Xinjiang in China’s Foreign Relations:

Part of a New Silk Road or

Central Asian Zone of Conflict?
Abstract This paper analyses how the situation in China’s most northwestern province-level unit Xinjiang has affected China’s overall foreign relations since disturbances in its capital Ürümqi in July 2009. Xinjiang’s most populous ethnic group is the mostly-Muslim Uighurs. The paper assumes a framework that puts a high priority on China’s facing west. Though no more important than the eastward-looking foreign policy that has dominated Western analysis, the paper sees China’s facing-west perspective as deserving more attention than it has received.

Russia and Central Asian countries have been positive about China’s economic aims in the region. However, friction has increased with China’s rise, Chinese authorities tending to blame Xinjiang’s disturbances on Islamism in Central Asia. China resents the United States for giving asylum to Rebiya Kadeer, president of the anti-China World Uyghur Congress. In 2011, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton pushed the idea of a “New Silk Road” in Central Asia for peaceful economic development. China has long espoused the “Silk Road” idea, developing its own “Silk Road Economic Belt.” Damaged due to the 2009 riots, the China-Turkey relationship has improved because of various visits and agreements since 2010. The paper balances the dominantly economic “Silk Road” concept against Islamist terrorism. It argues that the aims of the “Silk Road” and “Silk Road Economic Belt” are sensible and practical, with positive economic relations the main trend. However, though the Central Asian “zone of conflict” is a lesser trend, tensions are serious and long-term, especially those caused by Islamism and Islamist terrorism.

Keywords Xinjiang · Silk Road · China’s foreign relations · United States · Central Asia · Uighurs
Introduction

It is the aim of this article to analyse how developments in China’s largest and most north-westerly province-level unit Xinjiang have affected China’s international relations. Because of their importance, the time-point of departure are serious riots occurring in the Xinjiang capital Ürümqi in July 2009, although there will inevitably be references to earlier years. The author tries to be as up-to-date as possible, but practicality makes the end of 2014 a convenient final point.

The justification of this subject lies in China’s rise and the growing importance of Xinjiang relevant to that rise. This can be seen in the ways in which the economy of Xinjiang links in with Central Asia and other regions. But its strategic function has also increased because it is China’s main site of Islamist terrorism, which has assumed an international dimension in the twenty-first century it never had before.

Recent studies of China’s international relations tend strongly to assume a country that faces east, at least for its main priorities. The issue of Taiwan as part of China is at the top of China’s self-proclaimed core interests. The United States and Japan are among the most important countries featuring in China’s bilateral relationships and both of them have spawned a large and significant literature.1 Xinjiang reminds us that China is a country that also faces west. Indeed, in the imperial period, before maritime power assumed the significance we attach to it in the modern world, China’s international relations saw it facing west ahead of east. A classic study of Xinjiang described it as a “pivot of Asia” [2].

Also, the topic of Xinjiang’s function in China’s international relations in the twenty-first century has received very little attention up to now. There is an important and growing literature on Xinjiang, much of it extremely valuable. However, the focus is on history, economics and on the region as a home to significant ethnic minorities, especially the Uighurs,2 on ethnic relations, disturbances and tensions, and ethnic cultures.3 While there are studies of Xinjiang’s links with Central Asia (for example [4]), there is still a dearth of research on Xinjiang’s function in China’s overall international relations. This article aspires to contribute to the literature by filling a part of this gap.

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1 The Oxford bibliographies online, Chinese studies, edited by Tim Wright, already has an article on Sino-Japanese relations [1] with one on Sino-US relations due in 2015.
2 This ethnonym is usually spelt Uygur in official Chinese English-language texts, and Uyghur among the diaspora. A more neutral spelling is Uighur, and that is the one adopted in this article except in the case of official terminology, quotations or book titles.
3 See the long section “Xinjiang and the Uighurs” in [3].
The methodology of the article is mainly textual analysis. The author has visited Xinjiang several times, most recently in 2010, and carried out field research. Interview material was in line with current ethical practice, taking account of and observing human rights best practice. Interviewees include especially Uighurs, and their insights have contributed to this research. Multidisciplinary in taking demography, culture and economics into account, it is mainly focused on international relations, ethnic affairs and politics. The author has no conflict of interests in undertaking this work.

A specific argument flows from balancing the various factors involved in Xinjiang’s impact on China’s overall foreign relations. It is that the mainly economic factors implied in the “Silk Road” concept are primary, whereas the ethnic tensions implied in the term “zone of conflict” are secondary. While both sets of issues are important, economics is prevailing over ethnic hostility fuelled by Islamist terrorism and other factors.

**Xinjiang Background**

Xinjiang (or formally the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region) borders domestically with Gansu and Qinghai to the east and Tibet to the south. Its economy has developed well along with China’s spectacular growth. Though a long way from the eastern coast where the rise has been greatest, it has been a beneficiary of the “Develop the West Campaign” (Xibu da kaifa) begun in 2001. It has also become a major point of economic development and international trade. Located in the centre of the great Eurasian landmass, it “has the potential to serve as a two-way conduit linking China and Europe” [5, p. 189]. In ancient times, the area now called Xinjiang was the site of many important locations along the famous “Silk Road” and in recent decades the metaphor has increased greatly both in usage and significance [6].

