

HOW THE WEST WAS WON: CHINA'S EXPANSION INTO CENTRAL ASIA

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Abstract

In the People's Republic of China, the Great Western Development Drive has been promoted as a solution to the economic inequalities that exist between the eastern and western regions of the country. Although the initiative has overt economic objectives, these are accompanied by political objectives of internal security in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, an area also known as East Turkestan. The Great Western Development Drive also works in conjunction with China's economic and political objectives for the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. As a bridge to the markets of Central Asia, the Great Western Development Drive in East Turkestan has built an infrastructure with which China can export goods and import natural resources. Greater economic cooperation between Central Asia and China has also permitted the silencing of Uyghur dissent in Shanghai Cooperation Organization member states. The net result of China's expansion into Central Asia for Uyghurs in the region and in East Turkestan has been economic and political marginalization, most notably in the visible exclusion from the policies and projects of the Great Western Development Drive.

Keywords: *China, East Turkestan, Xinjiang, Uyghur, Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Western Development, Security, Economy*

Introduction

Signs of China's presence abound in Central Asia. Walk down a street in Almaty, Tashkent or Bishkek, and evidence of China is not difficult to find. Chinese goods fill the stores, people dress in Chinese-manufactured clothes, and vehicles imported from over the Chinese border navigate the traffic. Although this scene may be somewhat familiar in developing nations across the world as the People's Republic of China (hereinafter China) expands its markets and strategic interests, the difference with Central Asia¹ is the extent of China's reach. Central Asia is arguably the biggest success story of China's forays into global influence.

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¹ Understood, in this work, as the nations of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. While a more common definition of Central Asia would also include Turkmenistan, it has been omitted in this article as it is not a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

China's economic and political successes in Central Asia have been realized through two Chinese Communist Party (CCP)-led initiatives: the Great Western Development Drive (GWDD)² and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). This article illustrates how the GWDD in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, an area also known as East Turkestan,³ has served as a bridge for China to expand its economic and political influence in Central Asia through the SCO. The work explains how GWDD objectives in East Turkestan parallel and drive China's SCO objectives in Central Asia to create a consistent economic and political policy that encompasses the entire region. It also demonstrates that the GWDD in East Turkestan serves to establish physical links between eastern China and Central Asia, which China has utilized to realize its SCO objectives. This article will compare and contrast GWDD and China SCO objective operationalization to highlight the salient parallels, and examine the increase in the physical capacity required in East Turkestan, through the GWDD, to build a physical link between eastern China and Central Asia. This work will subsequently analyze the consequences of the GWDD for the Uyghur people of East Turkestan. Finally, the article concludes that the GWDD in East Turkestan and the SCO are fundamentally connected in fulfilling China's policies of regional economic and political dominance, and that China has ignored the interests and voices of Uyghur people in pursuit of these policies.

The GWDD and the SCO

The State Council of China adopted the GWDD as policy in January 2000 through the establishment of a Leadership Group for Western China Development. The Chinese government characterized the policy as an initiative that would raise the level of economic development in the western region⁴ to be at least equal to the one experienced in China's thriving coastal areas.⁵ The driving force of this proposed economic transformation in East Turkestan was specifically planned as mass investment in large-scale projects to exploit the natural resources of the region, which would, according to the architects of the plan, alleviate high levels of poverty by a trickle-down effect.

Economic indicators from the entire GWDD target area illustrate why the Chinese central government moved to address growing economic disparities between its eastern and western regions. Despite the fact that the western region comprises more than 71% (6.85 million square

² In this author's opinion, the Great Western Development Drive most closely matches the Chinese name of the policy, Xībù Dàkāifā. Variants in translation include: Developing the Western Region, Go West, Open up the West, West Region Development, Western Development Program, and Western Development Strategy.

