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**The Security Dimension of the
China-Central Asia Relationship:
China's Military Engagement with Central Asian
Countries**

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What is driving China's security engagement with Central Asia?

Introduction

China has traditionally been reluctant to engage in the Central Asian (CA) region in military terms, at least directly, much due to its own military weakness but also due to its domestic focus, military strategy, as well as the possible negative international perception overt Chinese military engagement or even intervention would entail.* This has changed in the last few years, however, and China is taking small but important steps not only towards greater military cooperation with the states in the region, but also adopting a broader security interest and strategies in the region that go beyond the Uighur situation in Xinjiang. In fact, nowhere else has China engaged in the same number of military exercises or had the same depth of regional cooperation in security issues.

That said, Chinese security engagement in the region remains modest, not least due to the fact that Russia views China's rise in the region as a zero-sum game that threatens to eclipse Russia as the preeminent security actor in the region.¹ Furthermore, the fact remains that China's primary current security interest in Central Asia is still mostly related to domestic security concerns, and not least the increased disturbances in its western regions (primarily Xinjiang) during 2014. Nevertheless, China has increasingly engaged CA in the security field to counter the development of rampant extremism and terrorism, failing states, government-sponsored organized crime, direct or indirect support for separatism in China, and not least securing trade and transit trade.

First priorities and secondary concerns

While China's inroads into the economic sector, and then in particular the energy sector, of the region have been significant, the same has not yet been true for the security sector.² For China the economy has hitherto been the overriding concern together with internal security considerations (questions related to Xinjiang). Despite the fact that security concerns have grown, not least due to the situation in Afghanistan, it is also clear that Central Asia is not a priority region for China. Chinese security focus is very much centered on the United States, Asia-Pacific, and even Europe before Central Asia. This is despite CA's geographical proximity, the instability of the region, and the growing problem of the criminalization of the governments in the region and the connection to radicalization.

China has been reacting to Russia's economic withdrawal from the region with the independence of the Central Asian states in 1991, and has increasingly sprinkled its economic engagement with larger security engagements with the member states of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Not only this but China has also closely observed the United States' role in the region, and in particular the proposed U.S. departure (albeit which suddenly does not seem so imminent) from Afghanistan and the impact this may have on China's internal security issues. It is evident that it is not, and arguably it is not in any region, a question of counter-balancing but rather a question of filling an unwanted void.³ In fact, there is a perception that a U.S. departure from Afghanistan could create more security challenges and a rampant growth in militant and extremist organizations.⁴ If this would happen, there could be an influx of radicalization to Tajikistan and Pakistan, both of which have easy

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border access with China and specifically Xinjiang. Therefore China has been a strong supporter of any multilateral attempt to strengthen Afghanistan but also the Central Asian region, as long as it ensures national sovereignty, respect for territorial integrity, and excludes foreign hegemons (read the U.S.).

The focus from China was initially exclusively on its own internal security challenges—a focus which was artificially disattached from the regional context. Part of the problem is the Chinese reluctance to take greater regional responsibility, which possibly can be attributed to its own weakness, and that it has refrained from dominating or even engaging CA on the more difficult issues. The reluctance to engage CA on security issues that could lead to military engagement from the Chinese side is founded in a three-pronged reasoning: the weakness of CA institutions, the relative weakness of the Chinese military, and perhaps most importantly the fear of alienating Russia (which has been an important instrument for China when it has been pressured by the West, but which has viewed the Chinese return to CA as a zero-sum game that Russia has been losing). This does not exclude a Chinese security policy that could be against U.S. interests (or for that matter Russia's) or a more assertive policy in the future; but more importantly the prior strategies have been founded in a failure to understand the regional context and its implications on China. Moreover, the central government in Beijing has not always been in agreement with the governments in the provinces on how to manage trade and security issues, domestic and regional. The same could, to some extent, be seen between different organizations in China dealing with security as well as economy, such as the Ministries of National Defense and State Security.

China's new security strategy towards Greater Central Asia

Among many analysts in China, and especially in the military circles, there is a perception that the United States is attempting to block China in East Asia and undermine its relations in Southeast Asia (something that they consider to be apparent in the South China Sea and increasingly in Myanmar). The U.S. alliance system in East Asia and its good relations with a number of states in Southeast Asia is, by the same perception, minimizing China's possibility to break the perceived encirclement. But while interactions with the United States are seen as a zero-sum game, the situation vis-à-vis CA is very different.⁵ Greater Central Asia has accordingly been given a more prominent position in China's foreign and security policy under President Xi Jinping and there has been a rather vibrant discussion about China's "March West" "西进" (*Xijin*).⁶

Insecurity is the main driver of China's *security* engagement in CA (in contrast to countering other actors or any geopolitical dimension). China's western neighborhood is characterized by insecurity with the arch of instability ranging from Pakistan to Kyrgyzstan, with the states of the region having become a hotbed for extremism and political radicalization. This problem is made worse by the fact that China's western border is vulnerable, with its own separatist groups and political/religious radicalization, criminal groups that could collaborate with governments and groups in CA, and which can easily cross the Chinese border which remains poorly guarded. Indeed, the situation in Xinjiang and CA was very much one of the drivers behind the Chinese concept of the "three evils," that is, separatism, terrorism, and religious extremism "三股势力" (*sangu shili*); organized crime could also be added as a fourth evil.⁷ The linkages between internal and external security have become increasingly apparent and China has subsequently increased its cooperation with the CA states. The mantra of the three evils also became a basic foundation of the SCO, which was established in 2001, and expanded China's security cooperation in the region.⁸