In July 2011 US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced a “New Silk Road Strategy.” In September 2011 a major meeting of senior foreign affairs officials from many countries took place in New York, and it supported this concept of a “New Silk Road” in Central Asia. One newspaper defined the “New Silk Road” as a “multinational initiative to build a multi-billion dollar network of roads, railways and gas pipelines linking the resource-rich Central Asia with the continent’s fast-growing economies.” Clinton said that the investments and markets resulting from the initiative would provide people in the region “with credible alternatives to insurgency” [7].
Most importantly, in September 2013, President Xi Jinping gave a major speech at Nazarbayev University in Astana, capital of Kazakhstan, in which he proposed a “Silk Road Economic Belt”. This would promote economic and cultural linkages over the Eurasian continent, especially trade and investment, and road and other networks [8]. In October 2014, a memorandum of understanding was issued in Beijing for a China-dominated Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, which would contribute to realizing the vision not only of the Silk Road Economic Belt but also a Maritime Silk Road. Xi Jinping’s proposal looks to greater Chinese influence in Central Asia that will rival, or at least balance, the American concept that Hillary Clinton had suggested earlier. It has great appeal, both outside China and domestically. As one scholar puts out, the term Silk Road “manages to create warm feelings outside China” but also “stirs up equal enthusiasm domestically because it taps into memories of former greatness and its new iterations, placing China once more at the center of the world” [9].

In his Astana speech, President Xi also warned against the threats of terrorism, extremism and separatism, which brings us to another side to the picture of rapid economic development in Xinjiang and Central Asia [8]. This is that the Central Asian region has been a source of considerable conflict in the twenty-first century. The main site is Afghanistan, but it is not the only one. Xinjiang has also seen violent incidents due to separatism, terrorism and dissatisfaction caused by a range of internal and external factors. Although violence in Xinjiang has been at a much lower level than in Afghanistan, what one leading scholar in the field has termed “organized protests and violent events” have punctuated the history of modern Xinjiang and persist down to the present.4 In the twenty-first century by far the most serious of these were violent incidents that occurred on 5 July 2009, with official Chinese estimates putting the number of dead at 197. The causes are hotly debated (see contributions in [11], [12] and [13]), but less controversial is the wide-ranging effects on Xinjiang society.

The aftermath of the July 2009 riots saw a swathe of measures designed to promote stability, most of them focused on improving economic performance, the theory being that prosperous people are less likely to rebel than poor ones. In 2010, the old city of Kashgar, a hub of Uighur culture, was one of two Xinjiang cities made into a special economic zone. The aim of the authorities was “to transform Kashgar into the transport hub of old - opening up markets in Central Asia and beyond” and to encourage investors and traders [14].

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4 The appendix of [10], entitled “Organized protests and violent events in Xinjiang, 1949–2005” lists such events by date, duration, location, type, and number involved, together with relevant comments.
impact on Uighur culture has proved extremely controversial, many locals and others complaining of destruction not only to old buildings, but to communities and traditions as well.

Other than those occurring in the Chinese Communist Party due to the 18th Congress in November 2012, there were also leadership changes in Xinjiang. Most importantly, CCP Xinjiang Secretary Wang Lequan was replaced in April 2010 by Zhang Chunxian. Wang had held the post since 1994 and gained a position so strong as to be called “the king of Xinjiang” [15]. However, some blamed him for failing to take adequate precautions that might have prevented the disastrous July 2009 riots, and in September the same year there was even a mainly-Han demonstration demanding his resignation. Though the central leadership continued to support him, he later decided to step down anyway.

Attempts to stabilize the situation and to suppress expressions of dissent do not appear to have prevented erosion of confidence in the government among Uighurs. Although there has been no repetition of the July 2009 riots, disturbances have continued and even worsened. I instance here only a few very serious incidents among a range that have afflicted Xinjiang in recent years.

One that got a good deal of publicity was the murder of the eminent Muslim seventy-four-year-old Uighur imam Abdurehim Daomalla in August 2013. Abdurehim was deputy chairman of Turpan city’s government-affiliated Islamic Association and had sided with the government in accusing the perpetrators of a violent incident that had occurred two months earlier of being terrorists [16]. The murderers were Uighurs bent on payback for what they saw as the senior Muslim cleric’s betrayal of their ethnic group. At the end of April 2014 a suicide attack occurred at a railway station in Ürümqi that killed three people and wounded many others. What made this incident worse in the eyes of authorities was that it took place within hours of Xi Jinping’s completing an inspection tour of Xinjiang and appeared to be intended as a calculated and direct insult to his authority and legitimacy. The next month, terrorists threw bombs into a market in Ürümqi, killing forty-three people and wounding nearly 100, the dead including four of the assailants and some elderly Han. In July 2014, clashes between police and Uighurs in Yarkand (Chinese: Shache) in southern Xinjiang caused, among other factors, by government-imposed restrictions during Ramadan, killed nearly 100 people, in casualty terms the worst incident since July 2009 [17] and [18].

Terrorist incidents involving Uighurs have occurred outside Xinjiang. One took place in October 2013 in Tiananmen Square right in the heart of Beijing; a Uighur man carried out a suicide attack together with his
wife and mother, killing two people in addition to themselves and wounding quite a few others. Another was on 1 March 2014, when knife-wielding attackers at Kunming Railway Station killed 29 people and injured many others [18].

