

HAUNTED BY HISTORY: CHINA AND ITS NORTHWESTERN NEIGHBOURS

Eric A. Hyer

Department of Political Science, Brigham Young University, United States. E-mail: eric_hyer@byu.edu

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Resumen: China's current relations with its northwestern neighbours, Russia, Mongolia, and the newly independent states of Central Asia are influenced by the shadow of the past that is cast over the present. To what degree does this checkered past fundamentally determine the possibility of close, strategic cooperation now and in the future? China's important and complex relationship with Russia will be considered first, followed by an analysis of China-Mongolian relations and finally China's relationship with the Central Asian status with which it shares a common border. The important American factor is also considered. The article concludes that despite the closer relations that are developing between China and its northwestern neighbours, the historical legacy of domination, unequal treaties, and ethnic conflict will haunt the significant improvement in relations.

Palabras clave: Central Asian States, China, international relations, Mongolia, Russia, United States.

Differences deeply embedded in a long history of conflict and territorial disputes complicated China-Russian relations long before Communist regimes came to power in either China or Russia. Czarist Russian expansion into regions claimed by China's Qing dynasty (1644-1911) eventually resulted in confrontation along the frontier that separated these two empires. The two powers concluded the Treaty of Nerchinsk in 1689, delimiting the Far Eastern sector of the China-Russia boundary, in an effort to avoid further conflict. During China's decline in the nineteenth century, Russia continued to advance into the Far East. Concluded in 1858, the Treaty of Aigun redrew the boundary between the two

countries along the Amur and Ussuri Rivers, but left territory east of the rivers in "joint possession" to be settled in the future. Two years later Russia prevailed on China to negotiate the Treaty of Beijing. This treaty granted the territory between the Amur and Ussuri Rivers and the Sea of Japan to Russia¹.

Czarist Russia also expanded into Central Asia where China claimed control over the area that is today China's autonomous region of Xinjiang. The 1864 Chuguchak Protocol and the 1881 Treaty of Saint Petersburg (Treaty of Ili) defined generally the boundary between Russian Central Asia and areas where China asserted control. The boundary was eventually demarcated except for one sector in the Pamir Mountains. Russian troops occupied this area in the early 1890s, and the Qing court protested by sending Russia a note stating that it retained its claim to the region even if it did not maintain a garrison there². Following China's defeat in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895, Russia prevailed on a weakened China to grant it the right to build a railroad across Manchuria to Vladivostok, Russia's principle naval base in East Asia, and a southern spur running southward through Manchuria to the Chinese port city of Lushun (Port Arthur). This legacy of Russian encroachment into regions that the Chinese consider their territory continued to plague China-Soviet relations even into the final decade of the twentieth century when the boundary was finally resolved by new treaties.

Following the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, China and the Soviet Union signed a treaty of friendship and alliance. Thousands of Russian advisers went to China to train Chinese technicians, and Chinese students were sent to the Soviet Union to study. With

time, however, China's growing resentment of Soviet domination, ideological differences between the two countries, and boundary disputes left over from the past sowed the seeds of conflict that led to the Sino-Soviet split in 1960, and eventually a border war in 1969.

TERRITORIAL ISSUES IN CHINA-SOVIET RELATIONS

Following the 1917 October Revolution, the new Soviet government issued the Karakhan Manifestos of 1919 and 1920 which renounced all the treaties concluded by the czarist government with the Qing dynasty. However, new boundary treaties were not a high priority in subsequent negotiations with China's republican government established after the 1911 revolution, but rather dealt with the issues of outer Mongolian independence and the Chinese Eastern Railway controlled by Russia. Mao Zedong raised territorial issues in early 1950 while he was in Moscow negotiating the Sino-Soviet alliance³. Several times during the next ten years China raised the boundary question with the Soviet Union, but in 1960, with the open split in the Sino-Soviet alliance, the boundary dispute became a major source of bilateral tension.