While controlling the Uighur situation in Xinjiang looms large in the Chinese and Western media, the issue has arguably decreased in relative importance in favor of a more diversified security interest that combines maintaining domestic (Xinjiang) as well as regional stability and economic progress to establish some form of long-term development. Therefore, at the same time as curbing any political support to alleged Uighur separatist and militants in CA (albeit a support that has largely been lacking), there is also a broader understanding of the causes of the militancy, and maybe an understanding that the Uighur militants are not as many, or do not have a broad base support among the Uighur community, as is conventionally believed. Today it is better understood that to decrease tensions, economic and social improvements need to be in place, and CA is central for this strategy even if there are still problems of implementation and government actions sometimes run counter to long-term resolution.⁹ Here is a discrepancy in terms of perception and actions taken between the local government and the central government that view the situation in different lights. The local government tends to be more interested in cross-border barter trade while the central government is more concerned with the long-term strategic issues. This is a division that could be an issue at times; indeed, the local government tends to be much more powerful in the implementation phase of policies and can adjust policies more often than is commonly believed.¹⁰ Moreover, there is a tendency for some local institutions to turn a blind eye to the thriving grey and black trade, much to the chagrin of Beijing that is forced to deal with the negative consequences.

Western China is still almost completely dependent on the continued trade and interaction with the CA states, a trade that in turn depends on people-to-people relations being as frictionless as possible. Economic development is the central pillar in the strategy to pacify the separatists as well as stabilizing its western border; even if some of the more hardline separatists would argue that this development is undermining their culture and that the Uighur community is excluded, such a policy would most likely have positive effects if successfully implemented. Eighty-three percent of Xinjiang's total trade is with the Central Asian states, and 80 percent of China's total trade with CA transits Xinjiang.¹¹ This means that the Xinjiang economy, and its stability, largely depends on the security and economic development of CA. Hindrances to trade from Xinjiang to CA would have a direct impact on Chinese national security and social stability in its western province.¹²

Economic instability and the impact on political stability in CA has become a serious concern for China, not least as the regional governments are under constant attack from both criminal and extremist organizations. Both the local and national governments in China have seen the impact of this criminalization and radicalization of CA in China, but also the impact from Uighur militants that have received training (to a lesser degree) but more significantly intellectual and moral support from non-governmental actors in CA. It is also a central concern for China to maintain secularized and politically friendly governments in CA; this does not necessarily indicate that they oppose democratic governments but definitely governments that could harbor anti-Chinese views. The establishment of religiously directed governments or Western (or Russia) oriented governments would decrease Chinese influence in the region, something that is against the long-term interest of China.

China is not counter-balancing the United States as it is not in its strategic interest or within its capability to do this short term, but rather constraining others from dominating and excluding China in what it considers to be its own backyard. The Eurasian Union established by Russia is however a direct attempt to decrease the Chinese influence; and while not favorably viewed by Beijing even if its displeasure is not voiced, the limitations of the Union are in any case apparent, especially if the energy prices remain low and the Russian economy continues to falter. It is very unlikely that Russia could compete with the Chinese economy, and the Chinese concern is more in the security area. The

increased security cooperation with the regional governments is one of the strategies for long-term engagement and influence by China, this both bilaterally as well as multilaterally that could further Chinese long-term influence in the region.

Multilateralism and national agendas in Central Asia

Multilateralism has grown much more in importance in Chinese foreign and security policy. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization is one of the multilateral tools that China has at its disposal to increase stability in the region, but also to increase its own influence. It is evident that China is the driving force behind SCO; Russia is less interested much due to its own regional engagements with the Central Asian states, and SCO is viewed with some skepticism. Russia has been eager to establish multilateral ties with the Central Asian states (excluding China, EU, and the U.S.), particularly in the energy field, in which it has achieved limited success, and the security sector with significantly more impact.

There have been a number of regional attempts initiated by Russia with some success that have aimed at strengthening Russian leverage over Central Asia, such as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in 1991, the Eurasian Economic Community (EEC or EurAsEC) in 2002, and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) in 2002. These organizations were designed to promote specifically Russian interests and have effectively circumvented any involvement from other significant actors such as China and the United States. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) from 2001 (derived from the Shanghai Five from 1996) includes both Russia and China, but has arguably only been accepted by Russia for the purpose of monitoring the Chinese expansion into the region. The reality has become that SCO has subsequently developed a more independent role and this has increased the Chinese influence in the region and for this reason Russian trust in the SCO has been limited.¹³ Accordingly, Russia has been reluctant to allow SCO to play a more direct role in the creation of true multilateral structures because China has the leading role in this organization and, if further developed, SCO could be seen as a competing organization to the CIS. Nevertheless, the SCO has emerged as the most interesting regional organization in Central Asia with the potential to establish multilateral structures that could make deep inroads as regards regional integration. This is partly due to the fact that China then could rely on SCO rather than pursue bilateral strategies with individual states. Since most of the Central Asian states are small, this would make it more effective to deal with them multilaterally over time; but also a more regional engagement would be potentially perceived as less threatening to the Central Asian states and to Moscow that looks towards Beijing with great suspicion.

Elsewhere the SCO has been portrayed as an anti-Western organization or even a counter-organization to NATO. The reality is far from this, and even if it has interesting security aspects, Russia has viewed it as a structure to control China, while China views it more as a tool to increase influence in the region but without unduly provoking the concern of Russia or the regional states. This enables China to have more influence over the process but more significant is that the multilateral security cooperation is more of a window dressing than has real military impact. Thus while China strives to increase security multilateralism within SCO, the success has been modest. This is very much dependent on the inherent competition and lack of real reasons for cooperation between Russia and China; currently the main reasons for cooperation are external, i.e. tensions with foreign powers, with there being few grounds for sustaining deeper cooperation should China's relations with the international community improve. Russia has thus become a partner of necessity and not choice.