It is likely that China is being drawn into the tide of Islamic fundamentalist terrorism that is affecting Africa, India, Indonesia, Western countries and elsewhere, not to mention the Middle East. In a speech in Mosul, Iraq, on July 4, 2014, the leader of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi specifically included China among countries where Muslim rights had been forcibly seized, adding “your brothers all over the world are waiting for your rescue, and are anticipating your brigades”. The fact that in his speech he was asking for allegiance from Muslims around the world certainly added justification for the Chinese authorities to suppress signs of Islamism-inspired terrorism [19].

Another source of contention in Xinjiang has been demographic factors. Under the People’s Republic established in 1949, the Han population has increased dramatically, mainly through immigration. Between the 1953 and 1982 censuses, the ratio of Han to the whole Xinjiang population grew from 6.1 to 40.4 per cent [20, pp. 247–248]. Although the actual proportion of Han in Xinjiang has been more or less stable since the early 1980s, the cultural and economic impact of this ethnic group, which is by far the most numerous and powerful in China, has altered Xinjiang enormously, giving rise to a feeling of dispossession among Uighurs.

According to the 2010 census, the total population of Xinjiang was 21,813,300. The best represented ethnic group was the Uighurs, who make up 46.42 per cent of the total (about 10.13 million people), followed by the Han with 38.99 per cent (about 8.51 million), with the Kazaks and Hui being distant third and fourth, respectively at 7.02 and 4.5 per cent of Xinjiang’s total, or in absolute terms just over 1.5 million (Kazaks) and slightly below 1 million (Hui) [21, p. 4]. There are also members of many other ethnic groups in Xinjiang, including Russians and Mongolians. The Hui are Sinic Muslims, meaning that they are Chinese by culture and language but Muslim by religion. Uighurs often regard them as Han, even though sharing the practice of Islam, and it is quite commonplace for them to pray in different mosques.

Xinjiang and developments there have ramifications for foreign affairs. Xinjiang is at province not national level, but international relations apply to all of China. From time to time, minority affairs have played a role in China’s foreign relations, especially relating to the Tibetans and Uighurs. The fact that Xinjiang has a significant minority population thus exercises an impact on China’s international relations.
Xinjiang and China’s Relations with the West

The combination of Islam and separatism among the Uighurs made Xinjiang more important for China’s foreign relations following the September 11, 2001, incidents in New York and Washington than it had been in the twentieth century. One of the first results of September 11 was American and other Western military intervention in Afghanistan, with ramifications relevant both in this section and the next on countries bordering Xinjiang. On the economic front, the United States has become involved in the “New Silk Road” strategy.

Along with other Western countries, especially Germany, the United States has also become much more active in offering a haven to diaspora groups that oppose the Chinese government. There are two implications. One is that these groups are at the forefront of accusing China of human rights abuses and of suppressing the Uighurs, using Western fora for their attacks. The other is that China has reacted against the United States and other Western countries for allowing such activity on their soil.

Although there are ongoing and serious ramifications for the role of the United States in the Muslim world, American and other NATO partners in Afghanistan completed troop withdrawal at the end of 2014, though support for the continued development of the Afghan security forces and institutions and a wider cooperation with Afghanistan will continue. Soon after his election towards the end of 2011, the Kyrgyzstan President Almazbek Atambayev visited Turkey, where he made it clear he wanted the United States to withdraw all military installations from Manas transit centre near the Kyrgyzstan capital Bishkek when NATO troops withdrew from Afghanistan [22]. In the Kyrgyz capital Bishkek, Atambayev reiterated this demand in December 2012. Manas airport has been a valuable hub of transportation for military personnel and supplies to and from Afghanistan. The implication is that US military involvement in the Central Asian region is waning sharply. The re-elected administration of Barack Obama seems keen to maintain some economic involvement in the region, as shown by American involvement in the “New Silk Road” strategy. However, American participation in this strategy could likely suffer as a result of the NATO military drawdown [23]. This will remove one of the balances to China’s own Silk Road Economic Belt and its growing involvement in Central Asia, a theme to which we return in the next section.

Another implication of the intervention of American troops in Afghanistan was that twenty-two Uighurs were among those imprisoned in Guantanamo Bay in Cuba. These men caused considerable legal
problems for the American authorities, because the United States refused to repatriate them for fear that China would treat them badly but also, along with most other countries, refused them asylum. Various countries have given them refuge over the years. Finally, at the end of 2013, the last three were transferred to Slovakia. The relevant State Department spokesman Cliff Sloan said that the release of the three to Slovakia was “an important step in implementing President Obama’s directive to close the Guantánamo detention facility” [24]. It also removed a significant difficulty in Sino-American relations.

We turn now to the Uighur diaspora groups, which have probably been the source of Xinjiang’s most publicized and direct impact on Western countries’ relations with China since 2009. The most important of them is the World Uyghur Congress (WUC). Established at a major conference in Munich in 2004, this body represented a coalition of anti-Chinese diaspora groups, which aimed, according to its website, “to promote the right of the Uyghur people to use peaceful, nonviolent, and democratic means to determine the political future of East Turkestan” and to oppose “Chinese occupation of East Turkestan” [25]. East Turkestan is the name WUC and diaspora groups apply to what the Chinese and the international community generally call Xinjiang.