³ Use of the term East Turkestan does not define a pro-independence position. Instead, Uyghurs wishing to assert their cultural distinctiveness from China proper use this term. Xinjiang, meaning "new boundary" or "new realm", was adopted by the Manchus in the Qing dynasty (1644 -1911) and reflects the perspective of those who gave it this name. This use of this terminology, either Xinjiang or East Turkestan, is often compared by Uyghurs to the use of the term Tibet by Tibetans. That is, Tibetans use the name they choose instead of a translation of the Chinese Xizang, meaning "western treasure-store". Uyghurs also choose to use a name other than the one designated by the Chinese authorities.

⁴ The western region includes five autonomous regions: the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, the Tibet Autonomous Region, and Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region; six provinces – Gansu Province, Guizhou Province, Qinghai Province, Shaanxi Province, Sichuan Province, and Yunnan Province; and one municipality – that of Chongqing.

⁵ Asian Development Bank, *The 2020 Project: Policy Support in the People's Republic of China* (Manila: Asian Development Bank, 2004), xxiii.

kilometers) of China's total landmass and more than 28% of China's total population, it only accounts for 17% of the national gross domestic product (GDP).⁶

The GWDD does not appear to be a codified plan of economic development with measurable predetermined goals. Holbig states that the initiative “appears as a highly diffuse decision-making process shaped by dynamic interactions between numerous actors at central, provincial and local levels”,⁷ with five areas of priority:

- Quest for equality
- Foreign investment
- Infrastructure investment
- Sustainable development
- Tackling the nationalities issue⁸

The five areas of priority Holbig outlines appear to indicate that the Chinese central government is attempting to tackle a complex mixture of regional economic and political issues through the GWDD. The quest for equality, foreign investment, infrastructure investment and sustainable development areas of priority address the economic objectives underpinning the GWDD initiative; however, these four priority areas can also be viewed as influential in the final priority area of tackling the nationalities issue, which is a much more political objective than the others.

The entire GWDD target area contains the majority of China's minority groups and includes all five of China's ethnically arranged autonomous regions. In East Turkestan, Chaudhuri explains that areas containing high densities of Uyghurs⁹ experience elevated levels of poverty compared to areas with high densities of Han Chinese (see Table 1 below).¹⁰ The GWDD has been planned to stimulate growth in high minority group regions to preempt already aggravated minority group grievances stemming from unequal development and a number of other issues. Managing minority group discontent through economic policies designed to boost income is but one method employed by China in “tackling the nationalities issue”; the GWDD has also permitted an influx of Han Chinese in-migrants to minority group areas with the result that strong cultural identities have been diluted.

⁶ Ding Lu and William Neilson, *China's West Region Development* (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 2004), 1.

⁷ Heike Holbig, “The Emergence of the Campaign to Open Up the West: Ideological Formation, Central Decision-making and the Role of the Provinces,” *China Quarterly*, vol. 178 (2004): 335-357.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Variants include: Uygur, Uigur, and Uighur. The spelling used in this article, Uyghur, is based on: Reinhard F. Hahn, *Spoken Uyghur* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1991).

¹⁰ Debasish Chaudhuri, “A Survey of the Economic Situation in Xinjiang and its Role in the Twenty-first Century,” *China Report*, vol. 41:1 (2005): 1-28.

Table 1: Ethnic Distribution and Per Capita GDP at Current Price (2002)

City	% in Total Population		Per Capita GDP (Yuan)
	<i>Uyghur</i>	<i>Han</i>	
Khotan	96.8	3	1,977
Kashgar	89	9.4	2,650
Aksu	72.8	25.9	5,429
Turpan	69	24.2	13,059
Kizilsu	63.7	5.9	2,468
Hami	18.4	68.8	7,815
Karamay	13.8	77.6	45,033
Urumchi	12.7	73.5	17,780
Shihezi	1.2	94.7	10,973

Source: Debasish Chaudhuri, “A Survey of the Economic Situation in Xinjiang and its Role in the Twenty-first Century,” *China Report*, vol. 41:1 (2005): 6.