Increased multilateralism is within the new security (as well as economic) strategy for China in the region, and it is likely that multilateral security cooperation will increase, not least to create regional security structures that exclude unwanted participation from the United States and Europe.¹⁴ The SCO plays an important role in multilateral military exercises but it is unlikely that we will see it develop into an organization that promotes military security, the reason being that Russia and China distrust each other and the CA states view each other with even greater suspicion. Combating organized crime is even more problematic – the problem threatens the very fabric of the CA states – as the political classes and law enforcement authorities in a few of the states are directly involved in organized crime and thus have little or no interest in combating what is a lucrative business. The greatest value SCO could have is as an anti-terrorist structure: each of the member states has major issues with alleged terrorist organizations and there is a strong government to government support in combating terrorism, and it could even in some cases be relevant for government security to combat terrorists multilaterally.

Military cooperation through CIS and CSTO is still most important in Central Asia, much due to the track dependency involved in military affairs but also to the fact that Russia has been one of the few states willing to sell to the Central Asian states with few limitations. Yet this is arguably a large drain on its resources because Russia currently has major difficulties in replenishing its own accounts and does not have extensive financial resources to spend in Central Asia. Moreover, Moscow lacks a clear and unified vision about the future of regional structures such as CSTO and CIS, which cripples the potential of these organizations.¹⁵ As noted before, the military exercises are crucial for the Central Asian governments since these will both train them for possible domestic unrest and secure Russian support to counter such events. This was particularly noticeable after the Tsentr-2011 exercises, which involved 12,000 mostly Russian soldiers. Although publicly presented as an antiterrorist exercise, it had all the characteristics (in terms of armament, size of troops, and strategy) of fighting a more traditional conflict, potentially aimed at securing friendly governments in the region. Neither the exercises in themselves nor their political outcome have been very clear among the participating states, leading to distrust among some of the smaller states concerned about aggression from more powerful states, not least Russia.

The view of multilateralism between China and Russia differs greatly, much because China views it from a position of strength and Russia from a position of decline. China is more interested in stabilizing states, increasing economic development, and increasing international trade and interaction (even if not necessarily at the Chinese expense). Russia on the other hand has a more traditional position of political control and military cooperation per se and views China's return to CA as a zero-sum game. It seems unlikely that stronger multilateral security cooperation will develop as long as China and Russia stand so far from each other on principal issues. China has relatively recently therefore turned to international initiatives, such as the Istanbul Process, for support in stabilizing the region. As long as the multilateral initiatives support national sovereignty, political reconciliation (in a broader way than the West normally would accept), strong focus on economic reconstruction, no foreign influence, and the acceptance that China will not put boots on the ground they will have strong support from Beijing.¹⁶ That said, there is significant skepticism that international initiatives are used to sustain foreign influence in the target states as well as a directed against China's legitimate role among its neighbors. Accordingly, if China's support is to be sustained it would need reassurances on the aforementioned concerns. Furthermore, as China becomes more capable and resourceful it is potentially a possibility that China will become less eager to cooperate in what could be considered its own backyard and is likely to be more assertive in its demands and actions.

Security and military cooperation

China's broad security goal in the CA region is to create stable and friendly regimes that support China in its strategy of combating the "three evils" – and also which prevents separatists from gaining a foothold in CA and Xinjiang – as well as securing trade and business in and beyond the region. China has today engaged all states in the region in security dialogues and has increased security cooperation, both through the SCO and more importantly bilaterally. While China's traditional focus in the security field has been to eradicate the so-called three evil forces, it has also changed to become more about stabilizing the neighboring region than to combat each and every group – in thus doing, minimizing the support for radical groups in Xinjiang and so indirectly reducing tensions. This strategy also has a geopolitical component to it; by engaging the CA states they become more dependent on Chinese aid and collaboration, which in the long term increases China's influence in the region. China is still largely an external actor and has no military bases in CA.¹⁷ This is to a great extent because of the unwillingness of Russia to allow it, but also because it would put the PLA in a difficult public relations position where the "March West" could suddenly be interpreted as Chinese hegemonic assertiveness. Moreover there has not so far been a security situation that would require establishment of military bases or even military solutions in CA, and, even so, the current capacity of the Chinese military would benefit very little from forward looking bases in CA. This as China strategically has little to gain from a presence in the region and it would risk China being dragged into regional conflicts it could not afford to be engaged in.

Short term the goal of combating terrorism and extremism in its neighborhood is more tangible but likely to be more difficult to accomplish than the long-term goal of influence. According to the Ministry of State Security in China, Al Qaeda and the Taliban have trained a large number of Uighur separatists from Xinjiang in Afghanistan and Pakistan.¹⁸ Even if the size of the groups and who has done the training is debatable, it is evident that there is some flow of people between Xinjiang and the CA region. The number of Uighur separatists trained in Greater Central Asia (primarily in Pakistan and Afghanistan) is arguably not as high as that which has been cited in Chinese sources but there is a real fear in China that this could be the case and the spread of radicalization is viewed worryingly.¹⁹ As a result a great deal of military support has been extended to SCO and the individual states to combat the growing extremisms and terrorism which would include alleged Uighur separatists but also organizations that could support them over time.

China has boosted military aid to all CA states, even if still in relative terms it remains modest. China has pledged large boosts in military aid to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, the two Central Asian states most affected by internal strife, and in September 2014 the Kyrgyz Armed Forces announced that China would give 100 million RMB in aid; this comes on top of newly constructed apartment buildings for officers that China has built.²⁰ And in April 2014, Defense Minister Chang Wanquan pledged "hundreds of millions of dollars" for new uniforms and training for the police in Tajikistan.²¹ Similar projects are ongoing in all CA states, and the Chinese National Defense University as well as other military organizations in China have seen a great increase in visitors and students from the CA states. China has also begun a modest arms sale to the CA region as well as military aid. Currently this is primarily in light weapons, such as sniper rifles to Uzbekistan, and military equipment, such as flak jackets and night vision equipment and vehicles, but more substantial systems are being considered.²² As the Chinese arms trade increases it is likely to undercut the Russian prices and provide "copied" Russian and independently developed Chinese technology at a lower price.