As ideological and political tensions escalated between the Soviet Union and China, the Soviets grew concerned that the boundary question had become such a salient issue in Sino-Soviet relations. In May 1963 the Soviet Union proposed holding boundary consultations. At the talks held in February 1964, Mao prevented progress toward an agreement when he raised "historical" issues. He asserted that during the czarist period, China had ceded more territory to Russia than to any other imperialist country and that czarist Russia had expanded its borders at the expense of China. Mao stated that "this list is too long and we have not presented our bill for this yet"⁴. The Russians responded by accusing China of betraying socialist internationalism and fostering a Maoist personality cult. China accused Russia of Soviet imperialism and abandoning Marxism. After this polemical exchange, the two powers made no progress on boundary questions.

During China's Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the boundary dispute was exacerbated by the hyper-nationalistic and hyper-vigilant Red Guards. In March 1969 a military confrontation

at Zhenbao (Damansky) Island in the Ussuri River proved that the boundary dispute could very well be the cause of a larger military conflict. In the wake of the March clashes, tensions also rose along the border in Xinjiang, and during the summer of 1969 several other military incidents occurred. At the time, Moscow even considered a preemptive nuclear strike on China, but boundary negotiations were initiated and a larger war was avoided⁵. Both China and the Soviet Union understood the real possibility of escalation and agreed to renew boundary negotiations.

BOUNDARY SETTLEMENT

During the 1970s and early 1980s the two countries made no progress toward a boundary settlement. However, with the rise of Mikhail Gorbachev in the mid-1980s, Chinese-Soviet relations began to improve. A significant breakthrough came when Gorbachev, speaking in July 1986 in Vladivostok, showed a clear willingness to improve China-Soviet relations and publicly stated that Russia was willing to make necessary compromises to achieve a boundary settlement. This significant leadership change, and Russia's new conciliatory attitude toward a boundary settlement, set the stage for renewed negotiations and an eventual settlement of the boundary⁶.

Coupled with Gorbachev's Vladivostok initiative was the Soviet Union's growing willingness to withdraw its military from Afghanistan, which it had invaded in 1979, end its support for Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia, and dramatically reduce its troop strength along the Chinese-Russia border and in Mongolia. Progress in satisfying these three Chinese preconditions for normalization of relations resulted in the first Sino-Soviet summit in twenty years in May 1989 when Gorbachev and Deng Xiaoping met in Beijing, formally ending the thirty-year-old Sino-Soviet split.

Mutual interest in improving bilateral relations and the absence of ideological shackles created an atmosphere of cooperation and resulted in a relatively quick resolution of the boundary dispute. Following Gorbachev's May 1989 trip to Beijing, negotiations moved forward rapidly, and they signed a boundary treaty in May 1991 covering the sectors on which they had reached a compromise agreement when Chinese president Jiang Zemin traveled to Moscow. The

newly established Supreme Soviet of the Russian Federation ratified the accord on 3 February 1992, and the Standing Committee of the Chinese National Peoples Congress ratified it on 25 February⁷. Russia and China concluded a treaty delimiting the short fifty-three-kilometer boundary to the west of Mongolia in September 1994. In April 1999 demarcation of the entire Chinese-Russian boundary was finally completed, with the exception of the boundary at the confluence of the Amur and Ussuri rivers complicated by a few islands that remained in dispute for another decade; the detailed maps and comprehensive documentation weighed more than thirty kilograms⁸.

In October 2004, Russia and China signed of an agreement settling the river boundary at the confluence of the Amur and Ussuri, finally settling the 4,300 kilometer Chinese-Russian boundary that was disputed for over three centuries. In a joint statement, Russian president Vladimir Putin and China's president Hu Jintao asserted that the agreement provided "favorable conditions for the long-term, healthy and stable development of China-Russia strategic partnership of cooperation." The PRC Foreign Ministry statement concluded that the treaty will "enrich the content of China-Russia strategic cooperative partnership"⁹.

POST-COLD WAR DYNAMICS

With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, China-Russian relations entered a new phase. This sudden and fundamental shift in the global balance of power made it imperative for China and Russia to develop closer relations. In the mid-1990s, Chinese and Russian leaders formed a Sino-Russian "strategic partnership" to counterbalance American unilateralism in world affairs. These closer military and strategic relations between China and Russia are due in part to both countries' intensely nationalistic response to American power in the post-Cold War world. China and Russia, both undergoing a difficult transition from Communism to a market economy, have bruised national identities that make them natural allies against America's global hegemony.

