

# CHINA'S NEW JOURNEY TO THE WEST

## China's Emergence in Central Asia and Implications for U.S. Interests

A Report of the CSIS Freeman Chair in China Studies

### **Foreword**

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# Foreword

*Zbigniew Brzezinski*

The very topic of this report—China’s emergence in Central Asia—implicitly reflects a very important geostrategic change in world affairs. Twelve years ago, neither the United States nor China was really present in Central Asia. The United States, in fact, had never been there until very recently. China was there, but a very long time ago, in the era of the Mongol Empire, more than 600 to 700 years ago. From that period until recent years, China had been receding from the region, while another presence, Russia, was expanding.

Over the course of those centuries, Russian expansion reached China from the area that today defines Central Asia. And while the northeastern frontier of China, from Central Siberia to the Pacific Ocean, was defined largely through a succession of treaties with Russia, their borders in Central Asia were left to face Russia’s progressive expansion. Colonization followed promptly and energetically between 1893 and 1912, when no less than 750,000 Russians and Ukrainians were settled in Central Asia. Central Asia thereby became absent in world affairs, and the Czarist era, followed by the Soviet era, involved the growing subordination of the area to a large Russian empire.

Today, much has changed. Central Asia is a focal point of competing historical interests, cultural collisions, national aspirations, and geopolitical ambitions. All the Central Asian countries are determined to consolidate their national independence. In that sense they react against the recent past. But they also suffer from various degrees of internal strife, which primarily involves a determination to define a national identity: still open to debate are questions of how this national identity should be defined in terms of history, religion, and the degree to which these states ought to be secular or pro-Western. Moreover, Central Asia is also an area in which these newly independent states collide with each other over different aspirations and frictions.

As an overlay to all this, Central Asia now witnesses a very complicated interplay among the regional states and Russia, the United States (especially since September 11, 2001), and China.

The Russian role is clearly receding, most dramatically on the political and economic level, though its cultural connection remains strong. The internal problems Russia faces—depopulation, social crises, and crumbling industrial infrastructure to name a few—limit Moscow’s decisive influence on the future of the region, even though Russia remains omnipresent in terms of history and immediacy. Addition-

ally, Central Asian nations themselves want to reach out to the world and replace what has traditionally been the second language, Russian, with English, not in deference to the United States but in acknowledgement of global realities.

It is likely that U.S. involvement in Central Asia will continue only to the extent that there is a U.S. stake in Central Asia that can be defined more broadly than the five former Soviet Central Asian republics. For the United States, Central Asia is not the five republics by themselves but also Afghanistan and, increasingly, Pakistan as well. Arguably, Iran is also a significant Central Asian player for the United States. In the end, U.S. involvement in the region tracks closely with how Washington defines the region and the nature and scope of the challenges posed there for U.S. national security policy.

China's influence adds a very important new geostrategic dimension to Central Asian relations. Granted, China is not yet dominant in any single Central Asian country, nor is it comparable in stature yet either to the Russians by tradition and history or to the very visibly dominant and captivating U.S. presence. Nonetheless, China's steady expansion of regional involvement within the Shanghai Five, and subsequently the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, is a geopolitical watershed. China, in effect, is returning to the region as a major player. The Shanghai process formalizes that new reality and is a particularly significant acknowledgment of the fact that Russia itself accepts that it can no longer play a decisive or exclusive role in defining the nature of the region or its place in the world.

And China's role in the region is growing. It is growing because as the region enters the world, new routes for trade, such as pipelines, highways, and railroads, significantly increase China's involvement and physical presence, which is already quite evident when one visits the market places in major Central Asian cities. This influence is likely to grow even more as China emerges as the most powerful, dynamic, and immediate neighbor of Central Asia. This new reality suggests that in the longer run, China will become increasingly preeminent relative to Russia and the United States. As a consequence, the assessment by the Central Asian countries of Russia's role may change. It may become more convenient for them to try to engage Russia in a continuing relationship as a way of balancing China. In the longer run, though, a rising China, with an economy that is already five times larger than Russia's and with a strategy for rapid development in its northwest expansion, will become an overwhelming and dominating presence.

In sum, Central Asia is a place in which one can define political realities occasionally just by looking at the street signs. In 1997, one of the major thoroughfares in Bishkek, the Lenin Prospekt, had a large section renamed as Deng Xiaoping Prospekt. This is a portent of things to come. In examining this future, this report will assess the process of China's emergence in Central Asia and what it means for the interests of the United States.

