

March 18, 2015

“Looking West: China and Central Asia”

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“Testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission”

There are often two dominant lines of argument used to explain China’s foreign policy in Central Asia. One asserts that China’s approach is singularly affected by its imperatives within the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (hereafter, Xinjiang), while another perceives Beijing’s diplomacy in the region as driven by a desire for geopolitical advantage vis-à-vis the United States (and Russia). Both of these views are not mutually exclusive however. Andrew Nathan and Andrew Scobell have argued that China’s global foreign policy is structured by a need to navigate through a “terrain of hazards” on its way to great power status.¹ This “terrain of hazards” consists of four concentric “rings” of potential threats: (i) threats to political stability and territorial integrity from internal and external foes (e.g. disaffected ethnic minorities); (ii) threats derived from sharing borders with multiple neighbours; (iii) threats from China’s connection to six distinct geo-political regions; and (iv) threats from the “world beyond China’s immediate neighborhood”.² These “rings of threat” constitute a domestic-regional nexus (the first and second rings) and a regional-global nexus (third and fourth rings) of challenges that Beijing must confront. China’s enmeshment in the Central Asian region through its control of Xinjiang – historically and culturally a part of Central Asia (understood here to include the five Central Asian republics, Afghanistan and Xinjiang) – exposes it to each of these “rings of threat”.

Securing China’s control over Xinjiang is Beijing’s core interest within the domestic-regional nexus. China’s anxieties here stem from the fact that it has been pursuing an inherently imperial project in Xinjiang that seeks its thorough political, economic and cultural integration. Despite China’s contemporary claim that Xinjiang has been “an inseparable part of the unitary multi-ethnic Chinese nation” since the Han dynasty (206 BC–24AD), the historical reality, due to the region’s geopolitical position and the ethno-cultural dominance of Turkic and Mongol peoples, was one of intermittent periods of Chinese control.³ Beijing has neutralized these historical constraints via the implementation of a strategy of “repression, restriction and investment” that has coupled a state-led modernization agenda with control of the political and cultural expression of the region’s non-Han Chinese ethnic groups. While this strategy has undoubtedly brought economic development to the region it has also contributed to ethnic tensions through the encouragement of Han Chinese settlement, growing rural-urban economic and social disparities and greater inter-connectivity with Central Asia.⁴

China’s interests within the regional-global nexus are thus shaped by the core imperatives of security and development in Xinjiang. However, Chinese perceptions of the threats and opportunities presented by the Central Asian geopolitical environment are also conditioned by its global foreign policy agenda of combating the perceived negative attributes of US primacy. China’s foreign policy in Central Asia can thus be understood as the product of the interaction of its interests and anxieties across the domestic-regional and regional-global nexuses. This can be seen in China’s multilateral engagement of the region via the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), its bilateral relationships with each of the Central Asian republics and Afghanistan, and its handling of the threat of Uyghur terrorism.

¹ Andrew Nathan and Andrew Scobell, “How China Sees America: The Sum of Beijing’s Fears”, *Foreign Affairs*, 91 (5) (2012): 32-47.

² Ibid: 33-34.

³ James A. Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads: A History of Xinjiang* (NY: Columbia University Press, 2007).

⁴ Gardner Bovingdon, *The Uyghurs: Strangers in Their Own Land*, (NY: Columbia University Press, 2011).

The Domestic-Regional Nexus: The Xinjiang Factor in China's Approach to Central Asia

Beijing's approach to post-Cold War Central Asia, including Afghanistan, has been underpinned by a trilogy of core interests – security, development and energy. Two factors – the collapse of the Soviet Union and Beijing's goal of integrating Xinjiang into the PRC – generated China's pursuit of these interests. Domestically, the fall of communism soon after the Tiananmen Square Massacre in June 1989, pushed regime survival to the forefront of the CCP leadership's minds. For paramount leader Deng Xiaoping, regime survival could only be assured through continued “reform and opening” and the delivery of economic growth/development with firm one party rule. In order to effectively carry this out however China required, in Deng's view, a stable international environment characterized by a return to “multipolarity”.

These concerns combined to produce a foreign policy in which China would “bide its time, and build capabilities” by seeking to develop multiple regional and global linkages to grow China's economy, resolve long-standing disputes with neighbours and combat the ill-effects of US predominance.⁵ Chinese foreign policy from the mid-1990s thus demonstrated a preference for “cooperation”, “multilateralism”, and “regionalism”, modalities that became central to Beijing's “new security diplomacy” (NSD).⁶ While linked to Chinese anxieties about long-standing regional security issues, NSD was also driven by the desire to balance against perceived US predominance and NSD achieved three inter-linked goals in this regard. First, by embracing multilateralism, China's leaders sought to “dampen tensions in its external security environment” in order to “focus on domestic economic, political and social reform challenges”. Second, engagement in multilateralism assisted Beijing to expand its influence while simultaneously reassuring neighbours about its rise. And third, involvement in regional and global multilateralism contributed to China's ability to counter, co-opt or circumvent US influence and “hegemony” around the Chinese periphery, while simultaneously avoiding overt confrontation with the United States.⁷

This naturally flowed into China's foreign policy toward the newly independent states of Central Asia, whereby it sought to enhance bilateral trade and develop a regional approach to the resolution of Soviet-era territorial disputes. This was complemented by Beijing's reconfiguration of how it would attempt to achieve its long-standing goal of integrating Xinjiang. Until the mid-1980s Beijing had perceived Xinjiang's geopolitical position at the “crossroads” of Eurasia as an obstacle to its goal of integration due not only to the vast geographical distance between the region and the Chinese heartland but also to the obvious historical, ethnic and linguistic affinities that linked the Turkic-Muslim peoples of Xinjiang with their brethren in a Central Asia then divided between Soviet and Chinese spheres. However, with the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, the region's geopolitical position was no longer viewed as an obstacle to be overcome in pursuit of integration but rather as an important asset to achieve it.⁸

This reconfiguration has been no more clearly expressed than in Beijing's consistent rhetoric since the early 1990s that has envisaged Xinjiang as a “Eurasian Continental Bridge”, a hub of a “New Silk Road” or, in Xi Jinping's latest iteration, a hub of a “Silk Road Economic Belt” (SREB). These rhetorical flourishes have encapsulated the spirit of Beijing's policies in the region since the early 1990s which have been guided by the desire to connect the region's economy with that of Central Asia, South Asia and the Middle East through the development of direct trade relations with neighboring Central Asian states, massive state investment in infrastructure projects in Central Asia (including oil and gas pipelines), and greater development and exploitation of Xinjiang's own oil and gas resources.⁹

⁵ Bates Gill, *Rising Star: China's New Security Diplomacy*, (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2010).