In 1992 President Boris Yeltsin of Russia and President Jiang Zemin of China both began promoting a strategic partnership between China and Russia. This new focus on China-Russia

cooperation resulted in several high-level meetings and agreements. The two leaders formally announced the strategic partnership during a summit meeting held in April 1996 in Shanghai. The two countries now have a thriving military relationship, with Russia's cash-strapped military industries supplying China's technologically backward military with advanced jet fighters, missiles, and naval vessels. In 1998 China ranked second, after India, as the major purchaser of Russian military equipment; in the last five years, Beijing has spent over five billion dollars to acquire Russian hardware. Besides military hardware, Russia also has sold China production technologies and has helped China develop new weapons systems by sending Russian scientists to work in China's defense industries. Recently, Beijing and Moscow announced that the Chinese and Russian militaries will hold joint maneuvers on Chinese territory in the latter half of 2005. According to Russian sources, the maneuvers will not include large numbers of Russian troops, but will include state-of-the-art weapons, including submarines and strategic bombers¹⁰. Many assume that these new developments represent a sea change in Chinese-Russian relations. Clearly this is an attempt by China and Russia to balance power by breaking American hegemony; China considers this hegemony the primary source of its growing sense of "uncertainty, instability, and insecurity" and Russia desperately wants to rehabilitate its profile in the world. However, this also begs the question: given the checkered past of Chinese-Russian relations, haunted by centuries of suspicion, betrayal, and military conflict, is it possible for China and Russia to develop true "strategic cooperation" in an attempt to undermine American hegemony?

The present China-Russia strategic partnership is unlike the Sino-Soviet alliance of the 1950s. China and Russia are not attempting to establish a formal military alliance. Nevertheless they are cooperating closely to improve military-to-military relations and to develop confidence-building measures. Russia and China hope to make themselves more secure in the face of the threat both countries feel from the United States. But will their concerns over American power be sufficient to overcome the decades of hostility and centuries of suspicion in the same way that China's and the United States' perceived threat from the Soviet Union in the 1960s provided enough incentive for both to compromise on

Taiwan and abandon Vietnam in order to establish strategic cooperation?

Economic relations have improved more slowly than the military relationship. Trade over the past several years has stagnated at 5 to 6 billion dollars annually, only 2 percent of China's total foreign trade. However, a robust border trade has developed over the past decade, and several border towns have become "open cities" to facilitate this dynamic local trade. The greatest potential for cooperation is in developing the energy sector. China's rapid economic development during the past several decades has increased its demand for imported oil and gas. Experts estimate that China will import 3.6 million barrels of oil annually by 2010. The Russian Far East has vast underdeveloped oil and gas fields. However, during its last visit to China in October 2004, President Putin turned down China's proposal for an oil pipeline from western Siberia to China and no agreement was reached on an eighteen billion dollar project to pipe Russian gas to China. Putin made it clear that any such cooperation on energy development must "meet our own national interests"¹¹.

Russians living in the Russian Far East are reluctant to develop closer relations with China due to their apprehension about the socioeconomic consequences of a stronger Chinese presence in the region. This apprehension is rooted in the deep historical and cultural differences, and the history of conflict along the lengthy mutual boundary. The demographic imbalance in the Far Eastern regions of Russia and northeastern China is also a point of concern. The Russian Far East has a population of roughly 8 million, while northeastern China has a population of approximately 100 million; the Russians fear Chinese immigration will cause them to become a minority in their own country. Regional leaders in the Russian Far East have been more skeptical than leaders in Moscow about developing closer strategic and economic relations with China. They would rather develop closer relations with Japan, South Korea, and the United States¹².