The president of the WUC since 2006 is Ms Rebiya Kadeer. A former businesswoman, she became very rich indeed and was touted as a success story in socialist China, but was later imprisoned for stealing state secrets, almost certainly a trumped up charge. She was released in 2005 due to a deal with the Bush Administration and allowed to go and live in the United States.5

When the July 2009 riots occurred, the Chinese authorities put much of the blame on the WUC and on Rebiya Kadeer personally. She visited Australia in August 2009 to attend the premier of a documentary she had made on her own life and anti-China struggle. Entitled The 10 Conditions of Love, the documentary was shown at the Melbourne Film Festival, against bitter opposition from the Chinese authorities. The English-language China Daily even came close to charging the Australian government with supporting terrorism when it declared in an editorial that “by providing Kadeer a platform for anti-Chinese separatist activities, Canberra chose to side with a terrorist” [27].

Rebiya Kadeer continues to live in Washington and puts out statements from time to time accusing China of poor human rights and calling for democratic change there. For instance, in November 2012, on the eve of the 18th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, she issued a statement accusing the Chinese of

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5On her career down to the time she went to the United States, see [26, pp. 357–361].
following “policies of Uighur cultural genocide” and expressing the hope that Xi Jinping would seize the opportunity “to push for lasting democratic reform by breaking from CCP's past of authoritarianism.” She continued: “I also believe a democratic China could peacefully resolve the problems besetting East Turkestan” [28]. She obviously maintains her rage against China.

Correspondingly, the Chinese authorities have not forgiven Rebiya Kadeer. During a visit to Xinjiang in 2010 I found nobody was willing to mention her name and a supermarket she had once run was being demolished. The Chinese authorities continue to harass her family still in Xinjiang. However, it is obvious that the WUC and Rebiya Kadeer have come to occupy a lower priority in China’s relations both with Australia and the United States than they did just after the July 2009 riots. When The 10 Conditions of Love was televised by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation in May 2010, Chinese reaction took a low profile. Later, Rebiya Kadeer revisited Australia in October 2011 for an Amnesty International meeting in Brisbane. There were no repercussions or Chinese reaction even remotely similar to those she had aroused at the premiere of The 10 Conditions of Love in 2009, and her visit went off with little notice and without incident.

Rebiya Kadeer has received funding from the State Department-sponsored National Endowment for Democracy. The WUC and other diaspora bodies centred in the United States regularly put out statements accusing the Chinese of repression against the Uighurs and blaming the authorities for violent incidents. However, Chinese castigations against Rebiya Kadeer and the United States for stirring up trouble in Xinjiang appear to have subsided. Although on a lower level than the 2009 riots, there have been several incidents since then, which Chinese authorities have mostly blamed on local terrorists, separatists or religious extremists. For instance, an incident in Kashgar killing at least a dozen people in February 2012 was laid at the door of an unspecified number of “violent terrorists” [29]. These people were apparently locals. They were not inspired from outside China, let alone the United States.

One other significant development is that, on its side, the United States has begun to change its attitude towards attacks in and connected with Xinjiang. Its approach has been to place a good deal of the blame on China for its poor ethnic policies and human rights abuses. However, its official spokespeople have abandoned their reluctance to attribute the attacks in Xinjiang and elsewhere to terrorism. In response to the May 2014 incident in the Ürümqi market, the White House Press Secretary Jay Carney issued a strongly worded statement beginning that “The United States condemns the horrific terrorist attack” in Xinjiang, thus leaving no doubt that it blamed terrorism. He continued: “This is a despicable and outrageous act of violence against innocent
civilians, and the United States resolutely opposes all forms of terrorism” [30]. The change in attitude is probably a result of the rise in international Islamist terrorism at the time, best symbolized by the declaration of ISIL in January 2014.

**Bordering Countries; Former Soviet Union States**

Xinjiang’s longest international borders are with Mongolia and Kazakhstan. There are substantial borders with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and short borders with Russia and Afghanistan. Also worth noting is a significant border with Jammu and Kashmir, including both the Pakistan- and Indian-controlled sections.

**The Russian Federation**

Of all China’s bilateral relations with border countries, the one that matters most overall is that with Russia. Sino-Russian ties have been very good in the period covered in this article, with the two countries taking a common front against the West over many important international issues. China’s Russia relationship since the July 2009 Ürümqi riots is not considered in detail here, because it is not greatly affected by Xinjiang. However, there is an important area where Russia sets the tone of the broad international web of relations among the countries covered in this article: namely the economic aspect, especially as concern gas and oil. In May 2014, during a visit President Vladimir Putin made to Shanghai, Russia signed a contract worth more than $400 billion to supply China with natural gas over thirty years. This is an agreement with enormous international implications, especially its effect in increasing the price of natural gas in Europe and over the long term strengthening overall Sino-Russian friendship at the expense of both countries’ relations with the West [31]. Moreover, another Sino-Russian gas deal was reached during the APEC meeting in Beijing in November 2014, which aimed at expanding and strengthening the earlier one. However, since the Xinjiang factor is no more than peripheral, there is no need to consider the issue in more detail here.

**The Republic of Mongolia**
Xinjiang’s border with the Republic of Mongolia is the most easterly of all those it has with another country. Despite the length of the border, Xinjiang is not an important factor in Mongolia’s relations with China. As it happens, these relations are somewhat ambivalent. For Mongolia, China is becoming more and more important economically, politically, and in other ways. On the formal government level, relations are good. On the other hand, many Mongolians resent China’s increasing dominance, especially in the economy.