⁶ Shuisheng Zhao, “China's Periphery Policy and Its Asian Neighbors”, *Security Dialogue*, 30 (3) (1999): 335-46; and Chien-pung Chung, “The Shanghai Cooperation Organization: China's Changing Influence in Central Asia”, *China Quarterly*, 180, (December 2004): 989-1009.

⁷ Gill, *Rising Star*. 29.

⁸ Michael Clarke, *Xinjiang and China's Rise in Central Asia – A History*, (London: Routledge, 2011):

⁹ Nicholas Becquelin, “Staged Development in Xinjiang”, *China Quarterly*, 178 (2) (2004): 358-378

This strategy in the 1990s was characterized as one of “double-opening”: an attempt to simultaneously integrate Xinjiang with Central Asia and China proper in economic terms, while establishing security and cooperation with China’s Central Asian neighbors. The key elements of this strategy throughout the 1990s, however, demonstrated the primacy of the internal goal of tying the province closer to China. These elements included the re-centralization of economic decision-making to increase the region’s dependency on Beijing; the expansion of Han colonization of the region; increased investment for the exploitation of Xinjiang’s potential energy resources; the opening of border trading “ports” with Central Asia; and significant investment in infrastructure links with Central Asia. Xinjiang’s petrochemical industry in particular was to become a “pillar” industry within this strategy with the primary goal of establishing the region into a transit route and refinery zone for Central Asian oil and gas as a means of combating China’s growing dependency on Middle Eastern sources.¹⁰

Afghanistan’s position in this approach was secondary and driven by Chinese concerns about the potential spill over of radical Islamism into Xinjiang. Symptomatic of this threat was the Baren Incident of April 1990 in which a group of Uyghur men conducted an armed uprising against Chinese police and security forces in the township with the aim of establishing an “East Turkestan Republic”. While the rebellion was forcibly quelled, the authorities subsequently claimed that the leader of the rebellion had been the leader of an “Islamic Party of East Turkestan” that was bent on launching a *jihad* against Chinese rule with potential support from *mujahideen* groups in Afghanistan. While the CCP was quick to link such violent unrest to external influence it was less inclined to draw attention to the fact that it had been engaged in a renewed anti-religious campaign in the region, targeting what it termed “illegal religious activities” such as construction of unauthorised mosques and madrassas.¹¹

As Afghanistan descended into civil war in the mid-1990s, Beijing’s interest with respect to the country remained largely negative – i.e. to prevent any potential spill over into Xinjiang of radical Islamism and other non-traditional security threats (e.g terrorism, weapons and drug trafficking).¹² The potential for these threats to enter Xinjiang was also heightened by China’s strategy in Xinjiang noted above (i.e. push for greater economic linkages with Central Asia). Illustrative of this dilemma was the role of the Karakoram Highway in facilitating not only trade flows but also cultural-religious and smuggling flows between Xinjiang and Afghanistan and Pakistan that worked against Beijing’s integrationist project in Xinjiang.¹³

These concerns encouraged China to take the diplomatic initiative in Central Asia and soon after the Soviet collapse Beijing played the key role in forming what became known as the “Shanghai Five” (S-5) grouping of China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in 1992. This dialogue, originally focused on resolving Soviet-era territorial disputes and military confidence building measures, culminated in the formal establishment of the group as a regional multilateral forum in 1996. The official communiqués released upon the establishment of the S-5 in 1996, while signalling a intent to broaden regional cooperation on security and economic issues, also demonstrated the inter-linkages between China’s domestic, regional and global interests as they noted the grouping’s support for China’s position in Xinjiang and Tibet, its claims to Taiwan, and desire to see a “multipolar” international order.¹⁴

China’s perception of Afghanistan as a source of potential threats to not only its security but that of the wider Central Asian region was heightened sharply with the emergence of the Taliban as a force in the country. The Taliban’s provision of safe haven to a variety of radical Islamists from Central Asia including

¹⁰ Nicholas Becquelin, “Xinjiang in the Nineties”, *The China Journal*, (2000): 65-90.

¹¹ Michael Clarke, “Xinjiang in the ‘Reform’ Era, 1978-1991: The Political and Economic Dynamics of Dengist Integration”, *Issues and Studies*, 43 (2) (2007): 39-92.

¹² Felix K. Chang, “China’s Central Asian Power and Problems”, *Orbis*, 41 (1) (1997): 410.

¹³ Ziad Haider, “Sino-Pakistan Relations and Xinjiang’s Uighurs: Politics, Trade and Islam along the Karakoram Highway”, *Asian Survey*, 45 (4) (2005): 522-545; and Sean Roberts, “A ‘Land of Borderlands’: Implications of Xinjiang’s Transborder Interactions”, in S. Frederick Starr (ed.), *Xinjiang: China’s Muslim Borderland*, (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2004): 226-227.

¹⁴ Clarke, *Xinjiang and China’s Rise in Central Asia*: 128-129.

the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) became a major concern not only to the largely secular and authoritarian post-Soviet regimes in Central Asia but also to China and Russia (which was in the midst of its first war in Chechnya).¹⁵ The IMU's launching of yearly incursions from its bases in northern Afghanistan into Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan from 1998 prompted the S-5 to shift some of its focus to combatting what the Chinese would come to term the "three evils" of "terrorism, extremism and separatism". At the S-5's 2000 summit the group issued a joint declaration that condemned the Taliban for supporting "terrorism", agreed to establish a joint "anti-terrorism centre" and committed member states to greater cooperation to combat the "three evils". Once again, however, this declaration also reflected Beijing's broader foreign policy goals and interests with specific mention made of the group's respect for "national sovereignty" and adherence to "non-interference" in others "internal affairs", the group's opposition to US plans for Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD) systems, and Chinese and Russian positions on Xinjiang, Taiwan, Tibet and Chechnya.¹⁶ The overall impact of the IMU's activities was to drive Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan toward closer relations with Russia and China. After 1998 these states thus became more receptive to Chinese requests for greater cooperation regarding what Beijing defined as Uyghur "separatist" or "terrorist" organisations with, for example, the Kazakh and Kyrgyz governments concluding a number of border security and extradition agreements with China.¹⁷