# Executive Summary

## About the Project

Recognizing the potentially dramatic impact of China's emergence in Central Asia and how it informs an understanding of China's greater diplomatic strategy, the CSIS Freeman Chair in China Studies initiated a project in January 2003 to analyze this new and interesting set of regional developments. The project consisted of four major conferences and several smaller seminars, as well as dozens of interviews and extensive independent research.

The conferences involved between 60 and 90 attendees, drawn from the government and congressional, diplomatic, media, and policy communities, and addressed four principal themes:

- Current state of China–Central Asia diplomacy and implications for U.S. foreign policy;
- Counterterrorism, stability, internal security, and China–Central Asia relations;
- Energy and trade in China–Central Asia relations;
- The role of Xinjiang in China–Central Asia relations.

These events featured prominent keynote speakers from the United States and abroad—Zbigniew Brzezinski, Chas Freeman, Charles William Maynes, and Dmitri Trenin—along with detailed presentations from highly accomplished specialists and officials—Martha Blaxall, Robert Ebel, David Finkelstein, Paul Fujimura, Graham Fuller, Dru Gladney, Fiona Hill, Richard Hoagland, Nancy Lubin, Steven Mann, Justin Rudelson, Tom Sanderson, and Kang Wu.

The full programs for the four conferences, listing the presenters, their affiliations, and their presentation topics, can be found in appendix 2.

The presentations and discussions of the conferences and smaller seminars were integrated with extensive interviews and research to form the basis of this report. In compiling the report, we have worked closely with the conference speakers and presenters. The final document, however, does not necessarily reflect their views, and the authors take responsibility for the findings, recommendations, and opinions expressed. The authors also wish to thank Eric Hagt and William Leahy, researchers with the Freeman Chair in China Studies, for their able research assistance in the completion of this report.

## Findings

- In seeking to reestablish its historic connection with Central Asia and reflecting Beijing's overall foreign policy and "new security concept," China has exercised a more flexible, responsive, and restrained diplomacy with its western neighbors.

While still ranking behind Russia and the United States in terms of regional influence, China has begun to emerge as a key player in the region with clearly defined and enduring interests that both complement and contrast with those of other major powers involved in Central Asia.

- Within the next decade, China will occupy a more influential strategic, security, and economic role in Central Asia, with important implications for U.S. foreign policy goals in the region.

On the basis of geographic proximity, economic imperatives, and Beijing's security concerns, Chinese influence in Central Asia will likely continue to expand over the longer term.

- Beijing's Central Asia policy is shaped by four principal sets of interests.
  - **STRATEGIC POSITIONING:** China's engagement with Central Asia, and specifically the creation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), is part and parcel of China's overall diplomatic strategy of fostering a stable and productive international environment around the country's periphery while fostering a more widely accepted Chinese regional leadership role. Beijing's relations with Central Asia also aim to legitimize Chinese positions on major international principles and issues, strengthen relations with Russia, and serve as a counterpoise in relations with the United States. Overall, China's diplomacy with Central Asia is aimed at preventing the region from becoming a distraction from China's internal development goals or its primary foreign policy priorities.
  - **NATIONAL SECURITY:** Beijing's primary security goal in Central Asia is prohibiting the region from becoming an external base of support for separatist Uyghur elements in China's northwestern Xinjiang province. Additionally, China will assist the Central Asian states in controlling their own domestic security challenges, including terrorism, separatism, religious extremism, and drug trafficking, so that these problems do not become a security threat to China itself.
  - **BORDER STABILITY:** China shares a nearly 7,000-kilometer border with Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, and has expended considerable amounts of energy in the last decade demarcating and demilitarizing that frontier. This achievement has allowed China to divert resources and attention to high-priority challenges such as its domestic economy and relations with neighbors to its east. Maintaining this stability is central to China's development plans and foreign policy priorities.



- **ECONOMICS AND TRADE:** With growing energy demand, Central Asia—Kazakhstan in particular—represents a vital source of oil and gas to fuel China’s rapidly developing economy. Central Asia also represents a budding market for the export of inexpensive Chinese goods. Chinese export routes and a potential role as an economic engine for greater Central Asia offer China a potentially vital role in the region’s development and a strong position from which to fulfill its own development needs.
- In the near to medium term, Beijing and Washington, as well as Moscow, share a general convergence of interests in Central Asia.