One way in which the Republic of Mongolia is worth mentioning in considering Xinjiang is its ethnic minority population. According to the November 2010 census in Mongolia, there were 101,526 Kazaks in that country at that time, almost all in the western regions in the border areas with Xinjiang.⁶ There are some social relations between the Kazaks on either side of the border, as well as some trade dealings not necessarily involving particular ethnic groups. However, in the big picture of how Mongolia relates to China, it is the part of China to the east of Xinjiang that matters.

Pakistan

So we turn next to several other countries that border Xinjiang. We can begin with a brief discussion of Pakistan, which has traditionally maintained very good relations with China, but has been the scene of many Islamist-inspired disturbances [33]. The big picture viewed from Pakistan sees a “faltering” relationship with the US, especially since 2011, when several untoward incidents occurred that produced a damaging effect on bilateral relations. Among these were the assassination of Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden in May 2011 on Pakistani soil without authorization from the Pakistani government and a NATO strike that killed two dozen Pakistani soldiers [34]. The India-Pakistan relationship is by tradition relentlessly hostile and shows no signs of improvement. On the other hand, the historically fraught Sino-Indian relationship has recently tended to mellow. China is tentatively moving towards India in various ways, as evidenced, among other respects, by their working together in the BRICS forum⁷ and by President Xi Jinping’s visit to India in September 2014.⁸ At the same time China is doing its best to maintain its close and cooperative relationship with Pakistan, where China enjoys a very favourable image [33, p. 5].

⁶ The figure comes from the Mongolian-language communication by the National Statistical Office of Mongolia of the 2010 census [32].
⁷ BRICS is the acronym for Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. The first BRIC summit was held in 2009 in Yekaterinburg, Russia, with South Africa being added the following year.
⁸ For example, see [35], which not only paints a picture of expanding cooperation between India and China, but predicts that China has much more to gain from a good relationship with India than with Pakistan.
China’s economic relationship with Pakistan has expanded recently. Trade has benefited from a free-trade agreement signed between the two countries in 2006. China has also invested extensively in Pakistan’s infrastructure, a major example being a port at Gwadar in southwest Pakistan, in a position greatly facilitating the transportation of goods through the Strait of Hormuz to the Persian Gulf. During a visit to Pakistan in May 2013, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang formally raised the idea of a China-Pakistan Economic Corridor linking Kashgar in Xinjiang with Gwadar, opening the potential for a major gateway for trade and energy supplies between China, the Middle East and Africa. On 22 May 2013 Li stated: “We hope to create a giant economic corridor that would not only enhance China’s strategic significance but would also help in restoring peace and stability to Asia.” (Cited [33, p. 27]). Xinjiang thus assumes great importance not only for China’s relations with Pakistan but in its overall trade and economic development.

Li’s reference to restoring peace and stability raises the issue of Islamist terrorism in Xinjiang, which is undoubtedly among the main factors why that region impacts on China’s overall relations with Pakistan. Some Uighurs suspected of terrorism and fighting in Afghanistan have taken refuge in Pakistan, while others have trained in Pakistan to take part in a jihad or holy war against the Chinese state. On the positive side for China, it was Pakistani troops who in October 2003 killed Hasan Mahsum, the leader of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), which China condemns as a terrorist organization and holds responsible for many of the terrorist acts in Xinjiang [34, p. 8].

When violence erupted in Kashgar in July 2011, the Chinese authorities blamed Uighur terrorists. However, instead of associating them with Rebiya Kadeer or the United States, they claimed that the leader of one of the main incidents had trained in Pakistan [36]. As one academic study puts it, this was “the first time China has publicly pointed the finger at Pakistan” [34, p. 8]. As it happened, the incident did not harm Sino-Pakistan relations. The Pakistani government denied any links with Uighur terrorists and, according to Sean Roberts, “insisted that it would assist the PRC in tackling the problem it faced” [12, p. 16]. According to an October 2013 BBC Urdu report (cited [37]), the Pakistani government added ETIM and two other bodies to its list of proscribed terrorist organizations, and did so at China’s behest. China is obviously the senior partner in this relationship with Pakistan, and Pakistan is clearly very keen to keep China as a friend. Yet China clearly has a major stake in maintaining good relations and it is not surprising, as academic Raffaello Pantucci aptly writes, that “the prosperity and, indeed, the survival of the Pakistani state is essential to China” [37].
In evaluating the role of Xinjiang in Sino-Pakistani relations, there are possibly more complexities in balancing economics against security than with other countries. Economics may be less important in China’s Pakistan relationship than with other countries or regions, while security may loom larger. The mid-December 2014 Pakistani Taliban terrorist massacre in the school in Peshawar that killed 148 people, mostly children, shows beyond any doubt just how serious Islamist terrorism is in that country. Yet there do not appear to be links with Xinjiang, and the incident has increased the determination of the Pakistani government to defeat terrorism. It is not clear whether economics or security is primary in Xinjiang’s function for China’s relationship with Pakistan since 2009.