Although now China and Russia share common strategic concerns and some complementary economic interests, they will not easily overcome the deeply rooted historical and geopolitical legacy of conflict. Many inherent

tensions are simply due to the fact that China and Russia share a long border. More fundamental causes of friction are the result of China's dynamic economic growth and Russia's precipitous economic decline, resulting in a shift in the balance of power between the two countries over the long term. Russian anxiety, especially in the Russian Far East, over what is perceived as a demographic time bomb just across the border in northeastern China will stymie economic cooperation and integration for the foreseeable future. Nonetheless, if China and Russia effectively manage the inherent tensions in their bilateral relations, "strategic cooperation" is possible. One factor that will determine the closeness of Russia-China relations is the relationship between the United States and China and between the United States and Russia. Certainly for economic reasons, both countries would value a better relationship with the United States more than a closer relationship with each other. However, concern over American hegemony or unilateralism could cause a closer China-Russia strategic relationship that may form the cornerstone of an anti-American coalition seeking to undermine U.S. influence in important regions of the world, especially Northeast Asia.

CHINA - MONGOLIA

Ever since Russia pushed into the Far East and China extended its domination north of the Great Wall, Mongolia has been one arena of the "great game" in the struggle for empire between Russian and China. Mongolia's leader in the early 1900s, a Buddhist lama, characterized Mongolia's geopolitical position as a "critical condition, like piled up eggs, in the midst of neighboring nations"¹³. Russians have historically regarded Mongolia as a buffer state, while the Chinese have viewed Mongolia as historically part of China. After the fall of the Manchu/Qing dynasty in 1911, Mongolia asserted, and has since preserved, its independence as a nation in the midst of two hegemonic powers. Czarist Russian policy sought to preserve Mongolian autonomy from China but did not support Mongolian independence in order to maintain Russia-China relations and not alarm Japan. After 1917 the Soviet Union did eventually support Mongolian independence but was not always firm in its support. China, on the contrary, persistently attempted to absorb Mongolia into the new Chinese nation-state¹⁴.

MONGOLIAN INDEPENDENCE

Following the October 1911 Chinese revolution, the Mongolians rejected inclusion in the newly established Republic of China. Mongolia had enjoyed a special relationship with the Manchu court, and the Mongolians believed that Mongolia was not an integral part of China. At the time, the Chinese maintained that Mongolia was an integral part of China, but the Chinese did not have the military strength to force the integration of Mongolia into the newly established Republic of China.

Czarist Russia did not recognize Mongolia's independence but it did provide Mongolia significant political, financial, and military support. From 1911 to 1915, Russia, Mongolia, and China engaged in convoluted negotiations, including frequent secret bilateral talks, and military posturing that eventually led to a June 1915 tripartite agreement that afforded the broadest possible "autonomy" for outer Mongolia. The agreements included provisions on trade, taxes, and other matters and paved the way for Mongolia's eventual total independence from China. A neutral zone between outer and inner Mongolia was established, but no boundary agreement was concluded¹⁵.

Following the 1917 Russian Revolution, China renewed its efforts to assert control over Mongolia and under pressure from Beijing, Mongolia "petitioned" for abolition of Mongolia's autonomy in November 1919. This reassertion of Chinese control did not last long, however; Mongolia became a battlefield in the Russian civil war and the White Russians drove the Chinese from Mongolia in 1921 –only to be defeated themselves at the hands of the Bolsheviks.

THE MONGOLIAN PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC

With the blessings of the Buddhist lama who was the leader of Mongolia at the time, and with the support of the Soviet Union, Mongolian revolutionaries established a Marxist regime in 1921. But the Soviet Union, like czarist Russia, still viewed Mongolia as a bargaining chip in its relations with China. In May 1924 The Soviet Union withdrew its support for the revolutionary government in Mongolia and recognized China's "full sovereignty" over outer Mongolia. However, a month later, following the death of the supreme lama, Mongolia declared its

independence as the Mongolian People's Republic (MPR), becoming the first Soviet satellite. China's internal problems prevented it from reasserting control; the most it could do was protest the Soviet-Mongolian agreements.

Mongolian independence was bolstered two decades later at the Yalta Conference when the Allies agreed that the status quo in Mongolia should be preserved following the war. Following a plebiscite in Mongolia that overwhelmingly supported independence, the Nationalist Chinese government grudgingly agreed to recognize outer Mongolia's independence in 1946. Inner Mongolia was already fairly *sinified* and was subsequently partitioned into several different Chinese provinces by the Republic of China before it was reunited as the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Regions after the People's Republic of China was established in 1949.

