

# Creeping encroachment, China's western surge

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While many are concerned with territorial disputes in Southeast Asia, the fact that China is quietly expanding its presence westward often goes unnoticed. Beijing has now become a huge player in Central Asia's Great Game.

A Chinese worker stands in front of a poster during the inauguration ceremony of the Kazakh stretch of the 1,833-kilometer Turkmenistan-China pipeline at Otar gas station, outside Almaty, Kazakhstan.

Chinese President Xi Jinping has made his nation's border relations a major priority in his vision for China's foreign policy. However, when focusing on this, outside observers often look to China's sea borders, in particular China's contentious relations in the East and South China Seas. This focus on rocks in the sea and nine dash lines misses what is one of the more significant border tussles that China is involved in to its west: where China's economic push is slowly reshaping the geopolitical landscape in Central Asia and bringing China into confrontation with perennial "frenemy" Russia. International attention may focus on China's aggressive postures with its eastern Asian neighbors as a lens through which to understand the new Chinese foreign policy towards borders, but it is to China's west that a framework can be seen showing how China is increasingly pushing its power beyond its borders.

Central Asian borders are relatively new concepts. As late as the early 1900s the region was still dominated by nomadic tribes who would freely move back and forth around the region following seasons and herds.

Concepts of nationhood and borders were largely non-existent, with the occasional encroachment and domination by a neighboring tribe or subjugation by an Empire emanating from Moscow, Beijing or London as the only expressions of a collective supra-tribal or ethnic identity. With the advent of the Soviet Empire, however, this changed with first Lenin seeking to bring the tribes of Central Asia closer into Moscow's dominion, with his Commissar for Nationalities Joseph Stalin laying out a map of the region sketching out the borders that continue to define the region to this day.

In drawing up the borders in Central Asia amongst the various Soviet Socialist Republics (SSR), Stalin made

a particular point of making sure that no single SSR was clearly defined by one population or another. Each one was given a name corresponding to the dominant ethnic population, but no effort was made to ensure that there was ethnic homogeneity in each state. Rather, his redrawing of the region seemed specifically intended to ensure that the region would always be divided with important historical and religious sites purposely placed in other SSRs. For example, the spectacular and rich religious capitals of Bukhara and Samarkand (both predominantly Tajik cities) were placed within Uzbekistan. Osh, a majority Uzbek trading hub, was placed in Kyrgyzstan, while Tajikistan be-

came a melting pot of Badakhshanis and Tajiks. The Fergana Valley, the most lush and prosperous part of the region, was divided amongst the various countries with the awkward border intersection between Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan creating a logistical nightmare in a region previously deeply interconnected.

The logic behind this awkward redrawing of the region was to intentionally create local divisions and mean that no single state could emerge to challenge Moscow. Leaderships were installed and the same networks largely remain in power today. The biggest threat to the countries came at the end of the Soviet Empire when dissolution of the USSR suddenly forced the







As China's economy grows in its remote northwest, the perennial popularity of the donkey cart is gradually replaced by the affordability of motorized scooters, seen here at the Sunday Bazaar in Kashgar, in northwest China's Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region. Kashgar has been a Silk Road trading center for over two millennia retaining its fascinating ethnic mix of Uighurs, Tajiks, Kyrgyz, Uzbeks and Han Chinese.

countries to become independent entities no longer formally dependent on Moscow. While at first hesitant towards this newfound independence, after realizing Moscow's rejection was categorical, they shifted rapidly to embrace national identities.

For China the dissolution of the Soviet empire was a mixed blessing. On the one hand it removed a strategic foe (with whom admittedly a gentle rapprochement was underway), but on the other hand it suddenly left China with a rather exposed border to its west. In the years prior to the collapse of the Soviet regime, relations between China and the Soviet Union had been improving. Mikhail Gorbachev famously visited Beijing as the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989 were underway, and Jiang Zemin visited Moscow himself in May 1991, a few months before Gorbachev's formal dissolution of the Soviet Empire. The groundwork laid during these visits included declarations to increase stability along their common Central Asian border, something that both sides continued to embrace in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Central to these discussions was the grouping of the Shanghai Five – China, Russia, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan – that formally declared itself an entity in April 1996 at around the same time as Russia and China formalized their warming relations. The entity built on previous border demarcation discussions that had been ongoing since the formal end of the Soviet Union and essentially sought to delineate China's borders with the former Soviet space.

