China’s Post-9/11 Strategy in Central Asia

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Regional Outlook
Executive Summary

Since 11 September 2001, and the subsequent US politico-military penetration of Central Asia, there has been much speculation regarding China's perceived strategic ‘defeat’ in Central Asia. This is said to have compromised China’s long-term plans regarding the integration of Xinjiang. Such an assessment, however, fails to take into account not only the demonstrated intent of the People's Republic of China to expand its influence in Central Asia following the collapse of the Soviet Union but also the long history of the Chinese state’s integrationist project for the north-western province of Xinjiang.

The 13 years from 1991 to 2004 have been a period of transformation for Chinese policy in Xinjiang and Chinese foreign policy in Central Asia. The transformation began with the wave of internal unrest throughout China and Xinjiang in 1989-90 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in September-October 1991. The transformation of Central Asia from being a component of a superpower, and hence part of the international system, to the constituent parts of an emerging regional order has had profound implications, not only for the states of Central Asia, but also for China.

Xinjiang occupies a geo-strategic position at the crossroads of five cultural and geographic regions. The sensitivity of the Chinese government to developing ethnic nationalism in Xinjiang in the last decade, although a product of China’s historical experience, has been reinforced by ongoing regional political, economic and ethnic conflicts, as well as the rise of militant Islam. The potential for these destabilising influences to traverse China’s borders and threaten its control of the predominantly non-Han and Islamic Xinjiang is China’s major fear. On the other hand, Xinjiang’s geo-strategic position coupled with China’s continued economic reforms place Xinjiang in a prime position to become China’s gateway, in economic and political terms, to Central Asia. This strategic value has also been enhanced recently by the discovery of oil deposits in the Zhungar, Turfan and Tarim Basins, a factor of great significance transforming China into a net oil importer.

The challenges to China’s control of Xinjiang therefore come not only from non-state actors, such as ethnic groups or Islamist political groups, but also from the various states (regional or otherwise) who have a stake in the “New Great Game” for Central Asia. This paper, however, will argue that the strategic implications of the US penetration of Central Asia have in fact resulted in the re-invigoration and reinforcement of China’s goal and instruments of integration in Xinjiang. This dynamic has been expressed within Xinjiang, in the form of the strengthening of the major instruments of internal control and development, and externally in the form of China’s foreign policy calculus in the context of its relations with the states of Central Asia.
1 Introduction

The influential British geographer Halford Mackinder asserted that the regions currently defined as Central Asia and Xinjiang formed a central part of the “geographical pivot of history”:

Outside the pivot area, in a great inner crescent, are Germany, Austria, Turkey, India, and China, and in an outer crescent, Britain, South Africa, Australia, the United States, Canada and Japan.

For Mackinder, the flow of world history could be viewed from this perspective as the product of a circuitous process of confrontation and contact between the pastoral-nomadic civilisations of the “pivot area” and the sedentary-agricultural civilisations of the surrounding “crescents”. At the time of his writing on this subject, in 1905 and 1943, the modern states that he suggested were poised to control this “pivot of history” were Russia and Germany in 1905, and then the Soviet Union in 1943. At the end of his 1905 paper, however, he made a statement that takes on greater significance in the context of the early 21st century:

In conclusion, it may be well expressly to point out that the substitution of some new control of the inland area for that of Russia would not tend to reduce the geographical significance of the pivot position. Were the Chinese, for instance, organized by the Japanese, to overthrow the Russian Empire and conquer its territory, they might constitute the yellow peril to the world’s freedom just because they would add an oceanic frontage to the resources of the great continent, an advantage as yet denied to the Russian tenant of the pivot region.

Mackinder’s notion of a geographic “pivot of history” was, however, revisited by Owen Lattimore in his seminal Pivot of Asia in 1950. Lattimore utilised Mackinder’s “pivot of history” formulation to describe the instrumental role of Xinjiang in determining the geopolitics of Asia and the implications of China’s reclamation (under the People’s Republic of China) of the Qing legacy in the region.

The geo-political position of Xinjiang, at the crossroads of five distinct geographic and cultural regions (Russia, Central Asia, the subcontinent, Tibet and China), made it over the centuries both the “back door” to China and China’s corridor to Central Asia. Lattimore perceived that the Chinese state’s reclamation of Xinjiang in 1949 thus had the potential to make Mackinder’s 1905 prediction of Chinese hegemony in the “geographic pivot of history” a reality. Although deteriorating Sino-Soviet relations after 1949 militated against the rapid fulfilment of such potential, China’s control of Xinjiang was firmly consolidated over the subsequent 1949-1991 period. Chinese rule of Xinjiang throughout this period was characterised by the twin imperatives of internally consolidating and accelerating the region’s integration and isolating the region from Soviet influence.

The creation of five independent states in Central Asia with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 simultaneously removed the long-feared Soviet threat to Xinjiang, while creating new and diversified sources of potential threats to the Chinese position. Perhaps of equal significance was that the new states of Central Asia were to be assailed by a multiplicity of external forces over the course of the next decade. The removal of Soviet-Russian dominance returned Central Asia in a geo-political sense to a situation comparable to that experienced by the region up to the Russian conquests of the late nineteenth century. Central Asia under the Soviet Union had been isolated and "sealed off" from the contiguous regions of South Asia (such as Iran and the subcontinent) and East Asia (Mongolia and Xinjiang) to which it had had geographical, historical and cultural linkages. Such a process of isolation had also been undertaken in Xinjiang since the founding of the PRC in 1949.
Following the Soviet collapse, however, the various geographical, historical and cultural linkages were revived and, in concert with the West’s “discovery” of the region’s largely untapped hydrocarbon resources, these generated a multifarious geo-political scramble for influence in Central Asia.

Thus Chinese rule of Xinjiang at the beginning of the 1990s was confronted with a rapidly changing external environment. The collapse of the Soviet Union re-opened Central Asia to the geo-political influences of neighbouring regions, such as Iran, China, Afghanistan and Turkey that had been systematically excluded during the Soviet era. The reassertion of historical linkages between such regions and the newly independent states of Central Asia was also given further impetus by the strategic imperatives for external powers, such as China, Russia and the US, flowing from the relatively underdeveloped hydrocarbon resources of Central Asia. The combination of historical, political, economic, ethnic and cultural linkages with the strategic imperative of gaining access to or control over Central Asian oil and gas led the emergent geo-political competition to be dubbed the “New Great Game” for Central Asia. This allusion to the nineteenth century “Great Game” for Central Asia between Tsarist Russia and the British Empire, although conveying the grand scale of developments in the region, does not serve particularly well as a conceptual guide to the complex issues involved. The “New Great Game” has involved the interaction of the divergent political, economic and strategic imperatives of neighbouring external states such as Russia, China, Iran, Pakistan, and Turkey, and the world’s sole superpower, the US. The dominant external powers in the “New Great Game” have been the US, Russia, and increasingly China, with other powers such as Iran, Turkey and Pakistan having more limited interests to pursue in Central Asia.

