

China and Central Asia: Enduring Interests & Contemporary Concerns

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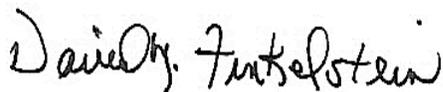
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Dr. David M. Finkelstein¹

On February 5, 2003, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, DC, held a conference focused on China's interests in Central Asia. The author was asked to provide scene-setting remarks and historical context. The following is a transcript of the comments he made at the event.

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Introduction

I was asked by the conference organizers to provide a scene setter for the Chinese perspective on Central Asia and to address what I see as Beijing's national interests in that critical part of the world.

My views on this subject are refracted through three prisms. The first is my training as a historian of China. When considering contemporary affairs, a long-term perspective is sometimes helpful — not always, but sometimes. In the case at hand, Chinese interests in Central Asia, I do think a long-term perspective is useful for contextual purposes. The second prism is my many years as an analyst of Chinese defense and security affairs, first for the U.S. Army, then in the Pentagon, and now at CNA. The third, and most important prism, is that of canvassing the relevant Chinese literature on this topic. I will let you decide whether I can make a rainbow come out of a set of such disparate lenses.

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Let me begin by saying that Beijing believes it has extremely important national security interests in Central Asia. I offer two data points that underscore this:

- First, China was the leading force in the creation of the “Shanghai Five” in 1996 and the subsequent formation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in June 2001. The SCO is the first multinational organization with a security dimension that the PRC has ever joined. But even more significant than China’s participation in the SCO is the leading role that China played in the establishment of the SCO. This constituted a departure from Deng Xiaoping’s oft-quoted dictum, “In international affairs China should keep a low profile and avoid taking the lead.”²
- Second, in October 2002 the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA) conducted combined anti-terrorism exercises with the armed forces of Kyrgyzstan. This was an unprecedented event. In discussing this event with a PLA official in the Ministry of National Defense, I was told that this was the first time since the founding of the PRC (in 1949) that the PLA had crossed its borders into another country in peacetime to conduct a combined training exercise with the armed forces of another nation.

The SCO, of course, was founded prior to the terrorist attacks on the U.S. on September 11, 2001 (9-11). The “Shanghai Five” predates 9-11 by five years. Still, the combined exercises with the Kyrgyz were likely possible only because of the post-9-11 international security environment. Clearly, Beijing’s security interests in Central Asia have been heightened as a result of 9-11. I shall address those issues later. But also worth pointing out is that China has had vital

² The original “Shanghai Five” members were China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Uzbekistan was added as a sixth member in 2001 when the Shanghai Cooperation organization was established.

national interests in Central Asia for more than a millennium. These enduring interests are, in my view, worth reviewing.

Enduring Interests Across the Millennia³

In pre-modern and early modern times, Central Asia was a key region in the security calculus of most Chinese dynasties. Chinese security interests were threefold:

- Ensuring physical security along China's frontier borders with Central Asia. This meant control of the passage of people and goods in both directions.
- Ensuring that no empire hostile to China occupied the Central Asian steppes or the river valley oases.
- Ensuring that China had unfettered access to the natural resources of the region.

I would argue that these three issues from the pre-modern and early modern period persist today as China's overarching national security interests in the region.

It is worth remembering that China's borders with Central Asia, along with its borders with its other "Inner Asian" frontiers, were for many hundreds of years the key portals through which the Chinese empire came into contact with the non-Han cultures and civilizations of Eurasia. In many cases, contacts along these borders were not particularly positive. One might say that China's Central Asian frontiers were the locus of one of the major and enduring "clashes of

³ Much of the historical overview in this section is based on Morris Rossabi's excellent monograph, *China and Inner Asia* (New York: Free Press, 1975), although much of the analysis is this author's.

civilizations” in the East, as the sedentary-agricultural Han civilization abutted the great pastoral-nomadic cultures of the times. Where there was friction and conflict between the two, it was usually over the terms of trade, perceived imbalances in economic benefit, or the rights of passage through key territories.

Moreover, Central Asia served as a strategic buffer between China and some of the other great empires of the times. Those who wanted to invade China from the west, such as Tamerlane (who tried to do so in 1404), had to traverse the steppes of Central Asia.