The perceived growth of the threat of radical Islamist movements to the states of Central Asia, Russia and China and the entrenchment of Taliban ascendancy in Afghanistan resulted in the expansion and reorientation of the S-5 to become the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The group's meeting in Shanghai on 14 June 2001 transformed the organization into a fully-fledged international institution complete with secretariat and inter-ministerial committees. The organization also adopted two documents at this meeting - "Declaration of the Establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization" and the "Shanghai Covenant on the Suppression of Terrorism, Separatism and Religious Extremism" – which proved to be of lasting significance. The latter demonstrated that establishing a regional response to the perceived threat of radical Islam was a central concern of the new organization. The former, however, also explicitly outlined the principles of the SCO and demonstrated the influence of Chinese interests. This document asserted that the principles of the group, or the "Shanghai spirit" as Chinese commentary would refer to it, comprised of "mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, consultation, respect for multi-civilizations and common development".¹⁸

Therefore, while the SCO's agenda was the result of a gradual convergence in the interests of Russia, China and the Central Asian states, the guiding principles of the group strongly reflected China's wider foreign policy interests including its desire to build regional partnerships to combat the hegemony of the US. An understated element of this latter interest was Beijing's desire to craft alternative normative/ideological principles for multilateral cooperation. The so-called "Shanghai Spirit" was one of the first such attempts to present an alternative to the Western led international order. The "Shanghai Spirit" not only established "a set of regional norms which move beyond power differentials amongst the organization's members and toward a consensus-based approach to resolve regional problems" but were also promoted by Beijing as not merely tailored for the specific regional environment of Central Asia but "as universally applicable and as a basis for global politics".¹⁹

¹⁵ Ahmed Rashid, "The Taliban: Exporting Extremism", *Foreign Affairs*, (Nov/Dec 1999).

¹⁶ For the text of the joint declaration see, "Shanghai Five Nations Sign Joint Statement", *People's Daily*, 6 July 2000.

¹⁷ Clarke, *Xinjiang and China's Rise in Central Asia*: 127-130.

¹⁸ SCO Secretariat, "Declaration on the Establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization", 15 June 2001, <http://www.sectsc.org/502.html>; "Shanghai Five Mulls Expansion in Search of Regional Stability", *Eurasianet*, 13 June 2001, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav061401.shtml>. Uzbekistan also formally joined in 2001.

¹⁹ Thomas Ambrosio, "Catching the 'Shanghai Spirit': How the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Promotes Authoritarian Norms in Central Asia", *Europe-Asia Studies*, 60 (8) (2008): 1327.

The Regional-Global Nexus: Central Asia and China's Search for Geopolitical Advantage into the 21st Century

On the eve of 9/11 Beijing had thus developed a relatively successful approach to Central Asia and Afghanistan based on three core interests: security, development and access to the region's energy resources. The rapid and successful insertion of US military forces into Afghanistan and the consequent rise in US influence amongst the states of Central Asia (including leasing of bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan) was a contradictory development for Beijing. The overturning of the Taliban was a positive in the context of Chinese concerns about their potential linkages to violent Uyghur separatism and terrorism in Xinjiang. Yet viewed from the perspective of China's regional and global foreign policy agenda this development was a set back as it compromised Beijing's bilateral and multilateral diplomatic efforts in Central Asia and augured the geopolitical "encirclement" of China by the US and its allies.

In response China attempted to "double down" on its pre-9/11 strategy in the early 2000s by seeking to develop the SCO as a viable regional security organisation. China's efforts in this regard were aided by some missteps in Washington's handling of Central Asian capitals. Most important in this respect was the US response to the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan and the Andijan Incident in Uzbekistan in 2005. Both of these events, from the perspective of the authoritarian regimes in the region, were attempts to overthrow the status quo and emblematic of the George W. Bush administration's "democracy promotion" agenda. States such as Uzbekistan viewed this to be clearly at odds with the US global "war on terror" and the stability of the region vis-à-vis radical Islamism. Not surprisingly China (and Russia) were able to counter-pose the SCO's "non-interference" principles and privileging of state sovereignty and security to this and began to coax the Central Asian states back into the Chinese and Russian orbit.

China's response to the "Greater Central Asian Partnership" (GCAP) raised by S. Frederick Starr in 2005, which detailed an agenda for the transformation not only of Afghanistan but the broader Central Asian region "into a zone of secure sovereignties sharing viable market economies, enjoying secular and open systems of government and maintaining positive relations with the United States", highlighted Beijing's perception of Afghanistan's connection to its regional and global foreign policy agenda. In August 2006 the *People's Daily* issued a commentary that critiqued both the concept and the motives behind the GCAP. It asserted that it had "always been a goal of the United States to penetrate Central Asia" and that the "9/11 incident gave the US a god-sent chance" to do so. It subsequently noted that US "democracy promotion" and "interference" in the internal affairs of the region in 2005 (i.e. reference to the Tulip Revolution and Andijan Incident) was a "policy mistake" for Washington that rebounded to the benefit of the SCO. Moreover, the "main idea" of the GCAP was "to take US control of the situation in Afghanistan as an opportunity to promote cooperation in security, democracy, economy, transport and energy and make a new region by combining South Asia with Central Asia". Crucially, "the reason why it [i.e. US] has brought up the so-called 'choosing from the South' policy in Central Asia is that it is determined to use energy, transportation and infrastructure construction as bait to separate Central Asia from the post-Soviet Union dominance". "By this means", the US "can change the external strategic focus of Central Asia from the current Russia-and-China-oriented partnership to cooperative relations with South Asian countries", "break the long-term Russian dominance in the Central Asian area", "split and disintegrate the cohesion of the SCO" and "establish US dominance in Central and South Asia".²⁰

Significantly, the GCA concept served as building block for the Obama administration's "New Silk Road Initiative", unveiled by Secretary of State Hilary Clinton in 2011. Key to this vision would be for the US to assist countries in the region to reorient their key infrastructure southward and assist in "removing the bureaucratic barriers and other impediments to the free flow of goods and people".²¹ The success of this initiative would also serve a geopolitical goal as the consolidation of an amenable regime in Afghanistan

²⁰ "US Scheming for a "Great Central Asia" Strategy", *People's Daily*, August 4, 2006, http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200608/03/eng20060803_289512.html