China's strategic imperatives in Central Asia, as I have argued elsewhere, derive primarily from its rule of the restive province of Xinjiang. The province is populated by predominantly Turkic-Muslim ethnic groups, such as Uighurs, Kazaks and Kyrgyz, which comprise 52.78 per cent of Xinjiang’s population of 18.1 million. Since the fall of the Soviet Union the region has shared borders with the independent states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, whose titular ethnic groups are represented in Xinjiang’s non-Han population. The independence of the Central Asian states has proven to be both a threat and opportunity for China’s position in Xinjiang. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, China has attempted to harness its strategic position to strengthen its hold on Xinjiang through the implementation of an encompassing “double opening” strategy aimed at the simultaneous integration of Xinjiang with Central Asia and China proper. This fourteen-year effort is central to understanding China’s foreign policy in Central Asia and thus its role in the “New Great Game”.

This paper will argue that China’s strategy in Xinjiang and Central Asia places within its grasp an unprecedented opportunity to extend its power and influence into the “geographical pivot of history”. Moreover, I will demonstrate that even after the events of 11 September 2001 and the subsequent expansion of US power and influence into Central Asia, China’s strategy not only remains on course but has been strengthened. The rationale of the Chinese approach to the changed geo-political environment of Central Asia following 11 September 2001 flows directly from the encompassing strategy for Xinjiang constructed over the course of the 1991-2001 period. Thus, to fully appreciate the importance of the linkages between China’s strategy in Xinjiang and Central Asia at the turn of the twenty-first century, it is necessary first to briefly survey the course of Chinese power in the region since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The post-11 September 2001 to 2004 period will then be addressed to highlight the continuity between China’s strategy in the region and demonstrate the reinforcing impact of the expansion of US power into Central Asia. As such I will argue that the penetration of US political, military and economic power into Central Asia since 2001 has generated four major strategic implications for China’s position in Xinjiang and Central Asia:

1. Development of limited regional cooperation on the part of the US, Russia, China and the Central Asian republics;
2. An initial weakening of the influence and role of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in Central Asia, which has in turn fostered regional competition and rivalry;

3. The ability for China to adopt a “zero tolerance” approach to ethnic minority opposition in Xinjiang under the cover of the War on Terrorism;

4. Reinforcement of China’s goal and instruments of integration in Xinjiang.

Points one and two directly relate to China’s foreign policy framework in Central Asia, while three and four address the impact of the changed regional environment for China’s position in Xinjiang.
2. Chinese Policy in Central Asia from the Collapse of the Soviet Union to 11 September 2001

The core of China's strategy regarding Xinjiang since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 has rested on the goal of simultaneously integrating Xinjiang with Central Asia and China proper. This agenda had been expressed within Xinjiang through increased central government investment, particularly regarding construction and infrastructure projects (especially energy related), and increased government control and management of ethnic minority religious and cultural practices. Meanwhile, China's foreign policy in Central Asia reflected the pre-eminence of this goal of integration for Xinjiang, with an emphasis placed upon the establishment of political, economic and infrastructural links with the Central Asian states, particularly Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. An important over-arching theme within the context of this process has been the state's attempts to reconcile the perceived need for strengthened integration and security of the province with the recognition of the economic and political opportunities presented by the relative retreat of Russian power from Central Asia over the 1991-2001 period.

The collapse of the Soviet Union presented China with an opportunity to fully exploit Xinjiang's geo-political position to increase China's political and economic influence in the region. The fall of the Soviet Union, however, also stimulated a resurgence of ethnic minority opposition to Chinese rule in Xinjiang. The causes of the resurgence of ethnic minority opposition to Chinese rule were not solely the result of external developments. Rather, the Soviet Union's collapse coincided with China's ongoing economic reform program, which had a major impact on the state's overall strategy for Xinjiang. The basis of this strategy was the implementation of political and economic measures that simultaneously attempted to integrate Xinjiang with the domestic economy and Central Asia. A major element of this strategy concerned the exploitation of the region's oil and gas resources. This particular aspect of Xinjiang's economic development has had significant implications not only for China's internal economic development but also for its foreign policy and foreign relations. China's increasing energy consumption, which saw it become a net importer of crude oil in 1996, has made China dependent upon the Middle East for crude imports. The consequent strategic vulnerability that flowed from this development compelled China to both restructure its domestic petrochemical industry and diversify its foreign sources. Internally, this resulted in increased efforts to maximise domestic sources of oil and gas, most notably in Xinjiang's Tarim Basin, and externally, a reorientation of China's energy security strategy toward the states of Central Asia.

This “double opening” strategy, as of 2001, had only been partially successful due to the fact that such opening is in fact a double-edged sword. China's attempt to integrate Xinjiang with Central Asia had increased the linkages between the two regions, thus increasing the opportunities for the spread of radical Central Asian and Afghan movements or ideologies such as the "Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan" (IMU) or the Taliban into Xinjiang. This process was in turn exacerbated by inter-state competition amongst external states for strategic advantage and the hydrocarbon resources of Central Asia, and ongoing political, economic and social instability within the Central Asian republics. The economic policies encompassed in the state's strategy – such as the promotion of cotton cultivation and infrastructure development – also played an instrumental role in generating ethnic minority opposition in Xinjiang. Particularly important in this regard were the waves of Han in-migration facilitated and required by these policies. Although this influx of Han into Xinjiang during the 1990s was seen by a number of observers as "voluntary", in contrast to the forcible in-migration of the Maoist era, it has emerged that population transfer has been re-invigorated as a key facet of the state's integrationist project in Xinjiang. The state's
strategy in Xinjiang was also underpinned by continued control of the parameters of ethnic minority cultural and religious practices. From 1991 onward these internal and external pressures converged, with varying intensity at specific periods, to strengthen the state's perception of a causal link between manifestations of internal ethnic minority unrest and trans-national political, ideological and cultural flows from Central Asia, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Across the 1990-2001 period there were numerous incidents of violent ethnic minority opposition to continued Chinese rule, such as widespread demonstrations and riots in the Ili region in April 1995, and demonstrations and riots in Kulja in February 1997. In January 2002 the Chinese government released a detailed document, "East Turkistan Terrorists Exposed", which claimed that over the 1990-2001 period there had been over 200 "terrorist" incidents in Xinjiang resulting in the deaths and injury of 162 and 444 people respectively. Moreover, throughout this period the Chinese authorities blamed such outbreaks of ethnic minority opposition and acts of violence upon "hostile external elements", including movements in Central Asia or Afghanistan such as the IMU, Hizb-ut-Tahrir (Islamic Freedom Party) and the Taliban.