The new military aid and collaboration is not only to combat radical organizations such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), Hizb-ut-Tahrir, and East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), but also to strengthen the very institutions that deal with security issues. Some of these radical organizations have a presence in Afghanistan or Pakistan while others have a more local presence in Central Asia and are more political in nature than military. The distinction between the different organizations is difficult to make and the states differ largely on the relative importance they ascribe to the different organizations in terms of threat they pose to state security. There is also little common understanding how to act to prevent further radicalization: the only common denominator is that all states in CA as well as China and Russia have a common interest in preventing the spread of extremist organization as well as unwanted opposition alike.

Yet, the failure to agree on how to manage direct security threats and how to approach the long-term security challenges, bilaterally or multilaterally, are a challenge that has crippled security cooperation. Each state mistrusts the other and upholding national sovereignty is so strong that practical cooperation has been difficult. Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev has suggested an intra-SCO dialogue on the future of Afghanistan as it will be central for the CA region, but there seems to be little constructive agreement. China, and the other states, has rather resorted to bilateral measures by giving limited support to the Tajik police and Afghan security forces to assist those countries in an effort to contain the possible spread of Afghan extremism in the event of an international pullout from that country.

China's security diplomacy has traditionally been bilateral but increasingly SCO has grown to become a more important, even if in relative terms still weak. In fact, it has been argued that the SCO security structures are embryonic and the security development is only symbolic.²³ Agreements and consultations are primarily bilateral due to the failure to agree among the SCO member states even if consultations are done on a more multilateral basis such as in SCO and the trilateral consultations between Pakistan, Afghanistan, and China. It is safe to say that coordinating foreign policy targets among the members has been less than successful and the economic integration has been very weak. The interesting exception, despite modest, is the development of the anti-terrorist center in Tashkent (RATS), even if criticism has emerged that the combat of terrorism is equally used in the Central Asian states in combating opposition. RATS has been relatively successful in coordinating national anti-terrorist activities and sharing of information among the members but exaggerating its impact so far would not be wise.²⁴ However, RATS will only be as effective as its member states allow it to be, and currently there is very little trust between the member states and not least Russia and China that will cripple any deeper engagement.²⁵

On paper, there have been an impressive number of military exercises between SCO member states (as well as involving China bilaterally with individual states). In August 2003, the first multilateral military exercise was held between China and Central Asian states; this was preceded by a bilateral exercise with Kyrgyzstan in 2002. This has since grown to encompass more than 25 exercises over time of which the exercises "2013 Peace Mission" and the "Naval Interaction 2013" were in many ways milestones of military cooperation in the region.²⁶ Thus, CA has been the testing ground for multilateral security cooperation and has as such been relatively successful compared to other regions; and China is increasingly eager to improve and extend its security cooperation.²⁷ But in looking at their content it is clear that the outcomes have been less impressive. It is striking that the structure of some of the exercises seems to be more geared towards preventing outside actors from gaining access and, to a lesser degree, on how to stabilize a small state than on only combating terrorism.

China's challenges in CA

When discussing Chinese military capability, it is necessary to point out that despite significant increases, albeit arguably not sufficient, in the Chinese military budget, not much is directed towards Greater Central Asia. Rather the focus of Chinese military development has been on bolstering the navy and developing anti-ship cruise missiles, counter-space weapons, and long-range missiles.²⁸ This is in contrast to the kind of forces, resources, and equipment required in China's western regions. Indeed, the challenges emanating from CA are rather asymmetric in nature involving mainly non-traditional security threats that require a different response. A more detailed discussion of the Chinese military capability in CA is included in the references as it is not a direct question for this hearing.²⁹

The greatest security challenge for China over time will be the weakness of the states in CA and the radicalization of the societies,³⁰ not least if the security situation in Afghanistan continues to deteriorate which would result in that Central Asia would increasingly be a transit hub for organized crime and radical groups. As a result, instability will increase in the region and there will be a growing threat of the aforementioned "three evils" spilling over into China. Indeed, in the context of increased instability and criminalization, the trafficking of drugs and other illegal commodities has already increased with a concomitant drop in the price of heroin in the border region of western China—the latter a site of growing drug abuse and rampant corruption as a result. The official view from the Chinese government is that this is primarily a domestic issue for the CA states. But the tide is turning and among scholars there is a great deal of fear that the weak economies and lack of political legitimacy could further destabilize the region and China's borders as criminalization and radicalization tend to merge in the CA region.³¹

In spite of yearly military exercises with the Central Asian states, Beijing has failed to establish more effective security cooperation. This failure is a reflection of the fact that the region is only of secondary interest for China as well as skepticism and fear on the part of China's neighbors including Russia. However, despite its still relatively limited security engagement, China has nonetheless emerged as the fastest *growing* security actor in the region, especially in terms of multilateral engagement, even if it still lags far behind Russia and the United States. The military exercises within the framework of the SCO are good examples of how China is very much the driving force behind the strengthened multilateralism in the region.³² China has not been a major provider of hardware, despite emerging sales of light weapons, but rather driving the development towards military multilateralism, arguably to avoid challenging Russia on a bilateral basis. This is very much a part of the strategy to increase its power as an agenda-setting (话语权 *huayuquan*) state and in CA they are encouraged to be in the driving seat of multilateralism, even if Russia is opposing such a development, and the problem is rather that China has become a hegemon when it comes to agenda setting by virtue of the lack of interest or ability by other actors.

