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**Chinese Security Interests  
in Central Asia**

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## Key Points

\* The sudden change in the geopolitical configuration in and around Central Asia caused by the collapse of the USSR came as a considerable surprise to China. On one hand, the emergence of new independent states opened up opportunities for China to expand its presence globally and regionally, but, the fundamentally different alignment of forces in the world including in Central Asia gave rise to new threats to China's security interests.

\* In the early 1990s, China had not yet built up an integrated, systematic picture of the region and its potential. However, it was understood in China that only constructive cooperation with the Central Asian states could guarantee regional security.

\* Initially, Beijing prioritised the development of cooperation to solve the problems inherited from the Chinese-Soviet era as well as those arising from the disintegration of the Soviet Union. A careful, but at the same time persistent approach's enabled China to achieve favourable solutions to a whole series of questions by the mid-1990s.

\* The late 1990s, however, saw an increase in the negative effects of new threats associated with the military-political instability in Afghanistan. In this situation, Beijing pressed for even more active cooperation with the Central Asian states. China tried to adopt the role of external guarantor for a regional security system and offered a strategic partnership with Moscow, which, unlike Beijing, had a historic presence in the region.

\* 9/11 and the subsequent strengthening of the USA's military-political presence once again changed the alignment of forces in and around the region to the disadvantage of China. After developing appropriate conceptual solutions, Beijing significantly accelerated its attempts to consolidate stability and strengthen its influence in the region, placing major emphasis on the economic component of relations.

\* Overall, the dynamic developing in and around Central Asia is causing China to make constant adjustments to the assessment criteria with respect to the threats to its interests in the region and, accordingly, to the algorithms for reaction to them. Today, as before, Beijing looks at the region not only with a view to the possibilities for strengthening its positions, but also in the context of the need to react appropriately to real and potential threats to its security.

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# Chinese Security Interests in Central Asia

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## Introduction

The collapse of the USSR created a new geopolitical situation close to the western borders of the People's Republic of China (PRC) which was viewed in quite different ways in Beijing. On the one hand, the fall of the Soviet Union opened up additional opportunities for China to expand its presence in Central Asia and, on the other hand, it was undoubtedly felt in Beijing that the emergence of these circumstances in this segment of post-Soviet space would be accompanied by painful processes which, in combination with the problems inherited from the Soviet-Chinese era, might have an extremely negative effect on the security of the Xinjiang-Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) and the PRC as a whole.

And, to this very day, China regards the situation in Central Asia not only as a new opportunity, but also as a set of potential threats to its own security. The dynamic of the processes developing in and around Central Asia is causing Beijing to make constant adjustments to the assessment criteria with respect to the threats to its interests in the region and, accordingly, to the algorithms for reaction to them. However, one of the fundamentally important components of China's regional strategy in the field of security is close cooperation with Russia.

Overall, looking at the development of the situation in and around Central Asia in the context of potential threats to the PRC's security, three key factors can be identified:

- collapse of the USSR;
- instability in Afghanistan;
- strengthened US presence.

## 1. Collapse of the USSR

Such an epoch-making event as the collapse of the Soviet Union and the creation of new independent states in Central Asia radically changed the alignment of forces and interests in and around the region, which was itself a destabilising factor for China, directly bordering as it does three Central Asian countries – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

The development of events in a way which was negative for Beijing might have been caused both by the problems inherited from the Soviet-Chinese era and by the emergence of new threats resulting from the change in the geopolitical situation in Central Asia. Under these circumstances, it was important for China above all not to allow sources of tension to develop on its western borders or the situation in the

XUAR to be exacerbated. The greatest preoccupation in Beijing was therefore with the following potential threats:

- intractability of border and territory questions;
- high level of military presence in border districts;
- increase in manifestations of Uyghur separatism.

### **Intractability of border and territory questions**

The shape of China's border with the Russian Empire, stretching for almost 7500 km, came about over several centuries and was basically established in the late 19th century. However, the Chinese authorities repeatedly expressed their disagreement with the line of the border and made territorial claims, first against Tsarist Russia and then against the Soviet Union. They considered sectors in the Far East, Transbaykal and Central Asia to be disputed.<sup>1</sup>

It was not until the mid-1980s that the political changes occurring in the Soviet Union and China first led to a relaxation of the positions of Moscow and Beijing and then also to agreement on sectors of the border in the Far East and Transbaykal. However, a final decision with respect to western (Central Asian) sectors of the Soviet-Chinese border about 3200 km long was interrupted by the events of 1991 in the Soviet Union and then by the collapse of the USSR.

The existence of undelimited sectors of border and disputed territory and the lack of an appropriate legal and contractual basis between China and the new post-Soviet states caused Beijing to be justifiably concerned about the situation, since it could lead to border conflicts. But, at the same time, there was also a wish in China to take advantage of the "favourable" circumstances arising after the collapse of the USSR to gain maximum benefit for itself in resolving border and territory disputes.

