

CHINA S POLICY TOWARDS CENTRAL ASIAN REPUBLICS IN THE AFTERMATH OF THEIR INDEPENDENCE

Dr Saifullah Joyo

Sino-Central Asian relations have roots in history because Turkic tribes for a period during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries A.D ruled parts of China; and China s Han Dynasty ruled large tracts of Central Asia until the second century A.D. For more than a thousand years ago an epic legend has also been handed down through generations of Kyrgyz tribes. Its millions lines tell of the famous warrior Manas, who conquered lands from Central Asia to Beijing (China), and whose descendants carried on the family name and established traditions still honored among the Kyrgyz.¹ Poets could spin-out the tale of Manas into weeks, even months, of narrative episodes of adventure, conquest and romance.

The Silk Road which is dated back to more than 2,000 years ago is also a historical testimony of traditional economic and cultural exchanges between China and Central Asia. The Silk Road also testifies to the great contributions that China and Central Asia have made to the development of world civilizations. The Silk Road , which has now been revived at the dawn of the 21st century, is likely to exert greater impact on Central Asia.

China shares the largest border with Central Asia and Russia. Three out of five successor states to the former Soviet Union in Central Asia, i.e., Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan share more than 3,000 km border with China.² Their independence has drastically reduced China s common borders with Russia, especially in Northwest China. It has also created a large buffer between China and Russia. It has so happened because, sixty percent of Sinkiang s (China) 15 million population are: Uighurs

(7 million), Uzbeks and Kazakhs (1.5 million), Kyrgyz (140 thousands), Tartars and other Turkic-speaking Muslims who share religious beliefs, cultural values, and a common heritage with their cousins in Central Asia.³ According to Chinese statistics, about 600,000 ethnic Chinese were also living in Central Asia.⁴

There have been large-scale cross-border migrations since 1917. Nomads entered Sinkiang with their flocks during the Civil War and Collectivization Campaign, and there were similar migrations from Sinkiang to Soviet territory during Mao's Great Leap Forward in the 1950s and the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s. Right after the break-up of the Soviet Union, there was a flurry of activity between China and Central Asia, which included trade, setting up of joint ventures and communication links. In the past, China's policies towards its northwestern frontiers could be summarized in one word: defence, but now, the main thrust of Chinese policies is opening.⁵

There has also appeared the possibility of a political rapprochement between the Turkic populations of the Chinese Western province (Sinkiang) and their ethnic cousins in Central Asia. The end of July 1992 saw an unexpected appearance of forces whose activities may provoke clashes between China and Kyrgyzstan. In Bishkek, the Party for a Free Uighurstan held its founding congress. It declares as its goal, the creation of a state of Uighurstan out of Sinkiang Uighur Autonomous Region of China bordering on Kyrghzstan.⁶ An appeal was also made to the peoples and parliaments of the world to support the aspirations of the Uighur people for a state of their own. In October 1992, the Justice Ministry of Kyrgyzstan, in line with leadership's attempts to remove any troublesome issues between Beijing and Bishkek, refused to register the party's statute, and some aims stated in this document were described as interference in the internal affairs of a sovereign state.

On the political front, China made no territorial claims on eastern Central Asia, and it cooperated with new states on border demarcation.⁷ Similarly, recognizing the negative and destabilizing influence of the Sino-Soviet conflict, Kazakhstan, Kirgызstan and Tajikistan signed an agreement on September 8, 1994 in Minsk on negotiations with the Chinese on the border demarcations and for reducing their troops in the border regions.⁸ This agreement is generally viewed as an encouragement of trust and understanding in Asia. Besides this, by April 1995, fifteen rounds of border talks had been conducted between the working group of the joint delegation of the governments of Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. On 26 April 1996, China, Russia and Central Asian states also signed a Five-Nation Agreement on Confidence Building in the Military Forces in the Border Areas, at a Summit Meeting in Shanghai. This agreement was a crowning achievement in defence and military cooperation between these states.