MONGOLIA AND THE PRC

Chinese Communists were also reluctant to acknowledge Mongolian independence and harbored irredentist sentiments. Mao and Stalin discussed the status of the Mongolian People's Republic during this first Sino-Soviet summit in Moscow in February 1950. Mao stated his desire for the eventual reunion of Mongolia with China and raised the boundary issues as well. The MPR and the Soviet Union were both apprehensive about the PRC's ambitions in Mongolia and insisted on a Chinese declaration acknowledging Mongolian independence¹⁶. During the negotiations with Mao, Stalin insisted on a Chinese declaration acknowledging the MPR's independence (despite the fact that the Republic of China had recognized Mongolia's independence in 1946)¹⁷. Despite that declaration, China raised the issue again in October 1954 during the first trip of Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev to China after the death of Stalin. Zhou Enlai broached the issue with Khrushchev. Khrushchev, according to his memoirs, declined to speak for Mongolia but did not voice strong opposition to growing Chinese influence in Mongolia¹⁸.

However, as Sino-Soviet relations deteriorated in the late 1950s, Mongolia was caught in the middle of the Sino-Soviet dispute. Mongolia's initial wish was to remain neutral and officials believed that the dispute would not influence Mongolia's relations with the PRC or the Soviet

Union. But its precarious geopolitical circumstances made it impossible to remain neutral for long. Following the open split between the USSR and PRC after the October 1961 Twenty-second Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Mongolia adopted a pro-Soviet position.

Beijing appealed to Mongolian nationalism in a bid to bolster its influence among Mongolians. During the commemoration of the 800th anniversary of Genghis Khan's birth in 1962, the Mongolians dedicated a statue at a location believed to be his birthplace. The PRC also celebrated the event and supported the MPR festivities. Beijing, with both nationalistic and racist overtones, portrayed Genghis Khan as a positive "cultural force." Not surprisingly, the Soviets criticized the celebrations. They characterized Genghis Khan as a reactionary "who had overrun, looted, and burned most of what was then Russia" and said his "bloody invasions" were a "great historical tragedy"¹⁹.

LINGERING SUSPICIONS

In December 1962, MPR leader Tsedenbal traveled to Beijing and concluded an agreement to settle the Sino-Mongolian boundary. After demarcating the boundary, a treaty was signed in Ulaanbaatar in 1964; this boundary agreement closed a long chapter on Chinese irredentism toward Mongolia and represented what seemed to be China finally accepting an independent Mongolia²⁰.

In the 1990s, Mongolia-China relations have entered a new period of flux and possible instability. However, China and Mongolia remain extremely sensitive about their historical relationship. Democratic Mongolia could emerge as the focal point for a reinvigorated pan-Mongolian nationalism that would surely alarm China. In recent years, Chinese officials in Inner Mongolia have taken measures to dampen a smoldering Mongolian nationalist movement. Russia, on the other hand, views Mongolia as a bulwark against an awakening Chinese dragon that is becoming an economic and military power. And apparently the legacy of the Chinese empire lingers in the minds of Chinese. In 1992 China's State Security Ministry revived the specter of Chinese irredentism when it issued a statement saying that: "As of now, the Mongolian region comprises three parts that belong to three countries" –the Russian regions

of Tuva and Buryatia, Mongolia, and the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region– but "the Mongolian region has from ancient times been Chinese territory"²¹. Since the early 1990s, Mongolians have carefully considered their geopolitical position between an economically weak Russia and a dynamic China. Ever vigilant against Chinese ambitions in Mongolia, whether territorial, political, or economic, Mongolia has actively sought to strengthen its ties with Europe and the United States in order to balance the threat it feels from the "rise of China."

CHINA - CENTRAL ASIA

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, China faced the challenge of managing bilateral relations with the newly independent Central Asian states. The independence of these states exacerbated long- smoldering ethnic unrest in China's Xinjiang Autonomous Region that borders several of the Central Asian states. After establishing relations with the Central Asian republics in early 1992, China and its new Central Asian neighbors signed more than twenty agreements on boundaries and economic and cultural cooperation within a short period.