The management of the relationship between external developments in Central Asia and developments within Xinjiang was thus a major dilemma for the Chinese government over the 1990-2001 period. China's response to this complex dilemma was, however, complicated by the rationale that underpinned its complex of integrationist techniques and tactics of rule in Xinjiang. The establishment of political, economic and cultural linkages with Central Asia was seen as vital to the success of the state's goal of integration for Xinjiang, yet was simultaneously viewed with suspicion as a potential source of threat to this very process. The contradictory nature of this position compelled China to seek a broader regional approach to issues of regional economic cooperation, ethnic separatism, drugs and weapons trafficking, radical Islam and border security that culminated in the creation of the "Shanghai Five" in 1996 and its eventual transformation into the "Shanghai Cooperation Organisation" (SCO) in June 2001. China's foreign policy toward the states of Central Asia throughout the 1991-2001 period was thus focused on achieving two broad and inter-connected goals – the establishment of cooperative security and economic relations with Central Asia and the strengthening of state control over Xinjiang.

Simultaneously, however, the establishment of such forums as the SCO that were ostensibly aimed at developing regional cooperation occurred in parallel with the continuation, and even intensification, of regional rivalries. This process, as alluded to above, was the result of the combined pressures of the dynamics created by the "New Great Game" for Central Asia and the internal dilemmas of the Central Asian states, China and Russia. Of particular import, for example, in deterring the establishment of effective regional cooperation regarding the supposedly mutual threat of radical Islamic movements was the fact that each state's perceptions as to the nature of the threat and the most efficacious response were necessarily filtered through a prism of domestic peculiarities. Russia and China viewed the growth and expansion of the Taliban and the IMU, for example, by reference to their own "internal" problems with restive ethnic groups in Chechnya and Xinjiang. For the Central Asian states most affected by radical Islam – Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan – although portraying the threat posed by groups such as Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HT) and the IMU (and the associated phenomena of weapons and drugs trafficking) as emanating from external causes, they were in fact symptomatic of an interlinked regional dynamic. The development, growth and activities of such groups demonstrate that they were products of intra-regional conflicts and crises, such as the Tajik civil war and the authoritarian regime of Uzbekistan's Islam Karimov, rather than simply "exported" phenomena of external states. The alleged connections and linkages between the IMU and HT on the one hand and Afghanistan, the Taliban and al-Qaeda on the other appear to have been formed during and after conflicts and crises within specific Central Asian states. In effect Afghanistan, from 1991 onward, became a haven for Central Asian Islamists who had already run afoul of the existing governments of the region. This process was intensified with the rise of the Taliban after 1994 and the cessation of the Tajik civil war in 1997. Moreover, the pan-regional problems of the IMU and drugs and weapons trafficking as often prompted regional suspicion, bickering and rivalry as cooperation. This was highlighted by the reaction of
Uzbekistan following the “Batken Incident” of September-October 1999, in which 1000 IMU fighters captured a number of villages in the Batken and Chon-Alai raions of south-west Kyrgyzstan, bordering on the Uzbek portion of the Fergana Valley. The Uzbek government responded to this crisis by unilaterally bombing Kyrgyz and Tajik territory in the pursuit of the IMU insurgents, while President Islam Karimov accused Tajikistan of tolerating the presence of the IMU.27
3. The Strategic Implications of US Penetration of Central Asia

Since 11 September 2001, and the subsequent US politico-military penetration of Central Asia and Afghanistan, there has been much speculation regarding China’s perceived strategic “defeat” in Central Asia. Moreover, this “defeat” is said to have compromised China’s long-term plans regarding the integration of Xinjiang. The strategic implications of US penetration of Central Asia, however, have in fact resulted in the re-invigoration and reinforcement of both the Chinese state’s goal and instruments of integration in Xinjiang. This dynamic has been expressed within Xinjiang, in the form of the strengthening of the major instruments of internal control and development, and externally in the form of China’s foreign policy calculus in the context of its relations with the states of Central Asia. China’s foreign policy in Central Asia since 1991 can be seen as a key manifestation of its “grand strategy” of heping jueqi or “peaceful rise.”

This attempt to engage with, and safely enter, the existing international order has seen China develop a preference for “cooperation”, “multilateralism” and “integration” in its diplomatic endeavours, particularly with neighbouring states. Moreover, the diversification of China’s foreign relations that this strategy entailed also served to negate what the Chinese government has long feared – strategic “encirclement” or “containment”. Although the collapse of the Soviet Union removed the strategic threat from China’s Eurasian frontiers, the perceived threat of “containment” remained salient for Chinese leaders well into the 1990s as they faced a US mono-polar order. Thus the establishment of favourable relations with the states of Central Asia and the strategic security of China’s western frontiers became pre-eminent foreign policy goals from 1991 onward.

These watchwords were central to the conduct of China’s foreign policy in Central Asia over the 1991-2001 period, both in terms of its bilateral and multilateral relations. The major strategic consideration that compelled China to develop constructive relations and linkages with the states of Central Asia over the 1991-2001 period was undoubtedly its ongoing project of integration in Xinjiang. This “domestic” overspill into China’s foreign relations, however, developed in parallel with the broader dynamics of China’s strategic design – to develop multiple regional and global relationships in order to mitigate against the perceived threat of monopolar US power in the international system. The expansion of Chinese influence and interests in Central Asia, prior to 11 September 2001, also held the promise that China would avoid strategic entanglements with the US, in contrast to the sources of tension in Sino-US relations in the Pacific. Thus a “continental” focus in China’s strategic outlook became (and continues to be) enticing:

In policy terms, China would prefer a quiet eastern front and intense interaction with the West. A certain ‘benign neglect’ of the Pacific region, or at least a non-confrontational posture, may become necessary for China to avoid dangerous strategic entanglements ¼ Beijing is not seeking a place in the sun, but rather a protected place in the shade. The Eurasian continent could cast a comfortable shadow for years to come.

Thus the major question is how has 11 September 2001 and the expansion of US power into Central Asia impacted upon this “grand strategy” of Eurasian orientation?

Although the immediate post-11 September 2001 period did in fact see a convergence in the interests of the major regional powers – Russia and China – with those of the US, it was in fact a temporary “marriage of convenience”. In this period China, and particularly Russia, acquiesced to US imperatives in Central Asia, which concerned the establishment of military bases in the Central Asian republics contiguous or in close proximity to Afghanistan – Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Moreover, both Russia and China for their own
specific reasons (which I shall address shortly) shared intelligence with the US and pledged support, moral and material, for the Bush Administration’s “War on Terrorism” in Afghanistan. However, the inherent tensions between the strategic imperatives of the US, Russia and China re-emerged rapidly after this initial period of consensus. China’s response to the “War on Terrorism” in Afghanistan, and its consequences for the international politics of the region can only be understood with reference to its strategy in Xinjiang. As stated earlier, this paper argues that the US politico-military penetration of Central Asia after 11 September 2001 has had four major implications for China’s position in Xinjiang and Central Asia. I will now address these implications in more depth in order to demonstrate the determining factor of China’s integrationist goal for Xinjiang in its foreign policy calculus in Central Asia.