Given that the GWDD was conceived as a center-led initiative for the “peripheral” western regions, official employment policy has reflected this by importing human capital from eastern China to shore up a perceived shortfall of skilled workers in the local labor market.¹¹ In East Turkestan, a 2003 Chinese government white paper details how “other provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities have provided immense amounts of aid for Xinjiang in terms of technology and skilled people.”¹² More specifically, civil service appointments in East Turkestan to administer the GWDD have favored the hiring of Han Chinese. In 2005, all of the 500–700 new civil service appointments made by the regional and central government in the Uyghur majority area of southern East Turkestan were reserved for members of the Han Nationality.¹³

As a result, the GWDD has been perceived among Uyghurs as a concerted effort to assimilate East Turkestan firmly into China, and as a mechanism by which China’s concerns over sovereignty in the region are being addressed. In essence, the claimed economic character of the GWDD masks a more controversial one of consolidating internal security. Moneyhon adds that “[a]lthough construed as an effort to alleviate poverty and bridge the growing gap of economic disparity between the eastern and western regions, Go West is actually an attempt to quell ethnic unrest, solidify the nation, and legitimize the current regime by taming the ‘wild west’ ”.¹⁴

The security objectives of the SCO, as mentioned above, are closely intertwined with China’s implementation of the GWDD. The SCO was founded in 2001 and is a multi-lateral organization

¹¹ Gardner Bovington, *Autonomy in Xinjiang: Han Nationalist Imperatives and Uyghur Discontent* (Washington: East-West Center, 2004), 25-26.

¹² Chinese Government, *History and Development of Xinjiang* (Beijing: Information Office of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China, 2003), 658.

¹³ Congressional-Executive Commission on China, *Annual Report 2005* (Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, 2005), 20.

¹⁴ Matthew Moneyhon, “China’s Great Western Development Project in Xinjiang: Economic Palliative, or Political Trojan Horse?” *Denver Journal of International Law and Policy*, vol. 31:3 (2004): 491-523.

comprised of China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan;¹⁵ however, its origins are found in the Shanghai 5, which was itself established in 1996. The Shanghai 5 comprised the aforementioned states, except Uzbekistan, and had at its core the objective of building consensus between Central Asian nations and China on a number of internal and regional security issues.

At the time of the post-Soviet fallout, China viewed the Central Asian states' new freedom as a possible threat to its territorial sovereignty over East Turkestan. From China's perspective, the Shanghai 5 operated as an arrangement to manage pro-independence advocacy by the sizeable Uyghur Diaspora in Central Asian states and to curtail possible pro-independence leanings of China-based Uyghurs. This internal Chinese security objective of the Shanghai 5 was transferred to the declaration that established the SCO:

*“The purposes of the SCO are: strengthening mutual trust and good-neighborly friendship among the member states; encouraging effective cooperation among the member states in political, economic and trade, scientific and technological, cultural, educational, energy, communications, environment and other fields; devoting themselves jointly to preserving and safeguarding regional peace, security and stability; and establishing a democratic, fair and rational new international political and economic order”.*¹⁶

This paragraph of the declaration outlines an ambitious agreement on economic and political ties between China and the Central Asian states. Although the language is dominated by security issues, the paragraph also mentions the development of trade and economic cooperation as an important aspect of SCO objectives. This language of combined economic and political objectives reflects a similar combination found in the GWDD areas of priority, with the difference being on emphasis. Political objectives and security issues appear much more prominently in SCO than in GWDD literature. Nevertheless, the SCO security-dominated objectives have manifested in an enlarged role for trade between China and the Central Asian states, just as the economic-dominated objectives of the GWDD have manifested in an enlarged role for security in East Turkestan.