The republics of Central Asia

Turning to Central Asia, we find that the overwhelmingly important development in the region is the spread of China’s economic and strategic influence. As with Mongolia, this is usually welcome in the official state policy of the various countries. The “decision-making circles, the presidential families, the political elites and the private sector oligarchs and directors of large public companies” are “broadly oriented toward China.” Also like Mongolia, there is sometimes resentment against China and Chinese people. One major study sees Sinophilia and Sinophobia going hand in hand in Central Asia, with the latter even “taking the upper hand” with potential long-term social consequences [38, p. 192].

It is important to note diversity among the various countries in the role China plays. However, in discussing the big picture of the Central Asian landmass in the years leading up to 2012, one study concludes that “China is consolidating its position into what appears to be an inadvertent empire” [39].

In this view, an exaggerated emphasis on the maritime aspects of China’s rise in the east has led strategists to overlook the vast land areas to China’s west. Over many centuries, China has been a continental land power, not a naval one. US President Obama’s late 2011 initiative to renew the projection of American power in the Pacific ignores the very quiet but more important Chinese advance in Central Asia, in which the role of Xinjiang is crucial.

It is necessary to mention a body that in the twenty-first century has exercised significant influence in this region, namely the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Set up in 2001 as an grouping of states
heavily involved in Central Asia, it brought together China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. In 2004 and 2005, four countries were accepted as observers, namely Mongolia, India, Iran and Pakistan. Then, at the summit meeting in June 2012, the SCO invited Afghanistan to become an observer and suggested playing a greater role there, given the withdrawal of NATO and Western troops by 2014. In 2012, also, three countries were invited to take part as formal “dialogue partners”, the most important being Turkey. The SCO is aimed at protecting joint interests of member countries, and one of its roles is to counter Western influence, especially American, in the Central Asian region.

Although China’s economic push into Central Asia is multidimensional, its main focus is the securing of resources and energy. In September 2013, President Xi Jinping made a very high-profile visit to the region. Although he discussed many issues, the economy was primary and “a staggering array of deals worth dozens of billions of dollars were signed” [41].

Policies such as those implied in this comment have resulted in Chinese investment in oil, gas, copper and other production units in all the countries of Central Asia. One important example is in Kazakhstan. After investment failures in 2003, Chinese companies, especially the China National Petroleum Corporation and Sinopec, “have succeeded in making a grand entrance onto the Kazakh market, mainly by accepting Astana’s stipulation that all oil consortiums involve [the Kazakh state-owned] KazMunayGas in their activities” [38, p. 69]. In Afghanistan China has secured a twenty-five-year tender to develop an oil field in Amu Darya in the country’s north. In addition, China has been the main builder of an infrastructure network that includes oil and gas pipelines, roads, and railways [39].

There is a cultural side to China’s initiative in Central Asia. The learning of Chinese language has become quite popular in Central Asia and is probably the second most taught foreign language, after English, in the universities of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. An office affiliated with its Ministry of Education has established a range of Confucius Institutes in Central Asia to teach Chinese language and spread Chinese culture. Although these Institutes are certainly not unique to Central Asia, Tashkent in Uzbekistan was the site of a pilot in June 2004 even before the first formal one was established in Seoul later the same year. China has encouraged Central Asians to study at its universities and also delegated Chinese professors to teach and work in

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9For a good account of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in the period before the one of relevance in this paper and from China’s point of view see [40]. For a perspective focused more on the Central Asian states, see [38, pp. 27-43].
Central Asia. It has also sent cultural delegations like orchestras and theatre troupes to visit and perform in Central Asian countries [38, pp. 133–140].

There are also strategic concerns, and they cut all ways. One of the main reasons for establishing the SCO in the first place was to prevent the spread of Islamist influence and terrorism, and the cross-border transport of narcotics. The SCO early set up a Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS), based in Tashkent. Ironically, the SCO’s establishment was in June 2001, that is a few months before the September 11 Incident, meaning that the countries of the region were well aware of such dangerous influences before the event occurred.

Nevertheless, the September 11 Incident certainly added a justification to the formation of the body. For China, one of the causes of the July 2009 riots was interference from outside, including Central Asia, and it remains fearful that hostile influences can stir up dormant ethnic tensions and hatreds in Xinjiang. The SCO forums allow China and other countries to air their concerns regarding Islamist extremism and other matters. In 2013, the RATS established a special unit to help China against terrorism in Xinjiang. The director of the RATS executive committee Zhang Xinfeng justified the decision of collective action throughout Central Asia as follows: “Terrorist attacks in Xinjiang are closely related to the activities of terrorist, separatist and extremist forces in Central Asia, so joint anti-terrorist efforts from the member countries are crucial to China’s stability, and it is a long-term mission” (quoted [42]).

Meanwhile, the countries of Central Asia are to some extent wary about the expanding influence of China. It may be very useful to them economically, because it helps development, but all countries fear too much dominance, especially from a country they have got used to regarding as poorer than themselves and in many ways inferior. Russia, which was for so long master of the whole region before and during the Soviet period, may enjoy good relations with China but sees its own interests directly threatened by the Chinese advance into Central Asia. The Russian leaders know it is to their advantage to get on with China, but they cannot relish the fact of this strongly rising neighbour at the same time as they themselves may be on the back foot, and even on the decline, in Central Asia. China’s rise is inevitably a challenge to Russia. The writers of a relevant article [39] aptly summed up China’s role in Central Asia as follows:

It isn’t clear that even China grasps the incidental impact of its regional activity in reshaping Central Asia or how it is perceived by regional states, as Chinese actors are simply so focused on developing
Xinjiang and extracting what they want from Central Asia. With Russia’s influence in the region at a historically low ebb and the widespread perception across Central Asia that the United States will strategically abandon the region once most combat troops have withdrawn from Afghanistan, Beijing has carved out an inadvertent empire. Lacking a clear strategy and attempting to keep a low profile (a characteristic Chinese approach), China has become the most consequential actor in Central Asia.

