

# China and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: The Dynamics of “New Regionalism,” “Vassalization,” and Geopolitics in Central Asia

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## Introduction

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is a multilateral group comprised of six member states—China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan—and four observer states—Mongolia, Iran, India and Pakistan. This organization has been variously described in recent times by external observers as “the world’s least known and least analyzed” multilateral group, an “OPEC with [nuclear] bombs,” and a prospective anti-American “Asian NATO” (Bailes et al 2007; Brummer 2007, 185; Weitz 2006, 42). Yet, these somewhat alarmist characterizations stand in stark contrast to the treatment of the organization immediately after the events of 11 September 2001, whereby it was dismissed as either an ineffectual and shallow regional “talk-fest” or a transparent cloak for the maintenance and expansion of malignant Russian and Chinese influence in Central Asia (Blank 2002b; Tisdall 2006).

These perceptions, however, fail to understand the roots of the organization and the manner in which it has evolved and, perhaps more importantly, the core imperatives of its principle driver, the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Indeed, China’s foreign policy in Central Asia has been variously characterized as constituting a “new regionalism,” establishing vassal relations between China and Central Asia or as geopolitical maneuvering (Chung 2004, 989-1009; Lanteigne 2006/07, 605-22; Swanstrom 2005, 569-84). I will briefly address what each of these conceptualizations of China’s foreign policy mean and then relate these models to the record of Chinese foreign policy in the region since 1991. What will emerge from this discussion is that all three conceptualizations can be seen as constituting accurate pictures of China’s multilateral (new regionalism) and bilateral (vassalization) diplomacy/relations in Central Asia and its over-arching strategic concerns/imperatives in the region (geopolitics). Moreover, it will also be suggested that the development of these three levels within China’s approach to the region have been a significant expression of China’s grand strategy of “peaceful rise”.

This chapter will argue that while the SCO resembles other multilateral organizations on the surface, its origins and the interests of China have shaped it in a particular and unique fashion. Indeed, the organization’s norms, declared policies and rhetoric to a large degree bear the imprint of China’s evolving foreign policy thinking since the early 1990s, particularly Beijing’s formulation of “new regionalism” and “new security concept” to promote China’s “peaceful rise” in international affairs. For Beijing, the organization is an example of “new regionalism” in that it is defined by “open, functional, interest-based cooperation among contiguous states” that is underpinned by a mutual respect for the member states’ sovereignty (Chung 2004). This imperative of privileging state sovereignty within a multilateral context is driven by China’s twin concerns with its own sovereignty and control of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) and its desire to develop multiple regional and global relationships in order to counter US primacy in the international system. Therefore, Chinese policy in Central Asia is the product of the interaction of its domestic security and development concerns in Xinjiang, its region-specific interests in Central Asia (such as border security and counter-terrorism) and its global foreign policy strategy of hedging against potential US containment.

The analysis concludes that China has been relatively successful in embedding these three imperatives within the operation of the SCO, although the potential remains for specific issues, such as those surrounding competition for access and/or control of Central Asian energy resources, to upset the equilibrium established between China and Russia within the organization since the late 1990s. The chapter will begin, however, with a brief discussion of the evolution of China’s grand strategy of

“peaceful rise,” as this “big picture” perspective provides an excellent vantage point from which to assess the development of China’s diplomacy and foreign policy in the discrete Central Asian context. What will emerge is that each of the strands of Chinese policy toward the region have been shaped by fundamentally strategic decisions about China’s internal development (specifically in Xinjiang) and the opportunities for geopolitical gains in post-Soviet Eurasia. As such Chinese policy toward Central Asia significantly contributes to the achievement of its “peaceful rise” in international affairs.

### **China’s Grand Strategy of “Peaceful Rise” and the Role of Central Asia**

A major question that has confronted observers of China’s diplomacy in Central Asia since the end of the Cold War has been how best to conceptualize and explain the bases of Beijing’s approach to the region. The response of scholars has been varied. Some simply suggest that Beijing opportunistically took advantage of the relative retreat of Russian power after 1991 to expand its influence in the region (Kerr and Swinton 2008). Others suggest that the drivers of Chinese interest in Central Asia have had purely domestic origins ranging from concern for the security and development of the restive province of Xinjiang to China’s burgeoning need for further sources of oil and natural gas to fuel its growing economy (Chang 1997). Another recent theme has been to perceive the relations between China and Central Asia as increasingly defined by a dynamic of economic and political dependency that resembles imperial China’s “vassal” relationships with neighboring states (Swanstrom 2005; Goldstein 2005). None of these conceptions provides a coherent picture of Beijing’s encompassing interests or of the full weight of its long-term significance for the region and the world. Attempting to explain China’s approach to Central Asia in isolation from a consideration of the evolution and driving themes of Beijing’s post-1991 foreign policy risks occluding the intimate and dynamic connections between the internal, regional and global visions of this rising power.

The end of the Cold War and the strategic certainties of that era resulted in the development of three guiding themes for China’s post-Cold War foreign policy—“preservation, prosperity and power” (Wang 2005). Key to securing this trilogy of national goals has been the development of a foreign policy “line” of “peaceful rise (*heping jueqi*)” (Yongnian 1999, 114-116). These pre-eminent concerns have meant that from 1991 onward China has generally attempted to safely enter and engage with the existing international order in order to reap the benefits of the contemporary international political and economic system. Thus, China developed a preference for “cooperation,” “multilateralism,” “integration,” and “regionalism” in its diplomatic endeavors, especially with respect to relations with immediate neighbors—a dynamic particularly prevalent in Beijing’s relations with Central Asia (Hsiung 1995; Chung 2004). This dynamic illustrates a central facet of China’s strategic and foreign policy since 1991—the development of multiple regional and global relationships in order to balance against the perceived threat of US predominance (Hsiung 1995; Foot 2005).

China’s grand strategy of “peaceful rise,” as officially stated has reflected these themes of establishing good relations with neighbors, integration in the international economy and avoidance of conflict with the US. For Zheng Bijian, the former vice-president of the Central Party School in Beijing and originator of the term, the essence of China’s strategic path of “peaceful rise” consists of, “independently building socialism with Chinese characteristics, while participating in rather than detaching from economic globalization” (Zheng 2003). Chinese President Hu Jintao has also stressed that, “The very purpose of China’s foreign policy is to maintain world peace and promote common development” through forging “good neighborly relationships” while practicing “a policy of bringing harmony, security and prosperity.” Such an approach, according to Hu, would ultimately lead to the “strengthening of mutual trust and cooperation between Asian countries” (Hu 2004). Thus, the Chinese “are not seeking to become a big military power contending for hegemony around the world, but a big market, a major civilization and a responsible big power playing a constructive role in the international community” (Zheng 2005).