In addition to providing physical security, the region was also economically important to China. Although Imperial China continually claimed self-sufficiency, Central Asia contained items that were either much needed by, or desired by, the various dynasties. In the former category were horses for Chinese cavalry. In the latter were jade and other precious gems from the Tarim River Basin, to include the blue dyes used in Ming ceramics.⁴ And of course, the fabled “Silk Road,” which was the principal trans-Eurasian trade route before the age of maritime exploration, traversed Central Asia.

For many hundreds of years, therefore, affairs in Central Asia were one of *the* key Chinese security issues.

Significantly, China’s response to the challenges it faced, both in that region and along its other Inner Asian frontiers, had a defining impact on how China viewed foreigners and how China dealt with foreigners. For example, it was the Chinese experience with the people of Central Asia and Inner Asia that gave rise to the well-known “Tribute System” of foreign relations.⁵ Moreover, Chinese concerns

⁴ Rossabi, p. 30.

⁵ See John K. Fairbank, *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China’s Foreign Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968).

about security along its Central Asian frontier had a formative impact on the organization of the late imperial military establishment. Examples are the *wei-so* (*wei suo*, 卫所) system of far-flung military outposts, the creation of military districts and military magistrates, the existence of military horse farms and military colonies (*tun tian*, 屯田), and the construction of walls and fortified towns.⁶

Over time, the various Chinese dynasties employed three basic strategies, which I refer to as the “Three Cs,” to secure Beijing’s three enduring national security interests along its Central Asia frontier: (1) co-opting, (2) conquering, and (3) colonizing.

- First, the **co-opting** of non-Han peoples and their leaders in the border regions was accomplished, when possible, through trade, political favors, the enticement of self-rule within the empire, or outright bribery. Mostly, this was carried out through the vehicle of the Tribute System and it often occurred when dynasties were militarily weak.
- Second, when China was militarily strong, it often opted to **conquer** and physically occupy strategic border regions. It is interesting to note that when they were strong enough, the most expansionist dynasties of Imperial China — the Han, the Tang, the early Ming, and the early Qing — all sent military expeditions northwest to conquer and occupy salients in the region of modern-day Xinjiang.
- Finally, dynasties also secured their interests through **colonization**. The Sinification of China’s strategic border areas with Central Asia was both a

⁶ See David M. Finkelstein, “A Brief Outline of the Ming Military System” (unpublished paper, Princeton University, 1983), for an overview of the system and the impact of Yuan (Mongol) Dynasty military organizational practices.

traditional objective and a strategy for reducing the potential threat from the non-Han people of the region. In times of peace, the Imperial Government encouraged Chinese farmers to move west. In times of war, when China was able to conquer these regions, waves of colonists were almost certain to follow the armies. (Also, in some cases the conquering soldiers were demobilized and turned into farmer-colonists).

If we consider and review the policies of the Government of the People's Republic of China toward Xinjiang since 1949, we see that China continues to use all of the Three Cs — co-opting, conquering, and colonizing — to maintain control today.

China, Central Asia, and the Cold War

Briefly, during the Cold War, at the height of Sino-Soviet tensions, Soviet Central Asia was an area of vital strategic concern to Beijing. Soviet armies to the north and in the Central Asian SSRs were *the* most serious military threat faced by the PRC. The threat of Soviet invasion from the north and west dictated the thrust of Chinese military strategy, force deployments, and civil defense.⁷ Moscow's invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 heightened the military threat to China and, at the time, solidified Beijing's strategic tilt to the United States. Overall, then, during this period of hostile Sino-Soviet relations, all of China's key security interests in Central Asia were challenged: China's western border was under direct threat; an empire hostile to China controlled nearly all of Central Asia; and Beijing had almost no access to the resources of the region.

⁷ Not until the mid 1980s did Chinese defense planners assess that a Soviet invasion of China (or a nuclear war between the two superpowers) was unlikely. This assessment, often called Deng Xiaoping's "strategic decision," served as the analytic justification for a radical change in China's national military strategy. The PLA shifted from a wartime footing to a peacetime footing, underwent a massive military demobilization, and began the military modernization program that persists today.

The Immediate Aftermath of the Cold War

Although relations between Moscow and Beijing quickly began to thaw under the foreign policies of Gorbachev, it was not until the demise of the Soviet Union that China was finally in a position to work seriously with Russia and the newly independent states of the Former Soviet Union in Central Asia to resolve long-standing border disputes. In this respect, the collapse of the USSR was a positive development for Chinese interests in its western regions.

But, from Beijing's perspective, the new security environment also arrived with a new set of challenges — some close to home and some farther away.