### **High level of military presence in border districts**

As a result of the Soviet-Chinese conflict in the early 1960s and the subsequent sharp deterioration in bilateral relations, China became viewed as one of the Soviet Union's "likely enemies". Therefore, in the late 1960s, large military groupings of the USSR Armed Forces were concentrated along the entire length of the Soviet-Chinese border.

Troops of the Central Asian Military District were deployed on the territory of the three soviet republics (Kazakh, Kyrgyz and (partly) Tajik SSRs) bordering the XUAR.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, some of the USSR's strategic nuclear arsenal was stationed there as a deterrent for China.<sup>3</sup> In the first half of the 1990s, with the border and territory disputes still not resolved, the rather high concentration of military might and the presence of nuclear weapons on territory adjacent to the XUAR could not fail to cause concern in Beijing.

### **Increase in manifestations of Uyghur separatism**

The problem of Uyghur separatism is deeply rooted in history. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Xinjiang again saw the gradual rise of Uyghur separatist activities aiming for secession from the PRC and the establishment of an independent state to be known as "East Turkestan".

It was quite obvious that the “perestroika” starting in the Soviet Union and the subsequent collapse of the USSR with the emergence of new independent states was a catalyst for the rise of a separatist mood in the XUAR. The very fact that ethnically and religiously similar peoples in Central Asia had gained sovereignty and established national states greatly influenced the mood of the local population in the XUAR, mainly Uyghurs.

Such a development of events in and around Xinjiang caused the PRC’s leadership quite serious concern.<sup>4</sup> This concern was also heightened by the fear of a repeat of the historical precedents whereby close neighbours play the “Uyghur card” and support national separatism.<sup>5</sup> All this could not fail to cause alarm in Beijing, especially in view of the presence in the Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan) of quite a large Uyghur diaspora, numbering 300 000 to 400 000 people.

### ***Chinese Security Policy***

Immediately after the collapse of the USSR, China was one of the first to recognise the new states of Central Asia and established diplomatic relations with them in early 1992<sup>6</sup> and, from the very start, Beijing set course toward a more rapid resolution of the problematic questions affecting China’s security interests, counting on the development of cooperation with Russia, which had enormous historical experience of presence in Central Asia.

#### **Settlement of border and territory questions**

First of all, China immediately took the initiative to resume the negotiations on border and territory problems which had started in the Soviet era. It was clear to the Chinese leadership that the fundamental principles of security, integrity and inviolability of the PRC’s territory would only be assured when the state borders had finally been determined, clearly marked and consolidated by treaties.

As early as the first half of 1992, China initiated bilateral consultations with Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan (owing to incipient civil war, Tajikistan practically dropped out of the negotiating process) with regard to the line of the borders and the disputed territories. In parallel with this, Beijing agreed to Moscow’s proposal to hold border negotiations on a multilateral basis. In September 1992, a working group was set up in Minsk (Belarus) which comprised a joint Russian, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Tajik delegation and a Chinese delegation (the so-called “4 + 1” formula).<sup>7</sup> During the negotiations, the understandings reached previously between the USSR and the PRC on border questions were confirmed. Subsequently, China settled on this position with each of the countries in bilateral agreements.

#### **Reduction in the level of military presence**

The question of a reduction in the level of military presence in the border regions was resolved in parallel with the border and territory problems within the “4 + 1” format working group. Beginning in 1993, this group began to operate on a permanent basis. By 1996, on the initiative of Beijing and Moscow, the conditions

had been created to allow the heads of the 5 states to sign an agreement in Shanghai “on confidence building in the military field in the border area”.<sup>8</sup> Within the framework of the so-called “Shanghai Five”, China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan had already reached agreement on the restrictions to be imposed on any military manoeuvres in the border areas and on the need to keep one another informed about troop activities within 100 km of the border.

In Moscow in April 1997, again in the “4 + 1” format, a second document of importance to China was signed – an agreement “on mutual reduction of armed forces in border areas”, introducing limits for ground and air forces within a 100-kilometre demilitarised zone. The restrictions were established such that the 130 000-strong grouping of PRC armed forces deployed in the XUAR was able to “face” the Russian, Kazakh, Kyrgyz and Tajik grouping, which was similar in numbers but only a joint grouping.<sup>9</sup>

Overall, the agreements reached in Shanghai and Moscow positively stimulated, first of all, the process of settling border questions, second, the expansion of Chinese cooperation with the Central Asian states and, third, the creation of a strategic alliance between Beijing and Moscow.

### **Fight against Uyghur separatism**

In order to cut off outside supplies to Uyghur separatist groupings in the XUAR, including those coming from Central Asia, in the early 1990s China strengthened its border protection and made it more difficult to enter its territory. The number of border details and posts was increased. The Chinese special forces established tight control of the routes along which “shuttles” had begun to visit the XUAR in large numbers with the collapse of the USSR.