Where does Central Asia fit in this grand strategy? Central Asia's importance in China's grand strategy is enhanced due to the fact that, "Beijing is not seeking a place in the sun, but rather a protected place in the shade" (Xiang 2004, 109). In essence, this view, in conjunction with the statements of Zheng Bijian noted above, suggests that China is seeking to orient its strategy of "peaceful rise" toward regions where there are less obstacles for the expansion of China's political, economic, strategic and military influence. In this regard an over-arching theme of "engaging the periphery" in China's post-1991 foreign policy, whereby China has sought to construct conducive relations with its immediate neighbors on the basis of shared economic and security concerns/interests, has been observed and commented upon in some detail (Shambaugh 2004/05; Kang 2003). In this context Central Asia has arguably emerged since 1991 to be a path of least resistance as it offered China a strategically "safe" axis for the expansion of its power, as the newly independent Central Asian states sought to diversify their foreign relations in the wake of the Soviet collapse and the absence of a significant US presence (Xiang 2004, 109).

There is also a complementarity between what might be termed China's Xinjiang, Central Asian and grand-strategy derived interests here. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, China has attempted to utilize Xinjiang's geopolitical position in order to simultaneously achieve the security and integration of Xinjiang and, as this project has progressed, China's rise as Central Asian power. The integration of Xinjiang grants China significant security, economic and strategic benefits that serve two purposes—the consolidation of China's control of Xinjiang and the expansion of Chinese power in Central Asia—which contribute to Beijing's quest for a "peaceful rise" to great power status (Clarke 2008).

### **China and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Toward a "New Regionalism"?**

The SCO, formed in June 2001, is of major importance not only for understanding China's approach to Central Asia but also to the development of its wider foreign policy grand strategy. Indeed, the SCO is the only multilateral grouping in which China is involved that has from the first been driven by Beijing. This is all the more noteworthy as the SCO's agenda was initially focused on military and security issues, areas which Beijing had traditionally been loath to engage with on a multilateral basis. Importantly, the SCO, both through its declarations and practical measures has developed a normative agenda, although one that is at odds with the normative agendas of other multilateral actors in Central Asia such as the EU not to mention the "democracy promotion" agenda of the administration of President George W. Bush. China's pre-eminent role in the SCO has been demonstrated through the framing of the organization's agenda by the principles of China's "New Security Concept" which stresses such things as non-interference in the internal affairs of member states and sovereign equality. While this could be portrayed as rhetorical window-dressing on the part of Beijing, it nonetheless reflects China's decision to engage Central Asia on the basis of shared interests in order to achieve its own strategic interests while preventing overt opposition from the region.

For Beijing, the SCO is an example of "new regionalism" in that it is defined by "open, functional, interest-based cooperation among contiguous states" that is underpinned by a mutual respect for the member states' sovereignty (Chung 2004). However, what is actually "new" about the "new regionalism"? For Fawcett, regionalism simply, "implies a policy whereby states and non-state actors cooperate and coordinate strategy within a given region" in order to "pursue and promote common goals in one or more issue areas" (Fawcett 2004, 433). Thus, regionalism is conceived of as a policy *and* a process (Schulz et al 2001, 5). However, regionalism can be divided into two types—"soft" and "hard", where the former is defined by a process of promoting a sense of regional awareness/community and the latter by the consolidation of regional groups/networks or sub-regional groups, "formalized by interstate arrangements and organizations" (Fawcett 2004, 433). According to some commentators, however, the "new regionalism" is also "extroverted" reflecting the greater inter-

dependence of the contemporary global political economy and is an “instrument to supplement, enhance or protect the role of the state and the power of the government in an interdependent world” (Schulz et al. 2001, 4). Therefore, the “new regionalism” is conceived of as operating not against the prevailing systemic structure but as means by which states can mediate or negotiate the challenges posed by the numerous trans-national processes identified under the rubric of “globalization”. The development and operation of the SCO correlates well to these parameters in that it exhibits both “soft” (promoting a sense of regional awareness/community) and “hard” (regionalism formalized by interstate arrangements) elements of regionalism.

*From the “Shanghai Five” to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization*

China’s pre-eminent interest in Central Asia after 1991 concerned ensuring the security of Xinjiang. Indeed, the recent history of Xinjiang has made Beijing vigilant against the potential infiltration of radical Islamism and Turkic nationalism into the predominantly Turkic-Muslim populated region (Millward 2004). This has resulted in an enduring Chinese concern with both external threats (from neighboring states or groups) and internal threats (from ethnic separatism) to Xinjiang. This has played a central role in generating China’s interests in Central Asia and in the development of the SCO. Arguably a circular logic lies behind China’s approach to Xinjiang and Central Asia with security within Xinjiang perceived by Beijing to be predicated on delivering economic growth, while economic growth is assured by the reinforcement of the state’s instruments of political and social control, which in turn is to be achieved by opening the region to Central Asia (Becquelin 2004). For Beijing, the evolution of the Shanghai Five (S-5) and the SCO has been particularly important in ensuring that this essential opening to Central Asia would not backfire on China. In this respect the core issues for the emerging multilateralism of the S-5 and SCO have often been a barometer of Chinese concerns in the region.

The SCO developed out of the so-called “Shanghai Five” (S-5) group of China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Significantly, this grew out of China’s bilateral discussions with each of these states soon after the Soviet collapse regarding issues of border demarcation, troop reductions and confidence-building measures (Dillon 1997, 136). These discussions led to the signing of the five-nation “Agreement on Confidence-Building in the Military Sphere in the Border Areas” at a heads-of-state summit in Shanghai on 26 April 1996. This agreement was wide-reaching, encompassing a package of fourteen agreements on border issues and military confidence building measures, and emphasized the need to maintain the multilateral nature of security dialogues in the region, demonstrating China’s desire to resolve its long-standing fear of vulnerability along its western frontier (*Beijing Xinhua* 1996a; Lanteigne 2006/07, 608).