Several crucial points emerge from this extract. For China, what counts most in Central Asia is developing its own economy, especially in Xinjiang. Central Asia may still be a zone of conflict. However, the “New Silk Road” and the prosperity it brings are more important than conflict in the overall scheme of things, as well as being potentially able to ameliorate tensions by promoting peace. Another point to emerge from the quoted extract is that China has not laid any long-term plan to expand into Central Asia. The expansion has just happened more or less by the force of circumstances and China’s need for resources and energy. But most important of all, whatever any of its leader’s intentions in Beijing or Ürümqi, China has surpassed the activities of all other players in Central Asia.

Xinjiang and China’s Relations with Turkey

We take up next a country that has leaned strongly towards the West since World War II and is even a member of NATO, namely Turkey. Since the Uighurs are Turkic, there is an ethnic connection that makes the situation in Xinjiang of concern to Turkey. It is an interesting historical fact that it was in Kashgar (southern Xinjiang) that the tenth-century Karakhanid monarch Satuq Bughra Khan became the first ruler among Turkic ethnicities to convert to Islam and to bring his people with him.

In essence, Turkey’s relations with China were very tense at the time of the July 2009 riots, but have improved fundamentally since that time. They show Xinjiang much more as part of a Silk Road than a zone of conflict. Turkey’s reaction to the July 2009 riots was very negative, especially that of its prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan. According to Agence France Presse, he said that “[T]he event taking place in China is a kind of genocide,” adding “we have difficulty understanding how China's leadership... can remain a spectator in the face of these events” [43]. So although he did not directly blame China for the fact that the disturbances occurred, he certainly criticized how it handled them and used extremely strong and harsh words in his comments. Both the disturbances and Erdogan’s response were particularly unfortunate for Sino-Turkish relations because they came
the month after Turkish President Abdullah Gül had been to China and made the first ever Xinjiang visit by an occupant of his post.

Developments since that time have been overwhelmingly positive for Sino-Turkish relations. Indeed, their growth and improvement have been so significant that their dimensions are no longer merely bilateral “but have a global characteristic” [44]. In other words, they have become important enough to affect not only Turkey and China, but even the whole Eurasian region and beyond.

Major leaders’ visits include Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao’s to Turkey in October 2010 and Vice-President Xi Jinping’s there in February 2012. On the other side, Erdogan visited China in April 2012, becoming the first Turkish head of government in twenty-seven years to do so. Already when Wen was in Ankara in October 2010 both prime ministers were talking of a “strategic cooperative relationship” [45] (Xinhua 2012) and commentators soon starting talking of a “strategic partnership” between the two countries [44].

Economics bulks very large in the relationship. During Xi Jinping’s visit to Turkey he attended an economic forum. He emphasized the complementarity of the two economies, stating: “We should see this potential and work accordingly for joint projects on both sides as well as in third countries.” Trade between the two countries saw US$21.6 billion worth of Chinese goods sold to Turkey in 2011, against only $2.5 billion the other way around. However, the two countries’ leaders agreed to strive to move towards a more balanced trade and, in particular, to quadruple the value to $100 billion by 2020. China is very interested in investing in Turkish infrastructure projects, such as a canal that will link the Black Sea and the Sea of Marmara. Most strikingly, during the economic forum Deputy Prime Minister Ali Babacan stated that Turkish leaders would start talks “with Chinese authorities and officials regarding nuclear energy” [46], a highly controversial area at the best of times.

The visit that aroused most interest, however, was Erdogan’s to China in April 2012. His delegation of key officials and 300 businesspeople began its China trip in Ürümqi, the site of the July 2009 riots that had drawn the prime minister’s acid comments about “genocide.” He also went to Beijing, where he saw Vice-President Xi Jinping and other leaders.

There were various reactions to Erdogan’s China and Xinjiang visit. One highly enthusiastic exponent of the anti-China Uighur cause, former President of the Uyghur American Association Nury Turkel, went so far as to call the visit “an example for Western democracies” because of the concern Erdogan showed for the local
Uighurs. His claim was that the Turkic people of that region “greeted Mr. Erdogan like a rock star, and little wonder”. While trade, investment, Syria and other issues might be high on the agenda, “showing support and sympathy for the Uighur people appeared to be equally important to the prime minister. They rarely enjoy such vocal support from foreign leaders” [47].

An alternative perspective comes from Peter Lee. He claims that Erdogan “did not antagonize his hosts by posturing as the protector of Xinjiang's Uighurs” and was keen not to upset the apple cart of Sino-Turkish relations. This would most certainly be the result of any attempt to support anti-China activity among the Uighurs. Lee notes that, even in Turkey, Erdogan suffered criticism for focusing too much on Syria in talks with Chinese leaders at the expense of “succoring Turkey's Uighur brethren” [48].