Close to home, the collapse of the USSR unleashed new political and military instabilities in some of the newly independent Central Asian states. Beijing worried that some of these instabilities might spill over into its territories.

One such challenge was the rise of ethnic or religious identification as a rallying point for solidarity among the disparate peoples of the region, and the specific threat that Beijing perceived this to pose in long-restive Xinjiang Province.

We are all aware of the long-standing situation in Xinjiang, and there is no need to review it here. But it is worth pointing out that Beijing's concerns about Xinjiang in the post-USSR period were heightened by:

- Fears of Kazakh nationalism among China's own citizens,
- The so-called Pan-Turkic movement and Beijing's Uighur minority,
- The rise of militant Islam as a general phenomenon,

- The increased calls for an independent “East Turkistan” that seemed to have some base of support (however weak the reality) outside China, and
- Incidents of provincial violence and acts of domestic sabotage in the 1990s, which the Chinese claim were the work of “Xinjiang separatists.”

If these developments were not enough to increase Beijing’s concerns, Chinese security analysts also began to raise alarms about the intentions of the United States in Central Asia — even before 9-11.

These concerns emerged within the context of the general downward spiral in U.S.-China security relations throughout the 1990s — especially in the latter half of the decade — and the deepening mutual suspicion at that time on both sides of the Pacific. In addition, China’s discomfort with the rise of the United States as “the sole superpower” (to use China’s term) was growing.

In Central Asia itself, the Beijing defense and security establishment found new cause for worry over the implications of NATO’s eastward expansion and the extension of Partnership for Peace (PFP) into Central Asia. The U.S. Central Command’s 1997 exercise in Kazakhstan, CENTRAZBAT-97, heightened Chinese concerns. In this combined (multinational) exercise, U.S. airborne forces made the longest non-stop flight to a drop zone in history — from CONUS directly to Kazakhstan. As odd as it may seem to Americans, Chinese analysts assessed that U.S. initiatives in Central Asia represented the last geo-strategic piece in Washington’s “strategy” to contain China militarily, given (1) enhanced U.S. military ties with Japan, (2) talk of “Japan as the northern anchor and Australia as the southern anchor” of U.S. military presence, and (3) heightening friction over Taiwan.⁸

⁸ The U.S. and NATO intervention in Serbia and Kosovo without UN authority raised tremendous fears in China that the U.S. might intervene unilaterally in other ethnic conflicts around the globe.

In short, I would argue that it was the confluence of these new opportunities in Central Asia and the mounting concerns listed above that impelled Beijing to take a leading role in the formation of the “Shanghai Five” group, and its later transformation into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. In doing so, China created a mechanism to achieve the following objectives:

- Resolve long-standing border issues with Russia and the newly independent Central Asia nations,
- Create a security mechanism for containing the chaos on the other side of its borders and isolating its own problems in Xinjiang,
- Lay the groundwork for trade with and access to the key economic resources of Central Asia — including the increasingly important prospect of energy resources, and
- Establish itself as a significant player in Central Asian affairs before the U.S. became too entrenched through PFP and before Russia attempted to reinsert itself into its “near abroad.”

And finally, symbolically, the “Shanghai Five” (and SCO) mechanism served as a major rhetorical device touted by Beijing to counter the U.S.’s regional security model, which was based on bilateral military alliances. The SCO was (and still is) marketed as a prime example of China’s alternative model of comprehensive

Chinese analysts watched carefully to see whether Chechnya would be next and, if so, what that might mean for Xinjiang.

multilateral partnerships as outlined in Beijing’s so-called “New Concept of Security.”⁹

Impact of 9-11, *Operation Enduring Freedom* and China’s Current Concerns

The terrorist attacks on the U.S. on 9-11 were shocking to Beijing, and just as shocking was the relative speed and efficiency with which U.S. forces went into Afghanistan to deal with the Taliban and Al Qaeda. As ever, the Chinese viewed these developments with concern and a good deal of ambivalence, seesawing back and forth between dark implications and potential opportunities. In retrospect, Chinese reactions to *Operation Enduring Freedom* can be parsed into three phases: (1) initial shock and worry, (2) assessing, and seizing, the opportunity for near- and mid-term gains, and (3) reverting back to long-term concerns about U.S. intentions.