Even at this early stage it was clear that the grouping was perceived by China as an important means through which to not only secure its western frontier but also to further its wider strategic interests. Indeed, a joint Sino-Russian statement regarding the establishment of a Beijing-Moscow “strategic partnership” issued after Presidents Jiang Zemin and Boris Yeltsin met on the sidelines of the summit emphasized the need to counter “hegemonism” (i.e., US-primacy) and the importance of achieving “regional and global stability, development and prosperity” on the basis of “the principles of mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in each others internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit and peaceful coexistence” (*Beijing Xinhua* 1996b). While this statement and that of the 1996 S-5 summit carried the caveat of not being “directed at any third country,” they were clearly congruent with Beijing’s goal of developing multiple regional and global relationships to counter what it perceived to be the negative aspects of US primacy in international affairs. On the issue of China’s specific interest in the security of Xinjiang, the S-5 summit of 1996 was also used to pressure the leaders of Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan to declare that they were “opposed to any form of splittist activities”—code for cooperating with Beijing

to control the activities of pro-independence Uyghur émigré organizations within these Central Asian states (*Beijing Xinhua* 1996b).

The S-5 experienced significant development over the subsequent four years due to China's perception of a confluence of external and internal threats to its interests in Central Asia and its governance of Xinjiang. Externally, Central Asia over the 1996 to 2000 period was characterized by the rise of Islamic radicalism in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan and the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan, while the region was also bedeviled by weapons and drug trafficking. In particular, China and Russia viewed with alarm the rise of the Taliban and its influence in the wider Central Asian region through the development of linkages between it and Central Asian Islamist groups such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HT) which aimed to topple the authoritarian but secular regime of Islam Karimov in Uzbekistan (Rashid 2002, 137-156). Internally, China's rule of Xinjiang was rocked by a wave of ethnic minority unrest and anti-government violence over the same period with a vice-chairman of the XUAR admitting in May 1998 that the region had been plagued by violence and that the "separatists" were using weapons "smuggled from abroad" (O'Neil 1998). Despite this Chinese implication that such violence was externally generated, it was clear that government policy also played a key role in generating unrest (Millward 2004, 14-19). Major elements of Chinese policy, such as increased migration of Han Chinese into Xinjiang and increased state control/management of ethnic minority religious and cultural expression, were widely recognized as sources of Uyghur grievance against the state. The state's response to this has consisted of alternating periods of repression, with the authorities instituting regular "Strike Hard" campaigns against "splittists" and "separatists" in the region. These campaigns focused on increasing arrests and accelerating trials and sentencing of "national separatists" which have led to widespread human rights violations (Vicziány 2003).

These influences combined to encourage Beijing to expand the issues addressed by the S-5 process. Thus, while the second summit of heads-of-state of the S-5 in Moscow on 24 April 1997 produced a further agreement on troop reductions in border areas, the third leaders summit of 3 July 1998 in Almaty, Kazakhstan, witnessed a shift in the S-5's emphasis toward issues relating to "extremism," "separatism" and non-traditional security threats. The 1998 joint statement also declared that the member states would not "allow their territories to be used for the activities undermining the national sovereignty, security and social order of any of the five countries". This document also contained further development of the guiding principles of the organization with the statement declaring that the S-5 was a "concrete manifestation of the new-type security concept," which significantly had become a dominant trope of China's foreign policy discourse. The "new security concept" stressed the pursuit of common interests, peaceful dialogue, common security for all regional actors and the discouragement of formal, hierarchical alliances (Lantiegne 2005, 19). Its insertion into the declaratory output of the S-5 was significant as it not only demonstrated China's desire to use the forum to further its specific interests in the region but also to gain the rhetorical support of its partners for its attempt to construct alternative structures to the US-led "world order" (Lantiegne 2005, 140).

Despite the 1998 declaration that the S-5 would fight against "international terrorism" and other "transnational criminal activities," the subsequent year in Central Asia was in many respects defined by the continuation of these dynamics. China's motivation for greater regional action on the issue of trans-national Islamic movements was both obvious and pressing with ongoing incidents of ethnic minority opposition to Chinese rule in Xinjiang. Of further concern for China during this period were reports that the IMU was actively recruiting amongst all ethnic groups in Central Asia including Uyghurs (Rashid 1999). Russia, although alarmed by reports of connections between the IMU, secessionist Chechnya and the Taliban, also saw the specter of "Islamic fundamentalism" as an opportunity to draw the Central Asian governments back into its orbit. Thus, the agenda of the 24 August 1999 meeting of the S-5 in the Kyrgyz capital Bishkek continued to shift the focus toward

establishing a regional response to the inter-connected issues of trans-national Islamic movements, drugs and weapons trafficking and border security. The need for a common regional response to these issues was undoubtedly further impressed upon the meeting's attendees by the simultaneous incursion of 1000 IMU fighters into the Batken region of Kyrgyzstan (Davis 1999).

In the wake of the "Batken Incident," both China and Russia stepped up their diplomatic activities to persuade the Central Asia states of the need for a common regional response to what were perceived to be shared security concerns. As such Russia played a major role in convincing Uzbek President Islam Karimov to attend the S-5 meeting in the Tajik capital Dushanbe between 4 and 5 July 2000. At the meeting the members signed a joint declaration condemning the Taliban for supporting terrorism, agreed to the establishment of an anti-terrorist security centre in the Kyrgyz capital, Bishkek, and declared a commitment to increase collective efforts to counter what the group now termed the "three evils" of "separatism, terrorism and extremism" (Cummings 2001, 147). This declaration was also significant as it demonstrated the convergence of Chinese and Russian foreign policy and strategic interests beyond the specific Central Asian context. As such the declaration endorsed China and Russia's call for the development of a "multipolar" world order, stressed the need to respect national sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs of other states, affirmed the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM), and endorsed China and Russia's opposition to national missile defense (NMD) systems. Internal considerations were nonetheless also to the fore with the statement's section dealing with respect for national sovereignty explicitly referring to the S-5's support for Russian policy in Chechnya and China's stance on Taiwan, Xinjiang and Tibet (*People's Daily* 2000).

The meeting of the S-5 in Shanghai on 14 June 2001 transformed the organization into a fully-fledged international institution – now dubbed the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) - complete with secretariat and inter-ministerial committees, and a new member with the formal ascension of Uzbekistan to the organization (*Eurasianet* 2001; Cutler 2004). Two major documents were adopted at the meeting, the "Declaration of the Establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization" and the "Shanghai Covenant on the Suppression of Terrorism, Separatism and Religious Extremism" (SCO Secretariat 2001; Aris 2001). The latter document clearly demonstrated that establishing a regional response to the perceived threat of radical Islam to member states was a central concern of the new organization (*Eurasianet* 2001). The former document, however, was also significant as it explicitly outlined the principles of the SCO and demonstrated the influence of Chinese interests. Thus, the document asserted that the principles of the group, or the "Shanghai spirit" as Chinese commentary referred to it, comprised of "mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, consultation, respect for multi-civilizations and common development" (SCO Secretariat 2001). 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 also strongly reflected China's wider foreign policy interests:

These principles ostensibly establish 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. It is also important to note that this "spirit" is not seen as solely a set of regional norms, but is openly promoted as universally applicable and as a basis for global politics (Ambrosio 2008, 1327).