The creation of the Shanghai Five, however, devel-

oped rapidly into more than just a border demarcation organization and by 2001 it was decided to formally expand the group to include Uzbekistan and to upgrade the structure into a formal organization, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). This became the umbrella entity through which China could handle its engagements in the region. Military exercises were undertaken, a joint counter-terrorism center was established (initially planned for Bishkek, it was eventually opened in Tashkent as a sweetener to bring Uzbekistan into the group), while China continued to see it as a vehicle through which it could look at expanding its economic cooperation into the region.

But the root of the organization was border demarcation, something particularly awkward in a part of the world dominated by tribes and communities for whom the artificial borders imposed from foreign capitals are largely at odds with historical realities on the ground. China may see its border with Central Asia as a clear one, but there are Tajik, Kyrgyz and Kazakh communities within China as well – whose lives, appearance and language is far closer to those across the border in Central Asia than in Xinjiang. Conversely, Xinjiang's dominant minority community, the Uighurs, speak a Turkic language and are more ethnically proximate to their Central Asian counterparts than Beijing's Han Chinese. On top of this, substantial communities of Uighurs live in Central Asia, in particular in the border regions with Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. And none of this is to talk about the Dungan (ethnically Chinese found dotted across Central Asia) who have no home territory, but are quite clearly ethnically Chinese and tend to have strong links to China. The center of the Eurasian heartland, Central Asia has always been a melting pot of civilizations and populations, a reality that can still be found today in travelling around the region encountering the fascinating and confusing mix of languages, cultures and appearances.

This reality is something that has always complicated China's relations with this region. In much the same way as the artificial borders drawn by Stalin caused frictions between the Central Asian countries, the existence of these minority communities on both sides of the border has meant Beijing has long had the awkward task of trying to redefine borders from above

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A Kyrgyz woman milks a mare on the Suusamyrlar plateau, 2,500 meters above the sea level, along the ancient Great Silk Road from Bishkek to Osh, some 200 kilometers from Bishkek.

that are relatively meaningless on the ground. Yet, the instability in Central Asia (something that was highlighted particularly for the Shanghai Five with the brutal civil war in Tajikistan from 1992 to 1997) meant that China had a pressing imperative to define these borders to create breakers between itself and the ethnic strife that was inevitable in the tinderbox of Central Asia. That continues to cause problems today in modern China with the angry Uighur minority prevalent in Xinjiang.

The answer from Beijing's perspective to these problems is not only one of building local capacity and connections through border demarcation discussions and joint military exercises. The longer-term solution is massive economic investment – the point being that economic disenfranchisement is seen by Beijing as the root cause of people's discontent. This is something that can be seen across Central Asia where China has become the dominant force.

China has become a major player for economic investment in all of the five Central Asian states, and there are numerous examples of its work. Chinese state-owned enterprises tend to provide the funding and manpower to complete huge infrastructure projects. It has invested heavily in a network of pipelines,

namely the Central Asia Gas Pipeline, bringing gas from Turkmenistan to Xinjiang via other Central Asian states. Currently, planning is underway for the next string in four routes to get Turkmen gas to China, with Chinese National Petroleum Company's (CNPC) plans extending to allow it to become not only an exporter back home of gas, but also a regional supplier. CNPC is one of the only foreign investors that has been able to successfully enter Turkmenistan's relatively closed gas market. CNPC has also helped to construct an oil pipeline between Kazakhstan and China, and bought into a piece of Kazakhstan's super-giant off-shore oil field Kashagan. Beyond energy, China also plans to build a high-speed China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railroad, and has helped Tajikistan to build the Shahrison tunnel along the Dushanbe-Khujand road. This list is merely a fraction of the massive investments and projects that Chinese firms are currently undertaking in Central Asia – for the most part funded by soft or linked loans by the China Development Bank or China Export-Import Bank.

The need to develop Central Asia is not, however, an altruistic one. Rather, it is something that is undertaken by Beijing to help develop its own restive Central Asian region, Xinjiang. Landlocked and far from the

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Russian-built tanks rolling under Tajikistan's flags during joint counterterrorism military exercises of the troops from the six countries in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in Khujand, Tajikistan. Troops from Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan deployed more than 2,000 troops in the exercises.

seas, Xinjiang has two ways to build economic prosperity and develop trade links: one is long routes to China's seas, the other is through Central Asia. But for Central Asia to be able to host these routes, stability and security is essential, something Beijing sees as secured through investment and economic prosperity. Atop this, growing China needs many of the natural resources that Central Asia possesses.