The Russian factor

Russia's attempt to regain the military, economic, and political clout in what Russian foreign minister Andrey Kozyrev termed its "near abroad" (*ближнее зарубежье*) in the early 1990s has been partially successful, especially in the energy sector. To accomplish this, Russia has been trying to regain control of much of the crucial transport infrastructure both in terms of trade and oil/gas infrastructure. Moreover, military cooperation between Russia and the Central Asian states continues to be high; no other country approaches the level of security cooperation that Russia has had with the region. In other areas, such as trade in general, Russia's position remains secondary to that of China, much to Russia's chagrin.³³

The military field is the single area in which Russia retains significant control compared to China and the United States. Despite some inroads from Washington (military bases) and Beijing (weapon sales and exercises), Russia maintains close military links with Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. These regional influences have proven strongest in terms of weapons sales and the security leverage, particularly after the expected withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan. The committee for Military and Economic Cooperation (ICMEC) forms part of the strategy for closer integration of the military-industrial complexes in the region, a process highly subsidized by Russia. ICMEC was created in 2005 to systematize cooperation in military technology and make military integration more effective by controlling both purchases and development of new technology, something that has not been fully realized due to the suspicion the Central Asian states have shown towards Russia. Yet, such connections have given Russia sizable leverage. Even if there is a decline in trade figures and military control, it has been hard and will continue to be difficult for Central Asia to escape the Russian grip. Notwithstanding, the current trend has been a limitation of Russia's influence in the military arena due to Chinese sales to the region and the increased military cooperation with other states such as China through bilateral attempts as well as SCO and the United States through the Partnership for Peace initiative. Accordingly, it would appear unrealistic for Russia to return to its former preeminent position of strength in the military sphere.

Central Asia could be regarded as a weathervane for Sino-Russian relations and the long-term prospects do not look good. The reasons for closer cooperation and continued friendship are to a large extent based on the perception of the external threat and exclusion. Trade is decreasing and Russia is arguably degrading into a more aggressive and closed society as China is increasingly becoming more open (albeit not politically) society. The concept of security and even the functionality of SCO differs between the two states: China is focusing more on building long-term security through institution building and strengthening of national governments, while Russia is utilizing weak governments and failed institutions to exert control. Even if both are non-democratic systems, China's is based on a meritocracy and strong institutions (even with high levels of corruption) but Russia's is increasingly succumbing to kleptocracy and institutional decay. The separation between Russia and China will increase as the differences in society and governments increases exponentially.

Chinese Success in Perspective

China's Grand Strategy is accomplished to a higher degree in CA than in any other region, with China able to shape its external environment (塑造) with significant support for its core interests in CA, such as combating the "three evils." Moreover, it has been able to create a global outreach—that is, CA helps China to break out of its perceived encirclement and to reach out to Europe and the Middle East through its "March Westward" policy. Whereas relations with the U.S. remain an insecure area (重中之重), China hopes to build a better working relationship, not least in Afghanistan. The problem is that China is not willing to share the burden equally (seen from a western perspective) as the operation looks today but rather would like to use the United States as a proxy for implementation of its softer policy. This is not in the interest of the U.S. or any other actor that would like to see a greater Chinese engagement in peace enforcement operations, something that China is not willing to do. This is a division of interest that currently prevents any multilateral coordination including China in the security domain. However, there are major overlaps where the U.S. and China could cooperate in terms of increased trade in the region, not least to establish economic prosperity and structurally prevent radicalization through strengthening institutions dealing with the challenges.

Terrorism and organized crime are other areas where there is common understanding of the problem, even if not necessarily in how to deal with the challenges. It would be useful to further engage the SCO and RATS in international cooperation and training, not least to strengthen structures that are relatively weak and could be of regional and international importance. It could be argued that China's long-term interest overlap more with the U.S. than with Russia, even if the short-term strategic Sino-Russian cooperation is to continue. However, if the Sino-Russian relations in CA are a weathervane for its overall relations the cooperation will be increasingly difficult to maintain.

Direct involvement in the region, such as boots on the ground, is not possible at the moment for China which rather aims at providing greater support for institutionalization, economic development, as well as strengthening of security organizations to assist the CA government to manage their own problems. In so doing, China hopes that it can kill with a borrowed sword “借刀杀人” (*jiedao sharen*) and keep radicalism and terrorism from infiltrating China, while in Afghanistan there is a hope that the U.S. will maintain its presence until a more stable transition strategy has been established. The Chinese strategy is to strengthen the individual states, as well as the multilateral institutions, to the extent that they can resolve their domestic issues by themselves. The limitations to this strategy are several, however, not least the weakness of the CA states, rampant corruption, and the criminalization of state institutions. Moreover, even with strengthened national institutions it is far from certain that they will move in a direction that is in the Chinese national interest, or for that matter the U.S.

The security cooperation between China and the states in CA has increased significantly over the years and China is very much assisting the CA states to sharpen the sword they hope they can utilize. The exchanges between the NDUs of each country have increased exponentially and it has been a direct strategy to assist officers and higher officials. This said, the lingua franca among the security services in the region is Russian and up to now material and training has been exclusively Russian, a situation that is changing but slowly. Both the U.S. and China have a common interest in breaking the Russian domination in the security sector but neither has the interest nor the ability to commit the resources to commit to this.

The reality is that the PLA and China's security policy in CA and Xinjiang is in a state of muddling through. China has come much further in some aspects in CA than in any other region but in others China is facing challenges that there are no good solution to if the Chinese non-intervention policy is to remain. Therefore we should not expect any major initiatives in the region. This does in no way indicate that China is not interested in CA or is engaging the region. China is today in better control of the agenda setting but there is very little opportunity to create any substance in these agendas despite Chinese eagerness as it lacks partners in the region that are willing to deal with the security challenges. China will oppose any peace enforcement initiatives but are seeking good means of creating a sustainable strategy in CA. China could potentially be a spoiler of U.S. initiatives in the region but as long as China is informed and the initiatives are in line with international law, there is little reason for China to destabilize any initiatives. On the contrary, China is today welcoming international initiatives to secure the region, at least in the short and medium term.

Recommendations

1. Central Asia is not a priority region for any state but for that very reason increased Sino-U.S. security cooperation could be possible and should be sought out with realistic aims how far such cooperation could develop.