In parallel with this, thanks to efforts of a political and diplomatic nature made in the early to mid-1990s, Beijing managed to enlist the support of the Central Asian countries in the fight against ethnic separatism.<sup>10</sup> Proposals for the prohibition of the activities of Uyghur separatist organisations on the territory of the Central Asian states were constantly voiced by Chinese officials during negotiations at many and varied levels and then included in documents governing bilateral relations.

Beijing also made efforts on a multilateral basis in the fight against Uyghur separatism. In 1996, on the initiative of China and with the agreement of Russia within the framework of the “Shanghai Five”, the “Uyghur question” was put on the agenda for discussion, resulting in the development and documentation of a general position. At the Almaty summit held in July 1998, the heads of state of the “Shanghai Five” confirmed the rejection of any manifestations of national separatism and the need to prohibit separatist activities on their territory.

Overall, it can be stated with a fair degree of confidence that, as a result of these active steps and occasional diplomatic pressure from China on a whole series of states in the region, a policy agreed in the 1990s between the PRC and the Central Asian countries was adopted and is currently being implemented with respect to the problem of Uyghur separatism. Furthermore, in the late 1990s, the Chinese leadership fundamentally changed its approach to this problem and began to regard it not just as a “purely” internal phenomenon, but also as a component part of the international terrorist movement, the fight against which requires joint efforts.



## **2. Instability in Afghanistan**

In the late 1990s, the unceasing armed conflict between opposing groupings in Afghanistan and the chaos ruling in the country began to have an ever greater negative effect on the situation in both Central Asia and the XUAR.

Although events in Afghanistan hardly had any effect on China in the first half of the 1990s, the arrival of the Taliban Movement on the Afghan military-political scene changed the situation considerably. The successes of the Taliban in armed conflict with other Afghan groupings and their seizure of power in the country in the second half of the 1990s created extremely favourable conditions for the invigoration of various kinds of extremist forces on the territory of Afghanistan. This, in its turn, had an ever greater negative effect directly on the situation in Central Asia and the XUAR.

In this respect, the fight against new threats have come to the forefront for China:

- international terrorism;
- Islamic radicalism and extremism;
- drugs trafficking.

It is of fundamental importance that, from 2001, China's fight against these threats was directly linked to the US presence in Central Asia and Afghanistan.

### **Intensification of international terrorism**

In the second half of the 1990s, the continuing instability in Afghanistan resulted in a concentration of various extremist groupings on Afghan territory, enjoying the comprehensive support of Al-Qaeda. This transformed the country into a base for international terrorism.

The arrival of members of Uyghur groupings from the XUAR was noted in Afghanistan, where they acquired combat experience, taking part in combat activities on the side of the Taliban and also undergoing training in Al-Qaeda camps.<sup>11</sup> Returning to Xinjiang, they took a very active part in armed actions against representatives of the Chinese authorities and also acted as instructors at training bases set up in inaccessible areas of the PRC. The basic method of combat used by the Uyghur fighters was terror. The leadership of the Uyghur separatists justifiably considered that the Taliban Movement and Al-Qaeda represented a real power capable of providing effective assistance in the creation of an independent Islamic state. Besides the XUAR, Uyghur fighters also used the experience they had gained in Afghanistan on the territory of the Central Asian countries and also in Chechnya in units run by the international terrorist Khattab.

### **Spread of Islamic radicalism and extremism**

The "Talibanisation" of Afghanistan was the main reason for the even more active spread of various kinds of radical Islamist organisations both in Central Asia and in Xinjiang itself,<sup>12</sup> the main ones being the Hisb ut-Tahrir al-Islami party<sup>13</sup> and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) grouping. The threat of Islamic radicalism and extremism was a real one for Beijing since, of about 17 million people living in

the XUAR, more than 60% of the total population of the region (about 10.5 million people) were followers of Islam.<sup>14</sup> The Chinese leadership were also seriously concerned by attempts by IMU fighters to make incursions onto the territory of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan in 1999 and 2000 with the support of Al-Qaeda. The scenario of collapse of the existing regimes in the countries of the Central Asian region and the rise to power of radical Islamists there could hardly fail to worry Beijing. Such a chain of events could destabilise the situation in Xinjiang, which, in its turn, would bring a real threat to the territorial integrity of China.

### **Growth in drugs trafficking**

In the early 1990s, Afghanistan became the largest world producer and supplier of opium and heroin. But, although the drugs trafficking from Afghanistan had practically no effect on China at that time, when the major threat was from the “Golden Triangle” region of southeast Asia, from the second half of the 1990s the situation changed significantly. The flow of narcotics from Afghanistan in a northerly direction through the Central Asian countries increased substantially.