²¹ Robert Hormats, Under Secretary for Economic, Energy and Agricultural Affairs, "The United States' 'New Silk Road' Strategy: What is it? Where is it headed?", Address to the SAIS Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and CSIS Forum Washington, DC September 29, 2011, <http://www.state.gov/e/rls/rmk/2011/174800.htm>

would provide Washington with the capacity to develop north-south linkages between Central and South Asia (such as the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India Pipeline) to compete against the west-east linkages being developed by China and Russia. The US initiative has been undermined almost from the start however by the security situation in Afghanistan, the lack of economic integration amongst the Central Asian states themselves, and the administration's broader 'pivot' or 'rebalance' to the Asia-Pacific. The latter, from the perspective of Central Asia's political elites, signals a decline in US attention and commitment to the region from the high point of the early 2000s.²²

While Beijing's geopolitical reading of US policy has by and large remained into the present, it has also been coupled with a clearer recognition that US and NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan is not an outright positive for Chinese interests in Central Asia. Zhang Jiadong writing in the *Global Times* in February 2013 for example argued that for China there are two "worst case" scenarios here. The first would be that the US "stabilizes Afghanistan, establishes a steady government, and then builds frontline bases. This way the US could drive a wedge into Central Eurasia, and contain China from both sides". The second scenario "is one where Afghanistan falls into anarchy with the US exit, becoming a breeding ground for international terrorism and the drug trade" and thus become a "serious" source of non-traditional security challenges for Beijing.²³ Others, such as Zhao Huasheng, argue that US withdrawal at the end of 2014 will mean a diminution of US interests and commitments not only with respect to Afghanistan but also Central Asia. Again, however, this is viewed as a double-edged sword for a China, which according to Zhao, has a steadily growing economic presence in Afghanistan but limited capacity or political will to shape the security environment.²⁴

This recognition has had an effect on recent Chinese policy toward Afghanistan whereby Beijing has focused on three major issues: economic engagement with Afghanistan; pragmatic bilateral and multilateral political engagement, including with the Taliban; and cooperation on non-traditional security issues. Similar to its approach to the Central Asian republics, Beijing has invested heavily in the resource sector in Afghanistan including the Anyak copper mine in Logar Province and in exploration for oil and gas in the Amu Dayra Basin in the country's north. As in other regions of strategic investment, Chinese corporations reportedly secured these deals by providing additional inducements to the Afghan government that many Western corporations could or would not. In the instance of the Anyak deal, China Metallurgical in cooperation with the Chinese government undertook to construct a 400-megawatt, coal-fired power plant and a freight railroad that will connect Xinjiang with Pakistan via Tajikistan and Afghanistan.²⁵

China's political engagement with Afghanistan has also increased, particularly through the vehicle of the SCO. Although Afghanistan is not a member of the SCO, the organization, through the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group (established in 2005), has recognized the near and long-term significance of stability in Afghanistan for the wider Central Asian region. Animated by the need to combat the "three evils", the SCO now shares a common interest with the US to defeat and/or contain the Taliban-led insurgency. However, the organization's so-called "Shanghai Spirit", based on the commitment to "non-interference" in the internal affairs of member states, promises to continue to limit its ability to actively contribute to this goal. While this has precluded the organization or any of its members individually from committing military personnel to the US-NATO effort, it has oriented the group to focus on supporting

²² Joshua Kucera "Clintons Dubious Plan to Save Afghanistan with a New Silk Road", *The Atlantic*, 2 November 2011, viewed 15 January 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2011/11/clintons-dubious-plan-to-save-afghanistan-with-a-new-silk-road/247760/>; Younkyoo Kim and Fabio Indeo, "The New Great Game in Central Asia post 2014: The US 'New Silk Road' Strategy and Sino-Russian Rivalry", *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 46 (2) (2013), pp. 275–86.

²³ Zhang Jiadong, "Can China be a Winner in Afghanistan?", *Global Times*, 26 February 2013, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/764325.html>. Zhang is an Associate Professor at the Center for American Studies at Fudan University.

²⁴ Zhao Huasheng, "US Central Asia Diplomacy in the Post-Afghanistan War Era", *China International Studies*, (March/April 2014): 126.

²⁵ Michael Clarke, "China's Strategy in 'Greater Central Asia': Is Afghanistan the Missing Link?", *Asian Affairs: an American Review*, 40 (1) (2013): 15-16.

issues such as provision of military/police training for Afghan security forces and military equipment and counter-terrorism. In this latter regard the SCOs RATS has been active as a site of counter-terrorism intelligence sharing and cooperation. These activities remain relatively underdeveloped and are limited to sharing of 'watch lists' of 'terrorist/extremist' organizations and RATS does not itself engage in any interdiction/apprehension of suspected militants but liaises with the relevant security bureaucracy in each member state.²⁶

The SCO states' concerns with the potential spill over of Afghan instability into their states has clearly been the main driver of such activities. The potential linkages between the heroin trade and terrorist organizations have been of particular concern for Beijing due to the increase in traffic of the narcotic into Xinjiang over the past decade.²⁷ This aspect of China's Afghan problem is not simply of concern for Beijing due to such linkages (i.e. funding of terrorist groups) but also because it plays an indirect role in exacerbating social and ethnic instability in Xinjiang. As China's demand for illicit drugs has risen over the past two decades so too have the related problems of HIV/AIDs and organized crime in areas intimately connected with the trafficking of heroin from the "Golden Crescent" (i.e. Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan). In Xinjiang, in particular, China faces rising rates of heroin use and a "pandemic" of HIV/AIDs among the Uyghur.²⁸ Thus, for one Chinese analyst, US and NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan, regardless of what government emerges in the post-transition period, "may leave China facing many uncertainties in non-traditional security".²⁹

China has come to recognise that ongoing instability in Afghanistan is a brake on not only the economic well-being of Afghanistan itself but also an obstacle and potential threat to their investments in the country and its integrated strategy in Central Asia, and hence the security of Xinjiang. Most significantly for Beijing continued instability in Afghanistan threatens its investment in the country's mineral resources and the viability of trans-Afghan infrastructure, including oil and gas pipelines that, if successfully brought online, will facilitate the continued penetration of Chinese power and influence throughout Central Asia. This has led to a pragmatic approach to post-2014 Afghanistan with Zhao Huasheng noting that ultimately China's position is "based on the consideration that China will have enduring interactions with the Taliban...China is not opposed to the organisation but is instead opposed to terrorism, separatism and extremism".³⁰