Initial Shock and Worry

Initially, Chinese analysts assessed that *Operation Enduring Freedom* might very well undermine some extremely important Chinese objectives, interests, and initiatives in Central Asia, and exacerbate concerns in South Asia and even East Asia. These included:

- Replacing a former Soviet military presence with a U.S. military presence. Having shed the region of the Soviet military presence and Russian political clout, here came the Americans with a new political and military presence.
- Concerns about the U.S. tilt toward Pakistan and what that might mean for Chinese relations with Islamabad (Beijing’s key security partner in the region),

⁹ See David M. Finkelstein, “China’s New Concept of Security: Reading Between the Lines,” in *Washington Journal of Modern Chinese Politics* 5 (Spring 1999), no. 1.

as well as concerns about closer U.S. military ties with the PRC's enduring nemesis, India.

- Whether the U.S. presence would undermine the viability of the SCO. In June 2001 the SCO was formally established and Uzbekistan was admitted as a sixth member. A few short months later, U.S. military forces were being marshaled in that country.
- Whether the major fighting in Afghanistan would be protracted, destabilizing the region once again, or, worse still, whether it would spill over into China on the Sino-Afghan border.
- Whether Japan's military support to *Operation Enduring Freedom* would become the opening gambit for an expanded regional role for the Japanese Self-Defense Force.

Overall, the initial Chinese assessment was characterized by the adage “seeing the acorn, but imagining the oak tree.”

Seizing Near- and Mid-term Opportunities

Within six months or so, the Chinese assessment of the situation shifted, recognizing that there were some near-term benefits and mid-term gains for Beijing in an otherwise unhappy set of circumstances.

- The tragic events of 9-11 and China's support for the “War on Terrorism” provided the leadership in Beijing (and Washington, for that matter) with an international context in which to justify putting Sino-U.S. relations back on an even keel after a disastrous year of tensions over such issues as Taiwan and

the EP-3 “crisis.” Stable relations with the U.S. are still seen by Beijing as a prerequisite for the ability to focus on pressing domestic issues.

- According to PRC analysts, U.S. and coalition operations in Afghanistan indirectly assisted China in severing ties between Xinjiang extremists and their alleged Al Qaeda supporters. PRC analysts assert that U.S. forces captured 200 Chinese terrorists from Xinjiang in Al Qaeda training camps and that it had come to light that almost 1,000 had been trained to date. Clearly, I am not in a position to verify these claims.
- The war on terrorism permitted the PRC to tighten security in Xinjiang proper. As one PRC analyst put it, “the province has never been as stable as it is now.”
- In addition, the modest U.S.-China *rapprochement* in security affairs that resulted from the war on terrorism gave the PRC an international forum in which to discuss its own domestic problems with terrorism. Significantly (from Beijing’s perspective), Washington publicly acknowledged one Xinjiang-based group — ETIM, the East Turkistan Independence Movement — as worthy of being labeled a terrorist organization in the U.S. Department of State’s report.
- Finally, some Chinese analysts came to see the U.S. destruction of the Taliban and Al Qaeda as a potentially stabilizing event for the region that would allow Central Asian nations to focus on domestic development. More importantly, it would also stabilize the region for Chinese economic interests — especially energy sources and energy pipelines.

But Long-term Concerns Persist

This takes us to the final phase of Chinese assessment, which is essentially where China is today (2003) and which looks at the region for the long term.

First, no Chinese analysts with whom I have spoken (and probably no U.S. analysts, for that matter) believe that the war on terrorism will provide the strategic glue to fully repair Sino-U.S. relations on the security front for the long term. Too many other issues are still out there. Yet, events in Central Asia have provided a reason for the two countries to work toward repairing the relationship. This is a welcome development.

In regard to Central Asia proper, Chinese concerns will continue to revolve around the following questions:

- How long will U.S. military forces stay in the region?
- Even after its departure, how deeply will the U.S. become involved politically in the region?
- Will Russia, China's traditional competitor in Central Asia, who also now has a military presence in Kyrgyzstan, try to re-inject itself into Central Asia at the expense of Chinese interests?
- Will Central Asia become stable enough for Beijing to accrue the benefits of trade and natural resources?

Final Comments

In conclusion, Beijing's long-term concerns in Central Asia will remain the same as those of the dynasties of Imperial China, but must be seen within a contemporary context. These concerns include:

- Ensuring the security of China's borders, especially in light of its concerns about Xinjiang.
- Ensuring that no state perceived to be hostile to Chinese interests can dominate Central Asia.
- Ensuring access to the region's natural resources and establishing stable trade relations. This will remain especially important in light of Beijing's ongoing program to raise the level of economic development in its western regions and its desire to narrow the inland-coastal prosperity gap.