The territory of Chinese Xinjiang then became more and more actively used for international drugs trafficking – Afghan heroin was going directly into the PRC and passing through the XUAR into Russian regions (Siberia and the Far East). Furthermore, Afghan drugs syndicates were purchasing precursors in Xinjiang (raw materials used in the production of heroin from opium).

Today narco-expansion from Afghanistan has taken on even greater dimensions. The production of narcotics in Afghanistan increased sharply following the arrival of troops of the anti-terrorist coalition in 2001. Kabul and the foreign military formations supporting it were incapable of rectifying this situation.<sup>15</sup> The flow of Afghan narcotics into Central Asia and the PRC is continuing to grow and represents an ever more serious threat to their security.

## ***Chinese Security Policy***

In the late 1990s, as the effect of negative factors increased in the XUAR and Central Asia as a result of the on-going military-political instability in Afghanistan, China significantly intensified cooperation with Russia and Central Asian countries. The threats originating from Afghanistan began to be viewed altogether, since they were feeding off each other. Beijing made efforts to form a strategic partnership with Moscow.

The encouragement of cooperation between China and Russia on security matters in Central Asia was also the result of the appointment, in 1996, of E Primakov as Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, bringing significant changes to the Kremlin’s foreign policy: the eastern aspects were strengthened considerably. Russia expressed the intention of developing a strategic partnership with China, which was officially announced in 1996 at a Russian-Chinese summit held in Moscow during the visit of the PRC President, Jiang Zemin.

In August 1999, at a “Shanghai Five” summit held in Bishkek, Beijing and Moscow called for the rapid establishment of a legal and contractual basis and the creation of mechanisms for cooperation between law enforcement bodies and special services for the suppression of terrorist and extremist manifestations, operational reactions

and the exchange of information. In December 1999, there was a meeting in Bishkek between leaders of law enforcement bodies and special services from China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, when a Memorandum on the Organisation of Practical Cooperation between these bodies was signed.

Even closer security cooperation between Beijing and Moscow in Central Asia began after the rise to power of V Putin in Russia. An important achievement of the Chinese-Russian partnership was the establishment in June 2001, on the basis of the Shanghai Five and with the participation of Uzbekistan, of a new multi-faceted international organisation – the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). On 15 June 2001, the SCO signed a Convention on the Fight against Terrorism, Extremism and Separatism. This convention envisaged even closer cooperation between the member states and also suggested that it would be possible subsequently to involve other countries in cooperation.

Overall, Beijing not only managed to achieve strategic understandings with its neighbours, but also became one of the key components in the incipient regional security system. It is important to note that, having embarked on a course of closer relations with Russia and the Central Asian countries, China also took a series of steps to develop military cooperation both within the framework of the SCO and in a bilateral format. In the 1990s, Beijing showed determined restraint in this matter, restricting itself to just the examination of common approaches and protocol measures. However, after the attempt by IMU fighters to make an armed incursion onto the territory of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan in 1999-2000, China began to provide the Central Asian states with practical military assistance.

In particular, in April 2000, during a visit by the Kazakh Minister of Defence to China, an understanding was reached on the provision of free military-technical assistance to Kazakhstan to the value of 1 million dollars.<sup>16</sup> In the summer of 2000, China urgently provided Uzbekistan with military-technical resources and equipment for anti-terrorist sub-units. Similar assistance was also provided to Kyrgyzstan. During a visit by a Chinese military delegation to Tajikistan, the Chinese representatives even expressed a wish to send sub-units of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (CPLA) "to repel a possible incursion by fighters of extremist groupings from Afghanistan".<sup>17</sup>

As cooperation developed, China gradually increased the scale of military assistance. In particular, on 5 March 2002 in Bishkek, the Kyrgyz Minister of Defence and the Deputy Chief of General Staff of the CPLA signed an agreement on the provision of additional military-technical assistance to Kyrgyzstan to the value of about 1.2 million dollars. In October 2002, joint Chinese-Kyrgyz military exercises took place for the first time in the history of cooperation between the two countries in order to develop mutual support in repelling notional incursions by terrorist groups.<sup>18</sup> In August 2003, in contiguous districts of China and Kazakhstan, the first joint anti-terrorist exercises (Cooperation - 2003) were held under the auspices of the SCO, involving more than 1000 Chinese, Russian, Kazakh, Kyrgyz and Tajik troops and also heavy military equipment and aviation. In August 2007, the Russian Chebarkul training area in Chelyabinsk Region hosted a military exercise (Peace Mission – 2007) of unprecedented scale, involving more than 1700 troops from the CPLA alone.