Challenges to China's Approach: Internationalized Uyghur Terrorism, Central Asian Perceptions and Geopolitical Change

China's current approach toward Xinjiang and Central Asia is however challenged by three major factors: a rise in Uyghur terrorism; an apparent disjuncture between elite and public opinion in Central Asia regarding China's growing influence; and geopolitical change in Central Asia after the US and NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Internationalized Uyghur Terrorism

Xinjiang has experienced periodic ethnic and anti-state violence since the establishment of the PRC in 1949. However it was only in the aftermath of the events of 9/11 that Beijing chose to publicly frame such violence as "terrorism". China's publication of its first official account of Uyghur "terrorism" in Xinjiang in January 2002 was notable on two counts. First, this was the first time that Beijing officially detailed what it claimed were "over 200 terrorist incidents" in Xinjiang from 1990 to 2001. Second, the report contained the first identification of a specific organization, the "East Turkestan Islamic

²⁶ Meena Singh Roy, "Role of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation in Afghanistan: Scope and Limitations", *Strategic Analysis* 34 (4) (2010): 545-561.

²⁷ Richard Weitz, "The Limits of Partnership: China, NATO and the Afghan War", *China Security*, 6 (1) (2010): 24.

²⁸ Bates Gill and Song Gong, "HIV/AIDs in Xinjiang: A Growing Regional Challenge", *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, 4 (3) (2006): 35-50; and Anna Hayes and Abduresit Qarluq, "Securitising HIV/AIDs in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region", *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 65 (2) (2011): 203-219.

²⁹ Zhang Jiadong, "Can China be a Winner in Afghanistan?"

³⁰ Zhao Huasheng, "Chinese Views on Post-2014 Afghanistan", *Asia Policy*, 17 (1) (2014): 55.

Movement” (ETIM), as responsible for such “terrorism” and the claim that it was “supported and directed” by Osama bin Laden.³¹ While this report has since been the subject of considerable criticism³², it nonetheless assisted Beijing in obtaining international recognition of its struggle with terrorism in Xinjiang with both the US State Department and the UN Security Council listing ETIM as an “international terrorist organization” in September 2002.³³ Although Chinese claims regarding ETIM’s links to Al Qaeda were given some credence when it emerged that American forces had captured twenty-two Uyghurs in Afghanistan (who were subsequently detained at Guantanamo Bay), it became clear as early as 2004 that the majority of these men were not in fact “enemy combatants”.³⁴

China’s claims that it faced Islamist-inspired terrorism in Xinjiang increased again after large-scale inter-ethnic violence rocked the regional capital, Urumqi, in July 2009, in which up to 200 people were killed and hundreds injured. Since then numerous incidents of violence have occurred in the region including anti-government protests, attacks on police stations and inter-ethnic clashes which the regional authorities have claimed were the handiwork of “gangs” of “extremists and terrorists” bent on *jihad* with links to “hostile external forces”.³⁵ The trend toward greater extremism and violence was underlined by four major incidents in 2014: 1 March mass knife attack at Kunming train station in Yunnan that left 29 people dead and over 140 injured; 30 April suicide bombing outside Urumqi’s main train station that killed 2 and injured 70; 1 May attacks on an open-air market in Urumqi that killed 43 and injured 94; and 28 July “mass incident” in Shache township near Yarkand in which a “mob” of Uyghurs attacked local police and government buildings, the quelling of which resulted in the deaths of 59 “attackers” and 37 “civilians”.³⁶

Beijing’s response has focused on three fronts: strengthening of security and counter-terrorism measures; renewed exhortations regarding the importance of “stability” and “ethnic unity”; and a renewed effort to demonstrate the links between Uyghur “terrorism” and “hostile external forces” to the international community. With respect to the first issue, Beijing rapidly increased Xinjiang’s internal security budget in 2014 to some \$US 1 billion and President Xi Jinping now heads a specially formed committee on China’s new National Security Council to deal with security and counter-terror strategies in Xinjiang. The authorities have also stepped up repressive measures in the region with Xinjiang CCP Chairman Zhang Chuxian calling for a “people’s war” in which the state will “exterminate” the “savage and evil separatists”

³¹ Information Office of the State Council of the PRC, “East Turkistan Terrorist Forces Cannot Get Away with Impunity”, *People’s Daily*, 1 January 2002, http://www.peopledaily.com.cn/200201/21/print200020121_89078.htm

³² See Michael Clarke, “China’s ‘War on Terror’ in Xinjiang: Human Security and the Causes of Violent Uighur Separatism”, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 20 (2), (2008), pp. 271-301; James M. Millward, “Violent Separatism in Xinjiang: A Critical Assessment”, *Policy Studies* 6, (Washington: East-West Center, 2004); and Sean Roberts, “Imaginary Terrorism? The Global War on Terror and the Narrative of the Uyghur Terrorist Threat”, *PONARS Eurasia Working Paper*, (Elliott School of International Affairs, George Washington University, March 2012).

³³ “Treasury Dept. on addition of ETIM to terrorist list”, US State Department, 12 September 2002, <http://iipdigital.usembassy.gov/st/english/texttrans/2002/09/20020912191909jthomas@pd.state.gov0.751034.html#axzz3Q4aBDfAp>

³⁴ In early 2004 US military officials had already acknowledged that 16 of the 22 were not “enemy combatants”, although it would take until 2013 for all 22 to be cleared and find asylum in third countries. See Neil A. Lewis, “Freedom for Chinese detainees hinges on finding a new homeland”, *New York Times*, 8 November 2004, <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/11/08/national/08uighur.html?pagewanted=print&position=>; and Charlie Savage, “US frees last of the Chinese Uighur detainees from Guantanamo”, *New York Times*, 13 December 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/01/us/us-frees-last-of-uighur-detainees-from-guantanamo.html?_r=0.