### *9/11 and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization*

9/11, however, intervened to place the development of the SCO process in some doubt. 9/11 and the subsequent US invasion of Afghanistan to oust the Taliban and capture Osama bin Laden resulted in a Central Asian tilt toward the US to the detriment of China and Russia, and the SCO. For example, in

2001 and 2002 all of the Central Asian states except Turkmenistan signed military cooperation and base access agreements with the US, as well as receiving significant economic aid packages. Uzbekistan especially benefited from increased US interest in the region, receiving not only an initial aid package worth US\$150 million but also the conclusion of an US-Uzbek “Strategic Partnership” in March 2002 (Rumer 2002, 59-60). The security and economic benefits of the sudden US engagement with the region was seen as a windfall for the Central Asian states, with Kyrgyz Prime Minister Kurmanbek Bakiev reportedly suggesting that the basing of thousands of US military personnel at Kyrgyzstan’s Manas airbase was a potential “gold mine” (Peuch 2002).

Despite this both China and Russia attempted to reinvigorate the SCO process. At the SCO foreign ministers’ meeting in Beijing on 7 January 2002, the Russian and Chinese foreign ministers put forward proposals to improve the SCO's anti-terrorism and security capabilities. Moreover, Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov maintained that the SCO should assume responsibility for regional security, suggesting that China and Russia were already wary of the direction of the U.S. involvement in the region. These efforts made limited headway in 2002 due to the wide array of U.S. agreements and cooperation with the Central Asian states noted above. Indeed, the lack of concrete practical action to make good on SCO rhetoric regarding regional military and security cooperation in 2002 led some observers to consider it a “stillborn” organization made irrelevant by the penetration of U.S. power into Central Asia (Blank 2002a).

Nonetheless the SCO did make some progress in establishing the organization's operational framework. These included initial law enforcement agency meetings in Almaty, Kazakhstan, to coordinate responses to border security issues, illegal migration and drug trafficking and the official adoption of the SCO charter, establishment of the SCO secretariat in Beijing and the conclusion of agreement to open the “Regional Anti-Terrorism” centre in Bishkek (Blagov 2002). Between August 6-11 2003, all of the SCO states except Uzbekistan also conducted “Cooperation–2003” joint military exercises on Kazakh and Chinese soil, the first joint military exercises China had ever taken part in (Carlson 2003). Yet, the absence of Uzbekistan illustrated Tashkent's half-hearted commitment to the SCO and strengthened Russian and Chinese perceptions that Karimov's government was yet to be convinced of the benefits that the SCO could contribute to Uzbek security. Therefore, the 8 September 2003 SCO meeting in Tashkent assumed great importance for the strategic imperatives of China and Russia in the region. At this summit it was announced that the SCO secretariat would begin its functions on January 1, 2004 in Beijing and the executive committee of the RAT center would open on November 1, 2003 in Tashkent and not Bishkek as previously announced. The transfer of the RAT to Uzbekistan from Kyrgyzstan was symptomatic of Russia and China's desire to see Uzbekistan drawn away from the U.S. orbit (*RFE/RL* 2003). Therefore, by 2004 the SCO had achieved a measure of success in re-establishing its pre-September 11 positions in the region.

However, the major events that would enhance the SCO’s attractiveness to the Central Asian states were internal in origin. In March 2005, Kyrgyzstan experienced the Tulip Revolution that toppled long-standing President Askar Akayev, while in May Uzbekistan also experienced a wave of violent unrest in Andijan in which approximately 4000 people rioted and were violently suppressed by the Uzbek military. The significance of these events stemmed from their role in souring Central Asian perceptions of the US role in the region, with Central Asian leaders criticizing the US government’s promotion of democracy and human rights as opposed to “stability”. The aftermath of these events demonstrated that China’s previous investment in “community building” in the region through the guiding principles of the S-5 and SCO had not been in vain. Thus, China’s emphasis on common interests in economic development, security, stability and “anti-terrorism” through the SCO combined with China’s wider emphasis on “non-interference” in other states’ internal affairs to make China appear as reliable partner from the perspective of the region’s remaining authoritarian leaders (Rumer 2005).

The SCO's subsequent July 2005 summit in Astana, Kazakhstan, furthered the tilt of the Central Asian states away from the US and was arguably a triumph for Chinese strategic interests in Central Asia as it demonstrated the Central Asian states' disillusion with the Bush administration's agenda in the region. Thus, the heads-of-state declaration released after the conclusion of the summit requested that "the members of states of the SCO consider it necessary that the respective members of the antiterrorist coalition set a final timeline for their temporary use of objects of infrastructure and stay of their military contingents on the territories of the SCO member states"—a thinly veiled message to Washington that the immediate post-9/11 glow in its relations with Central Asia had faded (SCO Secretariat 2005). The sentiment expressed by the SCO was underlined when Uzbekistan subsequently cancelled its agreement with the US regarding the US military's use of the Karshi-Khanabad air base, with the last US Air Force plane flying out on 21 November 2005 (Rumer 2005, 141).

These two trends of further progress in the SCO's security cooperation and anti-US rhetoric remained predominant over the next few years. Indeed, the SCO's June 2006 summit in Shanghai resulted in the conclusion of agreements concerning further joint SCO anti-terrorism exercises, and the establishment of a US\$900 million credit fund, supplied by China, to establish a SCO Business Council and SCO Inter-Bank Association. This meeting also saw the attendance of representatives of four observer states in Iran, India, Pakistan and Mongolia. Meanwhile, the heads-of-state declaration re-stated the SCO's commitment to combating the "three evils" while celebrating the organization's promotion of a "new security architecture" that "discards 'double standards' and seeks to settle disputes through negotiation on the basis of mutual understanding" and respects the right of all countries "to pursue particular models of development and formulate domestic and foreign policies independently and participate in international affairs on an equal basis" (SCO Secretariat 2006).