(a) Limited Regional Cooperation Post-11 September 2001

Immediately after 11 September, Russian president Vladimir Putin moved quickly to provide not only moral support but also practical support for the US “War on Terrorism” in Afghanistan. Putin authorised intelligence sharing with the US, granted US access to Russian airspace and stepped up military aid to the Northern Alliance. Moreover, Putin also publicly endorsed the legitimacy of the US campaign in Afghanistan and actively encouraged the Central Asian republics to accede to US requests for access to military bases and opening of airspace in the region. China, in contrast to Russia’s rapid acquiescence to immediate US military imperatives in Central Asia and Afghanistan following the terrorist attacks, was far more cautious in extending its moral and practical support. Importantly, this support was also granted with significant caveats that illustrated China’s Xinjiang-centric perspective on the emergent “War on Terrorism” in Afghanistan. On 18 September 2001 a Chinese foreign ministry spokesman made an interesting statement that clearly linked the US agenda against “international terrorism” to China’s domestic separatist dilemmas:

The United States has asked China to provide assistance in the fight against terrorism. China, by the same token has reasons to ask the United States to give support and understanding in the fight against terrorism and separatists. We should not have double standards.

This was clearly a reference to what China perceived as its ongoing fight against terrorists and separatists in Xinjiang. The US did not, however, provide any statement of such “understanding”, but China, like Russia, extended its support for the US effort in Afghanistan by promising to supply the US with any relevant intelligence and avoided any direct criticism of US “interventionism”. This in itself was a significant development, given China’s vociferous protests against NATO’s intervention in Kosovo in 1999. The US intervention in Kosovo was deemed from Beijing’s perspective to be a further example of US determination to enforce its vision of “global order” on the world, even if this entailed the violation of state sovereignty through the use of armed force. The change was undoubtedly due to China’s perception that, although having US military forces engaged close to its frontiers was not a welcome development, the removal of the Taliban and hence the cessation of their support for Central Asian and Xinjiang terrorists was of value to its agenda in Xinjiang.

China’s efforts to convince the US, and to a lesser extent its Central Asian neighbours, of the connection between Uighur separatists and such groups as the IMU, al Qaida or the Taliban, did bear fruit. China claimed in December 2001 that up to 1000 Uighurs had been trained in Afghanistan in IMU or al Qaida camps, and that 300 Uighurs had been captured by US forces in Afghanistan. In the government report “East Turkestan Terrorists Exposed” released in January 2002, the Chinese, while documenting the hundreds of alleged “terrorist” incidents in Xinjiang since 1990, also charged that the “East Turkestan Islamic Movement” (ETIM), led by Hasan M ashum, was directly financed and supported by bin Laden’s al Qaida. In August-September 2002, the US State Department placed ETIM on its list of international terrorist organisations and claimed that it had evidence of a planned ETIM attack on the US embassy in Kyrgyzstan. A number of observers suggested that this was in fact a “trade off” between the US and China in order to secure China’s support for the “War on
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Terrorism” and part of a broader effort to stabilise a bilateral relationship that had been shaky since the advent of the Bush Administration. It has also been claimed that US moves in this direction were a strategic manoeuvre by the Bush Administration to appease China during UN Security Council negotiations regarding a resolution on Iraq.

Amongst the Central Asian states, Uzbekistan was the quickest to extend its support and cooperation to the US military effort in Afghanistan in mid-September 2001. Uzbekistan also signalled that it placed greater weight on bilateral cooperation with the US than with the multilateral SCO when it failed to attend the SCO’s emergency 11 October 2001 meeting. By the same month Uzbekistan was already hosting some 1000 US troops. Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan followed the Uzbek lead in December 2001, agreeing to allow US and other international troops to use military facilities in their territory. These states had a number of motivations to sign on to the US military action in Afghanistan that were not altruistic. Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan had, as noted earlier, been the most affected by the IMU insurgency in the late 1990s and they obviously saw this as an opportunity to rid the region of the IMU threat and reinforce their own position regarding internal political opposition. Moreover, cooperation with Washington promised wider political, economic and security benefits for these states. Since September 2001 the Central Asian states, particularly Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, have received greater attention from the US. Late in 2001, Uzbekistan received promises of $US 150 million in aid from Washington due to its commitment to the “War on Terrorism” and assurances that international lending agencies such as the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) would now grant loans to Uzbekistan. Furthermore in November and December 2001 the Kyrgyz and Uzbek governments agreed to the establishment of US airbases near Bishkek and Khanabad-Karsi respectively.

Thus within the space of five months the US had effectively established a political and military presence in the three “front line” states of Central Asia.

(b) The Role of the SCO in Central Asia & the Re-emergence of Regional Rivalry

The rapidity of Russia’s, Uzbekistan’s, Tajikistan’s and Kyrgyzstan’s military/security cooperation with the US was thus a blow to China’s vision of the SCO as a viable regional security organisation. Despite the pre-11 September SCO rhetoric about forming regional responses to the three evils of “terrorism, separatism and religious extremism”, noted earlier, when the opportunity came to demonstrate the organisation’s capabilities in this field, four out of the six member states decided to rely on bilateral arrangements with the US. That the US penetration of the region was indeed perceived to have weakened the SCO was illustrated by the organisation’s next meeting in January 2002. 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 US involvement in the region. Such a statement of intent was not, however, evidently immediately followed by practical action, although Russia and China intensified their efforts to counter US inroads in Central Asia through their bilateral relations with the region. The first half of 2002, however, witnessed the consolidation of Washington’s new relationships with the Central Asian republics. Uzbekistan emerged as Washington’s preferred regional partner, with a “United States- Uzbekistan Declaration on the Strategic Partnership and Cooperation Framework” signed on 12 March 2002. The emergence of Tashkent as the US favourite in Central Asia would in turn have significant consequences for regional politics that will be dealt with shortly. The US also further cemented its position in Tajikistan with Dushanbe receiving a $US 140.5 million humanitarian aid and security package, and an agreement from Washington to train Tajik border guards in 2002. Tajikistan, in apparent reciprocation, and much to the detriment of Russia’s imperatives, joined NATO’s “Partnership for Peace” program. The US-Tajik relationship was apparently further consolidated late in 2003 with the conclusion of a number of agreements. In a meeting with President
Rakhmanov on 13 November, US Assistant Secretary of State for Europe and Eurasia Elizabeth Jones declared Washington’s support for the Tajik bid for membership in the WTO, while on 9 October Tajikistan ratified an accord with the US granting US military personnel immunity from prosecution at the International Criminal Court (ICC), whose jurisdiction the Bush Administration does not recognise. Moreover, US influence also penetrated Central Asian states not directly affected by events in Afghanistan with the US agreeing to grant military aid to Kazakhstan in August 2002.