But Beijing's push into Central Asia is something that has not always gone smoothly. It has experienced some direct challenges resulting from the border delineations and subsequent ethnic clashes mentioned above. Line D of the Central Asia Gas Pipeline is scheduled to be ready in 2016 and runs through Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Border disputes between these two countries have called into question the feasibility of further expansion of China's pipeline infrastructure projects. In January of this year one such clash over disputed territory resulted in the wounding of security personnel on both sides of the Kyrgyz-Tajik border. Often such tensions reflect the economic competition and distrust between neighboring Central Asian states. For example, plans for a railroad linking Uzbekistan with Xinjiang caused major concerns in Tajikistan over the railroad's effects on its own economic status.

China itself has also met with opposition to some of its aspirations for the region. The question of land has been one of the biggest hurdles. In December 2009 President Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan announced that China had expressed interest in leasing a large piece

of land for its agricultural business in the country. The public outcry was immediate and substantial, forcing Nazarbayev to back away from the deal.

A similar deal took place in Tajikistan in 2012. Tajikistan's Ministry of Agriculture agreed to lease 6,000 hectares of land to China, while China offered \$2 million in direct investment to the underdeveloped land. This caused concern from the country's opposition groups. The agreement also followed on from an opaque deal in 2011 in which Tajikistan accepted China's request to grant China 1,100 square kilometers of Tajik territory. China claimed historical ownership of the land in the Pamir Mountains, a long-disputed region on the border. The latter deal in particular gave rise to wider concerns regarding Chinese geographical expansion.

These border delineation discussions underlined concerns in Central Asia about the more practical business deals with Chinese agribusiness. In Tajikistan, there was some question about whether Tajikistan would be able to develop the land, while Chinese firms offered a technical capability. But the two discussions coming so soon after each other, focused the growing sense in the Central Asian states that the borders they had only recently acquired with the collapse of the Soviet Union were now slowly being dissolved in a bath of Chinese investment and infrastructure. Anecdotal reflecting these concerns, experts in Bishkek in 2012 told one of the authors that a rumor circulating the city was that the Chinese had built roads around the country which were specifically designed to withstand the weight of Chinese tanks – the implication being that China was not only redrawing the borders publicly and economically, but was also laying the foundations for a possible future invasion.

For anyone who has travelled within the former Soviet space, these sorts of conspiracy theories will resonate. Videos and stories abound combining history and modernity together to weave fantastical stories of empires fighting over Central Asia. Central Asian analysts and officials will openly talk of their importance in Brzezinski's Chess Board or as Mackinder's "Pivot of History." But as with most conspiracy theories, there is a kernel of truth within these tales – something particularly visible in Russia's increasing push to try to reclaim its former sphere of influence in Central Asia.



Panoramic view of the beautiful and clear lake Sarez which sits 3300m high up in the mountains of Pamir, a long disputed region in Tajikistan.

This is most vividly seen in the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), the latest iteration of the economic alliance between Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia that will come into force in January 2015. Although the exact details of the agreements are not clear, the signing of the EEU in 2014 was a symbolic demonstration by Russia that it still had influence in its relationships with these former Soviet countries. This is something Russia is particularly keen to demonstrate after events in Ukraine, which have lost it credibility and trust in the international community. Russia hopes to draw Kyrgyzstan and possibly Tajikistan into this union in the future. Both countries have expressed intent to join, though talking to officials and businessmen on the ground, there is often little evidence that great consideration has gone into the economic implications of this move.

The nature of Russia's desired influence in the region is different to that which China is hoping to achieve. For Russia, organizations like the EEU are a means by which it hopes to possess more overt leverage over the Central Asian states. Russia not only wishes to encourage mutually beneficial economic development but also wants to ensure the loyalty of such nations in future disputes. How China will react and fit into this picture is still unclear, though the weight of Chinese investment and visible economic presence on the ground suggest that while Russia will seek to use the EEU as a way to bring Central Asia back into its orbit, China's economic surge in the region will mean it will remain an increasingly dominant player on the ground.

President Xi Jinping has made border diplomacy a priority for his administration. The common perception in the West is that this is something aimed in particular at sea lane and border disputes with its Pacific neighbors, which are ultimately about its struggle with the United States. The reality, however, is that it is to China's west that people should look with greater attention to see where China is redrawing its borders in a more significant and permanent fashion. Through its increasing economic re-wiring of the region, China is increasingly becoming the most significant geopolitical player in Central Asia. Something that Russia has noticed with increasing concern, but is only now retrospectively trying to do something about. China remains focused on the importance of national determination in its relations with other states, but the question becomes at what point does this become irrelevant due to the overwhelming economic influence that China is already starting to exert across Central Asia. Beijing's policymakers may talk a language of consensus and international cooperation, but the reality is that a region is slowly being drawn into its orbit with little consideration by either side of the implications of the longer-term consequences of this shift.

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