Overall, the nature of Chinese activities indicates that Beijing is continuing to display anxiety with respect to the threats arising out of an unstable Afghanistan and considers that events in that country may continue to have a negative effect on the situation in the PRC. It is no accident that, since 2005 and within the

framework of the SCO, a contact group known as “SCO - Afghanistan” has been operating with the active participation of Chinese representatives, providing a forum for direct consultation on the Afghan problem with Afghan officials. At a summit of the SCO member states held in August 2007 in Bishkek, President Karzai of Afghanistan was invited to the next meeting.

### **3. Strengthened US presence**

Before 2001, the US presence in Central Asia (unlike, for example, Eastern Europe and the Caucasus) was basically economic in nature and was viewed relatively calmly in Beijing.<sup>19</sup> The PRC leadership “in principle accepted the approaches made by Washington with a view to the development of market transformations in the Central Asian countries”.<sup>20</sup> However, the events of 11 September 2001 and the subsequent anti-terrorist operation conducted in Afghanistan under the aegis of Washington resulted in a fundamental strengthening of the United States presence, which changed the alignment of forces in the region into a configuration unfavourable to Beijing.

Furthermore, the so-called Coloured Revolution in Kyrgyzstan and the events in Uzbekistan in 2005 only confirmed the fears of the Chinese leadership in relation to “Washington’s real plans” in Central Asia and the possibilities for influencing the situation in a way which would be a potential worry for Beijing. Accordingly, China reviewed its system of priorities in assessing the threat to its security interests. China gave priority to the threats resulting in one way or another from the scale of the US presence:

- appearance of a large US military contingent in the region;
- veiled US political interference;
- expansion of US economic presence.

#### **Appearance of a large US military contingent**

The arrival of a large American military contingent for the first time on the western borders of China in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan was viewed with open disquiet in Beijing. These forces, plus the bases in Afghanistan, were, in the opinion of experts, quite sufficient, if necessary, to conduct local military operations and to control the western districts of China, especially in the XUAR,<sup>21</sup> where there is a whole series of strategically important facilities, including the “Lobnor” test range used for testing Chinese nuclear weapon. Furthermore, Washington was intensively pursuing military cooperation with the states in the region, which resulted in a breakdown in solidarity within the SCO and a certain political “drift” by some of the member states of the Organisation towards the USA.

Also, on a strategic level, the military presence of the United States in Central Asia and Afghanistan was regarded by Beijing as a possible lever for military-political influence on China as a potential rival not only in the region, but in the world as a whole. This, in its turn, prompted the Chinese leadership to look at this problem in the context of a policy being conducted by Washington with a view to establishing a monopolar model of the world order, which ran counter to China’s position with regard to the questions of global security.<sup>22</sup>

### **Veiled US political interference**

The American military presence in the region, in its turn, resulted in an expansion of US political influence in the Central Asian states. In order to gain control of the situation in Central Asia, making use of financial and political levers,<sup>23</sup> Washington was able to “loosen” the situation here using the so-called Coloured Revolutions. The events in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan in the spring of 2005 were seen by China as an extremely dangerous scenario with the development of events clearly regarded as a US aspiration eventually to gain a foothold in Central Asia. This, in Beijing’s view, would potentially allow Washington in the future to exert ever more significant influence on the socio-political situation in the PRC’s XUAR by playing the “Uyghur card” under the slogan of promoting democracy.

### **Expansion of US economic presence**

The US economic presence in Central Asia had already been noted in the mid-1990s, when Washington turned its attention to the hydrocarbon-rich Caspian region. American companies, mainly associated with the oil and gas industry, began activities in the Central Asian countries. It was in this period that the United States began to lobby for projects to transport hydrocarbon raw materials from Central Asia across the Caspian Sea and the Caucasus and on into Turkey, and through Afghanistan into Pakistan. However, Beijing did not at the time display any special concern about the activities of the USA in the region, since the diversification of hydrocarbon exports and the general development of market relations in the countries of the region under the “control” of Washington did not prevent (and in some cases even helped) China gradually to come to grips with Central Asia.

However, the policies implemented by the USA after 11 September 2001 under the slogan of unity of action by all the countries of the world against international terrorism clearly demonstrated to Beijing that Washington was not averse to a fundamental expansion of its economic presence. As can be imagined, particular misgivings arose in China as a result of perceived US attempts to exert control over strategic sectors of industry in the countries of the region. Subsequently, having gained a foothold in Central Asia and relying on its economic might, the United States would, it was believed, through the injection of finance acquire the ability to influence the political and economic situation in this segment of post-Soviet space to its own advantage.

## ***Chinese Security Policy***

Beijing reacted quite calmly, competently and appropriately to the new situation in Central Asia in late 2001 and demonstrated its readiness to use all of its potential to secure its interests in the region. Following the appearance of American bases on the territory of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan (SCO member countries), China reinforced its military grouping in the XUAR in order to secure its Central Asian and Afghan-Pakistani border. At the same time, Beijing intensified the development of cooperation with the Central Asian states with respect to security matters in order to create more stability and to develop practical mechanisms for cooperation.

