contrast, my book provides a detailed survey and critical analysis of Sino-Central Asian relations since 1991.

**Sources:** *The New Silk Road Diplomacy* is based on a wide range of sources in the Chinese and English language. In addition to books and scholarly articles, I have relied on newspaper accounts to piece together historical narratives. Official communiqués, government documents, and public testimonies are also used extensively throughout the book. In addition, I critically examine commentary by the policymaking community in China and the United States (and to a lesser extent, Russia).

Fieldwork for this project was undertaken in the People's Republic of China. In addition to collecting Chinese-language material that has not been used by Western scholars to date, I interviewed academics and policymakers in China. These interviews

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<sup>1</sup> Please note that the forthcoming volume by Clarke, M. E. & C. Mackerras, *China, Xinjiang and Central Asia: History, Transition and Crossborder Interaction into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2009) is an edited volume addressing the history of Xinjiang and Central Asia since the eighteenth century. Its subject matter does not overlap with my book's.

provided me with valuable insight into China's foreign policy priorities and informed my understanding of the policymaking process in Beijing.

**Readership:** China's growing stature in Central Asia has affected the geopolitics of the region. In addition, China is also one of the major future contenders for oil and natural gas from the region. *The New Silk Road Diplomacy* will be of interest to academic specialists studying contemporary Chinese and Central Asian foreign relations. Given my extensive discussion of Chinese and American policymaking considerations, my book shall also appeal to those interested in contemporary Sino-US and Sino-Russian relations. In addition, my book also contributes to the literature on ethnic relations in China and Central Asia.

Books on Chinese foreign policy are frequently used in university-level courses. In addition, more universities are developing teaching on Central Asia. I expect my book shall be read by graduate and advanced level undergraduate students in History, International Relations, and Political Science. Finally, *The New Silk Road Diplomacy* shall also be very relevant to the policymaking community in the Western world.

**Length of the Book and Table of Contents:** *The New Silk Road Diplomacy* is approximately 80,000 words in length (including notes but excluding the bibliography). The pagination in the following table of contents is provisional and based upon use of a double-spaced, 12-point font. A short description of the chapters follows the table of contents.

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**Chapter Descriptions:** A central theme in my book is that China's Central Asian foreign policy was shaped by how Beijing perceived challenges to its own power in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region. Following the independence of the Central Asian republics, there was a danger that Xinjiang too would try to break free of central control. This threat was informed by Beijing's past experience of administration in Xinjiang; since the mid-eighteenth century Qing conquest, Xinjiang had repeatedly resisted assimilation by Beijing.

*The New Silk Road Diplomacy* begins with a survey of the historical legacies in Xinjiang that influenced how Beijing proceeded to develop relations with independent Central Asia. These legacies included conquest by the Manchu emperors, challenges of administration in a distant periphery, and the marginalization of Xinjiang's Muslim, Turkic elite during the late Qing. Political fragmentation and ethnic marginalization carried forth into the Republican era as well (1911-1949).

In 1949, the communists came to power. I examine how Xinjiang was firmly integrated within the People's Republic after 1949 through the large-scale settlement of Han nationals in the distant frontier region, and the modernization of the traditional economy to bring it in line with communist visions of economic development. Although

party rule led to a greater degree of internal stability, a series of border conflicts with the Soviet Union (and a lesser one with India) ensured that China's Inner Asian frontiers remained heavily militarized after 1960. The security situation in Xinjiang was further aggravated by the Soviet invasion of neighboring Afghanistan that radicalized Muslims across the greater Central Asian region and created an illicit war economy based on trade in narcotics and small arms. China would suffer the adverse affects of these developments beginning in the 1990s.

Chapter two examines Sino-Central Asian relations between 1991 and 1996. I locate initial Sino-Central Asian cooperation within the framework of Chinese foreign policy during the twilight of the Cold War, namely, improving relations with the Soviet Union, and faltering Sino-US relations. I then examine China's immediate priorities in Central Asia: demarcating the borders, deepening bilateral economic cooperation, and prevailing upon the Central Asian leadership to take a firm stance against émigré elements from Xinjiang's Turkic population agitating for freedom from China. I also explore salient aspects of the Afghanistan-centered war economy and how it destabilized the greater Central Asian region following the retreat of Soviet power from the region. Finally, I consider how developments in Afghanistan (and neighboring Central Asia) affected stability in Xinjiang in the 1990s. Unrest in Xinjiang peaked in 1996 and 1997. These episodes are discussed in chapter three.

Chapter three also examines the beginning of multilateral diplomacy between China and the Central Asian republics. I explore how the multilateral agenda gradually developed between 1996 and 2001. This chapter also assesses energy politics in Central

Asia and how this became a pretext for increasing international involvement in the region by countries such as Turkey, Russia, and the United States.

Finally, chapters four and five discuss China's role in Central Asia since 2001. In the summer of 2001, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, along with Russia, formally established the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. But this development was soon overshadowed by the attacks of September 11, 2001. Consequently, the subsequent months saw the US rapidly develop strategic inroads into Central Asia. China's response was twofold. First, Beijing projected unrest in Xinjiang during the 1990s as being supported by the same transnational terrorist organizations that had carried out the attacks on New York and Washington. This allowed Beijing to continue to crackdown severely on separatists in Xinjiang, and at the same time actively participate in the war on terror that was unfolding on its western periphery. Second, Beijing gradually strengthened the SCO by building operational bodies, such as a Secretariat, a Regional Anti-Terrorism Center, and developing deeper commercial, fiscal, and energy cooperation.

China's increasing regional engagement has brought it into competition with the United States, a development that is also explored in the last chapter. Besides wanting to see the withdrawal of the US military from Central Asia, Beijing is competing with Washington for regional energy. In this chapter, I also discuss China's energy security concerns that were accentuated by extensive US engagement in the Middle East. Presently these concerns have been partially alleviated through the construction of a pipeline carrying oil from Kazakhstan.