The following table relates how China has successfully increased exports to Central Asia since the establishment of the SCO:

Table 2: Trade between China and Other Members of the SCO (In US\$1,000)

Country	2001	2005	Growth
Russia	10,670,550	29,103,140	173 %
Kazakhstan	1,288,370	6,810,320	429 %
Kyrgyzstan	118,860	972,200	718 %
Tajikistan	10,760	157,940	1,368 %
Uzbekistan	58,300	680,560	1,067 %

Source: Jia Qingguo, “The Shanghai Cooperation Organization: China’s Experiment in Multilateral Leadership” in *Eager Eyes Fixed on Eurasia: Russia and its Eastern Edge*, ed. Iwashita Akihiro (Sapporo: Slavic Research Center, Hokkaido University, 2007), 116.

¹⁵ Observer nations include: India, Iran, Mongolia and Pakistan.

¹⁶ Shanghai Cooperation Organization, “Declaration on Establishment of SCO,” Shanghai Cooperation Organization, http://english.scosummit2006.org/en_bjzl/2006-04/20/content_85.htm (accessed March 4, 2009).

The table shows in all cases, and especially in the cases of the Central Asian states, trade has increased sharply. Uzbekistan, which prior to 2001 had not been a member of the Shanghai 5/SCO, experienced one of the most notable spikes in growth.

In his historical survey of East Turkestan, James Millward describes the character of China's relationship with Central Asia as one of "expan[sion] westward into Xinjiang as part of its campaign against the steppe empire".¹⁷ While this particular observation was made in relation to the Qing Empire (1644-1911), it may equally apply to current China policies.

East Turkestan contains an estimated 20.9 billion tons of oil and 10.8 trillion cubic meters of gas¹⁸, which accounts for approximately 25% of China's reserves.¹⁹ Benson explains that investment in the GWDD "appears earmarked for major construction projects, including roads and highways, pipelines for oil and natural gas, and other infrastructure needed to exploit Xinjiang's natural resources".²⁰ By 2006, extraction of oil from East Turkestan had grown to 20 million tons per year.²¹

Sznajder reports that "Xinjiang has developed a comprehensive 86,000-kilometer road network, including highways linking various border gateways".²² GWDD investment in building transportation infrastructure not only appears to be directed at the movement of human capital and natural resources within China, but also to link eastern China through East Turkestan to the markets and natural resources of the Central Asian states.

China has long seen the potential of economic expansion into the Central Asian states and Premier Li Peng's visit to Kazakhstan in 1994 was an important milestone in that objective. On his visit to Kazakhstan, Premier Li "called for the construction of a new 'Silk Road,' connecting Central Asia with China".²³ Construction of this "new Silk Road" is now in full swing largely due to large-scale projects stimulated by the GWDD in East Turkestan. Current or proposed road and rail arteries now link China with all the Central Asian states on its borders, and Jia states that "[i]ncreasing economic relations are accompanied by enhanced efforts to build transportation links between China and other SCO members". Jia outlines the following upgrades to the transportation network:

"(1) Railways: in 1990, the rail line between Urumuqi (China) and Aqtoghay (Kazakhstan) was opened. Another line has been under negotiation between China, Kyrgyzstan, and

¹⁷ James Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 79.

¹⁸ Sina, "Xinjiang becomes China's second largest crude oil producer," January 2, 2009, <http://english.sina.com/business/2009/0102/208741.html> (accessed April 16, 2009).

¹⁹ China Internet Information Center, "Xinjiang 2004: The Year In Review," China Internet Information Center, <http://german.china.org.cn/english/features/ProvinceView/156243.htm> (accessed November 8, 2006).

²⁰ Linda Benson, "Education and Social Mobility Among Minority Populations in Xinjiang," in *Xinjiang: China's Muslim Borderland*, ed. S. Frederick Starr (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2004), 190-215.

²¹ Xinjiang Capital Attraction Network, "Present Economic Status," Xinjiang Capital Attraction Network, <http://www.xjdc.gov.cn/english/environment/Economic.htm> (accessed March 4, 2009).

²² Ariel P. Sznajder, "China's Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Strategy," *Journal of International Political Sociology*, vol. 5 Spring (2006): 93-102.