China is following the policy of establishing and promoting relations with Central Asian Republics. There is opening up of Sinkiang for traffic of Central Asian Republics through nine entry and exit points. In 1989, some 40,000 people crossed this border, while their number increased to 100,000 in 1994. There is also a trend in the region for the development of a Trans-Eurasian Railway. The Chinese Railway System has been plugged into the Central Asian Railway Network and today Shanghai on the Pacific rim is linked with Vienna in Central Europe and beyond with the ports on the Atlantic. Its another branch will link the Turkish Mediterranean ports through Iran with Central Asia. Alma-Ata is the hub of this vast railway communication network. Due to the development of transport links, a lively trade is also being developed in the recent years between Sinkiang and Central Asian Republics. Uzbekistan too, has expressed great interest in importing Chinese consumer goods. Fourteen urban areas in Sinkiang have been declared free trade zones as part of their

economic development efforts, including incentives for capital investments.

According to official Chinese statistics, in 1992, China's foreign trade with five newly independent Central Asian states was a total of US \$475 million. It is more than ten times that of 1990. In 1993, China's trade with five Central Asian states continued to grow to a total of more than US \$600 million. The annual increase rate was 31 percent.

(For details see Table of Sino-Central Asian Trade, 1992-1993). The picture of China's trade with Central Asia in 1994 was more complicated. The total trade stood at US \$577 million, which was 5 percent less than in 1993.

Over a thousand economic and trade agreements have been signed between China and the Central Asian Republics. These cover cooperation in the field of industries like construction, oil, metallurgy, textiles, paper manufacture, electronics, and aluminum production. According to the official Chinese statistics, at the beginning of 1993, there were only 95 Chinese joint ventures in Central Asia. A year later, that figure went up to 453. They were all in three Central Asian states, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. Of these 453 Sino-Central Asian joint ventures, 313 were in Kazakhstan, 75 in Kyrgyzstan, and 65 in Uzbekistan.⁹ The Chinese have setup therapy centers and are

TABLE OF SINO CENTRAL ASIAN TRADE, 1992 1993.

(In million US dollars)

Country	1992			1993		
	Imports	Exports	Total	Imports	Exports	Total
Kazakhstan	141.2	277.1	368.3	263.0	171.7	434.7
Kyrgyzstan	16.64	18.85	35.49	65.87	36.55	102.4
Uzbekistan	13.63	38.89	52.52	11.45	42.80	54.2
Turkmenistan	0.41	4.09	4.50	0.80	3.85	4.6
Tajikistan	0.80	1.95	2.75	5.87	6.48	12.3

Source: *Yearbook of China's Foreign Economic Relations and Trade, 1994-5*, (Beijing: The Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Cooperation, n.d), p.472

making medicines in Uzbekistan. China has also contracted to purchase cotton from Uzbekistan, Chemical fertilizer from Kyrgyzstan, and to exchange textiles for chemical fertilizers with Kazakhstan. There is also under consideration, the construction of a gas pipeline to China from Turkmenistan.

In March 1992, Uzbek President Islam Karimov visited Beijing and signed fifteen agreements with the Chinese Government that laid the ground work for bilateral relations.¹⁰ Similarly, the Chinese Prime Minister Li Peng who arrived in Uzbekistan on 18th April 1994, with Chinese businessmen delegation, wanted to encourage trade and economic links with Uzbekistan in particular and Central Asian Republics in general.¹¹

In the light of contemporary international and domestic considerations, China's policy in Central Asia in the aftermath of independence has been prudent, focusing on two axes i.e.,

commercial and political. As far as commerce with Central Asia is concerned, it has grown considerably and China is now a major trade partner of this region. From the Central Asian perspective, the China provides an additional trade partner, and offers a counter-weight to Russian influence. However, at the political front, relations with China are complicated by a number of conflict prone issues. The most obvious is the issue of territory. For many decades the Chinese authorities have made territorial claims to the former Soviet Union, in particular to a number of areas of present-day Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Though officially the problem was resolved by the legal registration of border in 1994, but the actual geo-political and demographic situation may well raise the issue again, particularly with regard to possible political changes on either side of the border. Similarly, China may prove cautious in expanding its ties with Central Asia, because of the danger that too-free exchange with Western Turkistan may prove destabilizing to Eastern Turkistan, as Uighurs call Sinkiang. Therefore, China's policy is to ensure that Central Asian resurgence does not accentuate the ethno-religious separatist movement in Sinkiang region. It is the fact that China is reportedly going ahead with its plans to settle a large number of Hans from Central China in the Muslim majority region of Southern Sinkiang, as a means to pre-empt any secessionist move in that area.