- a. Sino-U.S. relations are less tense in CA than in any other region surrounding China and China is more willing to seek new cooperative solutions here as they realize that their own ability and experience is limited. Moreover, it is not as strategically or emotionally important as the Yellow Sea or the South China Sea.
 - b. The stabilization of the CA would also have positive effects on some of the close friends of China, such as Pakistan and Iran, which could work positively on other U.S. priorities.
 - c. Cooperation should primarily be done through multilateral channels and focus on non-interventions and supporting local governments. China is reluctant to engage in any major operation that could force them to act militarily or bilaterally.
 - d. U.S. and China share concerns about the spread of radicalization and extremism and it would be useful to engage China in the Istanbul Process or the UN Joint Plan for Action for Central Asia. This is in line with the current Chinese strategy and Premier Li Keqiang has voiced China's appreciation of these initiatives.

2. China is currently the most constructive actor with influence in the region (excluding the U.S. and the international forces in Afghanistan) and the U.S. would benefit greatly if it increased its cooperation with China in the economic and security area.
 - a. China is driving both the economic development as well as the infrastructural development that could tie CA to other regions, such as Europe and the Middle East. China has become the largest trading partner in the region but CA is not crucial for China, even if it is for Xinjiang, but oil from Middle East and commercial trade with EU is.
 - b. Closer cooperation with China could decrease the Russian influence in the security sector but it is important to remember that the CA states are not ready to exchange one overlord against a new one.
 - c. The limitations are many but the primary one is that any engagement needs to be a multilateral initiative under the UN or under a regional structure and China would not be ready to engage in more assertive operations, such as peace enforcement.
 - d. The U.S. would need to reassure China that initiatives (bilateral and multilateral) are not to establish a long-term U.S. foothold or to contain China.

3. The U.S., as any other state, will have to be realistic about its goals in CA. The region is not a priority for China or the U.S. and the only way to have long-term positive impact is to cooperate, as the financial and political commitments will be relatively modest compared to the needs.
 - a. Due to the budgetary and political restrictions and limitations in engagement the U.S. should primarily focus on security cooperation such as training and military exchanges, strengthening institutions and infrastructural development. It would be unrealistic to see the U.S. take a much larger security engagement, much due to the Russian dominance but also due to consideration of other regions of greater strategic importance.
 - b. Similarly China is reluctant to put boots on the ground and it would very much be a common interest to strengthen security structures within each Central Asian state so that they will not be dominated by a declining and aggressive Russia.

4. The U.S. would benefit from increased bilateral security cooperation with Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan. Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are arguably too closely aligned with Russia for any significant cooperation to occur.

- a. The CA states are interested in preventing one hegemon (Soviet Union) being by another (China). The “third” neighborhood policy, i.e. diversification, is becoming more important when reaching out to non-regional actors.
- b. The CA institutions are weak and easy to coopt by organized crime, corruption and easy to radicalize. Efforts to strengthen and influence security structures should be high on the agenda for the U.S. and Europe.
- c. Strengthening government institutions is crucial to avoid further destabilization of the region and China has taken the lead but democratic states should also engage CA. The result of this could long-term be strengthened democratic institutions but short term preventing state failure. The key to stronger and more open institutions is connecting CA to international trade and multilateral institutions. A trade that is increasingly going east now.
- d. To diversify the trade it would paradoxically be useful to improve and connect to the infrastructural work China has initiated. This would connect CA with South Asia, Middle East and Europe. This would create viable alternative trade patterns for CA and decrease Russian influence over time.

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² It is in the economic arena where China has made the biggest inroads into the region and which has been its primary interest. Indeed, China has emerged as the most important trading partner and investor for GCA as a whole, eclipsing Russia as of 2013 (in the cases of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, China's share of trade is more than twice that of Russia's, at 36.3 and 47.3 percent, respectively). The bulk of Chinese trade with the states of GCA is in strategically valuable resources such as energy commodities, and to a lesser degree, other natural resources. Additionally, the region has also become increasingly dependent on Chinese infrastructure investments and consumer goods. With the new energy deals signed by President Xi Jinping with his Central Asian counterparts in October 2013, valued at approximately USD 100 billion in total (the deal with Uzbekistan is worth USD 15 billion, Kazakhstan USD 30 billion, and Turkmenistan USD 50 billion), China's dominant position will become even more consolidated and China is likely to remain the most important trading partner of all states. This is particularly true as these latest energy deals come on top of earlier investments in Central Asia and Afghanistan, such as USD 3.5 billion for the Aynak copper mine as well as USD 2 billion invested in infrastructure related to the mine. There has been some concern in China that the Eurasian Customs Union could impact Chinese trade negatively, but Chinese trade with the region has grown even faster, not least in energy resources.

³ Taylor Fravel and Christopher Twomey, "Projecting Strategy: The Myth of Chinese Counter-intervention", *The Washington Quarterly*, January 26, 2015.

⁴ 邵育群, 试析美国撤军后中美在阿富汗问题上的合作空间, *现代国际关系* 2013年8期 [Shao Yuqun, "China-US Cooperation on Afghanistan issue after the US Military Withdrawal" *Contemporary International Relations*, No.8, 2013]

⁵ Yun Sun, March West: "China's Response to the US Rebalancing" *Up-Front*, The Brookings Institution, 31 January, 2013. With the U.S. and Europe's influence in the CA states and the Middle East being seen as much more limited, increasingly a westward strategic shift has been seen among certain circles in China as a way to break the encirclement. Moreover, there is no major border conflict between China and the GCA states, even if there has been a rise in anti-Chinese sentiment in Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, and to certain extent Kazakhstan. This relatively positive environment has led to increased security cooperation and a more assertive and engaging diplomacy ranging from the GCA states to Iran and the Middle Eastern states.