The 16 August 2007 summit of SCO leaders in the Kyrgyz capital Bishkek not only further underlined these trends but also highlighted some emergent problems for the SCO. While the summit captured headlines for the anti-US rhetoric of Iranian President Ahmedinejad it was more significant for the re-emergence of Russia as an equal driver with China of the organization's agenda (*Eurasianet* 2007). Indeed, President Putin was publicly enthusiastic about the SCO "Peace Mission 2007" joint military exercises held between 9 and 17 August at Chelyabinsk arguing, "The idea of holding such regular exercises on the territory of various SCO member-countries deserves consideration" as this would "bolster the SCO's potential in security matters" (*Interfax* 2007). While the summit produced the now customary declarations of "good neighborliness, friendship and cooperation," perhaps the most significant factors were the explicit Russian and Iranian anti-US rhetoric and Sino-Russian hesitancy to admit new members to the organization (Marat and Murzakulova 2007). In this latter respect both China and Russia's position on SCO expansion was running counter to that of the Central Asian members with Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiyev asserting confidently prior to the summit that expansion was simply "a matter of time" (*ITAR-TASS* 2007). Such Chinese and Russian reticence was unsurprising given that expansion of the SCO to include any of the current observers would introduce extra-regional powers while diluting Sino-Russian dominance over the organization.

China's endeavors toward building a shared sense of regional interests among the states of Central Asia through the SCO, which had had some success since 2001, was subsequently threatened by Russia's intervention in Georgia in August 2008. Indeed, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev attempted, but ultimately failed, to get the SCO's unconditional support for its incursion into Georgia at the 28 August 2008 summit meeting in Dushanbe, Tajikistan (Farizova 2008). The summit's declaration noted the members' "deep concern" over the Ossetia-Georgia issue and called for *all* parties to resolve the issue through diplomacy. Moreover, the declaration reasserted the SCO's proclaimed commitment to the territorial integrity of states, good-neighborly relations and common



development (SCO Secretariat 2008). For Beijing the Ossetia-Georgia issue was unwelcome on a number of counts. First, China could not recognize Russia's intervention in Georgia as to do so would risk setting a precedent that could potentially be used against it in the future regarding Xinjiang, Tibet or Taiwan. Second, as Stephen Blank correctly noted, "separatism" is one of the "three evils" along with extremism and terrorism that form a core issue for the SCO, and thus Russia's actions arguably undermined this pillar of the grouping (Blank 2008). In terms of the power dynamics within the SCO, Russia's precipitous action in Georgia has arguably strengthened China's position as Beijing has to the present stood by the stated principles of the organization (Swanstrom 2008).

In summary, the development of the S-5 and the SCO, reflects China's endeavor to establish multiple regional and global relationships in order to counter US primacy in the international system—a goal achieved to an extent in 2005 and 2006 with the tilt of the Central Asian states back toward the SCO and China. Moreover, as the statements from the 2005, 2006 and 2007 SCO summits demonstrate, China increasingly views the SCO as a forum in which to present its foreign policy as a distinct alternative to that of the US. Of central importance here has been China's commitment to embed within the SCO a normative framework – focused on maintaining "stability" and guided by concepts of non-interference in "internal affairs"—that supports the political status quo in Central Asia. This is not only important for China's specific interests in Central Asia, such as ensuring the security of Xinjiang and a stable immediate regional environment, but also for its strategy of "peaceful rise" which places a premium on the maintenance international security and "stability".

### **China's Bilateral Relations with Central Asia: Toward "Vassalization"?**

A number of observers have suggested that Sino-Central Asian relations are increasingly defined by a dynamic of economic and political dependency resembling imperial China's "vassal" relationships with neighboring states (Swanstrom 2005; Goldstein 2005). For such observers, China's dominance can be seen through its bilateral trade relationships with individual Central Asian states and its major investment in acquiring Central Asian oil and gas. Indeed, Goldstein noted that "dramatic energy investments were the clearest sign during the 1990s that Central Asia figured prominently in China's overall development strategy" (Goldstein 2005, 18). However, China's interests in its bilateral relationships go beyond this, albeit crucial, desire for energy security to encompass wider political, economic and strategic interests. As will be demonstrated below, China's interests within its bilateral relations with Central Asia are intimately connected to its strategy toward Xinjiang. Before moving the discussion to focus on this however it is necessary to briefly clarify the concept of vassalization.

In John K. Fairbank's classical exposition, imperial China's foreign relations were framed through a complex of practices that he referred to collectively as the "tribute system". According to this model, imperial China structured its foreign relations with non-Chinese through a hierarchical ordering of culturally superior to inferior, focused on a Sinic cultural and geographic centre (Fairbank 1968, 1-17). Yet, there is an important aspect, particularly in the actual *practice* of this vision of world order that has been over-looked and is important to note in the context of China's relations with Central Asia. Through analysis of the practice of relations between the Qing empire and various non-Chinese peoples of Central Asia during the seventeenth and eighteenth century, for example, scholars such as Joseph Fletcher and James Millward, have demonstrated that the Fairbank model of a hierarchical relationship between the imperial centre—personified in the "Son of Heaven"—and the "tributary" state was more often fiction rather than fact (Fletcher 1968; Millward 1998). As they have suggested, the Fairbank model was often modified to serve practical material interests in imperial China's foreign relations.

Thus, while the ideal vision of the Chinese world order was hierarchical, in practice the conceit of Chinese civilizational superiority, and the Confucian emphasis on moral example, which lay at its core permitted the toleration of difference and plurality in the realm of "international relations".

Indeed, the Chinese *did not* attempt to make the conceit of hierarchical relationships embodied in the theory or ideal state of the tribute system fact through the conversion of the barbarian to Chinese ways. What lay at the core of the Chinese world order, was that *datong*—i.e., “great harmony” or “universal commonwealth” that theoretically all emperors sought to facilitate—would be achieved by the cultural attraction and example of the Sinic centre. This has a resonance with contemporary Chinese foreign policy in Central Asia – whereby it has made a great virtue in recent times, particularly through the SCO, of emphasizing common interests and reserving differences as a distinct counter-point to the neo-liberal agenda of the West. It should also be noted that the hierarchical “tribute system” often cost imperial China considerably more than it gained in economic terms, as for the hierarchical model elucidated by Fairbank was primarily an internally-focused political construct (Fairbank 1968b). As such Fairbank noted that in imperial China’s foreign relations, “the rulers of China usually declared themselves ready to sacrifice economic substance in order to preserve political form” (Fairbank 1968b, 12).

