

The New Silk Road Diplomacy

Introduction

In 138 BCE Han Wudi (r. 149-86 BCE) dispatched his trusted envoy Zhang Qian (d. 114 BCE) to Ferghana. The ambassador was instructed to seek an alliance with the Yuezhi confederacy against their common enemy, the Xiongnu, who had been pillaging China's northern frontier. Zhang Qian's mission to Central Asia marked China's first official foray into the region.¹ The ambassador's sojourn lasted over a decade, during which no news was heard from him. In his subsequent account, Zhang Qian described his capture by the Xiongnu, his escape many years later, and his rendezvous with the Yuezhi (who were uninterested in an alliance with the Chinese). He described Ferghana, where inhabitants lived in fortified cities, made wine from grapes, and rode blood-sweating horses that were descendents of heavenly mounts. He spoke of Central Asian city-states; of Chinese merchandise being traded in the bazaars of Bactria; and recalled tales of India, Mesopotamia, and Parthia – places that he did not visit but that he had heard of during his travels.²

Ever since Zhang Qian's travels through the region, China and Central Asia have influenced each other through trade, warfare, and religious and technological exchange. Soon after the ambassador's return, Han Wudi ordered China's first military expansion into the Western Regions (*xiyu*). Today, this region corresponds to the *Xinjiang weiwu'er zizhiqu* (Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region [XUAR]) sprawling across western China. While only a few Chinese dynasties successfully expanded west of the central plains (*zhongyuan*), all attempted to project their influence in the Western Regions. In doing so, they were driven by economic and strategic considerations; until the sixteenth century, Central Asia and its web of trade routes, collectively known as the Silk Road, were China's foremost gateway to the outside world. Control of the Western Regions, along with the northern frontier, both shielded the central plains from foreign incursions and provided leverage over lucrative trans-Eurasian trade. The Central Asian frontier was far from being a remote and insignificant border; throughout its vast history, Chinese strategy towards its Central Asian frontier was cognizant of the fact that the power of the centre was linked to its ability to project its influence along the distant periphery.

This truism remains valid today. China's relations with Central Asia affect both its internal stability and its international power and prestige. This book

examines how Beijing responded to the independence of the Soviet Central Asian republics – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan – following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and explores the variables that have determined China's foreign policy towards the region. China shares a 1,533-kilometre border with Kazakhstan, an 858-kilometre border with Kyrgyzstan, and a 414-kilometre border with Tajikistan, all in Xinjiang. In addition, Xinjiang, which is the largest of China's twenty-three provinces and five autonomous regions, also borders Afghanistan, India, Mongolia, Pakistan, and Russia. Eight of China's thirteen international borders lie in Xinjiang, making it a region of immense strategic significance.³

China's regional diplomacy has yielded important results since diplomatic relations were established in 1992. The Sino-Central Asian border, the site of bitter Sino-Russian conflicts since the nineteenth century, was demarcated and demilitarized. Today, there are no territorial disputes along the Sino-Central Asian border. Commercial cooperation between China and Central Asia has grown rapidly. With a population of approximately 60 million, Central Asia offered a large market for Chinese merchandise on its western borders. Between 1992 and 2005, trade between China and the five republics increased sixteen-fold, exceeding \$8 billion in 2007. Sino-Central Asian trade has played an important role in Beijing's efforts towards the economic uplift of traditionally underdeveloped western stretches of the country. Energy cooperation between China and Central Asia has been another key component of Sino-Central Asian relations. In a landmark development in December 2005, oil began flowing from Kazakhstan to Xinjiang via a newly constructed pipeline. This was not only one of the most ambitious energy development projects undertaken in Central Asia to date but it also enhanced China's energy security through diversifying oil procurement.

China's regional achievements took place amidst a frenzy of international engagement. After 1991, Central Asia was seen as a pivotal geopolitical crossroads where India, Iran, Pakistan, Russia, Turkey, and the United States, along with Japan and countries of the European Union, also sought energy or security cooperation. The landlocked region in the heart of Eurasia became a strategically important fulcrum in the post-Cold War world. There was frequent rivalry among international actors, which became most evident in attempts to gain access to the region's energy resources.

Within Central Asia, Beijing's most high-profile achievement was the forging of close relations with the republics and Russia through the *Shanghai hezuo zuzhi* (Shanghai Cooperation Organization [SCO]). The multilateral forum had its inception in 1996, when heads of state from China, Russia, Kazakhstan,

Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan convened in Shanghai to enhance confidence-building measures in the border regions. Between 1996 and 2001, the five heads of state convened annually to address border security, confidence building, and regional stability. Uzbekistan joined the multilateral forum in 2001 during the formal establishment of the SCO.

During its formation, the SCO had projected itself as a twenty-first-century organization that was suited to address both the regional security challenges (transnational terrorism, the illicit drug trade) and the economic opportunities (trade, energy cooperation). Member states have repeatedly stressed the success of the organization in addressing these issues of mutual concern and cooperation. Beijing, in particular, has repeatedly projected the SCO as a model for multilateral cooperation (*duobian hezuo*). Beijing's emphasis on multilateral diplomacy stands in contrast to the perceived unilateralism (*danbian zhuyi*) of the United States. In the post-Cold War order, the charge of unilateralism was the foundation of the Chinese critique of American foreign policy.⁴ Through the SCO's multilateral efforts, Beijing foresees the emergence of a mutually beneficial regional order.⁵

The emergence of the SCO as a prominent regional organization had important ramifications for the United States following the September 11, 2001 attacks on New York and Washington. This was because the greater Central Asian region – which also includes Afghanistan as well as Pakistan's frontier regions of North and South Waziristan – became a vital theatre for the United States-led “war on terror.” While the Afghanistan-based Taliban regime had given sanctuary to al-Qaeda, in fact, the entire region stretching from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan down to Pakistan's frontier regions contained pockets in which radical Islamist organizations took refuge. These organizations were hostile to both Western democracies and Muslim regimes allied with the Western world. Since 2001, there have been continuous counterinsurgency operations in this region as a part of the US-led war on terror. Washington considered extensive military engagement – by its own troops, by its NATO allies, and by the Central Asian and Pakistani armed forces – as crucial for combating transnational terrorism.

Beijing viewed Washington's leadership role in the war on terror cautiously. After the attacks on New York and Washington, the two powers had publicly professed resolve in combating transnational terrorism and building stability in the greater Central Asian region. But this resulted in little bilateral security cooperation between China and the United States. On the contrary, in the post-September 11 era, Central Asia emerged as a new theatre of competition between the two countries. This became abundantly clear in 2005, when the SCO demanded the United States provide a timetable for the dismantling of its military

bases in Central Asia. In doing so, it reinforced a perception among some American commentators that the SCO was a front for anti-US cooperation between Beijing and Moscow.

The post-September 11 developments heightened the strategic significance of the Central Asian region. But this should not detract from the fact that the independence of the Central Asian republics in 1991 had inadvertently posed challenges for China's territorial cohesiveness and self-projection as a harmonious, multiethnic state. This is a key theme of *The New Silk Road Diplomacy*: Chinese policy towards post-Soviet Central Asia was strongly influenced by challenges to Beijing's authority in Xinjiang. Since the mid-eighteenth-century conquest of the region, Xinjiang had repeatedly resisted Beijing's efforts at control. As this book demonstrates, the independence of the Central Asian republics led to a renewed emergence of pan-Islamic and pan-Turkic identity politics in Xinjiang that challenged the authority of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) over the Muslim, Turkic-majority frontier region. Here it should also be noted that *The New Silk Road Diplomacy* is not meant to be a focused study either of the nationalist aspirations of Xinjiang's Muslims or of the recent history and politics of Xinjiang, even though these do factor into the narrative.⁶

Another important theme that underlies the making of China's Central Asian foreign policy involves the fact that, with regard to building a new post-Cold War regional order, Beijing envisioned wide-ranging cooperation with the independent republics and Moscow. The high-profile Shanghai Cooperation Organization was projected as playing an important role in this effort at multi-lateral cooperation, which was depicted both as being a response to the new challenges and opportunities in the greater Central Asian region and as marking a departure from the Cold War mentality (*lengzhan siwei*) that focused on creating hegemonic spheres of influence.

The Internal Context: Unremitting Challenges in Chinese Central Asia

Beijing was challenged by the emergence of the Central Asian republics because of their proximity to Xinjiang, a Turkic, Muslim-majority region. The Chinese leadership feared that regional instability stemming from the retreat of Soviet power from Central Asia would adversely affect Beijing's authority in Xinjiang. This was because the people of Xinjiang, who shared cultural and ethnic similarities with their neighbours in the Central Asian republics, had historically resisted Beijing's efforts at control. Now, if the Central Asian republics could be free from the authority of a distant centre – and be so seemingly overnight – could the same not be possible in Xinjiang? Thus, from the beginning, Beijing found itself appealing to the secular Central Asian leadership to ensure that

émigré dissidents from Xinjiang did not receive encouragement to break free from the People's Republic.

But the retreat of Soviet power from Central Asia had resulted in the authority of the secular Soviet-origin leadership being diminished. Additionally, during the last years of the Soviet Union, restrictions on mosques, madrasas, and religious congregation had been lifted. Islam pervaded public life as independence dawned on Central Asia. Although the Soviet-era leadership across Central Asia had remained unchanged through the independence process, the secular heads of state were initially unable to stem the tide of pan-Islamic and pan-Turkic identity politics that began having resonance across the border in Xinjiang. Beijing was wary that some within Xinjiang's Muslim population would politically exert themselves to seek independence.

Beijing's fears were justified. From the early to mid-1990s, there was sporadic agitation for an independent Turkic state in Xinjiang. There was also a growing popularity of Islam at the grassroots level, as witnessed by an increase in unofficial mosques and madrasas. Some of the local Muslim cadres of the Chinese Communist Party now began publicly taking part in Islamic ritual. Religious practice was in stark opposition to the Marxist materialism espoused by China's leaders and was disallowed by the party.

These developments were the result of influence from post-Soviet Central Asia and, to a lesser extent at the time, Pakistan. The influx of foreign – and from Beijing's perspective, highly undesirable – influence was bolstered by the fact that Xinjiang was a frontier zone. In the absence of centralizing Soviet power in the Central Asian republics, the frontier zone became a dynamic margin where Beijing's authority overlapped with multiple sources of power emanating from beyond the border.

In considering how Xinjiang's location as a frontier region factored into China's Central Asian policy, it is helpful to consider the insightful contributions of Owen Lattimore (1900-89), a leading twentieth-century scholar on Inner Asia. In his magnum opus, *Inner Asian Frontiers of China*, first published in 1940, Lattimore described frontiers as “the geographical and historical boundaries conventionally set down as lines on a map [representing] the edge of zones.” The Great Wall of China marked such a frontier between the region that “was proper to include in the Chinese *t'ien hsia*” and the “barbarian” realm. Frontiers were continuously shifting, leading Lattimore to make the following observation: “Variants, alternatives, and supplementary lines of Great Wall fortification ... proves that the concept of a linear boundary could never be established as an absolute geographical fact. That which was politically conceived as a sharp edge was persistently spread by the ebb and flow of history into a

relatively broad and vague margin.”⁷ Therefore, the boundary was not “merely a line dividing geographical regions and human societies” but also represented a broad margin that signified “the optimum limit of growth of one particular society.”⁸ The optimum level of expansion varied over time, a fact borne out by the cyclical expansion and withdrawal from the Western Regions that corresponded with the centre’s ability to project decisive power into the contested frontier zone.

Owen Lattimore viewed Inner Asian frontiers as concentric circles where imperial power waned away from the centre. He described this in the following way: “The abstract concept of an absolute boundary was transformed administratively and politically into a system of zones: the boundary itself, with a more or less differentiated population adhering to it even on the hither side; the ‘auxiliary’ tribes in the frontier zone adjacent to the boundary, the outer edge of whose territory was treated as an outer-frontier zone; and beyond that, again, unregenerate barbarism.”⁹ In a later essay (1953), Lattimore described this as the “zoning” of Inner Asian frontiers.¹⁰ The extension of the frontier zones depended on how far the influence of the centre would disseminate.

Inevitably, the power of the centre conflicted with sources of power from within or beyond the frontier zone. The outcome of these conflicts determined the optimum level of frontier expansion. The Han (BCE 202–20 CE), the Tang (618–907), and the Qing dynasties (1644–1911) each expanded into the Western Regions, and each retreated when faced with insurmountable challenges. During the Tang and the Qing dynasties, expansion and withdrawal occurred repeatedly as the optimal level of expansion fluctuated in accordance with the power of the centre and the power of non-state actors along the frontier zone.

For this study on contemporary Sino-Central Asian relations, I take Xinjiang and the greater Central Asian region to correspond to Owen Lattimore’s description of a frontier zone. Lattimore’s understanding of frontier zones is relevant to this study because, traditionally, in Central Asia there have been multiple sources of power. Depending on their military might, empires would expand or withdraw from this vast region. In addition, there was an abundance of powerful non-state actors: itinerant merchants, pillaging nomads, and, in the nineteenth century, marauding jihadis. Historically, along this sprawling frontier, the state has represented one source of power among many others. Appreciating the multiplicity of power in the Central Asian region is important both for understanding China’s historic relations with the region and for understanding many of the regional developments after 1991. Consider, for example, that two thousand years of Silk Road trade was one of the most elaborate examples of informal economic activity ever known and that it was carried out by Badakshanis, Kashmiris, Mongols, Tibetans, Turks, Uighurs, and scores of

other groups who inhabited the vast Inner Asian landscape. Try as they might, Chinese dynasties could never entirely regulate this trade. Today's drug smuggling, gunrunning, and petty trading across Eurasia also occurs outside state jurisdiction. These continuities are important because they illustrate that the Central Asian frontier zone remains a site where authority from multiple centres overlap, allowing for the operation of non-state actors.