BOUNDARY SETTLEMENTS

The China-Central Asian boundary was originally established by "unequal" treaties concluded in the final decades of the Qing dynasty. The only area that remained unsettled by treaty was the boundary along the Pamir Mountains that divided China and Tajikistan. According to the Chinese, by these treaties, Czarist Russia gained 440,000 square kilometers of territory at the expense of China²². By the latter 1980s, China and the Soviet Union began moving forward toward a new boundary settlements in Central Asia. The outstanding issues remained complex and both sides agreed to postpone a final settlement in this region until after negotiations were completed for the eastern sector Sino-Russian boundary.

However, with the breakup of the Soviet Union, China faced negotiating treaties with the newly independent Central Asian states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. China was willing to accept the unequal treaties as the basis for new boundary agreements and negotiations moved forward fairly smoothly²³.

Following several years of negotiations, in July 1996, China concluded a boundary agreement with Kyrgyzstan. China and Kyrgyzstan have since concluded agreements to open new border crossings and construct a rail line linking to two countries. Two years later in July 1998, leaders signed a Sino-Kazakhstan boundary treaty. This marked the comprehensive settlement of "questions unresolved by history" concerning the unsettled 1,700-kilometer Sino-Kazakh boundary²⁴. China consistently asserted that Russia violated the 1884 Sino-Russian Kashgar Boundary treaty of 1892 and occupied more than 20,000 square kilometers of Chinese territory in the Pamir Mountains along China's border with Tajikistan. Nevertheless, during the 1990s the leaders of the two nations negotiated many agreements, including an agreement to open a road connecting China and Tajikistan to ease border trade²⁵. And finally in 2002, China and Tajikistan concluded a treaty settling their Pamir Mountain boundary when China relinquished its claim to approximately 27,000 square kilometers of mountainous territory. According to the Chinese Foreign Ministry report, this "symboliz[ed] the final and complete solution of the China-Tajikistan boundary question"²⁶.

REGIONAL STRATEGIC CONCERNS

The Central Asian states see China as a potential economic and demographic threat. One concern is China's dramatic population growth. With its large territory and abundant natural resources, Central Asia is logically a place for China to covet. Approximately 500,000 Chinese have already settled in Central Asia, and this number will increase over the coming years. Chinese traders have purchased considerable amounts of real estate in Kyrgyzstan. Kazakh officials believe that if the flood of Chinese coming to Kazakhstan continues, Chinese will overwhelm Kazakhstan in ten to fifteen years²⁷.

China is also very apprehensive about instability along the border²⁸. Following the Shanghai summit, in April 1996, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan signed an agreement with China on confidence-building measures along the border. In April 1997 they agreed to withdraw military forces 100 kilometers along the 3,500-kilometers boundary. A third agreement in July 1998 emphasized cooperation to dampen ethnic unrest in the region. Each government pledged to take steps to fight

against arms smuggling and not to allow its territory to be used for terrorist bases or activities undermining the national sovereignty, security, and social order of any of the five countries²⁹. To facilitate closer cooperation, in 2001 the Shanghai Cooperation Organizations was established with the addition of Uzbekistan as a member of what had previously been a more informal forum for multilateral negotiations and cooperation.

ECONOMIC INTERESTS

In the 1990s Central Asia quickly became an important center of China's economic attention as part of the revival of the "Silk Road" economy in the wake of the Soviet collapse. Chinese economic reformers in Xinjiang have argued that the "geographical, human and cultural advantages" of Xinjiang's ethnic ties with Central Asia will facilitate western China's economic development due to "complimentary resources and markets"³⁰. Border trade is an important part of the growing economic ties. In 1989 Xinjiang's trade with Soviet Central Asia amounted to only \$118.5 million. Trade has continued to grow and now accounts for 60 percent of the region's foreign trade. China is now Kazakhstan's major trading partner, and 25 percent of Kyrgyzstan's foreign trade is with the PRC. China has emerged as the second-largest trading partner for the Central Asian countries, significantly displacing Russian influence in the region³¹.