⁶ 王缉思: 《“西进”: 中国地缘战略的再平衡》, *环球时报*, 2012年10月17日 (Wang Jisi, " 'Marching Westwards': The Rebalancing of China's Geostrategy," *Global Times*, 17 October 2012). The idea of China's western march is not an isolated fanciful idea by a few academics but falls directly into the Grand Western Strategy "西部大开发" (*Xibu da kaifa*), the New Silk Road Economic Belt, China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, the Bangladesh-India-China-Myanmar (BCIM) corridor, as well as the Chinese attempt to create a Asian security architecture through, among others, the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia Summit (CICA) and the SCO. This is part of China's greater strategy of improving economic and social conditions in its more impoverished regions, such as Xinjiang and Tibet, as well as breaking out of the U.S. encirclement. There are many direct reasons for the focus on its western borders that will be discussed in the paper, but the personal interest for President Xi should also not be underestimated. As he was born in the far eastern corner of Shaanxi province, he feels very much connected to the Silk Road intellectually as well as emotionally.

⁷ "SCO supports China to crack down upon the 'three evil forces'", *People's Daily Online*, July 05, 2013 (accessed 2015-01-18), Webpage: <http://english.people.com.cn/90786/8311944.html>.

⁸ Imtiaz Hussain, "Shanghai Cooperation Organization", in *The Security Governance of Regional Organizations*, eds. Emil Kirchner and Roberto Dominiques, Routledge, Abingdon, 2011, pp. 261-262.

⁹ Justine Drennan, "Is China making its own terrorism problem worse?", *Foreign Policy*, February 9, 2015.

¹⁰ Interviews in Xinjiang and Beijing 2013-2015; Niklas Swanström, "China and Greater Central Asia: New Frontiers?", *Silk Road Paper*, The Institute for Security and Development Policy, Stockholm, 2011.

¹¹ Maika Tukmadiyeva, "Xinjiang in China's Foreign Policy towards Central Asia" *The Quarterly Journal*, vol. 12, Issue 3, 2013, pp. 87-88.

¹² Trade with the CA states is of strategic importance, especially as it comes with a political leverage, but much more important is the transit trade with Europe, South Asia, and Middle East that passes through some of the most destabilized states in the world. China is trying to stabilize the GCA states by increasing institutional support for government institutions, the training of security forces, creating a base for economic development, as well as maintaining a political status quo with secular and politically flexible governments in GCA that are not in conflict with China's interests. It is not only the Central Asian states that are instrumental in this regard, but also Afghanistan which sits as a hub between South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East. It still holds true that the one that controls Afghanistan controls the broader region. A decay of the current political and security situation in Afghanistan would have detrimental effects on the Chinese western strategies. Afghanistan is therefore one of the more contentious areas, especially if the United States and its allies decrease their forces in and engagement with the country.* Relations with the surrounding states are essential for trade and security cooperation as the Wakhan corridor between China and Afghanistan is of limited importance due to the climatic conditions and geographical location, a situation that is very problematic as the political situation looks today in GCA with growing regional tensions and the lack of political willingness in China to engage in stabilizing exercises outside of its own territory, especially if this would require military engagement from the Chinese side. Subsequently it is not in China's short-term interest for too much of a reduction in Russia's role in Central Asia or the U.S. role in Afghanistan to occur, as China would not be able to shoulder the responsibility to maintain the necessary stability without boots on the ground, an option that is not currently in Beijing's calculus.

¹³ *Eurasia's Ascent in Energy and Geopolitics: Rivalry or Partnership for China, Russia, and Central Asia?*, ed. Robert Bedeski and Niklas Swanström (London: Routledge, 2012).

¹⁴ 杨洁篪：《新形势下中国外交理论和实践创新》，求是，2013年8月16日 [Yang Jiechi, “Chinese Diplomacy under New Situations: Theoretical and Practical Innovations,” *Qiushi*, 16 August 2013]; 肖宪：《“向西开放”需外交全局统筹》，环球时报，2013年7月31日 [Xiao Xian, “March Westwards and the Coordination in the Diplomacy,” *Global Times*, 31 July 2013].

¹⁵ Joshua Kucera, “Russia: Moscow Strives to Clarify Vision for Central Asian Alliance,” *Eurasianet.org*, September 30, 2011, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/64248>.

¹⁶ Li Keqiang, “Promoting security and prosperity in Afghanistan and the region,”

China.org.cn, http://www.china.org.cn/opinion/2014-11/04/content_33961483.htm, (accessed 2015-03-09).

¹⁷ 中国将军公开澄清“海外建军事基地说法”，环球网，2010年，1月，(Chinese General Publicly Clarifies Statements About Establishing Overseas Bases,” *Global Net*, January 1, 2010.

¹⁸ 论中国的中亚战略陈迎春来源：《徐州工程学院学报（社会科学版）》2012年第1期（中国社会科学院研究生院，北京 102488）<http://euroasia.cass.cn/news/471529.htm> (accessed 2015-01-21).

¹⁹ 媒体称中国加强与中亚军事合作打击三股势力，2010年6月15日 08:24，来源：东方网 作者：书山 选稿：黄骏，<http://mil.eastday.com/m/20100615/u1a5265885.html> (accessed 2015-01-16); 论中国的中亚战略陈迎春 来源：《徐州工程学院学报（社会科学版）》2012年第1期（中国社会科学院研究生院，北京 102488）<http://euroasia.cass.cn/news/471529.htm> (accessed 2015-01-21).

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²³ International Crisis Group, “China’s Central Asia Problem,” *Asia Report* N. 244, 27 February 2013, p. 24.

²⁴ Richard Weitz, “The Shanghai Cooperation Organization: A Fading Star” *The ASAN Forum*, <http://www.theasanforum.org/the-shanghai-cooperation-organization-a-fading-star/>, August 11, 2014 (accessed 2015-02-22).