But similarities with the past do not mean that Xinjiang's role as a frontier zone has remained unchanged: an important change involves that fact that, in the eighteenth century, the region was incorporated into the Qing empire. The Manchu conquest under the Qianlong emperor (r. 1736-95) is often viewed as marking Xinjiang's entry into the modern world system. In his landmark study, *China Marches West: The Qing Conquest of Central Eurasia*, Peter Perdue argues that the demarcation of boundaries between the Qing and the Russian empires allowed for "the closure of the steppe."¹¹ This restricted the mobility of the nomadic Zungharian Mongols, who had previously had jurisdiction over much of Xinjiang, and deprived them of resources needed for state building.¹² This suggests that, by the mid-eighteenth century, the Qing dynasty had succeeded in greatly reducing challenges to Manchu authority in Xinjiang. These challenges were symptomatic of those that the centre had traditionally faced along its Inner Asian frontier. Thomas Barfield also considers the Qing conquest of the Zungharian Mongols as marking the collapse of the old order that was brought about by a changing world economy and improvements in communication and transportation. From here on, Barfield suggests, conflicts in Inner Asia would be between the two sedentary powers: China and Russia.¹³

While the defeat of the Zungharian Mongols did mark the end of the last steppe-based empire, I disagree with the contention that, from the mid-eighteenth century on, conflicts in Inner Asia would be between China and Russia only. As Chapter 1 illustrates, throughout the nineteenth century, Qing suzerainty in Xinjiang was threatened by incursions from the Central Asian khanate of Khokand. It would be close to two hundred years after the Qing conquest of Xinjiang before the modernization of transportation and communication would begin bringing Chinese Central Asia firmly under Beijing's control. I view the 1949 coming to power of the Communist Party, and the establishment of a centralized bureaucracy spanning the People's Republic, as marking an important step in changing centre-periphery relations. Although Beijing did not eliminate challenges from non-state actors after 1949, these threats were greatly reduced because of the imposition of a modernizing socialist order on Xinjiang.

The imposition of a centralizing rule was not without challenges in the frontier regions of the newly established People's Republic. This was because the People's

Republic of China (PRC), and the previous republican regime (1911-49), had inherited the landmass over which the Qing dynasty had established suzerainty. The transition from empire to nation-state highlighted challenges of national integration. The Qing empire had been an ethnically heterogeneous state. Manchu emperors acknowledged and celebrated ethnic diversity within the empire. In addition, until the nineteenth century, the Manchus took pride in their Inner Asian heritage, viewing themselves not simply as a Chinese dynasty but also as heirs to a proud steppe tradition of governance over a vast and ethnically diverse empire. Manchu celebration of ethnic diversity is evidenced in Qing art, architecture, and court ritual throughout the prosperous eighteenth century.¹⁴

But following the Opium Wars (1839-42), the Qing began facing both internal unrest and subjugation by foreign powers. Confronted with growing crises, Manchu imperial traditions quickly lost their allure. The Qing dynasty's Han subjects now viewed the Manchus and their imperial traditions as leading causes of the Qing dynasty's stagnation. In 1911, the Qing dynasty collapsed, bringing an end to Manchu rule over the empire. The state now went from being an empire, ruled by Inner Asians, to a republic, ruled by Han nationalists. Since the late nineteenth century, Han nationalists had looked down upon Manchu rule as antithetical to modernity, progress, and rationality. After 1911, there was yet another challenge facing China. Unlike the Qing dynasty, in which the Manchus celebrated ethnic diversity, China's republican leaders, most of whom were Han, faced a new question: how were they to account for ethnic minorities, such as those residing in Xinjiang and Tibet, who were included within the boundaries of republican China only as a result of Manchu imperial conquest?

Politicians and intellectuals now sought to unify China's ethnic groups into a cohesive Chinese nation (*Zhonghua minzu*): what impact these ideas had in the Han-populated regions of the state are of little concern here.¹⁵ My interest is with the people inhabiting the geographical margins of republican China, whose social, cultural, and political milieu was different from that of the Han in China proper. Consider, for example, the humiliation China endured because of its submission to European powers in the mid-nineteenth century. As Joseph R. Levenson famously observed, the treaty port system established "the cultural conditions of Chinese nationalism."¹⁶ Put another way, in the Middle Kingdom, coastal and central regions endured repeated humiliation by Western powers. But it is difficult to imagine how the experience of European imperialism in the coastal areas created a sense of indignation among the people of Xinjiang or Tibet. Notwithstanding the fact that Xinjiang was cut off from Beijing's

jurisdiction for much of the nineteenth century, and Tibet was autonomous in all but name during the same time, there was no discernible improvement in communication and transport, no rise in literacy, no dissemination of a common vernacular, and no simultaneous growth of print capitalism cross the sprawling Qing dynasty that could have forged a shared national identity.

Republican efforts at national assimilation sought to integrate people as disparate as Han and Tajiks and Tibetans and Hui on little more than having been subjects of the Manchus. The Republican regime was not alone in dealing with challenges of ethnic integration. Since the Communist Party was founded in 1921, Chinese communists have proposed a gamut of suggestions for dealing with ethnic plurality. For just Xinjiang itself, suggestions have ranged from autonomy (proposed in 1921),¹⁷ to the actual establishment of an autonomous region (*zizhiqu*) in 1955, to the statement that, “from [the Han dynasty] on, the central government has never ceased jurisdiction over Xinjiang,”¹⁸ which was made in 2002.

That party leaders have had to continuously address the place of national minorities (*shaoshu minzu*) within China illustrates the challenges of governing territories that are part of China only because of Manchu imperial ambitions. Corresponding to Owen Lattimore’s understanding of frontier zones as a region where multiple sources of authority intersect, Xinjiang remains a contested space, where the authority of the centre collides with pan-Islamic or pan-Turkic identity politics from beyond the international boundaries. These new identity politics in Xinjiang emerged after the Soviet withdrawal from Central Asia. This led to a crucial question for China’s leadership: could ethnic and religious identity politics in Xinjiang affect the party’s hold and challenge the territorial integrity of the People’s Republic? Any challenges to Beijing’s authority in Xinjiang would be detrimental to efforts to secure Tibet and, of course, could have grave implications for relations with Taiwan, which Beijing has always claimed as its own.

After 1991, Chinese officials and academics paid close attention to challenges faced by Beijing in Xinjiang. The security discourse in the PRC vis-à-vis Central Asia and Xinjiang demonstrated uniformity irrespective of whether it was disseminated directly by the state (through the Information Office), the media (the *Renmin ribao* [*People’s Daily*] was, and remains, a central mouthpiece), or scholarly publications. Within this discourse, the fundamental challenge was that of regional security (*diqu anquan*),¹⁹ stemming either from Islamic extremism (*yisilan jiduan zhuyi*)²⁰ or the problem of ethnic relations (*minzu guanxi wenti*) in Central Asia.²¹ For analysts in the PRC, instability in Central Asia was dangerous because it spilled over into Xinjiang.²² In this book, I examine this

discourse and discuss how it has evolved since 1991. Suffice it to note that challenges to Beijing's authority in Xinjiang were frequently viewed as the result of challenges from across the border in post-Soviet Central Asia. After September 11, 2001, there was an increasing focus on Afghanistan and Pakistan's frontier regions as centres of terrorism that were threatening stability in western China.

This is not to suggest that Beijing feared waves of jihadis pouring into Xinjiang, as had been the case during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan when tens of thousands of Mujahidin travelled from Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP) to fight against the Soviet army. Rather, Beijing has blamed unrest in Xinjiang on a small number of individuals. According to Beijing, these miscreants do not represent the political aspirations of Xinjiang's Muslim population. This is a credible claim. Affirmative action policies in education, employment, and family planning helped ensure that Xinjiang has remained largely peaceful since the Cultural Revolution. Xinjiang, under party rule, was never afflicted by violent insurgency as were some of the neighbouring Central Asian republics or regions in South Asia. It would be a mistake to see Xinjiang as a tinderbox ready to go up in flames. But Beijing has remained steadfast in its opposition to pan-Islamic and pan-Turkic identity politics and has cracked down harshly on suspected agitators, pressing the Central Asian leadership to stem support for separatists within Central Asia. Overall, Chinese authorities have taken a grave view of security challenges in this frontier region.

How were transnational identity politics sustained? As I discuss in the following section, the collapse of Soviet power created conditions for a regional war economy that sustained those challenging state power in Central Asia and China. Simultaneously, there was another important development taking place: shortly after independence, the Central Asian republics saw sustained efforts by global powers and regional countries to create inroads into this strategically important region. Seemingly overnight, Central Asia, which had remained inaccessible to the outside world throughout the twentieth century, became the focus of keen diplomacy. Thus, in addition to regional security considerations, China's policy towards Central Asia was informed by its diplomatic priorities in the post-Cold War world.

The International Context: Regional Posturing and Global Alignment in Post-Soviet Central Asia

The emergence of independent Central Asian republics took place amidst re-treating Soviet power and the winding down of the Cold War: the former created unique structural conditions, such as the war economy, while the latter influenced

the international community's approach towards the region. Combined, both shaped the environment beyond China's western borders that Beijing would have to negotiate gingerly after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Soviet power retreated from Central Asia, leaving economically impoverished, undemocratic, and authoritarian regimes in its wake. This bode poorly for regional stability. Another factor exacerbated the regional situation in the 1990s. This was the increase in economic, military, political, and cultural interconnect-edness among regional non-state actors: veterans of the Afghan War from every Muslim country in the world, radical South Asian Islamist organizations, Afghan warlords, the regional transport mafia, poppy cultivators, arms dealers, and itinerant merchants who were engaged in unregulated commerce that spanned not only Central Asia, South Asia, and the Persian Gulf states but also parts of China and Russia.

After 1991, different actors from within this motley crew challenged state authority in the greater Central Asian region through civil war, insurgencies, and radical Islamist agitation. The political scientist Mary Kaldor has termed these conflicts "new wars," which emerged in the post-Cold War era because of "the availability of surplus arms, the discrediting of socialist ideologies, the disintegration of totalitarian empires [and] the withdrawal of superpower support to client regimes."²³ The driving force behind the "new wars" was identity politics, described by Kaldor as "fragmentative, backward-looking and exclusive," and grounded in nostalgia for past glory, conquest, or defeat.²⁴

Anti-state movements across the greater Central Asian region acquired sus-tenance by tapping into an amorphous war economy that had come to term during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and that continued to grow fol-lowing the Soviet withdrawal. Spanning Afghanistan, the Central Asian repub-lics, Iran, and Pakistan, as well as Dubai and Russia, the Afghanistan-centred war economy dealt in narcotics, small arms, petroleum, precious stones, food-stuff, and consumer goods.²⁵ Not only were new identity politics being forged in the post-Cold War era, but also new means of financing the new regional actors were emerging.

The rise of these regional actors took place amidst efforts by countries near and far to build diplomatic inroads into Central Asia. Since 1991, besides China and the Soviet successor states, Germany, India, Iran, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Pakistan, Turkey, and the United States have sought to expand their influence in Central Asia for different reasons: to establish cultural and religious linkages, to seek access to natural resources, to build security alliances, or to establish a regional military presence. In the post-Cold War order, Central Asia was seen as a strategic crossroads (this rivalry was most evident in the energy

sector). Similar to the Anglo-Russian rivalry of the nineteenth century, which was popularized as the “Great Game,” the late twentieth-century international rivalry in Central Asia was based on a *realpolitik* assumption, whereby one measured one’s power relative to that of one’s adversary.

But Moscow still viewed Central Asia as a strategic periphery and was wary of the sudden foreign involvement in the region after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Unlike other countries, China was sensitive to lingering Russian interests in post-Soviet Central Asia, a fact that was acknowledged and appreciated by Moscow. Chinese commentators pragmatically noted that Russian influence was understandable, given Moscow’s extensive rule over Central Asia.²⁶ Publicly, China’s and Russia’s positions regarding Central Asia have converged. In addition, continued rule by the secular Soviet-installed Central Asian leadership after 1991 reduced the possibility of transnational identity politics – such as pan-Islamism or pan-Turkism – taking root among the Central Asian populace over the long-term and hence having a destabilizing affect on Xinjiang. Russian influence in Central Asia did not adversely affect China’s interests; on the contrary, it was perceived to be a stabilizing force. Had Iran, Turkey, or Pakistan successfully managed to draw any or all of the Central Asian republics into their orbit, the situation would have been worrying for China as this would have likely stirred up Islamic or ethno-nationalist identity politics in Xinjiang.