Russia and China intensified their efforts to consolidate their bilateral relations with the Central Asian republics over the 2002-2004 period, as well as gradual initiatives to reinvigorate the SCO to facilitate greater regional cooperation and thus counter US influence in the region. These efforts were aided to a degree by the emergence of Uzbekistan as the favoured US partner in the region. The significant military and economic aid granted to Islam Karimov’s government regenerated regional misgivings toward Uzbekistan, particularly on the part of its weaker neighbours Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. These states feared that Uzbekistan’s relations with its newfound superpower benefactor would bolster Uzbek pretensions to regional leadership and embolden Karimov to further belligerent unilateral actions to resolve regional disputes or problems. Uzbekistan had, as highlighted earlier, a well-established track record of unilateral and often belligerent behaviour toward its neighbours, particularly Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, prior to 11 September 2001. In order to balance the influence of the US, and its regional client Uzbekistan, the other Central Asian states sought to re-engage with the dominant pre-11 September external powers, Russia and China. Most significantly in the post-11 September 2001 environment, Russian and Chinese efforts focused on measures that would present them as creditable and viable security partners for the Central Asian republics both in a bilateral and multilateral sense.

This was attempted through a variety of direct military and economic aid, and the acceleration of measures to establish the SCO’s security and military credentials. In March 2002 Russian president Vladimir Putin held talks with Uzbek, Tajik and Kyrgyz leaders about the possible rescheduling or waiving of their debt to Russia. This was seen by some as a signal of Russian dissatisfaction with the US displacement of its position as the pre-eminent regional economic and security partner. In an attempt to demonstrate to Uzbekistan Russia’s continued security commitment to Central Asia, the Collective Security Treaty (CST) (involving Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Belarus and Armenia), that had once also included Uzbekistan, was re-invigorated with joint military exercises outside of Moscow in May 2002. Russia also signalled to the US that it was not simply grandstanding in Central Asia by increasing military cooperation with Kyrgyzstan, and through the establishment of a Russian air base at Kant in Kyrgyzstan and a Kyrgyz agreement to host CST troops in December 2002. The close US relationship with Tajikistan in 2002-2003, noted above, subsequently provoked Russian countermoves and damaged Russo-Tajik relations in the same period. Moscow and Dushanbe’s tense relations were demonstrated in an episode where Russia threatened to deport the large number of Tajik migrant workers in Russia back to Tajikistan in early 2003. In fact by early 2004, it appeared that the US had eclipsed Russia’s pre-eminent position in Tajikistan, particularly in a military sense, with Tajik president Emomali Rakhmanov announcing in April that Russian troops would soon depart the country. Russo-Tajik relations were also further weakened by wrangling over leasing arrangements for proposed new Russian military facilities in Tajikistan. A 4 June 2004 summit between Presidents Putin and Rakhmanov, however, produced an agreement that secured Russia’s dominant economic and military position in Tajikistan. Russia agreed to waive $US 300 million of Tajikistan’s debt in return for the rights to the Nurek space surveillance centre, Russian corporate participation and investment in Tajik hydro-electric projects and extension of the Russian military presence to 2006.

China also re-invigorated its position in Central Asia by forging new bilateral security agreements and cooperation with the region. China’s strategy, much like that of Russia, was to present itself as a real and reliable security partner for the states of Central Asia and thus provide them with a viable alternative to closer security and military relations with the US. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, perhaps not coincidentally due to their common
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borders with China and significant Uighur populations, were the focus of such Chinese efforts in 2002. In March 2002, the PLA’s Deputy Chief of Staff met with Kazakh president, Nursultan Nazarbayev, and on 18 March the Chinese government extended a $US 3 million military aid package to the Kazakhstani army. Furthermore, in July 2002 China conducted joint military exercises with Kyrgyzstan, its first with a Central Asian state, thus signalling its commitment to wider security-military cooperation in the region, while on 23 December 2002 a Sino-Kazakh “Mutual Cooperation Agreement” was concluded that pledged the parties to cooperate militarily to combat “terrorism, separatism and extremism”, and to develop trade relations. The following year China moved to extend this strategy toward its relations with Tajikistan and Uzbekistan that culminated in Chinese Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing’s visits to Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan between 1 and 6 September 2003. These visits resulted in the conclusion of inter-governmental agreements on bilateral cooperation against “terrorism, separatism and extremism” with each state. Moreover, in October 2003 China supplied Kyrgyzstan with over $US 1 million in direct security/military related assistance. Simultaneously, the government moved to ban four groups branded as terrorist and extremist organisations, three of which – Organisation for the Liberation of Turkestan, Islamic Party of Turkestan and ETIM – according to China, were involved in incidents in Xinjiang. Moreover, in 2002 and 2003 China, by virtue of bilateral security agreements and police cooperation, deported alleged Uighur “separatists and terrorists” from neighbouring Central Asian states, particularly Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, and from as far afield as Nepal. Such bilateral agreements, however, also developed in parallel to China and Russia’s re-ignigoration of the SCO over the 2001-2004 period. These efforts made limited headway in 2002 due to the wide array of US agreements and cooperation with the Central Asian states noted above. The SCO-related initiatives in 2002 were very much focused on establishing the organisation's operational framework, rather than active, “on the ground” military and security activities. Thus the heads of SCO states’ border guards met in Almaty (Kazakhstan) to coordinate responses to border security, illegal migration, and drug trafficking on 24 April 2002. Furthermore, the SCO’s official charter was adopted at its 7 June 2002 meeting in St. Petersburg and agreement reached regarding the establishment of the SCO secretariat in Beijing and the “Regional Anti-Terrorism” (RAT) centre in Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan). 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 the SCO a “still-born” organisation and a regional talk fest made irrelevant by the penetration of US power into Central Asia. Yet, China and Russia’s intent to make the SCO an important regional player was further underlined at a 30 November 2002 summit between Presidents Vladimir Putin and Jiang Zemin in Beijing that focused on promoting the role of the SCO and declared the continuation of the Sino-Russian “strategic partnership”. This Sino-Russian commitment was borne out in the following year. Between 6 and 11 August 2003, all SCO states except Uzbekistan conducted “Cooperation – 2003” joint military exercises on Kazakh and Chinese soil. The absence of Uzbekistan illustrated Tashkent’s half-hearted commitment to the SCO and served to strengthen Russian and Chinese perceptions that Karimov’s government was yet to be convinced of the benefits that the SCO could contribute to Uzbek security. The 8 September 2003 SCO meeting in Tashkent (Uzbekistan) thus assumed great significance for the strategic imperatives of China and Russia in Central Asia. At this summit it was announced that the SCO secretariat would begin its functions on 1 January 2004 in Beijing, and the executive committee of the RAT centre would open on 1 November 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 US orbit. This pandering to Karimov’s regional leadership pretensions appeared to be accepted by the other SCO states, particularly Kyrgyzstan, as a necessary concession to actively encourage Tashkent into wider involvement in the organisation. Therefore, by the beginning of 2004 Russia and China through their bilateral relations with the Central Asian republics and the SCO had achieved a measure of success in re-establishing their pre-11 September positions in the region. For China this was particularly accurate with respect to its relations with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.
4. China’s Response to US Penetration of Central Asia

China’s strategy in Xinjiang over the 2001-2004 period has thus been defined by the implications of the events of 11 September 2001 and the subsequent projection of US military and political influence into Central Asia. The impact of this process has been somewhat contradictory for China’s position in Xinjiang and Central Asia. In a regional sense, the projection of US political and military influence into four of the five Central Asian states is perceived to be a negative consequence of the “War on Terrorism”. As we have seen, US involvement has undermined to a degree China’s foreign policy efforts in Central Asia since 1991, whereby it had played a key role in establishing and determining the function of the SCO. Moreover, US involvement in the region has impacted on China’s bi-lateral relations with the states of Central Asia, as the Central Asian states have been compelled to choose between emphasising their relationships with either the US or China. However, the US government’s focus on combating Islamic “extremism” and “terrorism” has allowed China to frame its struggle against ethnic separatists by reference to the goals of the US “War on Terrorism”. Yet the projection of US power also threatens the Chinese state’s long-term strategy for the economic development and integration of Xinjiang. This section argues that China’s response has been to reinforce its hard-line approach to ethnic minority opposition and strengthen its linkages with Central Asia.