Beijing placed major emphasis on strengthening the SCO as a distinctive counterweight to the American presence in the region and generally as a

mechanism for the implementation of Chinese interests here. There was first of all a need to expand the legal and contractual basis for regional cooperation within the framework of the SCO and to make it more effective. At the summit held in June 2002 in St Petersburg, a Charter was adopted for the Organisation on the initiative of China and Russia, laying down the rights and obligations of its members in view of the new situation in and around Central Asia. It was no accident that one of the key features of the text of this document was “a ban on any illegal activities directed against the interests of the SCO and on the implementation of appropriate measures for action in relation to member states of the SCO contravening the requirements of agreements concluded”.<sup>24</sup> The reason for placing emphasis on these aspects was a certain drop in the Central Asian states’ interest in cooperating with China and Russia within the framework of the SCO.

During the period of the “Coloured Revolutions” in the post-Soviet space, a steady trend towards further rapprochement between Beijing and Moscow was clearly noted and was based on the similarity of their assessments of the situation in Central Asia and in the world as a whole. In fact, China and Russia came out in favour of an expansion of membership of the SCO in order to strengthen the potential of the SCO and to give it greater international weight. In 2004 and 2005 the Organisation welcomed Mongolia, Iran, Pakistan, India with the status of observers. Meanwhile, Washington’s request to join the SCO as an observer was not even considered. Furthermore, at the anniversary summit of the SCO held in Astana (June 2005), Beijing and Moscow initiated the adoption of a declaration concerning the length of time American bases should remain in the region.

At the same time, Beijing was determined to develop the political and economic components of the SCO: a multilateral deepening of relations with the Central Asian states through support for political regimes and participation in large economic projects. From 2005, Beijing made a whole series of practical proposals to stimulate economic cooperation with the countries in the region. These initiatives envisaged the creation of a free trade zone and a regional infrastructure under the auspices of the SCO encouraging stable growth of reciprocal trade in goods and services, the reduction and gradual elimination of non-tariff barriers and the undertaking of large projects in transport, energy, telecommunications, agriculture, light industry and textiles.

While banking on the SCO, China also proceeded to implement certain programmes for the development of cooperation in bilateral format, including in the military sphere, although these were not widely advertised. It is typical that Beijing’s military policy was conducted selectively. The facts indicate that this was largely conditional upon the prospects for and degree of implementation of large economic projects in any Central Asian country. Graphic confirmation of this can be seen in China’s plans announced in November 2007 to supply munitions to the Turkmen army in 2008. This was to be supported by the allocation of interest-free credit to the extent of about 3 million dollars.<sup>25</sup> It is worthy of note that the decision to supply military-technical assistance to Turkmenistan came immediately after Beijing and Ashgabat had signed a general agreement on the implementation of a gas pipeline in 2009 between the two countries, supplying China for 30 years with up to 30 billion cubic metres of gas per annum.

## Conclusions

The sharp change in the geopolitical configuration in and around Central Asia in the early 1990s came as a considerable surprise to China. This, in its turn, meant that the PRC leadership at the time had no clear views with respect to policies in the region, including in the security sphere. Subsequently, the dynamics of the processes occurring in and around Central Asia lay behind the constant adjustments made by China to its assessment criteria with regard to threats to its security interests and, accordingly, to the mechanisms and algorithms of reaction to them. But, in any case, Beijing clearly understood that constructive cooperation with the countries of Central Asia in order to ensure stability in the region was a guarantee of security for China itself. Beijing's main efforts were concentrated on resolving problems inherited from the Chinese-Soviet era of relations and also arising as a result of the fall of the Soviet Union. At the same time, thanks to Beijing's persistence, a policy relating to the problem of Uyghur separatism agreed between the PRC and the Central Asian states was adopted and is still being implemented.

However, in the late 1990s, in the period when Beijing was becoming ever more interested in the resource and transit potential of Central Asia, the negative effect of the military-political situation in Afghanistan on the region and the PRC's XUAR was increasing. Under these conditions, China made a strategic gamble on partnership with Russia.

The basic elements of Beijing's strategy to protect its interests in Central Asia have now generally been conceptually determined. The strategy itself comprises, with the support of the SCO and in close partnership with Russia, involvement in the resolution of a whole range of security problems, attempts to develop close relations with the Central Asian countries and achievement of its strategic goals, which mainly relate to preventing the further strengthening of the presence of the USA and its allies and opening up the rich natural resources of Central Asia.