Clearly, China’s stakes in Central Asia were high. But, despite the fact that stability in Xinjiang was affected by developments in Central Asia, Western commentators largely ignored Beijing’s initial regional diplomacy; China was not seen to be a particularly significant actor in Central Asia between 1991 and 2001. When I began exploring Sino-Central Asian relations in the year 2000, Western discussion on the topic was limited to chapters in select edited volumes (many written by scholars in the PRC), a few journal articles, or passing references in studies on Central Asia.²⁷ Among many foreign observers, even the formation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in the summer of 2001 was received with lukewarm interest rather than with genuine curiosity or careful analysis.

Instead, China-watchers focused on other foreign policy issues, such as relations with Japan and the Koreas, the Taiwan Straits crises of 1995–96, weapons proliferation, or China’s entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO). There was little discussion of China’s role in Central Asia. Yet, during the same time, there was tremendous interest in the newly independent Central Asian republics, as evidenced by frequent analysis of the “New Great Game” and the geopolitics and geostrategic importance of the region. Why was China missing from this discussion until 2001?

One reason is that, until 1997, China was absent from the competition for Central Asia's energy resources. Access to the region's energy resources and the determination of the direction of export pipelines was a pivotal component of international rivalry in post-Soviet Central Asia, and it generated extensive foreign policy commentary across the Western world. Iran, Turkey, Russia, and the United States were most active in seeking access to Central Asia's energy sector. China only began pursuing Central Asian energy in 1997, and its quest did not begin in earnest until 2002.

The other reason for the initial lack of interest in China's regional relations involves the fact that Sino-Central Asian relations progressed gradually and had well-defined, often modest, diplomatic objectives. This was especially true during the decade following the breakup of the Soviet Union. During that time, China and Central Asia laid out very clear targets: the demarcation of borders, the reduction of troop deployment along the frontier, an increase in trade, and the creation of new security institutions. There was always a specific bilateral or multilateral goal that had to be met. Another characteristic of Sino-Central Asian relations during this time was that, while these relations were gradual, they were also continuous. Therefore, while there were no momentous declarations, neither were there any periods during which some tangible progress was not made. The overall result was a slow and steady build-up of Sino-Central Asian relations that rarely attracted foreign attention. And the Chinese by no means considered this to be a bad thing!

The attacks on New York and Washington on September 11, 2001, drew the world's attention to the Taliban regime in Afghanistan as well as to Islamist organizations based in Central Asia and Pakistan. During the initial military campaign against the Taliban regime, the United States negotiated bilateral military agreements with Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan regarding the establishment of military bases. The other Central Asian states, and Russia, allowed over-flights of American military aircraft.

Beijing tacitly supported the military campaign to oust the Taliban. But soon afterwards, Chinese observers quietly began expressing reservations about heightened US power across Asia, which some scholars labelled a new imperialism (*xin diguo zhuyi*) driven by American unilateralism.²⁸ Chinese commentators were unhappy with American military presence in Central Asia as it was seen as giving Washington leverage in that energy-rich region. Some Chinese scholars depicted US interests in the region as being driven by the goal to secure the Caspian's energy resources.²⁹ This accentuated Beijing's concerns for energy security, a topic that, in recent years, has received extensive treatment from both Chinese scholars and industry analysts.³⁰ For their part, American analysts were

wary of Beijing's intentions in Central Asia. Some argued that China's post-September 11 role was that of a spoiler.³¹

The year 2002 marked a turning point in Beijing's Central Asian foreign policy. While for ten years Beijing had followed a gradualist policy in Central Asia, beginning in 2002 it broadened its regional engagement. This was done through strengthening the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, engaging in bilateral and multilateral military and counter-terrorism exercises, funding energy mega-projects, and furthering economic cooperation. In doing this, Beijing increasingly found itself in competition with Washington.

Sino-US relations play an important role in China's engagement with Central Asia and are an important theme in *The New Silk Road Diplomacy*. Thus, it is necessary to state my position on the Beijing-Washington nexus. On the one hand, I disagree with analysts – both in the PRC and in the United States – who foresee a clash between the two countries. Growing economic interdependence since the Reform era has meant that, at a diplomatic level, the two sides need to maintain good working relations. On a range of international issues – from the environment to international development to peacebuilding around the world – the two countries have acknowledged having similar positions. More relevant to the events covered in this book, Beijing supported the Anglo-American campaign against the Taliban and repeatedly offered full cooperation in the fight against terrorism following the attacks on New York and Washington. Among Chinese analysts, there was a genuine appreciation that efforts to uproot international terrorist organizations in Central Asia would pay dividends in Beijing's own struggle against separatists.

But there was another side to Sino-US relations, one characterized by caution and competition. Besides differences over trade – such as those resulting from China's entry into the WTO, the devaluation of the Renminbi, and the opening of different sectors of the economy – Beijing and Washington have chastised each other over their respective dealings with foreign regimes. Recently, Beijing has been under fire for not exerting enough pressure on Myanmar's military junta and on the Sudanese leadership to address human rights violations. Beijing has responded by pointing to ongoing instability in Iraq and the widespread abuses that took place there under the auspices of the US-led war on terror. Likewise, the two have been critical of each other's engagement in Central Asia. These disagreements emerged in the post-September 11 period. Due to the presence of radical Islamist organizations, significant energy resources, and Central Asia's pivotal location at the crossroads of Asia, the attacks on New York and Washington brought the strategic significance of the region into sharp focus. Put another way, after 2001 the anti-terrorist struggle created a new estrangement between China and the United States. While the possibility of a

clash between China and the United States in Central Asia is very low, there is mutual suspicion and strategic competition.

So far I have ignored the individual efforts of the Central Asian republics in determining the regional diplomatic environment. This is not to suggest that the republics did not influence regional politics and were mere pawns in a regional power struggle. On the contrary, these fledgling republics demonstrated remarkable diplomatic acumen. Here I wish to highlight one aspect of Central Asian diplomacy that is important and yet often ignored: for the Central Asian republics, international cooperation was not a zero-sum game. In their dealings with foreign countries, the Central Asian republics were highly pragmatic. An agreement with one country did not preclude a simultaneous agreement with its competitor. Until the souring of relations between the United States and Uzbekistan in 2005, the Central Asian leadership demonstrated a high degree of skill in negotiating competing foreign interests and making outside countries believe that a stake in Central Asia was critical to their international power and prestige.

The New Silk Road Diplomacy has five chapters. A fundamental assumption in this book is that many of the current challenges in Xinjiang are rooted in the past. These informed the post-1991 development of relations between China and Central Asia. Chapter 1 surveys historic impediments to Chinese rule in Xinjiang. It then examines how regional challenges were addressed following the 1949 communist takeover. While the party had a high degree of success integrating Xinjiang with the rest of China, a series of border conflicts ensured that China's Inner Asian frontiers remained militarized. The security situation in Xinjiang was further aggravated by the Soviet invasion of neighbouring Afghanistan.

Chapter 2 contextualizes Sino-Central Asian relations within the parameters of Chinese foreign relations during the twilight of the Cold War – specifically, improving relations with the Soviet Union and strained relations with the United States. It examines China's immediate priorities in Central Asia: demarcating the border, deepening bilateral economic cooperation, and prevailing on the Central Asian leadership to take a strong stance against allowing émigré elements from Xinjiang's Turkic populace to agitate for freedom from China.

Chapter 3 discusses how unrest in Xinjiang peaked in 1966 and 1997 as well as the beginning of multilateral diplomacy between China and the Central Asian states. It also explores energy in Central Asia and how it became a pretext for international rivalry.

Finally, Chapters 4 and 5 discuss China's role in Central Asia since 2001. The most notable development during this period involved heightened US strategic interests in Central Asia during the war on terror. China's response was twofold:

first, to project unrest in Xinjiang as linked to transnational terrorist organizations; second, to gradually strengthen the SCO so that it could become a viable regional organization. China's increasing regional presence has brought it into competition with the United States, an issue that is addressed in Chapter 5. In that chapter, I also discuss China's energy security concerns, which are exacerbated by extensive US engagement in the Middle East. Currently, these concerns have been partially alleviated through the construction of a pipeline carrying oil from Kazakhstan.

1

The Past in the Present: The Reach of History on the Sino-Central Asian Frontier

In 1991, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan became sovereign after more than a century of Russian rule. National delimitation of the republics had been the result of Soviet nationalities policy in the 1920s.¹ Prior to Soviet rule, the republics had never existed as independent states. Thus, after the breakup of the Soviet Union, Central Asian foreign relations, including relations with China, were without historical impediments. According to Xing Guangcheng, director of the Institute of East European, Russian, and Central Asian Studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), and among China's most prolific commentators on Sino-Central Asian relations, the absence of prior diplomatic relations between China and the five Central Asian republics meant that there was nothing impeding Sino-Central Asian cooperation.²

But the absence of prior relations did not imply an absence of challenges. In a Chinese-language account, Xing Guangcheng and Xue Zhundu (a senior scholar of Chinese foreign relations) identified shared Sino-Central Asian challenges: the problem of ethnicity (*minzu wenti*), the problem of religion (*zongjiao wenti*), the problem of borders (*bianjie wenti*), and the problem of nuclear weapons (*hewuqi wenti*).³ With the exception of nuclear weapons that Kazakhstan had inherited from the Soviet Union (all of which were transferred to Russia by April 1995), the challenges identified by Xue and Xing were rooted in Central Asia's modern history. Thus, while moving forward in establishing relations, Chinese academics and policy makers were acutely aware of the legacies of the past.

At the regional level, China engaged with the Central Asian republics across the 3,000-kilometre Xinjiang-Central Asian border. Given Xinjiang's location adjacent to Central Asia, China's regional foreign policy would be influenced by challenges that Beijing had faced since the mid-eighteenth century – of politically assimilating the distant frontier region.

Thus it is important to explore the historical legacies of Chinese administration in Xinjiang. This chapter identifies developments within or beyond Xinjiang's frontiers since the eighteenth-century Qing conquest that have had an impact on Beijing's approach towards Central Asia in the post-Cold War world.

These are the Qing conquest, which brought the frontier region into the folds of the Manchu empire in the eighteenth century; the marginalization of Xinjiang's Muslims as Han control over the regional administration increased in the nineteenth century; interference from Khokand and Russia, which, between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries either wrested Xinjiang from Beijing's control or sharply reduced Beijing's regional authority; after 1949, the attempts to bring Xinjiang back within Beijing's orbit through a centralizing civilian-military bureaucracy and Han migration to the region; repeated skirmishes along the Xinjiang-Soviet border, which was becoming increasingly militarized through the 1960s; and, finally, security challenges to Beijing in the form of a regional war economy and rising tide of Islamism, resulting from the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

These legacies stemmed from Xinjiang's frontier location and would affect Beijing's Central Asian foreign policy after 1991. I discuss each of these in turn. I begin my narrative with an overview of how identity was constructed in pre-modern Xinjiang and consider important legacies of the eighteenth-century Manchu conquest.

Human and Physical Geography, Local Identity, and the Manchu Conquest

Xinjiang is a land of frontiers and, as is the case with frontier zones, has a diverse demographic. Prior to the Qing conquest, there was a high degree of ethnic, occupational, and political heterogeneity across the region. This sprawling frontier region would undergo political and economic changes after the eighteenth century as Qing conquest, subsequent rule by republican governors, and, finally, communist rule would seek to rein it in. The imposition of centralized rule over the distant periphery would lead to governance challenges for the centre, some of which continue to the present.

Given that ethnic plurality underlies many of the challenges to centralized rule in Xinjiang today, it is useful to begin with a snapshot of the region's diverse demography. Figures from 2003 estimated the total population of Xinjiang at 19.25 million. Of these, the Uighurs made up 8.3 million, or 43.35 percent of the population. The Han were the second largest ethnic group, with a population of 8.28 million, constituting 43.02 percent of the population. In 2003, there were 1.24 million Kazakhs in the autonomous region, making up 6.47 percent of Xinjiang's population. The other ethnic groups had substantially smaller representation. For example, the Hui, who are ethnically Han but are followers of Islam and are considered an ethnic minority in the PRC, numbered 0.83 million. There were also 150,000 Kyrgyz and a marginally smaller Mongol population. The Tajiks numbered thirty thousand. In addition, there were small numbers of Uzbeks, Russians, and Tatars.⁴

Another important construct of local identity is language. Of the above people, the Uighurs, the Kazakhs, and the Uzbeks are Turkic and speak different, but mutually comprehensible, dialects of the Turkic language.⁵ The Tajiks are an Iranian people, and their spoken language is similar to that of the Dari of Afghanistan, the vernacular of Tajiks in Tajikistan, and the Pamiri of mountain communities in Pakistan.

Finally, geography also plays an important role in determining identity. Xinjiang has three major geographical regions. In the north lie the Zungharian grasslands, which blend into the Kazakh steppes. Sprawling across much of Xinjiang is the arid Tarim basin at the centre of which is the Taklamakan desert. Dotted the circumference of the Taklamakan are some of the Silk Road's most historic oasis towns: Hami, Kashgar, Khotan, and Yarkand. Both historically and currently, inhabitants here identify with their oasis communities.⁶ Finally, towering between Zungharia and the Tarim are the Tianshan and Pamir mountains. Glacial melt from these mountains feeds the rivers flowing into the Tarim oases.

Before communist modernization, which would have a homogenizing effect on the region's economy, there were occupational distinctions between the inhabitants of the three major geographical regions. These were the distinctions between the oases dwellers, who engaged in trade and agriculture; the pastoral-nomadic communities of Zungharia adjacent to the steppes; and the Tajiks, who lived in the Pamirs in the far west with small quantities of livestock.⁷ Thus, in premodern Xinjiang, identity was rooted in language, locality, and occupation.