³⁵ See Tania Branigan, “China: 21 Killed in Kashgar Clashes”, *The Guardian*, 24 April 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/apr/24/chinese-gangsters-police-shootout>; ‘Ethnic Unrest in Xinjiang: Unveiled Threats’, *The Economist*, 6 July 2013, <http://www.economist.com/news/china/21580491-more-outbreaks-violence-show-governments-policies-are-not-working-unveiled-threats>; and Jonathan Kaiman, “Chinese Police Arrest Suspects after Kashgar Violence”, *The Guardian*, 17 December 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/dec/17/violence-china-kashgar-dead-xinjiang-muslim>

³⁶ “China arrests three suspects in Kunming station attack”, *Australia Network News*, 4 March 2014, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-03-04/an-china-captures-three-suspects-in-kunming-station-attack/5296304>; Phillip Wen, “China makes Xinjiang death toll public”, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 August 2014, <http://www.smh.com.au/world/china-makes-xinjiang-death-toll-public-20140803-zzy4o.html>

who are influenced and directed by foreign “extremists”.³⁷ This has entailed not only accelerated arrests and trials of suspected terrorists – including public, mass sentencing rallies of Uyghur suspects - but also ongoing sweeps of Uyghur neighbourhoods and mosques in search of potential militants and their weapons.³⁸ The authorities have also attempted to elicit the assistance of ordinary Uyghurs through the offer of financial rewards for ‘tip-offs’ to police regarding suspicious individuals and activities.³⁹

Finally, Beijing has continued its post-9/11 strategy of attempting to publicise links between violence in Xinjiang and radical Islamists beyond China’s borders in Central Asia, Afghanistan, Pakistan and the wider Middle East. Chinese government spokesmen have linked the Kunming attackers to the Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP) (based in the tribal areas along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border) which it claims is a successor organization to the East Turkestan Islamic Party (ETIM), a group it has previously held to be responsible for various attacks in Xinjiang.⁴⁰ ETIM is believed to have functioned for a brief period from the late 1990s to early 2000s and effectively ceased after the death of its leader Hasan Mahsum during a Pakistani military operation in Waziristan in October 2003. Despite Chinese claims there has been little concrete evidence that ETIM mounted successful attacks in Xinjiang during that time. TIP emerged as a successor organization sometime between 2006 and 2008 and consists of between 200-400 militants based near Mir Ali in North Waziristan allied with the Pakistani Taliban and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU).⁴¹ In contrast to ETIM, TIP has maintained a higher profile through regular statements by its leadership regarding events in Xinjiang (e.g. its leader issued a statement praising the Kunming attack) and its use of the Internet as a vehicle to disseminate its calls for ‘jihad’ against Chinese rule.⁴² As with ETIM, however, TIP’s operational capabilities remain unclear and due to its geographic isolation from Xinjiang, lack of resources and limited number of militants it seems probable that its influence in the region may be limited to the virtual realm of the Internet. This is not an inconsiderable problem for Beijing and it has made clear that it views such influence as a threat to security with Xinjing’s CCP chairman, Zhang Chunxian, for instance, asserting that the easily accessible nature of Islamist propaganda on the Internet had facilitated the Kunming attack.⁴³

The major attacks in 2014 suggest a much deeper problem for Beijing than simply combatting small groups like ETIM and TIP. Despite the limited evidence available as to the effectiveness of such groups, Beijing’s current rhetoric is a continuation of a campaign launched after 9/11 to portray its struggle against Uyghur separatists and “terrorists” as part of the “War on Terror”. Beijing faces two core problems here however. First, Beijing appears to be incapable of acknowledging that its policies in Xinjiang have played a role in generating violence. In fact the over-whelming sentiment appears to be

³⁷ “China’s Xinjiang doubling anti-terror budget”, *Associated Press*, 17 January 2014, <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/chinas-xinjiang-doubling-anti-terror-budget>; Andrew Jacobs, “China says nearly 100 killed in week of unrest in Xinjiang”, *New York Times*, 3 August 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/04/world/asia/china-says-nearly-100-are-killed-in-week-of-unrest-in-xinjiang.html?_r=5

³⁸ For 2014 statistics on the number of trials involving charges of “endangering state security” in Xinjiang see, “Xinjiang State Security Trials Flat, Criminal Trials Soar in 2014”, *Dui Hua: Human Rights Journal*, 10 March 2015, <http://www.duihuahrjournal.org/2015/03/xinjiang-state-security-trials-flat.html>

³⁹ “China offers \$49m rewards to Xinjiang residents who help hunt suspected ‘terrorists’”, *Radio Australia*, 4 August 2014, <http://www.radioaustralia.net.au/international/2014-08-04/china-offers-49m-rewards-to-xinjiang-residents-who-help-hunt-suspected-terrorists-xinhua/1352416>

⁴⁰ “China says Uyghur militant’s support for knife attack ‘proof of China’s terror threat’”, *South China Morning Post*, 19 March 2014, <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1452534/china-says-uyghur-militants-support-knife-attack-proves-terror>

⁴¹ See Jacob Zenn, “Jihad in China? Marketing the Turkistan Islamic Party”, *Terrorism Monitor*, 9 (11) (2011), [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=37662&no_cache=1#.U-g4e0hYO7A](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=37662&no_cache=1#.U-g4e0hYO7A); Jacob Zenn, “Turkistan Islamic Party Increases its Media Profile”, *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, 5 February 2014, <http://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/12909-turkistan-islamic-party-increases-its-media-profile.html>; Muhammad Amir Rana, “Threat to Sino-Pak Friendship”, *Dawn*, 1 July 2014, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1109886/threat-to-sino-pak-friendship>

⁴² Shannon Tiezzi, “Turkestan Islamic Party Expresses Support for Kunming attack”, *The Diplomat*, 20 March 2014, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/03/turkestan-islamic-party-expresses-support-for-kunming-attack/>

⁴³ Phillip Wen, “Internet behind terrorism in China, including Kunming railway massacre, Xinjiang leader”, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 March 2014, <http://www.smh.com.au/world/internet-behind-terrorism-in-china-including-kunming-railway-massacre-xinjiang-leader-20140307-hvghi.html>

one of incredulity that Uyghurs could be so ungrateful for the modernity and development that Beijing has delivered to Xinjiang. Violent Uyghur opposition from this perspective is an abnormality to be cauterized from society.⁴⁴

Second, the use of indiscriminate violence in the Kunming and Urumqi attacks and the tactical use of suicide bombers, suggests that at least some Uyghurs may be in the process of adopting the modes of political violence associated with globally-oriented radical Islamist organizations. The rhetoric deployed by TIP in connection to the Kunming and Urumqi attacks points toward an endeavor to reframe their struggle as an ideological-religious rather than an ethnic one.⁴⁵ Thus, TIP spokesman, Abdulheq Damolla, praised the Urumqi bombings of March 2014, asserting that they “would fill the suppressed hearts of believers with joy, and fill the apostates and infidels’ hearts with fear” before lauding his “mujahideen brothers” for “the voluntary act that you carried out...when the filthy paws of Chinese leader Xi Jinping were stepping onto our motherland East Turkestan”.⁴⁶ “Taking part in this soldierly act”, he continued, “proves that the Muslims of East Turkestan will never welcome the Chinese immigrant invaders”. Significantly, the statement made few references to Uyghurs but rather only to “the *Muslims* of East Turkestan” and “immigrant Chinese invaders” in an effort to clearly link the struggle of Uyghurs against the Chinese state to the perceived persecution of Muslim minorities by non-Muslim majority states that is so often central to the rhetoric of contemporary Islamists.