It is clear that the "Kosovo Precedent" and the unrest in Tibet are pushing China even more towards a search for new, including asymmetric, solutions to protect its security interests on regional and global levels and generally leading to an increase in the importance to Beijing of Central Asia, the SCO and Russia.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> According to Russian experts, the view had long been held in China that land once forming part of the Chinese state or to some degree dependent on it was considered to be part of its territory. If, in the process of historical evolution, such land had acquired independence or formed part of other states, it was regarded as "lost" territory. It was felt in Beijing that Tsarist Russia had used "inequitable" agreements to "detach" a considerable amount of Chinese land and that the Soviet Union was still holding land measuring a total of about 33,000 km<sup>2</sup>. 'PRC's border policy', "ChinaStar" information portal (Russia), <http://www.chinastar.ru/rus/1/5/5/>

<sup>2</sup> The Central Asian Military District (CAMD), as an independent strategic formation, was split off from the Turkestan Military District in 1969 following the armed conflict on the border in the Zhalanashkol district. At the time of the collapse of the USSR, there was a grouping of Soviet troops "facing China" on the territory of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, as follows: HQs of 40 Army (brought out of Afghanistan in 1989) and 1 Army Corps, 68 Motor Rifle Division, 78 Tank Division, 37 Airborne Brigade, 44 Missile Brigade, 645 Artillery

Regiment, 962 Rocket Artillery Regiment, three large equipment storage bases (5202, 5203 and 5204), an Air Defence Corps and an Air Force Corps. The CAMD had more combat potential than the troops of the Lanzhou and Xinjiang Military Districts of the Chinese People's Liberation Army deployed in the XUAR.

<sup>3</sup> Kazakhstan hosted 104 static SS-18 missiles with 1400 nuclear warheads and also 240 nuclear cruise missiles. M Sh Gubaydullina, B Zh Somzhurek, *Establishment of a legal basis for military-political cooperation between the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Russian Federation*, Moscow State University Information and Analysis Centre (Russia), 22 August 2007), <http://www.gzt.ru/business/2007/08/22>. Prior to 1993, Kazakhstan was formally a country with nuclear weapons. In 1993, having ratified the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START-1) and the Lisbon Protocol to the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty, Kazakhstan officially renounced its nuclear status. The question of nuclear weapons was eventually settled when Russia and Kazakhstan signed a special treaty concerning strategic nuclear forces temporarily deployed on Kazakh territory on 28 March 1994. When nuclear weapons were finally withdrawn from Kazakh territory, China, along with Russia, the USA and France announced that they would guarantee Kazakhstan's security.

<sup>4</sup> According to the Russian (formerly Kazakh) expert Vitaliy Khlyupin, the worrying situation in the XUAR was discussed at a meeting of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee's Politburo held in the autumn of 1991, when it was stated that "Xinjiang could become a power base for those aiming to overthrow the socialist system throughout the country. Troops deployed in the XUAR were put into a state of heightened combat readiness and the local government authorities in the autonomous region were given the major task in 1992 of 'crushing separatism'". V Khlyupin, *A triangular geopolitical explosion: Kazakhstan – China – Russia*, International Eurasian Institute for Economic and Political Research, Washington, 1999, [http://www.iicas.org/AIBOLIT/publ\\_Vtr\\_5.htm](http://www.iicas.org/AIBOLIT/publ_Vtr_5.htm).

<sup>5</sup> In the late 1940s, the leadership of the Kazakh SSR raised the question in the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union of the creation of an Uyghur Autonomous Region within the republic so as to cooperate with the liberation movement in Xinjiang, at that time under the control of the government of Chiang Kai-shek (Kuomintang (National Party)). This region was to act as a kind of rear base for the East Turkestan Republic proclaimed by the Uyghurs in part of Xinjiang in 1944. Later, in the early 1960s, when Soviet-Chinese relations had cooled, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union decided to establish a few settlements in the eastern districts of the Kazakh SSR for Uyghurs from the XUAR, who were then enlisted by the appropriate bodies to conduct anti-Chinese propaganda.

<sup>6</sup> Diplomatic relations with the states of CA were established in the following order: Uzbekistan – 2 January 1992, Kazakhstan – 3 January 1992, Tajikistan – 4 January 1992, Kyrgyzstan – 5 January 1992, Turkmenistan – 6 January 1992.

<sup>7</sup> For all the new states, except Russia, this format was a fundamentally important condition: the Central Asian countries did not have the necessary records, legal, methodological, historical and other documents. The "joint delegation" format allowed Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan to obtain the necessary documents and the relevant minutes of Soviet-Chinese negotiations from the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

<sup>8</sup> The first article of this agreement provides as follows: "The military forces of the Parties deployed in the border area, as an integral part of the military forces of the Parties, shall not be used to attack another Party, conduct any military activity threatening the other Party and upsetting calm and stability in the border area". E Orazalin, *Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: principles, problems and prospects. Ways to improve cooperation mechanisms*, Institute of World Economics and Politics at the Foundation of the First President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Almaty, 2007 pp 59-60).

<sup>9</sup> V Khlyupin. Idem.