²⁵ For deeper discussion about Sino-Russian relations and possible tension see: Robert Bedeski and Niklas Swanström, *Eurasia’s Ascent in Energy and Geopolitics: Rivalry or partnership for China, Russia and Central Asia?*, (eds), Routledge, Abingdon, 2012.

²⁶ International Crisis Group, “China’s Central Asia Problem,” *Asia Report* N. 244, 27 February 2013, pp. 20-23; Siemon Wezeman and Pieter Wezeman, *Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2013*, SIPRI Fact Sheet, March 2014, <http://books.sipri.org/files/FS/SIPRIFS1403.pdf> (accessed 2015-02-19); XXXX

²⁷ Stephen Blank, “Recent trends in Russo-Chinese military relations” in *Eurasia’s Ascent in Energy and Geopolitics: Rivalry or partnership for China, Russia and Central Asia?*, Robert Bedeski and Niklas Swanström (eds), Routledge, Abingdon, 2012, pp. 108-134; Niklas Swanström, “Sino-Russian Relations at the start of the New Millennium in Central Asia and beyond” *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 24. Issue. 86, 2014.

²⁸ Kamphausen, Roy, and Andrew Scobell, “Right-Sizing the People’s Liberation Army”, Carlisle, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, 2007; 张芳，当代中国军事外交：历史与现实，时事出版社，2014年（Zhang Fang, ed., *Contemporary Chinese Military Diplomacy: History and Reality*, Beijing: Current Affairs Press, 2014）

²⁹ Notwithstanding this relative lack of interest, China has felt the need to develop forces that could act preventively in both Xinjiang and, if necessary, Central Asia, even if this is not an official position espoused by Beijing. In this regard, a new policy can be distinguished after the demonstrations in Urumqi in 2009, and the violence in Kyrgyzstan in 2010. In 2009 it was realized that the People’s Armed Police (PAP) was not up to the task of managing a wider national uprising, and the military exercises that followed the political turmoil in 2010 in Kyrgyzstan seemed more focused on how to deal with failing states than terrorist threats per se. This is in line with the development in China of the Rapid Reaction Forces “快速反应部队”(kuaisu fanying budui), Special Operations Forces “特种部”(tezhong budui), and the Resolving Emerging Mobile Combat Forces “突发应急事件解决流动作战部队”(tufa yingji shijian jieju liudong zuozhan budui) in the Lanzhou Military Region (LMR) since the early 2000s, which has operational responsibility for Xinjiang and Central Asia. This is not to say that PLA will act in domestic uprisings or assist neighboring governments in suppressing instability but that its capacity has been developed in line with increased regional volatility, especially across the border. This is also a modernization that is necessary for the LMR which needs further upgrades of its materiel, such as helicopters, desert and mountain equipment, but also more boots on the ground.

This is not to say that the LMR region is without strength in terms of military force. According to Russian estimates, Chinese forces in the LMR are stronger than the combined forces of all other actors in GCA (possibly excluding NATO forces in Afghanistan but including Russia). But such assertions probably say more about the Russian insecurity and lack of trust in China than about China’s actual capabilities. C4 (command, control, communications and computers) capabilities are still low and the ability to fight war in a modern context, much less in an informationalized context, lags far behind where China would like it to be. To bridge this weakness, China has increased military cooperation with all GCA states. Meanwhile, Russia’s military presence in GCA is much more limited than in earlier periods, particularly in Afghanistan, and it does not currently have sufficient conventional capacity to counter the Chinese if the latter were to decide to “move into” the region. This is despite the fact that Russia is still by far the most important security actor in Central Asia, and is today one of the few actors that guarantee the security of the weaker Central Asian states, such as Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Russia has shown a willingness to act militarily to stabilize states to an extent which no other actor has been willing to commit to.

The question is if China has been engaged in creating a strategy of the Empty Fortress (空城) (tricking the enemy to assume that they are weak when they are strong), but I would argue that China in fact is doing the opposite (feigning strength when weak). This relative weakness is all too apparent when travelling around the military regions in China and much more in the way of human resources as well as materiel is needed before China, if it is willing, is to engage beyond its western borders. In fact, Scobell et al. have pointed out that the Lanzhou Military region is the most porous region of China in terms of the ability to defend, with 220,000 troops defending a 3.4 million square kilometer area, which furthermore borders unstable neighbors. China is very reluctant to be caught up in its own strategy of luring the enemy deep within (诱敌深入), and assisting or controlling any country in the GCA would be resource intensive, something the allied forces have realized in Afghanistan. China does simply not have the boots on the ground, willingness, or the experience to manage such an operation. The scenarios that plausibly could force China to act and use PLA units would be peace enforcement, assisting failing states, or potentially conducting surgical strikes against groups that have attacked or could attack China. Even in these scenarios Chinese action is currently unlikely and there would have to exist a serious threat to China before the PLA would be authorized or willing to act. An example of the lack of Chinese willingness to act is the reaction to the uprisings in Kyrgyzstan in 2010. While Russia intervened to stabilize the situation, it was never on the agenda for China to follow step. Thus rather than intervening in conflicts external to it, maintaining secure borders is of greater concern for China. The two largest units in LMR are the 21st Group Army based in Gansu and the 47th Group Army based in Shaanxi, both situated far away from Xinjiang's western border and arguably not equipped for fighting terrorists outside of China or stabilizing any bordering states. In the largest military district in China, Xinjiang, there are only four motorized infantry divisions (4th, 6th, 8th and 11th as well as two artillery divisions). It should be noted that these divisions are comparatively well trained and motivated but are insufficient to be an effective force outside of China if they were to engage in peace enforcement, assisting a failing state, or even conducting a surgical operation against groups targeting China.

³⁰ International Crisis Group, *China's Central Asia Problem*, Asia Report N. 244, 27 February 2013), p. 17.

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