Thus, traditional “vassal” relations often did not necessarily conform to the conventional picture of a dominant China and weak Central Asia but of a more fluid and pragmatic set of relations. During the Qing period (1644-1911), for example, economic or trade advantage was given to Central Asian khanates in return for security guarantees for China’s position in Xinjiang (Fletcher 1968; Millward 1998). Indeed, the Chinese term *fan* usually translated as “vassal” has the meaning of “a hedge, a boundary; to screen, to protect,” which is suggestive of the role of Central Asia can play, in Beijing’s perception, regarding Xinjiang (Fairbank 1968, 9). As we shall see below, this more nuanced view of the “vassalization” of Central Asia, whereby China provides Central Asia with certain economic or political/security goods, for example through the SCO, in return for guarantees regarding the issue of Uyghur “separatism” in Xinjiang, is one that is more accurate than the one that is initially invoked by the “vassal” label.

#### *Security, Development and Energy—The Bases of Sino-Central Asian Relations*

China’s relations with individual states of Central Asia have been shaped and defined by two factors—the collapse of the Soviet Union and Beijing’s goal of integrating Xinjiang into the People’s Republic. Integration here is understood in its two predominant senses: (a) to the relationship between the majority and minority populations of a given state and to “the patterns by which the different parts of a nation-state cohere”; and (b) “the manner and degree to which parts of a social system (its individuals, groups and organs) interact and complement each other” (Mackerras 1994, 7; Seymour 1976, 6). The first understanding of integration can be seen as a means by which a large, multi-ethnic state can ensure and maintain sovereignty over its territory, while the second concerns the operation of society once the territorial integrity of the state has been ensured. In Xinjiang, the goal of integration encompasses both senses - the mechanisms by which the state has attempted to incorporate the territory of the region and the deeper endeavor to incorporate the non-Han peoples of the region into the “unitary, multi-ethnic” Chinese state.

This goal of Chinese policy in Xinjiang not only serves core internal functions but has also served as a key driver of China’s bilateral relations with Central Asia. In particular, it has been the way in which integration has been conceived of as both a goal and a series of policies in Beijing since 1991 that has generated this dynamic. The key here is that during the Maoist era and into the early 1980s, Beijing perceived Xinjiang’s geopolitical position as a liability and 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 a Central Asia then divided between Soviet and Chinese spheres. With the Soviet collapse, however, came something of an epiphany for Beijing. With the Soviet menace to its western frontiers gone it

would no longer view Xinjiang's geopolitical position as an obstacle to be overcome in search of integration but rather as an important asset to achieve it.

Thus, a dominant goal of Chinese policy from this point onward would be to make Xinjiang a "Eurasian Continental Bridge" connecting the region's economy with that of Central Asia through the development of direct trade relations with neighboring Central Asian states, increasing state investment in infrastructure projects, and fully developing and exploiting Xinjiang's oil and gas resources. However, this was to be achieved by a contradictory internal logic. In order to solve the separatist issue the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) had to deliver economic development through the entrenchment Deng Xiaoping's economic strategy of "reform and opening," while simultaneously maintaining "stability and unity" in Xinjiang through the strengthening of the CCP's hold on power (*Urumqi Xinjiang Ribao* 1991). Therefore, the security of the region was to be achieved by delivering economic growth, while economic growth was to be assured by the reinforcement of the state's instruments of political and social control, which in turn was to be achieved by opening the region to Central Asia. Importantly, the economic opening to Central Asia would come to offer Beijing a significant element of leverage to induce the Central Asian states to aid it in its quest to secure Xinjiang against "separatist" elements. This logic has continued to inform China's approach into the twenty-first century, although it is now framed under the banner of the domestic Great Western Development campaign. While this campaign is a nation-wide one, its operation in Xinjiang reflects the intensification of Beijing's long-standing state-building policies in the region (Becquelin 2004).

This strategy in the 1990s was characterized as one of "double-opening," that is 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 (Christofferson 1993). The key elements of this strategy throughout the 1990s demonstrated its purpose to serve the "internal" goal of tying the province closer to China and the "external" goal of utilizing the region's position to accelerate economic relations with Central Asia. These 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 transport links with Central Asia (Becquelin 2000, 71-74; Pannell and Ma 1997, 218-226).

The external manifestation of this approach was a concerted endeavor to develop greater economic and trade relations with the newly independent Central Asian states, particularly Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, through the extension incentives for border trade and improvement of infrastructural links (Pannell and Ma 1997, 223). Significantly, a major theme of Chinese overtures to the Central Asian states was Xinjiang's potential role in linking the economies of China and Central Asia to become the hub of a "New Silk Road" (Martin 1994, 30-32; Peng 1994, 18). One of the major commodities that would traverse this road, however, was to be oil/natural gas rather than the silk of times past. Indeed, Xinjiang's petrochemical industry was to become a "pillar" industry within the government's "double-opening" strategy for Xinjiang with the primary goal of establishing the region into a transit route and refinery zone for Central Asian oil and gas. Such an approach ultimately enmeshed China into the wider geo-political competition for not only access to Central Asia's oil and gas, but for greater political and economic influence in the region. Indeed, Beijing's reorientation of its energy strategy toward Russia and Central Asia in the early 1990s was very much a strategic maneuver rather than a "market" approach to energy security induced by the realization of the strategic weakness of China's growing dependency on Middle East sources of oil and gas (Andrews-Speed et al. 2002, 42-43).

In relation to China's foreign policy, the development of this strategy proved to be a further spur in generating China's greater engagement with the states of Central Asia (Martin 1994). In many respects China's economic and security concerns regarding its frontiers with the new states of Central

Asia were complementary. The development of bilateral relations, spurred on by the development of economic linkages noted above, was further strengthened by the identification of common interests in the security sphere. Significantly, as we have already noted, China used its emerging bilateral relations and the nascent multilateral forum of the S-5 to pressure the Central Asian states to control and suppress the activities of “splittist” elements within the significant Uyghur diaspora population in the region—a theme that has continued to define China’s participation in the S-5 and subsequent SCO process. Indeed, since 2001, China by virtue of bilateral security agreements with key Central Asian states and police/security cooperation through the SCO has successfully extradited a significant number of alleged Uyghur “separatists and terrorists” from Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan and Nepal (Mukhamedov 2004).