A final point of note is that, prior to Qing conquest, all of Xinjiang was not ruled by a singular state. The one exception was Chinggis Khan's (1167?-1227) thirteenth-century Mongol "world empire," which had incorporated all of present-day Xinjiang into its fold. After the breakup of the Mongol empire in the fourteenth century, political power across Xinjiang fragmented. In western Xinjiang, power was wielded by chieftains who ruled over oasis communities. These local rulers were either khojas, descended from members of Sufi orders tracing their biological and spiritual lineage back to the Prophet Mohammed (or the early caliphs), or Chaghadai Khans, successors of Chinggis Khan's third son, Chaghadai (d. 1242).⁸

Until the mid-eighteenth century, western Xinjiang was only a distant concern for the Qing; rather, the Manchu's attention was focused on the northern zone of Xinjiang, Zungharia. It was here that a western Mongol faction, the Zungharian Mongols, established themselves prior to the Qing conquest of Xinjiang. Following the rise of the Zungharian leader Galdan (r. 1676-97), conflict between the Manchu and Zunghars emerged. Galdan was a unifying leader who benefited, in part, from large-scale Mongol conversion to Tibetan Buddhism, which

fostered unity among the tribal confederacy. Galdan sought to unite the different Mongol factions into a single confederation, a move that would have led to the emergence of the Mongols as a formidable steppe empire.⁹

The emergence of the Zunghars as a steppe power clashed with the Manchu's self-projection as not only rulers of an agrarian Chinese state but also as Inner Asian empire builders who were heirs to the thirteenth-century Chinggisid world empire. In a symbolically important incident in 1633, the Manchu leader Hung Taiji (1592-1643) had been presented with the seal of Chinggis Khan and had been declared the incarnation of the World Conqueror as well as the universal Buddhist ruler.¹⁰

Buddhism played a key role in legitimizing the political authority of the Manchus and the Zunghars, with both groups seeking support from the Tibetan Buddhist lamas. Consequently, the Manchus grew alarmed when Galdan received backing from the Tibetan regent in the name of the fifth Dalai Lama (the fifth Dalai Lama had in fact died in 1682, although this was hidden from the public for many years). This alliance between the Zunghars and the Tibetan lamas challenged the Manchu's imperial mandate. Now an important part of Manchu strategy on the steppe consisted of trying to break the link between the Tibetan lamas and the Zunghars. The Qing succeeded in doing so by making Tibet a tributary in the early eighteenth century and, in 1717, appointing their own regent, Lazang Khan (1656?-1717). The Zunghars retaliated by attacking Tibet, deposing Lazang Khan, and ensconcing a regent allied with the Zunghars. This turn of events was again unacceptable to the Manchus. In 1720, the Qing struck back and overthrew the Zunghar-appointed regime.¹¹

Between the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries there was a continuous tussle between the Manchus and the Zunghars over who could gain the most political capital through an association with Tibetan lamas. This sharpened the Manchu's resolve to destroy the Zungharian state. Although the Manchus had been launching military campaigns against the Zunghars since the reign of the Kangxi emperor (1662-1723), by the middle of the eighteenth century the Qing were in a position to decisively project their power along the distant frontier, eliminate their traditional foe, and incorporate Zungharia and eastern and central Tarim into their vast empire. Notably, the initial Manchu conquest had not included the westernmost oases of Kashgaria. Military campaigns in this part of the Tarim began in 1757, when the Afaqi khojas, who had initially been supported by the Manchus against the Zunghar-backed Ishaqi khojas, refused to pay homage to the Qing.¹²

Thus, the conquest of Xinjiang was not driven by economic objectives but, rather, by strategic ones. This informs us how Xinjiang, a region that was culturally, economically, and geographically removed from the agricultural

base of the Qing empire, came to be incorporated into the modern Chinese nation-state. The conquest of Xinjiang was not a result of imperial armies marching into a region adjacent to the central plains; rather, it was a result of how the Manchus assessed threats on their Inner Asian flank and, equally important, of how they projected their power in the region. The conquest of Xinjiang involved a protracted conflict among Inner Asian contenders for empire on the steppe. As Laura Newby has suggested, the conquest and administration of Xinjiang was a uniquely Manchu endeavour (for example, until late in the nineteenth century, the region was solely administered by Manchu and Mongol officials).¹³

What was the scale of change immediately following the Qing conquest? For the most part, the Manchus retained the local secular elite, the Turkic begs. The begs were allowed to conduct their affairs and to retain their local customs. Local men were not forced to wear their hair in queues, and some trade was permitted outside of tributary regulations.¹⁴ This allowed the local elite to retain authority as they remained responsible for tax collection, water management, and the administration of justice. The mullahs, however, did see a curtailment of their power.¹⁵

In other areas of administration, the Qing conquest did bring about social, commercial, and administrative changes. Han from Gansu, Sichuan, and Shaanxi settled in Zungharia and eastern Xinjiang, although in smaller numbers than would occur in the twentieth century. The traditional steppe economy of Zungharia was also altered; agriculture was introduced in the Ili River valley, resulting in a decline in pastoral nomadic activity. The region was also commercially integrated with central China. Relying on the postal relay stations and hostels established by the bannermen and the Green Standard armies as they moved deeper into the region, Han merchants were often only a step behind.¹⁶ These structural changes were in keeping with the notion that a pronounced military and economic presence would closely integrate the distant regions within the Manchu empire. But despite the establishment of economic and military linkages, Qing rule in Xinjiang would frequently be challenged by foreign incursions that severely taxed the empire.

Whither Beijing's Frontier Authority? Foreign Incursions in Qing Xinjiang

A critical legacy of Xinjiang's modern history is that a weak central government, coupled with strong external interference, would erode the authority of the centre in the frontier regions. In this section, I consider how, in the nineteenth century, Beijing's authority in its Central Asian periphery was challenged both by incursions from Central Asia and by Russian interference. After the long Qianlong era – a time of economic prosperity and imperial expansion marking

the high Qing period – the empire slid into a century of internal rebellion and of exploitation by Western imperialism.

A key challenge to Beijing's authority in Xinjiang came from Russia. During the nineteenth century, Russia expanded rapidly into Central Asia, leading it to demand more trading privileges in Xinjiang. This was the beginning of Russian interference in Xinjiang, which would last through the 1940s, and the beginning of differences over borders, which would linger, in some cases, until the twenty-first century.

Like the Qing, Russia had expanded into Central Asia by the twentieth century. Unlike for the Qing, Russia's eighteenth-century march into Central Asia yielded little. However, in the nineteenth century, when the Manchus were struggling to retain their Central Asian territories, Russian expansion in the region quickened. Russia was in competition with Britain for territorial acquisition in Central Asia. In 1848, the British had annexed the Punjab, and, by doing so, they had moved closer to Afghanistan. Afghanistan was viewed as a buffer state between British India and the Russian empire in Central Asia, albeit one in which both Britain and Russia sought a presence, if only through political agents or small military detachments.¹⁷ While, in the nineteenth century, the Qing were beset by internal rebellion and Western imperialism, Russia and Britain began a race for empire that, by the end of the century, would bring most of Central Asia under their direct or indirect control.

British and Russian incursions into Central Asia in the nineteenth century were marked by hawkish strategies, bold military campaigns, complex local alliances, and the use of modern cartography as imperial frontiers were surveyed and extended. This was a far cry from Qing frontier strategy, which, far from expanding, was concerned with retaining previously acquired territory. In addition, the Qing were beset by another problem that would have grave consequences in the twentieth century: before the 1880s, the Qing administrators were unclear about the precise location of the westernmost boundaries of the empire. As S.C.M. Paine points out: “[Qing] sources are unclear regarding the extent of Chinese territories; they discuss a plethora of changing place names referring to areas of unknown extent and vague location ... Boundary negotiators before 1880 often did not have more than a very general idea about where allegedly integral territories were actually located.”¹⁸ But not all scholars share Paine's view of the Qing's rudimentary cartographic abilities. Drawing on Joseph Needham's study of Chinese cartography,¹⁹ Peter Perdue suggests that Jesuit cartographers brought modern cartography to China during the reign of the Kangxi emperor, although Perdue does note that the Jesuits and their assistants did not always visit places they were mapping (including Xinjiang).²⁰

The inability of the Qing dynasty to precisely locate its Inner Asian borders underscored another shortcoming – namely, that, even when it controlled Xinjiang, Qing power in the region was not absolute. Prior to the Opium Wars, the Qing dealt with foreigners through a ritualized system of tribute that positioned it as the dominant civilization surrounded by barbarians. The tributary system helped reinforce beliefs in Chinese supremacy.²¹ But, while, until the Opium Wars, the Qing kept up a façade of superiority in its dealings with foreigners in the coastal regions, on its Central Asian frontiers Qing power was anything but absolute. After 1820, a substantial amount of border trade in Xinjiang was free from tributary regulations. Merchants from the tiny Central Asian khanate of Khokand were engaged in a contraband trading network that stretched between Balk, Khokand, Kabul, Ladakh, and Yarkand.²² Much of the contraband trade was in tea, which has been consumed in Central Asia since the fifteenth century, and the demand for which had increased greatly in Russia in the nineteenth century.²³ Recent scholarship also describes a sophisticated network of opium smuggling in and through Xinjiang at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The individuals engaged in opium smuggling were not only Qing subjects but also Badakshanis, Kashmiris, and Khokandis.²⁴ In fact, in 1832, negotiators from Khokand made demands to the Qing court, which included the return of Khokandi prisoners who were being held in Xinjiang and tax exemptions for Khokandi and Badakshani traders.²⁵

More menacing to the Manchus than freebooting Central Asian traders and smugglers – the distinction between the two was not always clear – was the growing Russian presence in Central Asia. This was not the first encounter between the two Asian land-based empires; the Qing empire and Russia had negotiated their first commercial agreement, the Treaty of Nerchinsk, in 1689.²⁶ Resulting from Qing-Russian agreements in 1689, and the Treaty of Kiakhta in 1727, the Manchus confined trade with Russia to Kiakhta in the northeast. Here, the Qing had allowed the Russians the same limited concessions it had allowed the British at Canton. Both Russian trade in the northeast and British trade at Canton was severely restricted by Qing tributary regulations. This status quo was preserved through the eighteenth century. However, in 1805, relations between the Qing and Russia hit a hurdle. In 1793, the British envoy George Macartney (1737-1806) had refused to prostrate himself in front of the Qianlong emperor. Now, following Macartney's lead, the Russian envoy en route to Beijing, Count Iu A. Golovkin (1763-1846), also refused to kowtow in front of an image of the Jiaqing emperor (r. 1796-1820). As official trade between the two empires faltered, there was an increase in contraband merchandise from the Qing dynasty.

In response to rising contraband trade, by the mid-nineteenth century Russia began insisting on acquiring trading privileges in Kulja and Tarbagatai, located in present-day Xinjiang.²⁷ In 1851, the Russians got their way with the Treaty of Kulja. This agreement not only allowed border trade at Ili and Tarbagatai but also allowed for Russian warehouses and residences on Qing territory. Likewise, in 1860, the Treaty of Peking opened Kashgar to Russian trade. Manchu acquiescence illustrated the limitations of Qing power in the mid-nineteenth century. Although the Manchu rulers were unhappy with these agreements, they were not in a position to refuse. By being a signatory to the treaty, the Qing could at least pretend to wield authority.²⁸

Russia was not the only provocateur in Chinese Central Asia. Between 1864 and 1877, the Khokandi Ya'qub Beg (1820?-1877) established an emirate over most of the Tarim. Ya'qub Beg paid homage to the Ottoman Caliphate. The rise of his emirate took place following the Taiping Rebellion (1850-64), which had laid waste to the central regions of China. Economically, the empire was in shambles. To make matters worse, Western powers continued to press for greater concessions in the coastal areas. The Qing had to assess the feasibility of a protracted military campaign against Ya'qub Beg. Reconquest of the northwest would strain precious human and financial resources.

After extensive court deliberation, it was agreed that it was not just Ya'qub Beg who posed a threat but also the Russians, who had benefited at the expense of the Qing due to Ya'qub Beg's rise to power. In July 1871, during the height of Ya'qub Beg's reign, the Russians had occupied vast tracts of land in the Ili River valley under the directives of the Russian governor of Turkestan, General K.P. von Kaufman (1867-82). Two reasons are given for Russian expansion into the Ili River valley. First, the Russians believed that the Qing would not recover territories lost to Ya'qub Beg. Thus, they felt they could extend their own sphere of influence (Russia had already begun negotiating commercial treaties with Ya'qub Beg).²⁹ Second, the Russians were wary of a westward expansion by Ya'qub Beg into Russian Central Asia. Russian annexation of Ili would serve as a defensive measure.³⁰

The Qing dynasty was alarmed by Russian expansion and felt the urgent need to halt it through a reconquest of Xinjiang. The task of reconquest was assigned to Zuo Zongtang (1812-85), the celebrated general who had played a crucial role in putting down the Taiping Rebellion. By 1877, the Qing had suppressed the rebellion in the Tarim, and, in 1884, Xinjiang became a province.³¹ An important legacy of Zuo Zongtang's reassertion of Qing power in Xinjiang was the heavy-handed tactics that he used, which resulted in the indiscriminate killing of a large number of people.