(a) The “War on Terrorism” and China’s “zero tolerance” approach to ethnic minority opposition in Xinjiang

The events of 11 September 2001 and the subsequent US political, economic and military penetration of Afghanistan and Central Asia also had important implications for China’s position and strategy in Xinjiang. The most immediate impact of these developments was to reinforce the state’s long-held perception of a causal linkage between ethnic minority opposition to continued Chinese rule and external, Central Asian and “international terrorist forces”. One month after the 11 September attacks, in October 2001, China implemented another “Strike Hard” campaign in Xinjiang aimed at “ethnic separatist and terrorist forces”. According to Amnesty International, this involved further restrictions on the religious and cultural rights of Xinjiang’s Muslims between October 2001 and March 2002 similar to those instituted during the “Strike Hard” campaigns of the late 1990s that were detailed earlier. This report estimated that, over the October 2001 to March 2002 period, up to 3000 people had been arrested or detained in Xinjiang in connection with “illegal religious activities” or “ethnic separatism and terrorism”. As in the past, these measures not only targeted those deemed to be actively opposing the state but were also applied to religious and cultural practices that, in the state’s perception, reinforced ethnic minority separateness from the Chinese state. Thus, Muslim clerics and students were arrested or detained for participation in “illegal religious activities”, “illegal religious centres” were closed, and imams were compelled to attend “political education” sessions. Religious worship, education or instruction was also restricted to those 18 years of age and above, and a general discrimination against religious observance implemented. A pertinent example of the latter, and one that had been prevalent prior to 11 September 2001, was restricting the practice of fasting during the holy month of Ramadan, particularly for employees of state institutions such as schools, hospitals and government offices.

The authorities also identified increased censorship of cultural and media circles as a key area of “struggle” in the fight against “separatist” tendencies. The extent of the state’s connection of “separatism” with any overt sign of ethnic minority identity was further reinforced with the provincial government’s decision in May 2002 that instruction of the majority of courses at Xinjiang University were to be conducted in Chinese, rather than Uighur and Chinese as previously. Moreover, the following month also saw the authorities...
begin to confiscate Uighur language books dealing with political or cultural history from schools and colleges throughout Xinjiang. The Chinese government’s all-encompassing campaign to negate ethnic minority opposition under the guise of the “War on Terrorism” was carried into 2003 with Amnesty International’s Country Report on China for the period January-December 2003, asserting that China’s “zero tolerance” approach in Xinjiang was continuing unabated. Thus it argued that:

The authorities continued to use the international “war on terrorism” to justify harsh repression in Xinjiang, which continued to result in serious human rights violations against the ethnic Uighur community. The authorities continued to make little distinction between acts of violence and acts of passive resistance. Repression was often manifested through assaults on Uighur culture, such as the closure of several mosques, restrictions on the use of the Uighur language and the banning of certain Uighur books and journals.

The Chinese government’s linkage of Xinjiang separatists to the Taliban, al Qaida and the IMU, however, gained a measure of legitimacy over the same period. In March 2002 the US Department of Defence acknowledged for the first time that they had captured an undisclosed number of Uighurs in US military operations in Afghanistan and that the Northern Alliance held up to twenty others. The true number of Uighurs who fought (or perhaps are still fighting) with the Taliban, al Qaida or the IMU remains something of a mystery. China for its part claimed in May 2002 that over 1000 Uighurs had been trained in camps in Afghanistan and many had returned to Xinjiang to carry out jihad. The existence and scope of Uighur “separatist” groups operating within Xinjiang is also a matter of debate. The Chinese government on 14 November 2001, for example, presented to its SCO partners a list of ten separatist or “terrorist” organisations that it claimed were based in Afghanistan, Central Asia and Xinjiang. According to a US government report in December 2001, there were six major identifiable Uighur separatist organisations in Xinjiang and Central Asia:

1. United Revolutionary Front of Eastern Turkestan (URFET), based in Kazakhstan: originally the United National Revolutionary Front (UNRF) but changed its name in 1997 and switched to a policy of armed resistance to Chinese “oppression”.
2. Organization for the Liberation of Uighurstan (OLU): this organisation is reported to be internally divided but committed to armed struggle.
3. Wolves of Lop Nor: the Wolves have claimed responsibility for bombings and assassinations in Xinjiang over the 1991-2004 period.
4. Xinjiang Liberation Organization and Uighur Liberation Organization (ULO): this organisation is reported to be active in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan and thought to be responsible for the assassination of Uighurs viewed as “collaborators”.
5. Home of East Turkestan Youth: this radical group has been compared to Hamas and is reported to have over 2000 members, some of whom were trained in Afghanistan.

It is significant that this report does not mention ETIM, the group subsequently listed by the Bush Administration as an “international terrorist organisation” the following year. This report also suggests that some of these organisations may have links, not necessarily strong ones, to Central Asian and South Asian Islamic movements. The most incidental links appear to be with the Pakistani organisations Tableeghi Jamaat and Jamaat-i-Islami. The former is largely a missionary organisation that the Chinese government has blamed for the dissemination of “religious materials” in Xinjiang. The latter, however, is Pakistan's
largest Islamic political party and is regarded as having been intimately involved in recruiting for the Afghan mujahideen and then the Taliban. The strongest links between Uighur separatists and external organisations appear to be with Central Asian based groups. Most notable in this regard are the IMU, or the IPT as they have reportedly become since June 2001, and Hizb-ut-Tahrir (Islamic Revival), the history of which was addressed earlier. The Kyrgyz government on 8 October 2002 also claimed that there were linkages between the IMU/IPT, HT and Uighur separatists. The head of the Kyrgyz National Security Service, Kaliy Imankulov, announced that he had obtained information indicating that the IMU/IPT, HT, Uighur separatists and other Central Asian “Islamists” were uniting to form an “Islamic Movement of Central Asia”. Moreover, he claimed that this new amalgam of “Islamists” aimed to establish an Islamic caliphate across Central Asia, including Xinjiang.

Perhaps more importantly for China than for its SCO partners, acknowledging the “terrorist” threat in Xinjiang was the position of the Bush Administration. As noted earlier, the US State Department listed ETIM in September 2002 as an “international terrorist organization” and froze the group’s finances. Many observers questioned the veracity of the Bush Administration’s listing of ETIM on a number of grounds, including the fact that neither Uighur émigré organisations nor Xinjiang and Central Asian scholars had any knowledge of the group’s existence prior to the Chinese government’s claims in January 2001.