Central Asian Perceptions of China’s Rise

Although Beijing has been successful in convincing the governments of the Central Asian states to accede to its conception of the Uyghurs as “terrorists, extremists and separatists”, the same cannot be said for the general population of key Central Asian republics. In recent years the Uyghur population in these states such as Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have been very critical of these governments for ‘colluding’ with China in extraditing alleged Uyghur terrorists. The July 2009 unrest in Xinjiang, for example, prompted some protests amongst the Uyghur populations in these states, although both governments remained circumspect in their responses to the violence.⁴⁷ The cause of the Kazakh and Kyrgyz government’s subdued responses to the Xinjiang unrest not only stems from their own interest in maintaining domestic stability but also their countries’ SCO and economic relationships with China.⁴⁸

Central Asian publics remain ambivalent at best and fearful at worst about Chinese intentions in the region. Kazakhs, for example, are concerned about potential Chinese territorial and demographic expansion into their country and Chinese economic domination of their economy, particularly its energy sector.⁴⁹ China’s image, however, is most clearly tarnished amongst the publics of these states by the perceived maltreatment of the Uyghurs. One study notes that many Central Asian China experts are highly critical of what they judge to be Beijing’s political, economic and social “marginalization” of the

⁴⁴ Zhang Chunxian revealed this sentiment when he asserted after the Kunming attack: “Will it [terrorism] not take place if you don’t strike hard?...Terrorism is not something that happens because you fight it; it is a malignant tumour that is borne from society”.

⁴⁵ For the distinction between the two see, Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*, (University of California Press, 2003).

⁴⁶ “Militant Islamist group says deadly Xinjiang bomb attack ‘good news’”, *Radio Free Asia*, 15 May 2014, <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/attack-05152014171933.html>

⁴⁷ Maria Golovkina, “Central Asian Uighurs Harbor Revenge for Xinjiang Kinfolk”, *Reuters*, 16 July 2009, <http://www.reuters.com/articlePrint?articleId=USTRE56F2EU20090716>; “Central Asia Uighurs Look On with Fury at Bloodshed”, *ABS-CBN News Online*, 9 July 2009, <http://www.abs-cbnnews.com/print/619995>; and Masud Ali-uul, “Uighur Demonstration in Kyrgyzstan Ends with Arrest of Leaders”, *Central Asia Online*, 13 August 2009, http://centralasiaonline.com/en/articles/090913_arrested_nws/

⁴⁸ For China’s economic relationships with these states see, Marlene Laurelle and Sebastien Peyrouse, *The “Chinese Question” in Central Asia: Domestic Order, Social Change and the Chinese Factor*, (NY: Hurst & Co., 2014).

⁴⁹ See Konstantin Syroezhkin, “Social Perceptions of China and Chinese: A View from Kazakhstan”, *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, Vol. 7, No. 1, (2009): 36-45; and Michael Clarke, “Kazakh Responses to the Rise of China: Between Elite Bandwagoning and Societal Ambivalence”, in Emilian Kavalski and Niv Horesh (eds), *Asian Thought on China’s Changing International Relations*, (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014): 155-164.

Uyghur in Xinjiang and argue that the “Chinese refusal to listen to any autonomist demands, even cultural ones, can only encourage radical separatism to take root”.⁵⁰

A further spur to negative perceptions amongst Central Asian publics may also come if China’s National People’s Congress (NPC) passes a new draft anti-terrorism law currently before it. The new law will, if passed, create a legal framework for Chinese security forces to engage in counter-terror operations in neighbouring countries and establish a domestic counter-terrorism body that would have powers to designate organizations and individuals as ‘terrorist’ without due process.⁵¹ This would be remarkable and run counter to Beijing’s explicit commitment in both its regional and global diplomacy to the principle of “non-interference” in others’ “domestic affairs”.

China and Central Asia’s Geopolitical Environment

China under Xi Jinping’s leadership has signalled its intention to further entrench its growing power and influence in Central Asia. President Xi’s plans for the construction of a SREB, although linked to Beijing’s desire to secure Xinjiang’s economic development, also has an important function to play in China’s foreign policy in the context of the Obama administration’s “pivot to Asia”. Prominent Chinese scholar Wang Jisi, has argued in this context that China’s “march westward” is a “strategic necessity” as the “eastward shift” in strategic focus of the Obama administration (i.e. the “pivot”) otherwise threatens to lock Sino-US relations into a “zero-sum game” in East Asia. If China’s “march westwards” succeeds “the potential for US-China cooperation” across a variety of fields will increase and “there will be almost no risk of military confrontation between the two”.⁵² Central Asia thus emerges as a strategic “safety valve” for the expansion of Chinese influence given the perceived decline of US influence and interests in the region after its withdrawal from Afghanistan.⁵³

The motives behind Beijing’s desire to build the SREB are in some ways complementary to the interests of some of the Central Asian states. Most immediately, China’s focus on greater economic interconnectivity in the region through the improvement of critical infrastructure such as oil and gas pipelines, highways, railways and telecommunications networks gels with the long-held desire of Central Asia’s energy rich states (e.g. Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan) to diversify export routes for their oil and gas. Additionally, a number of the Central Asian states have also identified diversification of their economies beyond resource exports as a core priority for their future economic well-being.⁵⁴ China’s contribution of US \$40 billion to a “Silk Road Fund” to assist in the necessary infrastructural development for the SREB has also been seen by Central Asian states as a token of the seriousness of Beijing’s commitment to the project.⁵⁵ Yet the SREB and increasing bilateral economic relationships with Beijing are not unproblematic for much of Central Asia. The former, despite some recent Russian protestations to the contrary, runs counter to Moscow’s protectionist agenda within the rubric of its Eurasian Union as Beijing is clearly focused on facilitating freer economic interaction throughout Central Asia. One analyst has remarked in this respect that “the real concern” for Russia vis-à-vis the SREB is

⁵⁰ Laurelle and Peyrouse, *The Chinese Question in Central Asia*: 178-179.