Although Ya'qub Beg's emirate had been overturned, the Qing dynasty was no longer master of its previous domain as the Russians now occupied much of the Ili River valley. Following the reconquest of Xinjiang, in 1879, the Qing entered negotiations to address Russian occupation of Ili. The chief negotiator for the Qing was the Manchu official Chong Hou (1826-96). The initial round of negotiations culminated in the Treaty of Livadia in 1879. This treaty ceded territory in the Ili River valley to the Russians, allowed for greater Russian commercial penetration of the Tarim, and required the Qing to pay nearly a million pounds sterling in indemnities for the Russian occupation of Ili.³² The Qing dynasty was outraged at these terms that its own negotiator had accepted.

After denouncing Chong, and refusing to ratify the treaty, the Qing convinced the Russians to return to the negotiating table. Russia had just come out of a war with the Ottoman empire (1877-78) and wished to avoid conflict on its Inner Asian frontier. Hence, it agreed to another round of negotiations. The result was the 1881 Treaty of St. Petersburg. This treaty returned most of the Ili River valley to the Qing (although not the southwestern portion) and scaled back Russia's commercial penetration of Xinjiang. Although the indemnity to be paid to Russia increased by 80 percent, the Qing celebrated the agreement as a victory.³³

But a key shortcoming of the Treaty of St. Petersburg was its failure to demarcate the border along the Pamirs west of Kashgaria. In 1876, Russia had annexed Khokand, thus bringing most of the Pamirs into the Russian empire. In forays west of Kashgar during the Qianlong reign, Qing forces had penetrated deep into the Pamirs.³⁴ But the imperial borders had not been demarcated at this time. Setting precise boundaries on the westernmost frontiers was not a priority for the Manchus in the eighteenth century. As the Qing ruled through the local elite in Chinese Inner Asia, local alliances were more important than surveying and demarcating borders. The result was that, throughout the nineteenth century, the frontiers in the Pamirs had remained undemarcated. This became a concern for the Qing following Russian expansion into Khokand, which brought the Russians right up to the Qing frontier in the Pamirs. With the frontier poorly demarcated, what was stopping further Russian expansion?

For the Qing, the absence of a hard frontier in the Pamirs was a concern. In 1884, the Qing empire and Russia signed a protocol to the Treaty of St. Petersburg. On paper, the protocol demarcated the Pamiri frontier. But the reality on the ground was different, and the actual borders remained poorly defined. Also, according to the 1884 protocol, not only was there ambiguity about where precisely the border lay but there was also an undemarcated borderland between the two empires.

It was in Russia's interest to keep the demarcations vague and thus leave the possibility of future expansion open.³⁵ This was because Russia sought a border with India, which could be used as a pressure point in the event of hostility with Britain. Britain, wanting a buffer zone between the British and Russian empires, was eager to avoid this outcome. Consequently, Britain found itself encouraging Qing westward incursions into the Pamirs. This would enable the Qing empire to expand up to Afghanistan, thus creating a wedge between the British and the Russian empires.

Although suspicious of Britain's intentions, the Qing did send expeditions to the Pamirs in 1891. Reacting to Qing incursions in the Pamirs, and the British occupation of Hunza in 1891, the Russians stepped up their presence in the Pamirs beyond the point agreed upon in the 1884 Protocol. In an attempt to demarcate the border, the Qing and Russia resumed negotiations in 1894, although no formal agreement on border demarcation emerged.³⁶ No binding bilateral treaty called for the scaling back of Russian presence in the Pamirs.

Thus, an ad hoc arrangement determined Russia's Central Asian frontiers with the Qing. This arrangement remained in effect until 1991. Disputes over the location of the Sino-Russian boundary became a source of conflict between the two countries throughout the second half of the twentieth century. During this time, Russia insisted that the 1894 agreement was a formal treaty, whereas the Chinese argued that it was a *de facto*, provisional agreement and that the 1884 protocol was the last formal agreement between the two empires.³⁷ The significance of this disagreement was that Russia had clearly expanded beyond the vaguely set boundaries of the 1884 protocol – a return to which would still benefit China – and the 1894 negotiations failed to produce a binding agreement that would force Russia to scale back its expansion into the Pamirs.

Upholding the 1894 agreement worked to Russia's advantage. According to Beijing, twentieth-century Russian borders in the Pamirs infringed on Chinese territory. This claim was made despite the fact that the Pamiri borders were never properly demarcated and that the Qing dynasty never had more than a nominal and temporary military presence in the region (first during the Qianlong reign and then towards the end of the nineteenth century). Prior to 1884, within Xinjiang, a border region became a part of the empire not only because it was so demarcated but also because, through local patronage, the centre's influence extended that far.

By the end of the nineteenth century, a semblance of stability emerged along the Qing empire's far western borders. Although the 1894 agreement did not favour the Qing, the empire would soon be at war with Japan, and the ailing dynasty was not concerned with a minor territorial dispute on its westernmost frontier. In addition, the 1895 Pamir Boundary Commission established by

Britain and Russia allocated the Wakhan corridor – a 30-kilometre-wide strip separating British India from Russia and bordering Xinjiang in the east – to Afghanistan.³⁸ The major boundaries in Central Asia had been set, although not accepted.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Russia had established itself in Central Asia. From here it could exploit Xinjiang. The securing of trading privilege in Xinjiang was a crucial step for Russia. The turning point was the 1851 Treaty of Kulja, which paved the way for the opening of Xinjiang. The treaties that followed allowed for greater commercial penetration than had hitherto been possible. Although the Russians had been vying for increased trade with the Qing since 1805, it is no coincidence that they managed to secure their demands when Beijing was under stress due both to internal crises and to foreign pressures. Likewise, Ya'qub Beg's ability to establish an emirate in the Tarim speaks volumes about the inability of the Qing to control incursions from the tiny khanate across the frontier, along with its thirteen-year inability to put down the rebellion. Qing power at the end of the nineteenth century was indeed limited. And, as I discuss next, in Xinjiang, the collapse of the Qing dynasty in 1911 led neither to greater control by the centre nor to reduced Russian involvement.

Xinjiang under Warlord Rule

The collapse of the Qing dynasty in 1911 resulted in a statewide decentralization of power. In Xinjiang, provincial administrators enjoyed *de facto* autonomy from Beijing. During the Republican era, Xinjiang was administered by three Han governors: Yang Zengxin (1911-29), Jin Shuren (1928-33), and Sheng Shicai (1933-44).

In the years between 1911 and 1949, Xinjiang would see heightened Russian involvement. Another important development during this time, and one that continues to influence ethnic relations within Xinjiang, was the marginalization of Xinjiang's Muslims – in particular the town-dwelling Uighurs – as Han functionaries took over local administration. As a result, the difference between the Han and the Uighurs was not only of ethnicity and religion but also that between the rulers and the ruled. This division between the Han and the Uighurs, with the former occupying more positions of authority, remains a latent source of unhappiness among the Uighurs when it comes to their feelings regarding Beijing's administration of Xinjiang.

While the preference for Han functionaries began with the reconquest of Xinjiang in the late nineteenth century, by the Republican era the Han had overshadowed the administrative functions of Xinjiang's traditional elite. Owen Lattimore's first-hand observations of the divide between the Han and the locals

are illustrative of ethnic relations in the region. In 1926, Eleanor and Owen Lattimore passed through Xinjiang on an overland journey from Beijing to India. In his description of the journey, which was first published in 1930, Owen Lattimore expressed admiration for the tenacity of Republican rule in Xinjiang. His positive appraisal was based on the continuity of Chinese rule in the face of internal chaos and external pressure from Russia.³⁹ But underlying his positive appraisal was a sensitivity to the widening gulf between the Han and the locals. In his account of a meeting between the Turkic begs and a Han assistant to the district magistrate, Lattimore described the begs as immaculately dressed. The Han assistant, a “funny looking opium-smoking bumpkin,” had complete authority over the begs:

[The Han assistant] could not even speak the language of the people. The Begs who toadied him had to speak Chinese ... That such a man should have been competent to handle any matters that might come up was proof outright of the domination of the Chinese as a racial group.

[A] pointed racial superiority is publicly maintained by the Chinese. At any sort of public reception the subject races, if they are seated at all, are seated separately. Very often they are not seated at all. None of the Turki Begs of whom I have spoken would dare sit down in the presence of a District Magistrate's body-servants, unless they were invited to sit. Nor were they invited.⁴⁰

In a later article (first published in 1933), Lattimore argued that Han administrators kept themselves aloof from the local populace. He noted: “Chinese practice is the reverse of that of Western nations which rule in the Orient. The Chinese administrator knows and cares little about the language, life, customs, and point of view of people he governs. He works through a ‘native’ interpreter who can speak Chinese.”⁴¹

Lattimore noted that the Han saw themselves as culturally superior to Xinjiang's Muslims. He described this as “a conviction that the day of the barbarian was finally over. The [Republican government] urged that the time had come to set about the business of making all natives either turn Chinese or get out.” The Han administrators sought to achieve this by curtailing “the privileges and subsidies of the native Turki ‘princes,’ who had once been at the head of ‘native states’ in a number of southern oases,” and also by curtailing the power of “Kazakh chiefs” and “Mongol princes.”⁴² For Lattimore, ethnic polarity constituted the primary fault line in Xinjiang.

An important consequence of the ethnic schism in Republican Xinjiang was that it accentuated the religious differences between the administrators and their Muslim subjects. Religious strife factored into rebellions in the 1930s and

1940s. Tensions between the Han and the Muslims increased following Governor Jin Shuren's 1931 annexation of the Kumul khanate. The Kumul khanate had been one of the last semi-autonomous khanates in Central Asia in which the elite had traced their lineage to the principality allocated to Chinggis Khan's third son, Chaghadai. Annexation of the khanate antagonized the Muslims of Xinjiang.

The local population was also outraged by Governor Jin's refusal to allow Muslims to travel to Mecca for pilgrimage.⁴³ Matters came to a head in 1933, when a Han tax collector, said to be of questionable character, tried to force a Uighur from Kumul to give him his daughter in marriage. Islamic law forbids a Muslim woman from marrying a man of another faith, and in the polarized atmosphere of Republican Xinjiang, the Han suitor's proposition was taken as a great affront. Although what transpired immediately afterwards is unknown, enraged Uighurs murdered both the suitor and the Han residents of Kumul. Violence soon engulfed most of the Tarim.⁴⁴ Ma Zhongying (b. 1910?), a Hui from Gansu, led the uprising. Ma paid nominal allegiance to the Nationalist government but was allegedly supported by the Japanese.⁴⁵

The rebellion led to the formation of the *Sharqi Turkistan Turk-Islam Jumhuriyatti* (Turkish Islamic Republic of Eastern Turkestan [TIRET]) in western Xinjiang in 1933.⁴⁶ Wu Aitchan, who had been sent as a Nationalist advisor to Governor Sheng, describes the formation of the TIRET:

In September 1933 the Republic of Eastern Turkestan was proclaimed with much rejoicing. The flag showed a crescent moon and a star on a white foreground, on which there were also written certain texts from the Koran. All the Government seals were remolded and at every street corner slogans were posted up stating that the [Han] Chinese should be driven out of the new state. Delegates were sent across the mountains to Afghanistan to purchase ammunition from the Mohammedan ruler there, and it was proposed that certain Turkish subjects who had been exiled by the Kemalists and had taken refuge in the East should be offered citizenship in return for their help in founding the republic.