Domestically, the question of Xinjiang’s economic development has assumed national importance over the last decade with the central government’s launching of the “Great Western Development Plan” in 2000 which envisages the creation of Xinjiang as an industrial and agricultural base and a trade and energy corridor for the national economy (Becquelin 2004). This goal can only be achieved with the development of greater interaction and cooperation between China and the Central Asian states—a point underlined by Chinese rhetoric and policy since 2001 with ongoing references to the mutual benefits of developing a “Continental Eurasian land-bridge” that will link the major economies of Europe, East Asia and South Asia (*Xinhua* 2005; Garver 2006; Rallaband and Andresy 2007, 248). Importantly, Sino-Central Asian trade and economic relations since 2001 have experienced a “boom” with trade flows more than tripling from US\$1.5 billion in 2001 to US\$5.8 billion in 2005 (Rallaband and Andresy 2007, 250; Peyrouse 2007, 16). A closer examination of the structure and nature of this trade reveals that not only are Sino-Central Asian trade relations increasingly unequal but a relationship of economic dependency is developing that China will undoubtedly seek to leverage in order to negate “separatist” tendencies that it sees as the major threat to its position in Xinjiang.

Although the increase in trade flows noted above is significant, Central Asia now accounts for merely 0.6 per cent of China’s overall foreign trade (Peyrouse 2007, 18). China, however, accounts for 12 per cent of Central Asia foreign trade. China’s dominance in the realm of Sino-Central Asian trade relations is further underlined if we breakdown this trade data on a state by state basis. In particular, it becomes clear that China’s influence is predominant in the Central Asian states with which it shares borders with China accounting for 34 per cent of Kyrgyzstan’s foreign trade, 15 per cent of Kazakhstan’s and 10 per cent of Tajikistan’s. Of Chinese exports to Central Asia 85 per cent consist of low priced manufactured goods, while over 85 per cent of Central Asian exports to China consist of raw materials, petroleum, and ferrous and non-ferrous metals (Peyrouse 2007, 18). Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, with whom China shares the most significant economic relations, reflect this point most clearly. Some 86 per cent of Kazakh and 78 per cent of Kyrgyz exports to China, for example, are comprised of petroleum, non-ferrous metals and iron and steel (Wu and Chen 2004, 1067).

China’s growing economic weight in the region is also reflected in the number of Chinese companies operating throughout Central Asia with, for example, 744 Chinese enterprises (including 40 large companies) established in Kazakhstan, 100 in Uzbekistan and 12 in Kyrgyzstan by 2005 (Peyrouse 2007, 18). The lack of diversification in Central Asian exports to China has also resulted in growing regional concerns that China’s economic interests are simply based upon a need to extract natural and mineral resources necessary to fuel its resource-hungry economy. The flooding of Central Asia markets with cheap Chinese-manufactured consumer goods, combined with the increasing activities of Chinese companies and enterprises has also reinforced societal concern that Russian dominance will simply be replaced by that of China (Wilson 2007, 42-45). Yet there remain major impediments to the development of stronger Sino-Central Asian trade. The most important concerns the lack of adequate infrastructure linking the region to China and ongoing trade barriers such as tariffs and visa restrictions (*Xinhua* 2007; Rallaband and Andresy 2007, 242-243). The latter issues have been

important in driving Chinese support for the efforts of the Central Asian states for membership in the WTO, which currently is limited to that of Kyrgyzstan (Peyrouse 2007, 17; Norling and Swanstrom 2007, 360-361).

For China in particular investment in developing modern infrastructural links (e.g. roads, railways and telecommunications) between Xinjiang and Central Asia and the lowering of trade barriers are equally strategic as they are purely economic considerations (Garver 2006, 1). This imperative has been clear in Chinese policy since the collapse of the Soviet Union, with Chinese investment in infrastructure both within Xinjiang itself and between the province and the neighboring Central Asian states a major element of Chinese policy. Some significant developments in this sphere since 2001 have included:

- Opening of international bus routes between Osh (Kyrgyzstan) and Kashgar (Xinjiang) in May 2002
- Chinese pledge of US\$15 million for the construction of a highway linking Xinjiang and Lake Issyk-Kul in Kyrgyzstan in May 2003
- September 2003 agreement to establish a highway links between Xinjiang and Tajikistan.
- December 2003 announcement of Kyrgyz a deal to sell hydroelectric power to Xinjiang
- Announcement of Chinese government-funded US\$2.5 million feasibility study to construct a Kyrgyz-Xinjiang rail link.
- May 2004 Chinese extension of US\$900 million of credit to the five Central Asian states to finance infrastructure projects involving Chinese companies.
- Trilateral Uzbek-Kyrgyz-China project to link Andijan (Uzbekistan), Osh (Kyrgyzstan) and Kashgar (Xinjiang) by a 1, 000 km rail and highway connection (Peyrouse 2007, 30; Dillon 2003; Moore 2008)

China's energy security strategy of diversification and increased investment and exploration of its state oil corporations has also continued since 2001. Major developments and activities in this sphere have included:

- The conclusion of a Sino-Kazakh agreement in May 2004 for joint exploration and development of oil and gas resources in the Caspian Sea
- The acquisition of PetroKazakhstan by CNPC in 2005 for US\$4.2 billion
- The completion of the 988 km Kazakh-China oil pipeline linking Atasu in western Kazakhstan and Alashankou in Xinjiang in December 2005
- China's state-owned International Trust and Investment Corporation purchase, for US\$1.9 billion, of a stake in oilfields in western Kazakhstan.
- July 2006 US\$600 million loan to Uzbekistan for the joint exploration of energy deposits in Uzbekistan (Blua 2004; Blank 2006; Wilson 2007, 42-45).

More recently in April 2008, a joint venture between Uzbekneftegaz and CNPC to build and operate the 530 km section of the 1, 830km Turkmenistan-China natural gas pipeline was reportedly concluded. While in May 2008 it was reported that CNPC had unveiled a plan for a new Kazakhstan-China natural gas pipeline to carry 40 billion cubic meters of gas per year, 30 billion of which would flow to China, from the Darhan block on the Caspian Sea (*Energy Business Review* 2008).

Thus, China's relations with Central Asia have reflected the pre-eminence of the goal of integration for Xinjiang, with an emphasis placed on the establishment of political, economic, and infrastructural links with the Central Asian states, particularly Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Moreover,

it also reflected China's concern for the "safe" expansion of its political, economic and strategic power. In this respect, the developments in the sphere of Sino-Central Asian trade relations, Chinese investment and acquisition of Central Asian oil, and investment in infrastructure projects demonstrate Beijing's growing "gravitational pull" for the region. As noted previously, this has resulted not only in Central Asian acquiescence to China's dominant role in the SCO but also in Central Asian assurances and cooperation with Beijing on the issue of Uyghur "separatism" in Xinjiang. While China's strategic and economic weight ultimately plays a great role in determining that the Central Asian states will "toe the line" on such core security interests for Beijing as the issue of separatism, China's "soft power" in the region has also been significant and highlights the connection between Beijing's Central Asian foreign policy and its global approach. In this regard, it has been noted that China has undertaken a "charm offensive" in order to mitigate anxieties about the implications of a "rising China" (Kurlantzick 2007). In the Central Asian context this has consisted of coupling its growing dominance of Sino-Central Asian trade and political influence with, for instance, practical expressions of its rhetorical commitment to "common prosperity" through the provision of low-interest loans for local development projects (Trilling 2007). In combination with its multilateral efforts through the SCO, these developments ultimately highlight that Beijing's approach to Central Asia is fundamentally strategic in nature and informed by an acute understanding of the region's geopolitical importance.