The development of oil and gas is an area of important strategic economic cooperation. In 1994 China signed an agreement with Turkmenistan to construct a Turkmenistan-China gas pipeline. In 1997 China won the bid to develop Kazakhstan's Uzen oil field and construct a 3,000-kilometer oil pipeline from Kazakhstan's Caspian oilfields at Tengiz to Xinjiang and then to China's eastern coast. Additionally, China signed agreements with Kazakhstan to develop the Aktyubinsk oil fields along the Russian-Kazakh border³². Total Chinese investment in developing oil resources in Kazakhstan is estimated at \$9.7 billion, equivalent to 50 percent of Kazakhstan's gross national product. These agreements are a clear indication that China and Central Asia are developing an important economic and strategic link. China not only is seeking to ensure its energy security for the future, but also is attempting to shift the focus of Central Asia's

global vision toward China and away from Russia and Turkey³³.

ETHNIC UNREST

Since the independence of the Central Asian states in 1991, ethnic unrest in Xinjiang has been a major concern for Beijing. Continuing sources of tension in China-Central Asian relations are the sensitive issues of pan-Turkic nationalism and the Xinjiang separatist movements. Historically, China has struggled to maintain central government control over the region.

Present Chinese concerns are rooted in the not too distant past when Russian and Soviet intrigue and local independence movements were constant sources anxiety. The Uighurs wanted a homeland free of Chinese influence and established a short lived Eastern Turkistan Republic in 1944, in what is now Xinjiang³⁴. In 1962 China crushed a revolt by tens of thousands of Kazakhs who then fled across the border to Soviet Kazakhstan³⁵. Chinese now feel that the smoldering independence movements in Xinjiang are the main threat to stability in western China and after September 11, 2001 have vigorously suppressed what they consider Islamic terrorist organizations that do receive sympathy and support from organizations in Central Asia. An estimated one million PLA troops are stationed in Xinjiang; with no external threat, they are mainly there to deal with any ethnic unrest³⁶. In late October 2001, just weeks before September 11th, a large military exercise was conducted in Kashgar designed to signal local Uygurs of the government's commitment to meet any resistance to Beijing's control with overwhelming force.

A central issue in most all communiqués and agreements between China and other Central Asian states is a commitment not to support any separatist or terrorist movements. Both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, with 200,000 and 80,000 Uighurs respectively, have agreed to suppress such movements. Kyrgyzstan has prevented the organization of an ethnic Uighur political party and several separatist movements

have moved from Kazakhstan to Turkey where Uighurs living there continue to support the movement³⁷. Despite the pledge by the governments of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan not to support the Xinjiang separatist movement, supporters of the movement still openly operate from these countries.

The rise in ethnic unrest and pro-independence demonstrations and other activities in the 1990s have deep historical and religious roots and will persist for the foreseeable future. Pan-Turkic nationalism and anti-Chinese colonialism are important causes of the unrest. Many leaders are not simply religious fanatics, but are Pan-Turkic nationalists trying to preserve their cultural identity and resist the massive influx of Chinese settlers into the region.

CONCLUSIONS

Despite the closer relations that are developing between China and its northwestern neighbors, the historical legacy of domination, unequal treaties, and ethnic conflict may haunt the significant improvement in relations. On the contrary, however, just as the United States and China overcame their mutual hostility in the face of the Soviet threat, if American hegemony in the region continues to grow, Russian and China could overcome their historical antipathy and enhance strategic cooperation. However, the Central Asian states and Mongolia have very different perspectives. The Central Asian states have increased cooperation with the United States and in fact, in several cases, now host American military bases. Mongolia, after surviving centuries by balancing power between China and Russia now enjoys the support of other nations. Therefore, while Russia and China may consolidate their strategic cooperation in the face of growing American hegemony, it is doubtful that Mongolia and the Central Asian states will perceive the United States as more threatening than China, or Russia for that matter, and opt to strengthen relations with China in the future. History will continue to haunt China's relations with its neighbors and the likelihood of them developing significantly closer relations is doubtful.

NOTAS

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