An appeal was issued to all exiled Turks throughout the East, promising them a safe abiding place under the flag of East Turkistan.⁴⁷

Governor Sheng eventually suppressed the rebellion, although not without critical assistance from the Soviet Union. While the rebellion has received detailed treatment elsewhere,⁴⁸ here I wish to emphasize the role of religion in the uprising. The annexation of the Kumul khanate, the restrictions on pilgrimage to Mecca, and the Han tax collector's desire to marry a Uighur woman inflamed religious sensibilities. Many of the demands made by the rebelling Muslims had

been economic, such as the lifting of government-imposed trade monopolies. But Muslims also demanded the imposition of sharia (Islamic law).⁴⁹ Islam became part of the discourse against Han hegemony. The following notice, posted in Karakash and addressed to the Han, has strong Islamic overtones. Note how the anonymous author views the conflict between the Han and the Muslims in religious terms: “You ... try to seek out the supporter of Islam to kill him. Foolish infidels like you are not fit to rule ... How can an infidel, who cannot distinguish between a friend and a foe, be fit to rule? You infidels think that because you have rifles, guns ... and money, you can depend on them; but we depend on God in whose hands are our lives. You infidels think you will take over our lives ... If we die we are martyrs. If we survive we are conquerors. We are living but long for death.”⁵⁰

The role of Islam in popular mobilization needs to be approached cautiously and must be kept within the broad framework of changing socio-economic circumstances that the Muslims experienced within Republican Xinjiang. Put another way, Islam was important because it embodied a crucial point of difference between Xinjiang’s local population and the Han administrators. Xinjiang’s breakaway republics in the 1930s and 1940s were not akin to the late twentieth-century Islamist movements across Central Asia, the Middle East, and South Asia. The Islamist overtones of Republican Xinjiang’s breakaway republics should not be taken out of context and should not be conflated with anti-state Islamist movements in post-Soviet Central Asia (which I discuss in later chapters). Thus, while Pan Zhiping of the Xinjiang Academy of Social Sciences is correct in identifying the pan-Islamic (*fan yisilan zhuyi*) and pan-Turkic (*fan tujue zhuyi*) undertones of the TIRET, I am uneasy with his classification of the TIRET as an Islamic state (*yisilanjiao guo*).⁵¹ As Wu Aitchen’s personal observations indicate, the conflict did not only pit the Turkic Muslims against the Han. For example, at one point, Wu describes the situation in the southern oases, where “each of the several rebel chiefs was aiming at personal power. [One Kirghiz chief] was looting and murdering in all directions ... Not only were Chinese massacred but Muslims and Tungans were slain.”⁵²

Wu’s accounts demonstrate that the conflict, which spanned a vast area, was made up of different interest groups. Religion was not always the common denominator. For example, the Turkic people often identified the Hui with the Han, even though the former were Muslim.⁵³ The tension between the Turkic Muslims and the Hui continued to be played out after the end of the TIRET in 1934 in a Hui warlord enclave that was formed in the same year. Established in the southern Tarim around Khotan, for the duration of its existence (until 1937), this little-studied warlord enclave saw the continuous exploitation of the Turkic people by their Hui overlords.⁵⁴

The role of Islam is best situated within the declining socio-political standing of Republican Xinjiang's Muslim communities. Islam provided a language of resistance to state power, and it is problematic to remove the Islamic overtones from the context of ethnic polarization. For this reason, there is a problem in Pan Zhiping's approach, in which he sees independent "republics" in the 1930s and 1940s as precursors to the present-day separatist movements within Xinjiang. This is also Beijing's position today.⁵⁵

For some of Republican Xinjiang's Turkic elite, ethnicity was also an important unifier. The following example, albeit from a later date, illustrates Turkic ethnic solidarity. In 1945, there were calls for a unified Turkic movement from within the local elite. Owen Lattimore observed that this "Pan Turkic nationalism" was designed to "deal with the population of [Xinjiang] within the framework of a policy designed to strengthen their [the Turkic elite's] control over all people living within the province."⁵⁶ The demand of the pan-Turkic nationalists was not for outright independence but, rather, for a greater degree of administrative control.⁵⁷ Of course, we need to be careful about reading too much into this demand since it was made by the elite, who would not want to antagonize the Han rulers. Nevertheless, gaining more authority at the regional level, and not necessarily outright independence from Republican China, was the objective of many Turkic elite.

Besides the ethnic and religious polarization, another pressing issue was Russian interference, which contributed to the upheaval and intrigue in Xinjiang after 1933. In his account of a six-month journey from Beijing to Kashmir through Xinjiang in 1935, Peter Fleming, correspondent for the *Times*, commented: "[Xinjiang] is the last home of romance in international politics ... The present situation in [Xinjiang] is impossible to watch [from outside the region]."⁵⁸ Peter Fleming's observation that the situation in Xinjiang was continuously changing was shared by Owen Lattimore, who wrote: "The Chinese control of Chinese Turkestan, though maintained with admirable stability, is only maintained as it were from month to month ... In China itself, the welter and turmoil of the political and economic adjustment to new standards has drawn all the blood of the country to its heart, leaving no strength to administer its outer dominions, the buffer territories between Asiatic and European."⁵⁹

As Beijing's authority in Xinjiang waned, the Soviet Union consolidated its hold over the Tsarist Central Asian possessions that it had inherited. By the end of the 1920s, the Soviet Union was internally stable and could pursue its economic and political interests in Xinjiang. The establishment of the TIRET provided Moscow with its first opportunity for direct engagement in Xinjiang. In 1933, Governor Jin was forced to request Soviet help to bring the breakaway region back into its fold.

From this time on, Soviet power in Xinjiang remained steadfast. Between 1933 and 1949, the Soviet Union would exert strong influence within Xinjiang. Soviet troops were even garrisoned as deep as Hami. The Soviet Union's economic influence in Xinjiang was immense. Owen Lattimore estimated that, in the early 1930s, trade with the Soviet Union – much of it in livestock (from Xinjiang) and light manufactured goods and raw materials (from Soviet Central Asia) – accounted for 82.5 percent of Xinjiang's total foreign trade. Geography played an important role in increased Soviet interference. Trade between Xinjiang and India, either through the Karakorams or through Tibet, was a logistical hassle. Trade between Xinjiang and central China was likewise difficult because of the vast distance separating the region from China proper. Once transport costs were factored in, trade with central or coastal China was no longer viable.⁶⁰ The Soviet Union was Xinjiang's only feasible trading partner. Economic penetration by the Soviet Union went hand in hand with political control. Passing through Kashgar, Peter Fleming observed that “the whole city was in effect run by the secret police, the Russian advisors, and the Soviet Consulate, and most of the high officials were only figureheads.”⁶¹

What were Russian interests in Xinjiang? First, in the late 1930s Governor Sheng had declared himself a Marxist and became a member of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). This permitted Soviet interference at the highest level of administration. The Soviet Union also had strategic interests: after the 1937 outbreak of hostilities between China and Japan, Xinjiang's importance grew. The Soviet Union had long been suspicious of Japanese intentions in Inner Asia and feared that Xinjiang would become a sphere of Japanese influence just as had Manchuria. Besides the threat to the Soviet Union, this would allow Japan to flank Mongolia, itself a Soviet puppet, from both sides.⁶² In addition, Xinjiang provided a supply route to support the war effort in China.⁶³

Soviet influence in Xinjiang increased over the next decade. In 1943, a Kazakh rebellion broke out in the Altai region. Uighurs soon joined the uprising. In 1944, another revolt broke out in the districts of Ili, Dacheng, and Altai. The uprising came to be known as the Three District Revolution (*sanqu geming*) and was staunchly anti-Han.⁶⁴ Insofar as the Han were singled out for attack, there was a united front put up by the Muslim nationalities in Xinjiang.

The Three Districts Revolution was followed, one year later, in 1945, by the establishment of the *Sharqi Turkistan Jumhuriyatti* (East Turkestan Republic [ETR]). The ETR was centred in the Ili River valley, even though it included towns such as Aksu, which were located south of the Tianshan. The Soviet Union backed the ETR for two reasons: first, the Soviet Union gave strategic importance to securing a presence in Xinjiang (with a client state in Xinjiang, the Soviet

Union had a wall of buffer states stretching from Mongolia to Azerbaijan); second, Xinjiang was rich in oil and mineral resources, which the Soviet Union managed to exploit by supporting the ETR.⁶⁵ It is also possible that, after the end of the Second World War, the Soviet Union was wary of an American-backed regime ruling China. In such a case, having a client state in Xinjiang would be beneficial for Moscow.⁶⁶

After 1945, the Nationalist government attempted to bring Xinjiang back into its fold, even though much of it was now under the control of the ETR. For the Nationalists, the tide had begun to turn. In the following years, the Nationalists quickly lost ground to the CCP. Nationalist authority in Xinjiang diminished. By the summer of 1949, the CCP's First Field Army (FFA) was poised in Gansu. Leaders from the ETR flew to Beijing to attend the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference to negotiate an agreement with China's new leaders. En route to Beijing, their plane crashed. Everyone on board was killed, and the ETR found itself without leadership. On September 25, 1949, the Nationalist-appointed governor surrendered peacefully to the Chinese communists. Chaos followed as remnants of the ETR and some Nationalists refused to surrender to the communists. Finally, on October 12, 1949, Chinese communist troops entered Xinjiang. By the following year, Xinjiang was completely brought under the control of the party.⁶⁷

Party Rule in Xinjiang: Securing the Periphery

Reflecting back on Republican Xinjiang, Governor Sheng wistfully observed: "Sinkiang had been able to live in peace and happiness before its occupation by the Chinese Communists in 1950."⁶⁸ This was far from true. Forced to flee to Taiwan in 1949, Sheng felt bitter at the Communist victory. While much of Sheng's narrative is a polemical and defensive account of his role in Xinjiang's tumultuous history, he is correct when he notes that Xinjiang suffered from interference on the part of three imperial powers: Britain, Japan, and the Soviet Union.⁶⁹ Russia's role was, of course, more significant than was the role of either Britain or Japan. Russia was driven by its own economic and strategic interests. But to pin the blame squarely on Russian opportunism is to miss an essential point: Russian interference was made possible because of political disarray in Chinese Central Asia.

A fundamental shortcoming of the Qing and the Republican regimes was that both failed to unite Xinjiang's different regions into a cohesive administrative structure. The imposition of a unifying administrative structure had been difficult because of Xinjiang's geographical vastness. Another challenge involved the fact that the local social structure favoured decentralization. According to Owen Lattimore, the local population that had been confined to self-sufficient

oases had developed “social microcosms with no strong superstructures to unite them into a larger state.” Equally pertinent was his observation that a fundamental problem in Qing and Republican administrations was the fact that “the ability to conquer [outran] the ability to integrate economically and administer efficiently.”⁷⁰

A distant Xinjiang, exhibiting strong centrifugal tendencies, was anathema to the modern centralized state envisioned by the communists. The party’s objective was to impose centralized rule over Xinjiang through Han migration and the transformation of the traditional economy. Under party rule, the number of Han in Xinjiang increased dramatically, in the process erasing much of the traditional economy of Xinjiang.

The unstated assumption that underlies the official narratives about communist modernization in Xinjiang is the necessity of securing the frontier. This was the lesson learned from Xinjiang’s modern history. From the Qing conquest up until the end of the Republican period, Xinjiang had exhibited separatist tendencies. The history of the region was a telling reminder that, without the development of a centralizing infrastructure, and without Han migration and drastic changes to the modes of production, it would be difficult to impose centralized rule. Not surprisingly, territorial integrity was a foremost concern of the new communist regime. In the communist narrative, Xinjiang has been an inseparable part of the Middle Kingdom for the last two thousand years.⁷¹

The process of Han migration and the transformation of the traditional order were linked because changes in demography altered the traditional economy. Newly established military farms played a central role in altering the local demography and economy. As the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) fanned out into the Tarim at the end of 1949 and in early 1950, the military established local garrisons and farms, many of which would become centres of production and construction. Many of these farms eventually merged into the *Xinjiang shengchan jianshe bingtuan* (Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps [PCC]), which was formed in 1954.⁷²

The PCC was a mammoth organization that overlooked military units, agriculture, forestry, animal husbandry, industry, commerce, finance, trade, and transportation as well as land reclamation and civil engineering projects. When the PCC was initially established, it was under the Ministry of Agriculture; however, in May 1956, the newly established Ministry of State Farms and Land Reclamation took over the organization. Not only was the PCC closely linked to the PLA, but the corps was organized according to a military command structure, being divided into regiments (*tuan*), battalions (*ying*), and companies (*lian*).⁷³ The importance of the PCC can be gauged by the fact that, in 1965, the

organization was running just over half of the 243 state farms in Xinjiang. At the time, the PCC was made up almost entirely of Han. Even today, it remains a predominantly Han organization.

Another important function of the PCC was border security as it was to serve as the first line of defence in the event of foreign hostility. Thus, the need for increased border security in Xinjiang became a conduit for increased Han migration. In some instances, minority nationalities were moved out of the border regions.⁷⁴

The PCC enabled the party to reverse the historical tendency towards regional decentralization. Its developmental role stemmed from a Maoist dictum that saw the army as an active participant in the economic and social organization of the state. In Xinjiang, only a fourth of the military actively guarded the borders or were garrisoned as combat troops; the rest were engaged in state building projects.⁷⁵

In Xinjiang, the party and the PLA were particularly closely linked because the CCP had had little field experience there prior to 1949. While, in other parts of China, the party had had varying support prior to the capture of power, such had not been the case in Xinjiang. Given that the Soviet Union had exerted economic, political, and military leverage within Xinjiang, and that on two separate occasions after 1933, parts of Xinjiang had broken away, it was not surprising that the military played a central role in the post-1949 development in this frontier region. For this reason, most of Xinjiang's early leadership was drawn from the military.⁷⁶ The most well known personage was Wang Enmao (1912-2001), who, prior to 1949, had been a political commissar of the First Field Army. By 1956, Wang had assumed both the position of political commissar of the PCC and had become the first secretary of the PCC's Party Committee. A person of limited formal education, Wang had joined the party as a teenager and had taken part in the Long March.⁷⁷

Once the PLA had a firm grasp on Xinjiang, the region was open to large-scale Han migration. In 1953, the Han made up 6.1 percent of the population; by 1964, it constituted 32.9 percent. Han migration to Xinjiang continued unabated. In September 1979, Deng Xiaoping had assured Canadian prime minister Pierre Trudeau that Xinjiang could not absorb more Han for the time being. Soon afterwards, in 1982, the Han population had reached 40.4 percent of Xinjiang's total population. The Han population dipped briefly in 1990, to 37.6 percent; but, in 2003, it stood at an all-time high of just over 43 percent of the region's population.⁷⁸ The PCC, being the primary employer of the new migrants to Xinjiang, had played an important role in altering the demographics of the periphery.⁷⁹

The Han migrated to Xinjiang for two reasons: (1) to provide skilled technical labour in a region that, traditionally, suffered from a shortage of qualified individuals;⁸⁰ and (2) to join the regional workforce when demand for labour surged as more land was brought under cultivation.⁸¹

Han migration threatened the traditional culture of Xinjiang's nationalities. Scholars in the PRC view Han migration to Xinjiang as a dynamic process of cultural interaction that has led to increased assimilation between the Han and the non-Han peoples in spheres such as cuisine and language.⁸² They contend that there is no reason why Xinjiang cannot be a harmonious multiethnic autonomous region. But the reality is different, and even scholarship within the PRC acknowledges that Han and non-Han peoples occupy different living and work spaces and have a tendency to employ people from their own ethnic communities.⁸³ This, however, is as critical as Chinese scholarship gets on this topic. According to the official discourse, Xinjiang is a multiethnic autonomous region, and minority rights are not being infringed upon. Not only is Han migration to the region not a problem, it is a process through which different national minorities in China are enabled to actively engage in the creation of a socialist society.⁸⁴

Han migration to the region, and the appointment of Han to important administrative positions, resulted in Han control over Xinjiang. While there was some local representation in the civilian military bureaucracy, for the most part, Uighur functionaries remained subordinate to their Han counterparts.⁸⁵ In addition, the local nationalities were greatly outnumbered in the PLA. For example, Donald McMillen estimates that only 10 percent of PLA forces were minority nationalities.⁸⁶

An important result of communist modernization involved changes that were brought about in the traditional economy. Nomadism declined sharply. This was especially dramatic in the Ili River valley, where the people were traditionally pastoral-nomadic. Of course, this decline had begun when the Qing carried out the systematic extermination of the Zungharian Mongols following its mid-eighteenth-century conquest. The Qing had garrisoned troops and established military farms in the Ili River valley. During the Republican era, pastoral nomadic activity continued to decline. After 1949, pastoral nomadism became increasingly confined to smaller areas, leading to a decrease in livestock such as camels, horses, sheep, and goats.