### **Keeping the Wolf from the Door: The Geopolitics of China's Strategy in Central Asia**

China's strategy in Xinjiang and Central Asia has been defined by the endeavor to achieve a "double integration" of Xinjiang with China and Central Asia. Beijing has sought to achieve this through the extension of modern infrastructure throughout Xinjiang and the connection of these to neighbouring Central Asian states. This strategy has been significantly affected by the implications of the events 9/11 and the subsequent projection of US military and political influence into Central Asia. The impact of this was contradictory for China's position as the projection of US political and military influence into the region was perceived to be a negative consequence of the "war on terror" as it not only undermined Beijing's bilateral relations with the region but also the SCO. Significantly, these developments exacerbated perceptions in Beijing that Washington was bent on the strategic "encirclement" of China, a development that Beijing's post-Cold War foreign policy sought to avoid. Indeed, US-strategy in Central Asia was perceived in geopolitical terms with Washington's core goals identified as the containment of Russia, the "encirclement" of Iran and Iraq, the expansion of US influence in South Asia and the "containment" of China's rise (Gao 2002). Thus, Washington's aim, according to this view, was not only to weaken China's position in Central Asia, and therefore jeopardize the integration of Xinjiang, but also China's wider foreign policy strategy:

Central Asia is China's great rear of extreme importance. The penetration of the United States into Central Asia not only prevents China from expanding its influence, but also sandwiches China from East to West, thus "effectively containing a rising China". (Gao 2002)

Such perceptions reflect the inter-linked nature of China's interests in Xinjiang and Central Asia, and their connection to and role in Beijing's grand strategy of "peaceful rise". Thus, as we have seen, China's foreign policy in Central Asia has reflected the pre-eminence of the goal of integration for Xinjiang, with an emphasis placed on the establishment of political, economic, and infrastructural links with the Central Asian states. Indeed, for one Chinese scholar writing in 2001, China's strategy in Xinjiang was intimately linked to the achievement of its wider strategic goal of countering US dominance through establishing a foothold in Central Asia:

The core of the Go-West strategy consists of driving straight at Central Asia. Central Asia is the second Middle East, not only in terms of resources but also in terms of the strategic situation. Central Asia is of an extremely great geopolitical strategic value. One may well say that of the countries at both ends of the Euro-Asia land bridge, those that control Central Asia will be able to control the future of countries at the other end of the bridge (Li 2001, 26-27).

In addition the author also suggests, as do many western observers, that China's "westward advance" into Central Asia is also determined by its growing need for energy resources (Li 2001, 28; Goldstein 2005; Swantsrom 2005, 577-578).

More recent Chinese commentary further highlights these themes. An article prior to the 2007 SCO summit in Kyrgyzstan, for example, provided an analysis that further illustrated the strategic importance Beijing attaches to Xinjiang and Central Asia. The article, "SCO Reshaping International Strategic Structure" asserted that: (1) the region was characterized by an emerging balance between China and Russia; (2) as US strategic pressure on Russia mounts", the SCO's importance to Russia has risen making Russia, "even more dependent on help from the SCO" to combat US challenges to Russia's traditional pre-eminence in the region; and (3) securing China's western frontier will play a key role in China's overall foreign policy (Li 2007). The logic subsequently propounded to illustrate this latter point explicitly identifies the inter-linkages that Beijing perceives between the security and development of Xinjiang, its position in Central Asia and its grand strategy:

Even more importantly, as China embarks on the *great enterprise of national resurgence*, the biggest threats to its national security continue to be attempts to damage China's *territorial integrity and interference of outside forces* in its unification process. In this sense, China's strategic focus will remain in the southeast in the foreseeable future, with western China continuing to be the "rear" in China's master strategy for many years to come. *Nevertheless, only if the rear is secured will the strategic frontline be free from worry...* As the squeeze on China's strategic space intensifies, a stable western region takes on additional importance as a strategic support for the country. *The strategic significance of western China is self-evident* (Li 2007. Emphasis added).

### **Conclusion:**

This chapter has argued that from Beijing's point of view, China's position in Central Asia and Xinjiang is clearly linked to its ability to successfully pursue a strategy of "peaceful rise". As the preceding overview of China's strategy in Xinjiang and Central Asia suggests, Beijing is arguably in a stronger position in the region than at any time in the history of China-based state's attempts to control Xinjiang. It has consolidated and extended its mechanisms of political, economic and social control within Xinjiang through such instruments as Han colonization, increased state investment in the petrochemicals industry and modern infrastructure developments. Externally, Beijing has succeeded in leveraging its developing political and economic clout in Central Asia to enlist these states, both in a bilateral and multilateral sense, to resolve long-standing border disputes, develop security and military cooperation and undermine and control pro-separatist movements or organizations amongst the Uyghur diaspora in the region.

China has also been successful in absorbing and then countering the effects of the injection of major US influence into the region post-9/11 through the intensification of the major elements of its strategy toward Central Asia. Thus, Beijing played a major role in the reinvigoration of the SCO, assiduously worked toward the revitalization of its bilateral political, economic and military relations with key Central Asian states, and continued its quest to diversify its access to the region's oil and gas

resources. As we have seen, an important element of China's success in the SCO process has been the promotion of a normative agenda – under the label of “new regionalism”—that seeks to protect the regional status quo, promote economic development and combat the perceived common threat of the “three evils” of “extremism, terrorism and separatism”. Taken as a whole, China's strategy presents a complex web of inter-linkages between its imperatives of integration and control within Xinjiang, its drive for security and influence in Central Asia and its over-arching quest for achieving a “peaceful rise” to great power status.

### Related Websites:

SCO Secretariat Website: <http://www.sectSCO.org>

Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst: <http://www.cacianalyst.org>

Eurasianet: <http://www.eurasianet.org>

Central Asia-Caucasus Institute Silk Road Studies Program:  
<http://www.silkroadstudies.org/new/index.htm>

The Times of Central Asia: <http://www.times.kg/>

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