The changing geo-political and geo-economic situation in Central Asia has also entailed a number of new policy considerations for China. Before the independence of Central Asian states, China had to deal with only one country – the Soviet Union. Now China has to deal with a number of independent sovereign states on its periphery in the north-west. Since the Central Asian Republics are now independent sovereign states, different and some time divergent foreign policies are made and pursued to serve their national interests. It is therefore imperative for China

to have a comprehensive strategy and flexible policies towards Central Asia in order to meet the regional challenges.

At the end, we can say that there are two aspects of Central Asia's independence for China – positive and negative. The positive impacts can be seen for example, in the following:

1. The independence of Central Asian states has largely eliminated the military threat to China's north-west, from the former Soviet Union.
2. Just like Mongolia, the Central Asian states will serve as a buffer to compromise the possibility of direct conflict between China and Russia in China's northwest.
3. With the independence of the Central Asian states, a large market has emerged to China's northwest, with rich mineral and human resources. It has opened new opportunities for the opening of China's northwest and in particular for economic cooperation between Sinkiang and Central Asian states.

There are also some negative impacts, such as:

1. The rise of ethno-nationalism of titular nationalities of the newly independent Central Asian States has extended its influence across borders into China. Moreover, the penetration of the increasing influence of Pan-Turkism into Sinkiang also impairs the stability of the region.
2. Islamic fundamentalism and its organizations, such as Islamic Revival Party (IRP) in both Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, have engaged in activities that may have serious implications for political stability across the border

in Sinkiang.

However, looking back at the last few years, it should be argued that after the disintegration of the former Soviet Union, the independence of Central Asian states has mostly exerted a positive rather than a negative impact on China.

Affairs in collaboration with United States of America.

References

- ¹ Tashkend Defied Communism to Keep its Traditions Intact IV , *The Pakistan Times, Mid Week*, July 14, 1992.
- ² Kazakhstan has 1,700 km of common border with China, Kyrgyzstan about 1,000 km, and Tajikistan has more than 400 km.
- ³ *The News International*, 21 April, 1994, p.8.
- ⁴ Yongjin Zhang and Rouben Azizian (eds.), *Ethnic Challenges Beyond Borders: Chinese and Russian Perspective of the Central Asian Conundrum*, Macmillan Press Ltd., London, p.88, (here after cited, Zhang and Azizian, Ethnic challenges beyond borders).
- ⁵ Joyo Saifullah, *Post Soviet Central Asia: An Analysis of Internal Conditions and External Relations – A Case Study of Uzbekistan*, Area Study Centre for Russia, China and Central Asia, University of Peshawar, 2000, p.357.
- ⁶ Keith Martin, China and Central Asia: Between Seduction and suspicion , *RFE/RL Research Report*, Vol.3, No.25, 1994, p.29.
- ⁷ Liz Fuller, *RFE/RL Daily Report*, No. 80, 27 April 1994.
- ⁸ Tariq Aqil, Kazakhstan: A Role in Euro Asian Security , *The News on Friday*, 31 March 1995, p.33.
- ⁹ Zhang and Azizian, *Ethnic Challenges Beyond Borders*, op.cit., p.183.
- ¹⁰ Qaisrani Shahnawaz, *The Newly Independent Republics of Central Asia: An Overview*, Central Asian Culture and Trade Foundation, The Netherlands, 1993, p.80
- ¹¹ China and Central Asia , *The Economist*, 23 April 1994