²³ Jia Qingguo, "The Shanghai Cooperation Organization: China's Experiment in Multilateral Leadership" in *Eager Eyes Fixed on Eurasia: Russia and its Eastern Edge*, ed. Iwashita Akihiro (Sapporo: Slavic Research Center, Hokkaido University, 2007), 113-123.

*Uzbekistan. (2) Highways: In addition to the five hard-surfaced roads crossing between Xinjiang and Kazakhstan, several highways are either under construction or under improvement. According to a Xinhua news report, China plans to invest 2.3 billion Yuan (\$294 million) in the next five years to upgrade highways linking border-trading areas in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. On top of this, an agreement to build a highway linking nine Asian countries—South Korea, China, Japan, Uzbekistan, Vietnam, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Azerbaijan—took effect on July 4, 2005. (3) Airlines: After years of growth, China already has thirty-eight regular passenger flights with member states of the CAREC (Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation). These plus efforts to build oil pipelines and telecommunication optical fiber cables are laying a firm, solid foundation for further rapid expansion of economic relations among SCO member states.”*²⁴

China has utilized the GWDD to reach Central Asia through East Turkestan. It has done so by establishing transport networks first in East Turkestan, and then in Central Asia to not only expand its markets and extract natural resources from East Turkestan and mineral-rich Central Asia to fuel China's economy, but also to ensure greater oversight over domestic security issues in East Turkestan.

Outcomes for Uyghurs

On the surface, the GWDD objective to bring economic prosperity to East Turkestan appears on course. Not only does the initiative seek to increase employment opportunities in the private sector, but it also requires government investment in the public administration needed to oversee it. By 2004, the Chinese central government announced that this two-pronged investment in East Turkestan's economy had seen a rise of 11.1% in East Turkestan's GDP over the previous year. Moreover, 7.39 million residents were employed (a rise of 2.5% compared to 2003), and the unemployment rate now stood at 3.8%, 0.4% below the national rate.²⁵

As the evidence indicates, employment opportunities are increasing in East Turkestan under the GWDD; however, the ethnic distribution of these opportunities is unequal. Already stated is the preferential treatment Han Chinese receive in securing employment in both the public and the private sectors. One of the sources of this discrimination can be traced to the Han Chinese-ethnic minority relationship, which is dominated by the discourse of Han Chinese management over ethnic minority development. The traditionally patrician approach taken by Han Chinese to minority relations has also created a linguistic dimension to the discrimination facing Uyghurs in the domestic labour market. Mandarin Chinese, a language unrelated to Turkic Uyghur, is often a requirement for gaining employment. This was confirmed in a 2003 survey conducted by Wang, wherein 67% of people questioned stated that high competency in Mandarin Chinese was necessary for finding a job in East Turkestan.²⁶

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ China Internet Information Center, "Xinjiang 2004: The Year In Review," China Internet Information Center, <http://german.china.org.cn/english/features/ProvinceView/156243.htm> (accessed November 8, 2006).

²⁶ Wang Jianjun, "Kaizhan shehui diaocha peiyang shiyingxing hege rencai," [Develop Social Surveys, Train Qualified Talent] *Advanced Scientific Education*, vol. 6 (2003): 64-67.

While the growth of oil and gas industries are raising the GDP of East Turkestan, the large-scale projects involved are often disconnected from the everyday lives of Uyghurs. To underline this point, Pomfret writes that the “[oil] industry is now almost completely run by Han. The China National Petroleum Co. has brought most of its workers here from other parts of China, all but bypassing the provincial Xinjiang Petroleum Bureau in carrying out exploration.”²⁷ Compounded with the arrival of Han Chinese administrators in the public sector, the GWDD has been “tackling the nationalities issue” by diluting, through sheer force of numbers, Uyghur unease over CCP administration. The following quote from a correspondent succinctly describes the economic conditions for Uyghurs under the GWDD:

*“I have clearly seen that development benefits only the Chinese. Development is to attract those people. Jobs are being created for them, not for us. There are a very, very limited number of Uyghurs getting jobs. Uyghurs are forced to sell their land cheaply to immigrants. The difference between poor and rich is getting larger. Uyghurs are losing fast”.*²⁸

Additionally, the containment of Uyghur advocacy in Central Asia has been largely successful through the GWDD and the SCO. China has ensured that Uyghur dissidents and Uyghur groups among the Uyghur Diaspora in SCO member states are unable to carry out their work. According to Oresman, the “diaspora is predominantly concentrated in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, with 50,000 and 180,000 Uyghurs respectively”.²⁹ Oresman continues by adding: “[t]he Central Asian states are loath to offend China and have been proactive in appeasing Chinese worries about the Uyghur populations living in their countries. As one analyst put it, China is having the Central Asians do its ‘dirty work’ in the region”.³⁰ Extradition of Uyghurs to China from SCO member countries is another method by which pressure is applied to Uyghurs critical of China. The most well-known and controversial case is of Huseyin Celil, who was extradited in 2006 from Uzbekistan to China, despite his Canadian citizenship.

Conclusion

China has effectively used the GWDD as a bridge to expand its influence into the Central Asian states through the SCO. While the publicly stated objectives of the GWDD have been largely framed in economic terms, there are clear security objectives attached to the initiative. On the other hand, the SCO was created as a multi-lateral agreement on security, but with provisions on trade, which has seen a rapid growth in Chinese exports to Central Asia. China has achieved an expansion of its markets in Central Asia in addition to quelling dissent in East Turkestan through the application of pressure on Uyghur advocates in SCO member states. Boosts in transportation infrastructure funded by investment in the GWDD has aided China’s economic expansion into Central Asia, as well as established cross-border possibilities for importing natural resources from

²⁷ John Pomfret, “Go West Young Han,” *Washington Post*, September 15, 2000, Section A, 1.

²⁸ The quote is taken from a September 4, 2006 e-mail sent to this author by a Uyghur in East Turkestan. The sender of the e-mail wishes to remain anonymous.

²⁹ Matthew Oresman, “Beyond the Battle of Talas: China’s Reemergence in Central Asia,” in *In the Tracks of Tamerlane: Central Asia’s Path to the 21st Century*, eds. Daniel L. Burghart and Theresa Sabonis-Helf (Washington: Center for Technology and National Security Policy, National Defense University, 2004), 401-424.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 421-424.

Central Asia. This GWDD investment has also been effective in extracting from East Turkestan the natural resources that eastern China requires to fuel its economy. The building of this infrastructure and the large-scale projects required to extract natural resources in East Turkestan has brought with it a huge in-migration of Han Chinese workers, which has proved effective in diluting concentrations of Uyghurs.

Amongst all this activity, the Uyghur population of East Turkestan has been intentionally overlooked. Subjected to increased political pressure from within and without East Turkestan's borders, Uyghurs have so far been unable to participate in the decision-making processes that have such a profound effect on their region. Consequently, Uyghurs have been excluded from the opportunities afforded by the GWDD and the newly opened markets of Central Asia. In addition, the indications for the future do not look promising for Uyghurs, as closer cooperation between China and Central Asia increases the severity of Uyghur disenfranchisement. Oresman states "[o]n the basis of geography and economic realities alone, China appears well placed to expand its influence in the region over the long run. Central Asian states will continue to seek robust engagement with China as their transportation infrastructure and developing economies become more intertwined".³¹

In conclusion, this article argues that the GWDD and SCO have been detrimental to Uyghur economic, social and political interests. A move by Chinese government toward engagement with its Uyghur population, and the prospect of genuine participation for Uyghurs in shaping their economic and political future in the region, would be a critical but necessary strategic adjustment to GWDD and SCO policies in achieving stability and prosperity for all of the residents of East Turkestan.

³¹ Ibid, 402.