Land that had previously been used for herding livestock was now reclaimed for agriculture. After 1949, the PCC undertook massive projects of land reclamation and river harnessing.⁸⁷ In 1911, the amount of land under cultivation was 6,500 square kilometres; approximately a decade after the communist takeover, the land under cultivation had increased to 30,000 square kilometres.⁸⁸ Such

changes were paradoxical: on the one hand, the increase in arable land meant more grain; on the other hand, the increase in cultivatable land permanently altered the economic and social organization of the region. Traditional forms of economic specialization were incompatible with the modernization process envisioned by the communist regime. In Xinjiang's pastoral nomadic communities, changes in economic and social organization were synonymous with changes in culture.

During Republican rule, Beijing's authority in Xinjiang had been challenged because the centre was weak and because there was foreign interference. After the establishment of party rule, Beijing sought to address these challenges by instituting a centralized civilian military bureaucracy. But threats from across the frontier continued. China shared a 3,000-kilometre border with the Soviet Union in Xinjiang – a border that was poorly demarcated and that had been disputed since the nineteenth century. With the deterioration in Sino-Soviet relations at the end of the 1950s, security along the extensive bilateral border became a growing concern for Beijing. Although the Sino-Soviet border clashes would not reach a climax until the March 1969 clash along the Ussuri River, skirmishes along the border had occurred repeatedly since 1959.⁸⁹ These increased in frequency through the 1960s. Beijing accused the Soviet Union of instigating 4,189 border incidents between October 1964 and March 1969.⁹⁰ Most of these were in the northeast.

But Beijing also perceived a threat along the Xinjiang-Soviet border. In 1962, for example, border clashes with the Soviet Union occurred in the Ili River valley.⁹¹ Both China and the Soviet Union stepped up military deployment in Central Asia. In response to the seven to eight divisions in Soviet Central Asia (and Soviet troops in Mongolia after 1966), China garrisoned five divisions in Xinjiang by 1968.⁹²

At the core of the Sino-Soviet clashes was the disputed border. Between 1964 and 1978, China and Russia held ten rounds of negotiations to settle border differences. All ended unsuccessfully. Both sides took differing positions regarding the nineteenth-century treaties.⁹³ The Chinese argued that these had been unequal treaties forced upon an ailing Qing dynasty and that, as a result of this, the Soviet Union was now encroaching on Chinese territory. The USSR refuted this position and suggested that China should accept the current boundaries, at least until a new border accord could be negotiated and ratified.⁹⁴ A decade of border negotiations between China and Russia did little to diffuse bilateral tensions. Although in their September 11, 1969, meeting at the Beijing airport Chinese premier Zhou Enlai (1949-76) and Soviet premier Alexey Kosygin (1964-80) agreed not to go to war over border disputes,⁹⁵ the Soviet Union continued to deploy troops along its border with China. Between

1969 and 1976, the Soviet Union would triple its military strength along China's border.⁹⁶

The Sino-Soviet border was not the only disputed border in Xinjiang in the 1960s. In October 1962, China went to war with India. The reason for the conflict was also a border disagreement. The disputed demarcation was the McMohan Line, which had been fixed by the 1914 Simla Convention.⁹⁷ The Indian government argued that the McMohan Line was the international boundary, whereas Beijing argued that the McMohan Line ceded Chinese territory to India. Both claimed Aksai Chin, a territory just south of Karakoram and to the southwest of Yarkand. After its takeover of Xinjiang, the PLA used caravan roads through Aksai Chin to ferry supplies between Tibet and Xinjiang. Towards the end of the decade, the Chinese constructed an all-weather road through the region. In 1958, an Indian reconnaissance unit was detained by the Chinese in the vicinity of the new highway.⁹⁸ The Indian government saw this as an encroachment on its territory. The Chinese disagreed, regarding Indian claims on the region as an attempt by the Indian government to undermine China's role in the Himalayan region. War broke out between the two countries on October 20, 1962, and lasted just over a month before the Chinese declared victory. The conflict, though limited with regard to military engagements, underscored the fact that China's western frontiers were neither peaceful nor secure.

Elsewhere along the western frontier, border demarcations proceeded smoothly. In 1959, Pakistan proposed bilateral border demarcations. Negotiations began in May 1962 (in 1960 and 1962, the Chinese settled their border differences with Burma and Nepal, respectively). On March 2, 1963, the border agreement between China and Pakistan was announced.⁹⁹ Later the same year, China normalized its 75-kilometre-long border with Afghanistan, and in March 1964 the border protocol between the two countries was signed.¹⁰⁰ What is noteworthy is that the Chinese only normalized their western border with Afghanistan, or, rather, with the eastern frontier of Afghanistan's Wakhan Corridor. As per the 1884 protocol, and considering that the border had remained undemarcated, the Chinese could also have claimed a border along the north of the Wakhan Corridor.¹⁰¹ But this would have meant making a claim on territory that belonged to the then Soviet Socialist Republic of Tajikistan (today Tajikistan). Therefore, while the western frontier may have been demarcated with Afghanistan, this did not preclude the possibility of a new frontier's coming into existence north of the Wakhan Corridor in the event of a new border demarcation with the Soviet Union. Sino-Soviet relations remained tense in the early 1970s, although there were fewer border skirmishes. Between 1972 and 1977, China accused the Soviet Union of annexing over 7,000 square kilometres of territory in Xinjiang. For Beijing, another disturbing development was the

Indian annexation of Sikkim in 1975. Grave though these concerns were, they paled in comparison to the instability that threatened China after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.¹⁰²

The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan and Its Implications for China

On December 27, 1979, Soviet troops entered Afghanistan, ostensibly in an attempt to prop up the regime of Babrak Karmal (1979-86), the leader of the *Jamiat-i-Democratiki-yi Khalq-i-Afghanistan*, or *Khalq* (People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan [PDPA]).¹⁰³ While a discussion of the political changes within Afghanistan in 1978-79 is beyond the scope of this book, most scholars agree that the Soviet invasion was a response to political developments within Afghanistan. Karmal had come to power a year earlier supported by troops sympathetic to the Soviet Union.¹⁰⁴

The Soviet invasion would be the last Cold War conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union to unfold in a Third World country. The war would be one of the most devastating fought in the post-Second World War era, with an estimated 1.5 million Afghan lives lost.¹⁰⁵ The financial costs were likewise tremendous. The Afghan war cost the Soviet Union an estimated \$45 billion. The United States funnelled \$5 billion in aid to the different Mujahidin factions, and this was matched dollar for dollar by Saudi Arabia. In total, the different Mujahidin groups received more than \$10 billion in aid, mostly in the form of weapons.¹⁰⁶

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and its aftermath would have a strong impact on China's Central Asian foreign policy for two reasons. First, the conflict resulted in the creation of a war economy that was centred around narcotics production, gunrunning, and smuggling. This war economy would prove to be a major impediment to regional stability after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Second, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan contributed to the emergence of radical Islamist organizations across the greater Central Asian region. These Islamist groups would threaten regional stability, and countering them would be an important component of China's new Silk Road diplomacy.

Although these new challenges would not come to term until the 1990s, even in its immediate aftermath the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan heightened Chinese security concerns along the western frontier. The situation on the Xinjiang-Soviet border was already tense. Just prior to the invasion, in July 1979, Chinese and Soviet forces had clashed in Dacheng county.¹⁰⁷ During the initial phase of the Soviet occupation, Beijing had to contend with more Soviet troops on Afghan territory adjacent to Xinjiang.¹⁰⁸ Soviet military deployment and the construction of all-weather roads in the Wakhan Corridor alarmed Beijing because it resulted in another potential front where the Soviets could amass

troops against China.¹⁰⁹ In June 1981, the Soviet Union and Afghanistan finalized the northern border of the Wakhan Corridor, which, according to the 1884 protocol, China could have claimed.¹¹⁰ In hindsight, of course, it is clear that the Soviet Union had no plans to attack China through the Wakhan Corridor.¹¹¹ However, at the time, Beijing could not rule this out as a possibility. Given close ties between the Soviet Union and Mongolia, Beijing was fearful of being encircled by the Soviet Union along its Inner Asian frontiers. Consequently, China became one of the earliest suppliers of military aid to the Mujahidin.¹¹²

The war against Soviet occupation and the USSR's Afghan proxies was a guerrilla war that was orchestrated from Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province. In their resistance to the Soviet occupation, the Mujahidin benefited from financing and arms shipments from foreign patrons, foremost among whom were Sa'udi Arabia and the United States. On the ground, logistical support was rendered by the Pakistani Inter Services Intelligence (ISI). Supplying the Mujahidin factions within Afghanistan required developing supply pipelines through which arms would be sent from Pakistan to the different Mujahidin groups.¹¹³ Until 1986, when the US first provided "Made-in-America"-stamped anti-aircraft missiles, only weapons of Eastern Bloc origin were sent to the Mujahidin. This was an attempt on the part of the CIA and the ISI to maintain credible deniability. While large numbers of assault rifles were procured from Egypt, Israel, and black markets in Eastern Europe, substantial quantities were also purchased from China.¹¹⁴ In fact, according to the ISI's Brigadier Mohammad Yousaf, who oversaw arms shipments to the Mujahidin, prior to 1984, "the bulk" of arms and ammunition was procured from China.¹¹⁵

Afghanistan came to be awash in small arms. Barnett Rubin, an expert on Afghanistan, estimates that over \$10 billion worth of weapons were sent to Afghanistan between 1986 and 1990 (these included weapons purchased with both US and Sa'udi funds, and those supplied by the Soviet Union).¹¹⁶ The number of small arms sent to Afghanistan ran into the millions, turning the NWFP into "the world's premier arms bazaar."¹¹⁷ Weapons from the Afghan war were used in regional conflicts throughout the 1990s and continue to be used by insurgents today.

Closely linked to the influx of arms into the region was the shift from hashish production for local consumption to heroin production for international markets.¹¹⁸ During the Afghan war, poppy cultivation dramatically increased. Figures from the 1980s show an upward increase from 200 metric tons in 1980, to 450 tons in 1984, to 1,570 tons in 1989.¹¹⁹ The poppy was processed into heroin in Pakistan's NWFP and then loaded on to trucks, which returned "empty" after supplying the Mujahidin. The heroin was transported down-country and then to world markets.¹²⁰

Afghanistan's war economy was tolerated by the Mujahidin's patrons – the Americans, the Pakistanis, and the Sa'udis – as this was how the loyalty of Mujahidin commanders was bought and maintained. These commanders, besides fighting the Soviet Union, were just as often fighting each other. As Tom Naylor has observed, the weapons and narcotics pipelines were not only inseparable but, "from one end to another, the pipelines leaked." Weapons and supplies were skimmed off for personal profit at every level. Many of these weapons were used in regional insurgencies in the Punjab and Kashmir or made their way onto the international arms market.¹²¹ The war economy created scores of opportunities for corruption, patronage, and the amassing of personal fortunes and private militias.