(b) The Reinforcement of China’s Goal and Instruments of Integration in Xinjiang

As noted previously, China has since 1991 pursued a strategy in Xinjiang and Central Asia that has reflected its strategic concepts and goals for the closer integration of Xinjiang into the PRC. The events of 11 September 2001 and their aftermath in Afghanistan-Central Asia have done little to weaken China’s commitment to this goal. As I demonstrated earlier regarding the generation of regional competition/rivalry following 11 September 2001, China has continued to express the external modalities of its Xinjiang strategy – to achieve greater regional security cooperation, greater regional economic cooperation and development of infrastructural links with Central Asia. Moreover, I have just outlined the reinforced policies of control within Xinjiang and the acceptance, on the part of key powers in Central Asia – Russia and the US – of the “terrorist” threat to China in the region. The internal expression of this process has followed a similar pattern, with China intensifying its integrationist policies in Xinjiang. The “Great Western Development/Open Up the West” campaign (2000-2010), in which the government has arguably placed much political and economic capital, aims to make China’s western provinces into an industrial and agricultural base and a trade and energy corridor for the national economy. Xinjiang is central to this long-term strategy due to two related reasons: its geo-strategic position at the crossroads of Central Asia and the logic of China’s political strategy for Xinjiang. What I mean by this second aspect is that the Chinese government has viewed economic development and prosperity for Xinjiang’s ethnic minority populations as a cure-all for “ethnic separatist” tendencies. Therefore, the economic development of Xinjiang is perceived to be central to the state’s ability to secure the region and ensure its integration. This strategy has in fact been intensified since 11 September 2001 and as of January 2005 appears to have consolidated China’s control over Xinjiang and contributed to the re-invigoration of its position in Central Asia.

The re-invigoration of the state’s development strategy in Xinjiang over the 2001-2004 period has, as during the 1991-2001 period, focused on the development of economic and infrastructural linkages between Central Asia and Xinjiang. Significantly, the expansion of US power into Central Asia appears to have reinforced China’s perception of the necessity for it to diversify its energy strategy in order to safeguard China’s energy security. This has been reflected in a number of developments since 2001. In May 2002 the long talked-about Kazakhstan-China pipeline, a joint venture of CNPC and the Kazak state oil corporation KazMunayGaz, began construction. Moreover, the 1300km Atasu-Alatau Pass section (on the Kazakh-Xinjiang border) of this pipeline was begun in June 2004, while CNPC reportedly began construction of a 400km section from Alatauw to its Dushanzhi (Xinjiang)
refinery in May 2004. These pipelines are to be linked by 2006 to the estimated $US18 billion 2600km Xinjiang-Shanghai pipeline, of which the Shanghai-Changqing oilfield (in Shaanxi Province) section began construction in 2000. The central government reported in 2003 that it had invested approximately US$8.36 billion in such infrastructure development in the province. In an important development that signalled China's commitment to the diversification of its energy supplies, Chinese and Kazakh presidents Hu Jintao and Nursultan Nazarbayev signed an agreement on 20 May 2004 for joint exploration and development of oil and gas resources in the Caspian Sea.

There was also expansion after 2001 of other non-energy related infrastructure projects and developments between Xinjiang and Central Asia, such as the opening of international bus routes between Osh (Kyrgyzstan) and Kashgar (Xinjiang) in May 2002. In May 2003 China pledged $US15 million for the construction of a highway linking Xinjiang and Lake Issyk-Kul in Kyrgyzstan, and in September 2003 agreed to establish a highway link between Xinjiang and Tajikistan. Furthermore, in December 2003 Kyrgyzstan announced a deal to sell hydro-electric power to Xinjiang, while Chinese officials subsequently announced a $US 2.5 million feasibility study to construct a Kyrgyz-Xinjiang rail link. In parallel with these measures to expand the infrastructure links between Xinjiang and Central Asia, the Chinese government has also intensified the major elements of its economic development strategy within Xinjiang. The government's White Paper on Xinjiang of May 2003, for example, called for the continuation and intensification of the “Great Western Development” launched in 2000. This has involved the expansion of two “pillar” industries in Xinjiang, cotton cultivation and energy exploitation, that have been noted earlier. The scope of the cotton strategy, regardless of the political, economic, social and environmental implications, appears to have been intensified with 40% of Xinjiang’s arable land under cotton cultivation by 2003. The focus on the exploitation of the region’s energy sources also proceeds apace with CNPC investing 2.1bn yuan or $US 250 million in energy projects throughout Xinjiang in 2002-2003. These policies, however, have the potential to generate problems for China not only within Xinjiang but also in its relations with the neighbouring Central Asian states, particularly Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The cultivation of cotton of course requires vast quantities of water that in Central Asia and Xinjiang is a precious and limited commodity. China's need for water in Xinjiang has led to the development of plans to divert water from the Ili and Irtysh Rivers, which subsequently flow into Kazakhstan and Russia. The completion of this would have possibly disastrous environmental consequences, such as salinisation and desertification that has occurred in the Aral Sea, as well as negative implications for regional security.
Thus the events of 11 September 2001 and the subsequent penetration of US power into Central Asia have not so much transformed the geo-political environment in the region as introduced another variable into an already complex equation. The Central Asian states before 11 September 2001 were eventually compelled into greater cooperation both in a bilateral and multilateral sense (i.e. SCO) with the dominant external powers, Russia and China. Post 11 September, however, the Central Asian states rapidly aligned themselves with the US due to the political, economic and military benefits (as detailed earlier) on offer during the prosecution of the Afghan invasion. Largely due to the internal considerations of Xinjiang and Chechnya, and their overall relations with the US, both China and Russia acquiesced to the subsequent expansion of US influence in Central Asia. This convergence of interest proved to be simply a “marriage of convenience”, both in relation to the US-Russia-China configuration and the US-Central Asian relationships. For China, US penetration of Central Asia was a contradictory development. The removal of the Taliban and the rationale of the “War on Terrorism” were viewed as contributing to China’s strategic interests by removing an alleged sanctuary for Islamic militants from across Central Asia, including Xinjiang, and providing a further justification for its approach to ethnic minority opposition in Xinjiang. This was, however, the extent of the benefits accruing to China as a result of the US presence in Afghanistan and Central Asia.