⁵¹ “Draft Chinese law paves the way for counter-terror operation abroad”, *Voice of America*, 27 February 2015, ; and Simon Deyner, China’s new terrorism law provokes anger in U.S., concern at home”, *Washington Post*, 5 March 2015, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/china-invokes-terrorism-as-it-readies-additional-harsh-measures/2015/03/04/1e078288-139c-497e-aa8a-e6d810a5a8a2_story.html

⁵² Wang Jisi, “Marching Westwards”: The Rebalancing of China’s Geostrategy’, *International and Strategic Studies Report*, 73 (Center for International and Strategic Studies, Peking University: October 2012): 7-8.

⁵³ Tao Xie, ‘Back on the Silk Road: China’s Version of a Rebalance to Asia’, *Global Asia*, 9 (1) (2014), <http://www.globalasia.org/Issue/ArticleDetail/548/back-on-the-silk-road-chinas-version-of-a-rebalance-to-asia.html>.

⁵⁴ Richard Weitz, ‘Assessing Kazakhstan’s Revised National Development Strategy’, *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, 5 March 2014, <http://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/12928-assessing-kazakhstans-revised-national-development-strategy.html>

⁵⁵ Beijing has also intensified its economic engagement with Kazakhstan. President Xi signed 22 trade and commercial agreements during his September 2013 state visit valued at US \$30 billion, while Premier Li Keqiang signed economic cooperation deals, including a renewal of a currency swap deal, during his state visit of December 2014 worth US \$14 billion. Anuar Almagambetov and Bakhytzhan Kurmanov, “China Challenges Russian Influence in Kazakhstan”, *East Asia Forum*, 28 February 2015, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2015/02/28/china-challenges-russian-influence-in-kazakhstan/>

“China’s business-is-business approach with others, which differs from both the West’s political strings for economic intercourse and Russia’s heavy doses of geopolitics”.⁵⁶

China’s pragmatism is undoubtedly attractive to the majority of the ruling regimes in Central Asia. However the perception of increasing Chinese influence particularly in the economic realm has produced varying degrees of public disquiet regarding possible future dependence on Beijing.⁵⁷ Russia’s agenda in Central Asia under Putin, which has focused on retaining its dominant position in the energy sector and in maintaining its foothold in the strategic/military sphere, has been challenged or eroded by Chinese gains in each of these sectors.⁵⁸ The SCO’s, and China’s, insistence on centrality of principles of sovereign equality and non-interference in internal affairs as the basis for multilateral security cooperation in Central Asia is also more favourably viewed in Central Asian capitals than the alternative presented by the Kremlin in Ukraine over the past year. China’s assets (e.g. pragmatism) and liabilities (e.g. Xinjiang) vis-à-vis Central Asia appear to balance each other out.

Policy recommendations

Based on the analysis above, I would submit the following recommendations:

1. China has three core interests in Central Asia: security, development and access to energy resources. These interests, while deriving from Beijing’s integrationist project in Xinjiang, have also become inextricably linked to its regional and global foreign policy. For Beijing, the integration of Xinjiang is now not simply an end in itself but rather an important mechanism through which to facilitate the expansion of Chinese power and influence in Central Asia. The SREB in particular is emblematic of this linkage. Recognition of the linkages between China’s strategy in Xinjiang, interests in Central Asia and its global foreign policy will enable policy-makers to more readily discern the distinct motives behind Chinese policy initiatives in the region and calibrate a more effective US response – i.e. not all Chinese efforts in the region undermine US interests.

2. The US must recognize that China’s enduring anxieties with respect to Xinjiang critically shape its perception of the motives of other key actors in Central Asia. This is most clearly seen in reactions to international expressions of concern regarding human rights abuses in the conduct of China’s anti-terrorism activities in Xinjiang. The historical tenuousness of Chinese control over the region combined with contemporary concerns with the region’s openness to trans-national and non-traditional security threats feeds into an official narrative that lays the blame for unrest or violence in Xinjiang at the feet of amorphous “hostile external forces”. Depending on the context, this label can denote the US government, Uyghur exile organizations (e.g. World Uyghur Congress), or militant groups such as ETIM or TIP. Criticism of Beijing’s policies in Xinjiang often reinforces, rather than ameliorates, its predilection to see domestic opposition as inspired by meddling outsiders. Additionally, this mindset also colours Beijing’s reading of the initiatives of others in Central Asia – e.g. its geopolitical reading of the GCAP and the Obama administration’s “New Silk Road Initiative”.

3. China continues to perceive Central Asia (including Afghanistan) to be a source of potential trans-national and non-traditional security threats (e.g. terrorism, drugs/weapons trafficking) to Xinjiang. This provides an opportunity for the development of greater US-China cooperation in the region, particularly as China becomes more concerned with these issues in the wake of US and NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan. While China has successfully embedded its agenda on the “three evils” within the SCO process and does not fear that Central Asian governments could collude directly or indirectly with Uyghur separatists or “terrorists”, the mechanisms for Sino-Central Asian cooperation (e.g. the SCO RATS centre) remain under-developed. The key dilemma for US policy-makers in this

⁵⁶ Yu Bin, “China-Russia Relations: Putin’s Glory and Xi’s Dream”, *Comparative Connections*, (January 2014): 6.

⁵⁷ Clarke, “Kazakh Response to the Rise of China”: 157-159.

⁵⁸ Enersto Gallo, “Eurasian Union versus Silk Road Economic Belt?”, *Policy Brief* 159, (Institute for Security and Development Policy: August 2014): 1.

context is to strike common ground with Beijing without compromising its traditional concern for the protection/promotion of democratic values and human rights.

4. US policy-makers, while acknowledging that China *does* legitimately face the threat of terrorism, should also critically evaluate Chinese claims as to the extent and nature of that threat. This is especially relevant with respect to Chinese claims regarding: (i) the linkages between groups such as ETIM and TIP and regional and global Islamist groups (e.g. Al Qaeda); and (ii) the influence of radical Islamist ideology amongst the majority of the Uyghur population of Xinjiang.