This situation offers an opportunity for these powers, along with Central Asian partners, to work collectively to tackle challenges within and emanating from Central Asia and address future tensions before they arise, particularly over political reform and natural resource extraction in the region. Identifying common interests in the region would help Washington and Beijing to alleviate mutual suspicions in Central Asia while contributing to a more stable strategic situation in this increasingly important part of the world.

Despite the U.S. military deployment in the region, Chinese and Russian reactions have not been harsh, nor has intense counterbalancing arisen. Both Beijing and Moscow recognize that the benefits of the current U.S. political and military presence in the region outweigh the costs in the near to medium term.

- Competition among these external powers, and among Central Asian states, could become more intense over the longer-term, however.

This situation could arise as China becomes a more dominant player in the region, as Russian influence wanes, and as counterterrorism and security no longer form the basis for a political consensus among the major players in the region. Other issues and interests in Central Asia, such as political change and reform, economic development, and natural resource extraction and exploitation, could more sharply define the strategic differences among key actors, particularly between the United States and China. Central Asian governments continue to harbor suspicions about Beijing’s long-range intentions toward the region.

## Recommendations for U.S. Policy

Given the challenges and opportunities presented to Washington by China’s emergence in Central Asia, four overarching approaches should frame the U.S. policy to the region and to China’s role there.

- **STAY COMMITTED TO THE REGION.**

Wavering U.S. commitment to the Central Asia contributes to instability in the region. The United States must remain committed to Central Asia and Afghanistan for the foreseeable future if it ever hopes to defeat global terrorism and prevent it from taking root again. Moreover, in the face of growing Chinese influence in the

region and the challenges that could pose, the United States should remain engaged to assure the achievement of U.S. political, economic, and security goals in Central Asia, including political reform, access to natural resources, and regional stability.

■ ENCOURAGE GREAT POWER COOPERATION TO ADDRESS COMMON PROBLEMS.

As the Collective Security Treaty Organization Kant Airbase and Shanghai Cooperation Organization counterterrorism center become fully operational, Beijing and Washington, as well as Moscow, should take opportunities to coordinate activities and build common goodwill. Coordination should also be aimed at increased counternarcotic trafficking activities and even intelligence sharing about imminent threats. With all three powers operating in the region, cooperation in the security field is imperative if increased tensions and unintended military mishaps are to be avoided. To this end, the United States should encourage the creation of a Shanghai Cooperation Organization–North Atlantic Treaty Organization strategic dialogue in order to foster greater regional coordination and reduce suspicions among China, Russia, and the western allies. This NATO–SCO strategic dialogue will open a window for Washington into the SCO while also offering China a window into NATO. Such a move would provide NATO a useful consultative mechanism for many of its new activities in Central Asia and Afghanistan.

■ ESTABLISH LOW-LEVEL COOPERATIVE PROJECTS.

The United States and China (along with Russia) can establish a range of cooperative projects. These projects could include:

- Building and equipping border outposts;
- Increasing military-to-military transparency with the placement of liaison officers at the three security installations in Kyrgyzstan: Manas Airbase, Kant Airbase, and the SCO counterterrorism center in Bishkek;
- Conducting de-mining operations in border areas;
- Sharing intelligence on illegal cross-border activities such as trafficking in guns, drugs, and people;
- Funding HIV/AIDS education, prevention, treatment, and care centers;
- Improving social welfare infrastructure in Central Asia through establishment of schools, hospitals, clinics, and employment training centers.

■ REMAIN VIGILANT ON POLITICAL REFORM AND HUMAN RIGHTS.

The United States must be mindful of the support it lends the various regimes of Central Asia in light of their poor human rights practices. Washington should continue to urge political reform in the region and make the case in Beijing that China too will benefit from more stable, open, and responsive governments along its western frontiers. Calls for improved human rights and political reform in the region should also extend to China's Xinjiang Province, where recent U.S. policies have undermined support for Washington in some quarters.

■ ENGAGE CHINA IN THE REGION.

In carrying out its Central Asia policies, Washington should identify common goals with Beijing and work jointly toward them. Washington should continue to seek briefings from Chinese counterparts on the activities and aims of the SCO and likewise keep Beijing informed of U.S. policies and activities in the region. The United States and China have built up a substantial amount of goodwill in Central Asia over the last several years and have an opportunity to devote this political capital to promoting regional stability, integration, development, and political reform.