It emerged quite rapidly that the US emphasis on military and security relations with the Central Asian states weakened a key element of China’s strategy in the region – the SCO. By March 2002, however, both Russia and China moved to re-invigorate the organisation and make it a viable option as a regional security mechanism. These efforts, as we have seen, were aided to a degree by Uzbekistan’s emergence as the Bush Administration’s favoured regional partner, with Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan particularly wary of the possible spur to Karimov’s regional leadership pretensions that this could generate. The close alignment of the US with Uzbekistan thus prompted the other Central Asian republics to seek greater alignment with Russia and China, both as a countermeasure against Uzbekistan and as compensation for a relative “missing out” regarding US military and economic largesse. In a sense the expansion of US power into Central Asia facilitated the development of “multi-vector” foreign policies on the part of the Central Asian republics as they sought to diversify their foreign relations and generate greater strategic benefits from the competing external powers – Russia, China and the US. That is to say, the dynamics of the “New Great Game” have not been negated but sustained by the entry of US power onto the Central Asian stage. The Central Asian states to varying degrees have all sought to use the “War on Terrorism” to clamp down on existing political opposition within their own states and bolster their regional standing. The most obvious example of this has been Uzbekistan, but all the republics have indulged in similar tactics against domestic political opponents. In effect the US presence has emboldened some of the regional regimes that prior to 11 September 2001 led a fragile existence and, according to a respected Central Asian scholar:

Rather than being frightened of the United States, the Central Asian leaders generally see their role in the war on terrorism as making themselves less rather than more vulnerable to US criticism. Each leader seems to have convinced himself that his role is vital, whether the contribution is in the form of airbases (in Kyrgyzstan and in Uzbekistan), or of overflight and limited landing rights (in Tajikistan and Kazakhstan) or of facilitating the transfer of humanitarian assistance (in Turkmenistan). This message has been reinforced by the treatment that many of them have received during official visits to the United States in the past year.104

This state of affairs, not coincidentally, is reminiscent of the course of US foreign policy in the developing world during the Cold War, where the propping up of authoritarian or
dictatorial regimes so long as they opposed the omnipresent “communist” threat was par
for the course. The “War on Terrorism”, at least in Central Asia, appears to be following the
same path with authoritarian regimes pledging loyalty to the fight against the supposedly
encompassing (and conveniently ambiguous) threat of “terrorism”. The key problem for
the present US administration and its “allies” in Central Asia (such as Uzbekistan), and
Russia and China for that matter, is that the “enemies” are not other states but loosely
organised Islamic or ethnic separatist revolutionaries. In essence the US “led” “international
cohesion” against terrorism is nothing more than an alignment of states for the protection
of states, and as such it is inherently fragile as it is “first and foremost a policeman’s
association”.

Moreover, as I have demonstrated, China and Russia’s strategic goals in the
region, beyond the limited goal of destroying the Taliban, diverged significantly from those
of the US. Lieven’s categorisation of the “international coalition” as a “policeman’s
association” is apt and has proven to be accurate. The various measures instituted by the US in its
relations with the Central Asian states and similar measures undertaken by China and Russia
in the region have all reflected the “policeman’s” imperative to suppress overt manifestations
of threat rather than construct coherent responses to the cause of that threat. Thus
throughout Central Asia the existing regimes have been able to clamp down on domestic
political opposition with greater force than was possible before 11 September 2001. As of
March 2004 Uzbekistan’s jails, for example, held somewhere in the order of 5000 political
prisoners, the majority of whom were suspected of membership of the banned Hizb-ut-
Tahrir organisation, while similar campaigns against state-defined “Islamists” have also
occurred in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan since 2001.

China, as we have seen, has also utilised
the events of 11 September 2001 to further reinforce its “zero-tolerance” approach to
ethnic minority opposition in Xinjiang.

It is now clear that US involvement in Central Asia has played a significant role in intensifying
elements of the “New Great Game”, with the Central Asian states pursuing a multi-
 vectored foreign policy triangulating between the pre-eminent external powers of the US, China
and Russia. An important aspect of this process has been the fate of the SCO since 11
September 2001. The close cooperation of Russia and the Central Asian states with the
US in late 2001 and early 2002 weakened the viability of the SCO, challenging a key
element of China’s strategy in the region. The subsequent US courtship of Central Asia,
particularly Uzbekistan, compelled the remaining Central Asian republics to seek further
engagement with China and Russia. China and Russia for their part, although clearly
responding differently to the immediate US expansion into the region, gradually moved
closer together as their wariness of long-term US imperatives in the region grew. This
process was reflected in Chinese and Russian initiatives to re-establish the SCO as a regional
security mechanism throughout 2002-2004, as well as renewed bilateral initiatives with
the Central Asian states. The relative success of these efforts could be seen in the SCO
joint military exercises in 2003 and the establishment of the SCO RAT centre in Tashkent in
November 2003.

Thus China’s position in Xinjiang and Central Asia as of early 2005 is perhaps stronger than
it was in 2001. Moreover, I have demonstrated over the course of this paper that assertions
of China’s “strategic defeat” in Central Asia are not only premature, but fail to recognise
that China’s strategy in Central Asia is intimately linked to the progress of its integrationist
goal in Xinjiang. After the initial erosion of the “strategic partnerships” and regional institutions
(i.e. the SCO) constructed by China with key regional states (most importantly Russia)
following the US action in Afghanistan, there has been a re-establishment of closer
cooperation between China, Russia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, and a re-invigoration of
the SCO. Moreover, China’s “Eurasian experiment” appears to have been strengthened by
the challenges posed by the expansion of US power into Central Asia since 2001.
Notes


4 Ibid.


7 Ibid: 262.

8 Mackinder, “The Geographical Pivot of History”: 264. op. cit.?

9 Owen Lattimore, Pivot of Asia: Sinkiang and the Inner Asian Frontiers of China and Russia, (Boston: Little & Brown, 1950).


14 Other scholars have argued that the causes of unrest over the 1991-2001 period were more the result of external developments; see for example, Colin Mackerras, “Xinjiang at the turn of the century: the causes of separatism”, Central Asian Survey, Vol. 20, No. 3, (2001): 289-303.


For example see, Pannel and Ma, “Urban Transition and Interstate Relations”, and Colin Mackerras, “Xinjiang at the turn of the century”: 291-294, 298-300.


35 Ibid.

36 Potentially troublesome issues in the Pacific involving Sino-US relations include the crisis on the Korean Peninsula, a re-arming and re-assertive Japan and Taiwan.

37 Xiang, “China’s Eurasian Experiment”: 118.


39 Cited in Ibid: 34.


44 Gunitskiy, “In the Spotlight: East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM)”.


47 Ibid.


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55 Ibid.
56 Blua, “Central Asia: Militarization Could Come at a Cost of Regional Stability”.
57 Rumer, “The Powers in Central Asia”: 64.
59 Blagov, “Russia Probes to Bolster Its Authority in Central Asia”.
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83 Ibid, 5- 6.
85 Ibid.
87 Ibid.
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97 For example, Dolat, “Washington Betrays China’s Uighurs”, Seva Gunitskiy, “In the Spotlight: East Turkestan Islamic M ovement (ETIM )”, Center for Defense Information (CDI), (December 9, 2002), and Chinese government report, “East Turkistan Terrorists Exposed”.
100 Becquelin, “Staged Development”: 370.
101 Blua, “China: Beijing Keen to Pursue Oil Projects with Neighbours”. 

“China’s Great Game in Central Asia”.


Ibid.