Erdogan gained an agreement from China to establish a trade zone in Ürümqi. However, there is nothing unusual or against China’s interests in that. While Turkel may well be right that local Uighurs greeted Erdogan enthusiastically, I think he implies far more “vocal support” the other way around than warranted by the facts. It is reported that Erdogan promised Xi Jinping in Beijing that he would not allow anti-China secessionist activity among his own people. Xi Jinping is reported as saying that “to respect and support each other on issues regarding core concerns is not only a manifestation of political trust between China and Turkey, but also the foundation for healthy growth of our strategic cooperative ties” [49]. That would seem to square not only with Erdogan’s promise not to allow anti-China secessionist activity among his own people but also with Lee’s claim that the Turkish prime minister did not try to stir up separatism in Xinjiang, which is certainly a core concern for Chinese leaders.

All reports suggest that the issue of Syria loomed large in Erdogan’s talks with Chinese leaders. This was clearly a point of division, considering Turkey’s high profile support for the forces opposing Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and China’s active opposition to any proposal assuming Assad’s overthrow. That China was not particularly swayed by Turkey’s view may emerge from the fact that shortly after Erdogan’s visit, China welcomed Assad’s foreign minister, Walid Moallem. As Peter Lee notes, China “is not looking to Turkey for leadership” on the Syrian issue [50]. Another related issue on which these two countries do not see eye to eye is Turkey’s active support for the “Arab spring” beginning early in 2011 and China’s reservations.

So there are limits to how bright the future is for each country in dealing with the other. Another matter pointing in the same direction, though not related to Xinjiang, is that in September 2013, Turkey chose a
Chinese air-defence system in preference to one from NATO or Russia, but in mid-2014 the deal collapsed, largely due to pressure from NATO. The observer Zan Tao [51] well sums up the overall China-Turkey relationship as follows:

For Turkey, the importance of China lies mainly in economics, especially considering that China has become Turkey’s third largest trade partner in the last decade, after Russia and Germany. But the huge trade deficit on the Turkish side should not be forgotten. The Uighur issue will also be very hard, if not impossible, to eradicate from the Turkish-Sino relationship. Based on these considerations, it is safe to conclude that for Turkey, China is a potential partner but not an alternative partner to the West.

In the twenty-first century, Turkey is like China in doing well economically and raising its international profile. Turkey’s future is both interesting and important for its region and beyond. However, this issue is not crucial to the present discussion and needs no more treatment here.

Conclusion

Among the most important international trends in the first part of the twenty-first century is that China is rising at the expense of other major powers, including both Russia and the United States. The role of Xinjiang demonstrates that China’s foreign policy is not only about the seas to the east and south, but also shows the country as facing west. Xinjiang also shares in and contributes to the changing balance of power that favours China over the United States and Russia, above all as it affects Pakistan, the Central Asian region and Turkey. There is the potential for tensions between China and Turkey, which is also rising and important for the Turkic Uighur people of Xinjiang, but for the present a cooperative and stable bilateral relationship is decisively in the interests of both countries.

The “Silk Road” and the zone of conflict in Central Asia may be opposites in some ways, but they are not mutually exclusive. Those talking of the “Silk Road” in past times conceived it not only in economic terms, but as a conduit for ideas, the arts, and religions. However, in the present most people think of it as economic only. That is certainly what is implied both in Hillary Clinton’s and Xi Jinping’s concepts and that is how it is understood in this article.
So what is the direct answer to the question posed in the title, whether Xinjiang in China’s foreign relations functions as part of a new Silk Road or a Central Asian zone of conflict? It functions in both ways, but much more as part of a new Silk Road than as a zone of conflict. The idea of a “Silk Road” is actually not particularly new. Pushing trade and economic development from China westwards into Central Asia and beyond has been a process for some time, and it is something that appears to be in the basic interests of the peoples of the region. China’s push has been more or less worldwide so the Central Asian section is not something in contradiction with what China is doing elsewhere. China needs resources and the infrastructure that can help provide them. The information and analysis provided above suggest strongly that the economic ideas and trade that are inherent in the concepts of the New Silk Road and the Silk Road Economic Belt are the most important impulse developing in the Central Asian region, including Xinjiang.

Where does that leave the “zone of conflict”? The fact that the coalition forces led by the United States have withdrawn from Afghanistan may suggest reduction in conflict in some ways. But that would be only a partial reading of the situation. Ethnic and religious tensions are still serious in Xinjiang and appear to be intensifying. The potential to split China is not very strong, but these tensions are hardly dwindling, let alone disappearing. Islamist pressures are still present in Central Asia, even strong in some places. As a potential for Xinjiang in China’s foreign relations, the need to suppress terrorism and religious extremism is likely to continue to arouse the ire or anxiety of the Western powers on human rights grounds. However, they are very unlikely to rival mutual economic interests. It is simply not credible that the Western powers, or any others for that matter, will risk economic advantage in Xinjiang for the sake of criticizing practices regarded as human rights abuses. This is particularly the case since Chinese leaders aim such practices at the suppression of Islamist-based separatism/terrorism. After all, the West and China share a deep hostility to Islamism, and may be ambivalent even towards Islam itself.

So the “zone of conflict” idea in Central Asia is definitely the less important trend. It is most unlikely to undermine, let alone triumph over, the impulses towards economic rise and interchange implied by the Silk Road. But continuing tensions and even the possibilities of conflict cannot be overlooked.

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