An equally important development involved the transformation of the traditional social structures as Afghanistan adapted to the changes brought about by the war. Prior to the Soviet occupation, Afghan society functioned through a social consensus that recognized the authority of the tribal leaders. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and the US- and Sa'udi-funded resistance not only destroyed state institutions but also, in the process, destroyed traditional authority. With most of the traditional elite either killed or in exile by the early 1980s, Afghanistan was a vacuum that was ripe for the implantation of a Sa'udi interpretation of Sunni Islam, which disregarded classical interpretations of the Quran, Islamic philosophy, and Sufism, and sought a return to a puritanical Islamic society as it supposedly existed during the time of the Prophet.¹²²

Through its involvement in the conflict, Sa'udi Arabia managed to open an ideological battleground in the war-ravaged country. The promotion of a literalist interpretation of Sunni Islam was in keeping with political changes that had been occurring in the Middle East since 1967. The decisive victory of Israel over the Arab coalition in the 1967 war was seen across the Arab world as a failure of the secular pan-Arabism championed by Egyptian president Jamal 'Abd al-Nasser (1952-70).¹²³ The Sa'udi elite now sought to fill the void left by Nasserite internationalism. In this venture, it was aided by two important developments: first, being one of the world's largest oil producers, the Sa'udi government benefited from the rapid rise in oil prices in the 1970s; second, the Iranian revolution of 1979, bringing in a government that was antagonistic towards Arab regimes, positioned the tension between Iran and its Arab neighbours across a Sunni-Shi'a fault line. Afghanistan became a central arena for Sa'udi-backed Sunni internationalism, particularly since tens of thousands of volunteers from across the Muslim world travelled to Afghanistan to fight against Soviet occupation. As Fawaz Gerges has observed, "Never before in modern times had so many Muslims from so many lands who spoke different tongues journeyed to a Muslim country to fight together against a common enemy."¹²⁴

While most US funding went towards the procurement of weapons for the Mujahidin, the majority of Sa‘udi funding was channelled towards the establishment and operation of madrasas in Pakistan’s border areas. This explains the sharp increase in the number of madrasas in the country. In 1971, there were nine hundred madrasas in Pakistan; by 1988, this number had grown to eight thousand official madrasas, with an estimated twenty-five thousand unofficial ones.¹²⁵ The new madrasas served as a transit point for the kaleidoscope of citizens from every Muslim country that had volunteered for the anti-Soviet struggle. Mostly run by the Jama‘at-i Islami and Jami‘at al-‘ulama’-i Islam in Pakistan, the Pakistani and Afghan clergy at these madrasas offered an interpretation of orthodox Sunni Islam that was at odds not only with Shi‘a and Sufi interpretations but also often with traditional Sunni interpretations as well.

While this was an important trend, we should be careful not to overstate the transformation of Islam in the 1980s. Sa‘udi puritanical interpretations did not take hold either among most Afghan Mujahidin or in Afghan society during the early years of the anti-Soviet struggle.¹²⁶ On the contrary, based on his interviews with volunteers from the anti-Soviet resistance, Fawaz Gerges concludes that a schism emerged between the so-called “Afghan Arabs” and the Afghans themselves. Gerges writes:

An air of moral superiority colored some of the Afghan Arabs’ attitudes toward their hosts, and deep tensions existed ... under the surface ... [T]hey disagreed on almost everything [besides fighting the Soviets], including politics and religion ... Foreign fighters, particularly Afghan Arabs, considered some of the Afghans’ religious practices “sacrilegious” and tried to show them “the correct Salafi” (ultraconservative) way. At the heart of these differences lay a bigger moral clash between Afghans’ homegrown, nuanced tradition of worship and that of an absolutist, textualist, and fundamentalist interpretation that denies context-oriented local customs.¹²⁷

Through the 1980s, Afghan Mujahidin drew from traditional Islamist organizations, such as Burhanuddin Rabbani’s Jama‘at-i Islami and Gulbuddin Hikmatyar’s Hizb-i Islami. Traditional Islamist organizations and their leaders, who led the Mujahidin against the Soviet Union, were a product of the urban student movements of the 1960s. Ideologically, they were closer to the Ikhwan al-Muslimin (Muslim Brotherhoods) than they were to their successors, the Taliban. Olivier Roy, a leading scholar on Afghanistan and Central Asia, spent time with the Afghan Mujahidin through the 1980s and noted that the Afghans had a great tolerance for other faiths.¹²⁸

Among those impressed by the Mujahidin's resistance were Muslims in Soviet Central Asia. In the early years, many Central Asian Muslims were conscripted into the Soviet military to fight in Afghanistan. For many such conscripts, this was their first exposure to the wider Islamic world; many would return home with admiration for the Mujahidin. Some Central Asians taken prisoner by the Mujahidin opted to take up arms against the Soviet Union. This became so commonplace that, in the early years of the war, the Soviet military had to ensure that Soviet Tajiks did not serve in Afghanistan.¹²⁹

By the mid-1980s, there was growing admiration for the Mujahidin in Soviet Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. In 1987, the latter-day Tajik leader, Mullah Nuri, demonstrated in favour of the Mujahidin in Kurgan-Teppe. Another notable example is that of the latter-day leader of the insurgency in Uzbekistan, Juma Namangani, a Soviet paratrooper who became a born-again Muslim while deployed in Afghanistan. During this time, religious books published in Pakistan made their way into Soviet Central Asia via Afghanistan.¹³⁰ Additionally, hundreds of Central Asians travelled clandestinely to Pakistan to either study in the madrasas or to volunteer in the anti-Soviet war.¹³¹ In 1989, the veteran Afghan-watcher Ahmed Rashid interviewed Uzbeks and Tajiks who had fought alongside the Mujahidin and who believed that Soviet defeat in Afghanistan would lead to Islamic revolutions in Central Asia.¹³²

Uighurs from Xinjiang may have also been among the volunteers travelling to Afghanistan from the greater Central Asian region. According to Rashid, "scores" of Uighurs, supported by the Jami'at al-'ulama'-i Islam in Pakistan, may have made their way to Afghanistan to fight alongside the Mujahidin against the Soviet Union.¹³³ In his study, Michael Dillon suggests that there is some evidence that "Beijing itself" sent Uighurs to "liaise" with the Mujahidin between 1979 and 1989, although he does not reveal his evidence.¹³⁴ In an article published on March 30, 2002, in the Kazakh newspaper *Vremya Po*, an unnamed "Uighur expert" also claimed that, during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, the Chinese had established training camps in Taxkorgan, which is in westernmost Xinjiang close to the Afghan border. Uighurs who trained in these camps were supposedly sent to Afghanistan to fight the Soviet Union.¹³⁵ Given the sensitive situation within Xinjiang, I am sceptical of this claim.

In an unclassified report released in 1998 by the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS), independent analyst Paul George assessed the impact of the Afghan war on Uighur aspirations as follows:

As an ideological event, the Afghan conflict clearly had a powerful effect on those who now seek to create an Islamic state in East Turkestan. A number of Xinjiang Muslims are known to have fought alongside the Mujahideen in Afghanistan

together with other committed revolutionaries from a number of Islamic states. It is feasible that some of the Xinjiang Muslims who fought in Afghanistan have returned to take up arms against the Chinese. Certainly, radical Islamic international contacts were consolidated in Afghanistan and the end of that conflict has created a pool of well-trained, religiously motivated, fighters and a vast amount of surplus weapons. There is a virtually uncontrollable trade in weapons from Afghanistan to the border regions of Pakistan, Kashmir, Tajikistan and to criminal elements elsewhere in the region. Smuggling of all kinds of contraband is endemic throughout the area and centuries-old tribal connections make it unreasonable to dismiss the influence of “outsiders” in the Xinjiang conflict.¹³⁶

That Uighurs did cross Pakistan en route to Afghanistan is not in doubt. But, as I discuss in the subsequent chapters, it is not clear whether this occurred before 1989 and, if it did, whether they were supported by Beijing. I do not believe that Beijing was directly involved in sending volunteers to Afghanistan. However, in other areas, Chinese involvement was likely. For example, in his account of the Afghan war, Mohammed Yousaf has claimed that, inside Pakistan, Chinese weapons specialists were training the Mujahidin in the use of weapons.¹³⁷ During the war, the PDPA accused China of training Mujahidin in Xinjiang and in Pakistan.¹³⁸

On February 2, 1989, the last Soviet soldier withdrew from Afghanistan. Though the Soviet troops had departed, fighting still continued between the Mujahidin factions and the pro-Soviet regime of General Mohammed Najibullah (1987-92). After General Najibullah, Burhanuddin Rabbani (1992-96) became the head of the country. President Rabbani achieved little in terms of securing peace or dismantling madrasas, training camps, or the transnational networks that had provided the logistical backbone of the anti-Soviet struggle. The war economy of the 1980s was not replaced by a peacetime economy, and its continued existence not only contributed to instability across Central Asia and South Asia but also ensured that civil society, and publicly representative and accountable institutions, did not take root in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan now suffered from an economic collapse: between 1992 and 1996, the local currency, the afghani, plunged from fifty to the US dollar to 17,800 to the dollar (and, in some parts of the country, to 25,600 to the dollar).¹³⁹ The failure of the national economy encouraged informal economic activity. For many, the drug trade was the most lucrative economic outlet: one study on Badakshan province estimated that cultivators could earn between fifty to a hundred times more growing poppy than they would cultivating wheat.¹⁴⁰ Cultivators could also obtain loans against their poppy crops prior to harvest. In the northeast, the Tajik commander Ahmed Shah Masood taxed the trade

in lapis lazuli and emeralds, which was estimated at \$40-60 million annually. Afghanistan also served as a corridor for luxury goods smuggled between Central Asia, Dubai, Iran, and Pakistan. By engaging in informal economic activity, local commanders ensured that government institutions remained undermined and underdeveloped. The irony, of course, is that often the commanders engaged in racketeering were from the ruling regime.¹⁴¹

With the central government weak and unable to suppress the regional warlords, Afghanistan remained a haven for volunteers from different parts of the world who came for religious or military training. The focus of these foreign fighters was less on taking part in factional fighting within Afghanistan and more on acquiring a set of military skills to take back to their home countries.¹⁴² I discuss this later, with regard to volunteers from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan as well as Uighurs from Xinjiang.

Once the Soviet Union had withdrawn its troops, Afghanistan was no longer a pressing concern for the international community. As Dong Fengxiao noted, although Afghanistan had been a hotspot (*redian*) for the Soviet Union and the United States while Soviet troops were actually in Afghanistan, the international community grew increasingly apathetic (*mo bu guanxin*) towards the country after the withdrawal of the Soviet military.¹⁴³ The indifference of the international community did little to curtail the spread of instability in the greater Central Asian region. Hence, first Central Asia and then China began to feel the effect of instability stemming from Afghanistan after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Conclusion

History has had an enduring reach in Central Asia. The legacies discussed in this chapter formed the backdrop against which China's relations with Central Asia began evolving in 1992. The Manchu advance into Central Asia to bolster its own steppe power, the socio-political marginalization of Xinjiang's Muslims under the late Qing and Republican eras, the Russian exploitation of Beijing's tenuous power in Xinjiang, and the party's centralizing role in Xinjiang shaped the region through the final years of the Cold War and influenced how Beijing perceived its authority in Xinjiang in 1991. Across the border in Afghanistan, a sophisticated war economy was coming to term, and this would bolster anti-state movements across the greater Central Asian region. Regardless of the fact that the near-instantaneous independence of five new states on or just beyond China's frontiers was a historically unprecedented event, it was an event that was indicative of the utmost care that China would have to take in the following years.

The historical experience of Chinese rule in Central Asia mandated that Beijing proceed with caution. This was because the Sino-Central Asian frontier was not a cultural frontier. Ignoring for a moment the international boundaries

between China and Central Asia, and the process of modernization in the twentieth century, the cultural landscape of Xinjiang blends seamlessly into that of post-Soviet Central Asia. As Owen Lattimore observed in an essay first published in 1953: “An important characteristic of Inner Asia is that most of its political frontiers do not mark the edges of territories inhabited by people who differ from each other in language, economic activity, social organization, and in the kind of group loyalty that is founded on the feeling of kinship. [Political frontiers] divide kindred people from each other and place them under different political sovereignties.”¹⁴⁴

So long as China and the Soviet Union maintained suzerainty over Central Asia, the region could be administered from Beijing or Moscow. But this was predicated on the assumption that the two states were in a position to exert strong centralized rule. This was the case with Soviet rule in Central Asia until 1988, after which Soviet authority in the region began to wane, giving rise to an Islamic resurgence. While this resurgence was driven by an indigenous impulse, it was bolstered by contacts from across the Muslim world. In this regard, the lesson drawn from the final years of Soviet Central Asia was similar to that drawn from Republican Xinjiang: in the absence of strong centralized control, containing the Central Asian territory within the absolute political orbit of a distant and culturally dissimilar centre was difficult.

Beijing firmly maintains that Xinjiang is an integral part of a multiethnic People’s Republic. Since coming to power, China’s communist leaders have stressed the multiethnic nature of the state and have strongly condemned Han chauvinism (*dahan zhuyi*). But the past has weighed heavily on this frontier region, and China’s communist leaders learned the lessons of history well. That Beijing sought to firmly integrate the region within China through the influx of Han migrants to the region, and through the modernization of the traditional economy, suggests that, although the leadership considered Xinjiang an integral part of the country, it did not consider it to be a secure part of the multiethnic state.

Although the PRC has managed to exert strong centralized control in the region since the 1950s, the independence of Central Asia has led to the formation of economically impoverished states that have done little to transform the authoritarian Soviet political culture. Initially weak, economically vulnerable, and politically unrepresentative of their populations’ aspirations, when coupled with instability stemming from Afghanistan’s endless civil war, independent Central Asia presents China with immense challenges on its historically troubled frontier.