<sup>10</sup> In September 1995, during a visit to Beijing, the Kazakh President N Nazarbayev agreed to sign a joint statement with the President of the PRC Jiang Zemin, in which it was stated that the two countries "were against national separatism in any form and would not allow any organisations or forces to take part in such separatist activities directed against the other country". S I Lunev, 'Role of external factors in Central Asia', Personal internet page, <http://www.ufalaw.narod.ru/4/mp/lunev/Lunev-glava5.htm>

<sup>11</sup> In November 2001, the Vice Premier of the PRC State Council Qian Qichen told UN representatives that about 1000 Chinese Muslims had undergone training in Al-Qaeda camps in Afghanistan and Pakistan and about 100 Uyghurs had fought directly on the side



of the Taliban. K L Syroyezhkin. *Problems of modern China and security in Central Asia*, Almaty, 2006, p 246).

<sup>12</sup> In the view of Kazakh experts, representatives of the following organisations of radical persuasion began to operate to one extent or another in the Central Asian countries in the early 1990s: the Muslim Brotherhood, a network of groups entitled the Social Reform Society, the Islamic Call Committee, Al-Igasa, the Asian Muslim Committee, HAMAS, the religious tendency Akromiya in Uzbekistan, the Centre for Islamic Development in Kyrgyzstan, Adolat Uyushmasi and the extremist tendency Tovba. 'Central Asia and terrorist organisations – 2004 (review)', *Gazeta.kz* (Kazakhstan), 5 August 2004.

<sup>13</sup> The fact that propaganda was being conducted on the territory of the XUAR with calls for the establishment of a “caliphate” is confirmed by the testimony of a whole series of Hisb ut-Tahrir al-Islami activists detained by the law enforcement bodies in Uzbekistan in 1999 and 2000. It can be seen from documents taken from them that the ten major cities of Xinjiang had primary cells of this religious organisation. In the administrative centre of the autonomous region of Urumchi alone, subversion was conducted by more than 20 leaders of the central unit and about 150 ordinary members. ITAR-TASS Information Agency (Russia), 30 July 2000.

<sup>14</sup> According to Russian experts, the excesses in confessional policy permitted during the years of the Cultural Revolution in China gave rise to protests on the part of the Muslim population of the XUAR and resulted in a rise in the number of supporters of Islamic radicalism there. The increasing politicisation of Islam throughout the world in the late 1980s saw the birth of illegal Muslim organisations and sects in Xinjiang, which, together with the Uyghur separatist movement, began to come out actively against Beijing policies. In early 1990, local Islamists announced the start of a holy war – “Jihad”. So, in Chinese Xinjiang, a kind of symbiosis was created between Islamic radicalism and Uyghur separatism, the common aim of which was to establish an independent state. 'From Xinjiang to Kashmir', *Novoye Vremya* Journal (Russia), No 40, 1999).

<sup>15</sup> A Lukin. 'Shanghai cooperation organisation: what now?', *Russia in Global Politics* Journal (Russia), No 3, 2007.

<sup>16</sup> I Komissina, A Kurtov. *China and Central Asia: problems and prospects for cooperation / New Eurasia: Russia and neighbouring countries*, Russian Institute for Strategic Research, Moscow, 2003, p 31.

<sup>17</sup> I Komissina, A Kurtov. Idem.

<sup>18</sup> 'China provides military assistance to Bishkek', *Military-Industrial Courier* Weekly (Russia), No 17, 12-18 May 2004, [http://www.vpk-news.ru/article.asp?pr\\_sign=archive.2004.34.articles.weapon\\_01](http://www.vpk-news.ru/article.asp?pr_sign=archive.2004.34.articles.weapon_01)

<sup>19</sup> Regarding the American presence in the region as a potential threat to the security of China, it is essential to bear in mind the dual nature of relations between the PRC and the USA, still based on a symbiosis of misgivings and mutual benefit. V Mikheyev, 'Security problems in Chinese foreign policy', *National security problems in Chinese foreign policy*, Russian Academy of Sciences Institute for World Economics and International Relations, Moscow, 2005, pp 14-15.

<sup>20</sup> K L Syroyezhkin, *Problems of modern China and security in Central Asia*, Almaty, 2006, p 197.

<sup>21</sup> K L Syroyezhkin. Idem, p 245.

<sup>22</sup> V Mikheyev. Idem, pp 14-15.

<sup>23</sup> According to the New York Times of 4 December 2005, in the 2005 fiscal year, the USA spent more than 75.5 million dollars on “promoting democracy” (including financing non-governmental organisations and independent media) in the Central Asian countries.

<sup>24</sup> K L Syroyezhkin. Idem, p 215.

<sup>25</sup> 'China arms and clothes Turkmen soldiers for \$3 million', *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* (Russia), 29 November 2007, <http://www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php4?st=11962839>



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