

# China and Inner Asia: New Frontiers and New Challenges

**Dr. David Kerr**

Durham University

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Inner Asia is an ambiguous region in the sense that sometimes it is there and sometimes it is not. 40 years ago Inner Asia had largely disappeared from view, obliterated not by one Cold War but three: the Cold War between the USSR and the West and the West's clients in Central Eurasia - Turkey and Iran; the Cold War between the USSR and the PRC that began in the 1960s but intensified with China's lean towards Washington after 1972; and the Cold War between China and India that began with the border war of 1962 but again intensified in the 1970s with Mrs Gandhi's lean towards Moscow and the dismemberment of Pakistan. At that time Inner Asia had nominally four states - the USSR, PRC, Mongolia and Afghanistan - but since the latter two had very significant Soviet military and intelligence presence in practice the region had two states and two proxies. At this time, therefore, Inner Asia was divided, isolated and militarized. This division, isolation and militarization was particularly notable for China. China's boundary in Inner Asia from the USSR, PRC, DPRK border in the Northeast round in an arc of some 16,800 kilometers to the India, Burma, PRC border in the Southwest was closed except for a single point of access to the interior of Asia over the Karakoram Range into Pakistan. So one principal effect of the multiple Cold Wars in Asia was to isolate China from interior Asia and to force its Inner Asian provinces into the role of Cold War frontiers. This Cold War Inner Asia has now been fully dismantled and the region has re-emerged in new configurations driven by internal, social changes and external, geopolitical changes.

In external geopolitical changes the most significant developments have been: the end of the USSR and the creation of sovereign Central Asia; the rise of China and India as modern Asian great powers; and the resurgence of Islam as a factor shaping the international relations of Central Eurasia and neighbouring regions. The primary internal and social changes have been: the emergence of some kind of civil society in post-socialist societies; the rise of new nationalisms in Inner Asia often drawing on

ethnic and religious solidarities, some of which are democratic and some of which are xenophobic and militant; and the development of new economic strategies for Inner Asia driven by activities like resource extraction, trade, investment and migrant labour. A further development that must also be noted is climate change, which will rise in diverse impacts in coming decades particularly through its effects in atmospheric warming, pressure on renewable water supply, and land degradation. These new forces - geopolitical, social, and environmental - will shape and define the region interacting with older issues in these societies to do with inter-ethnic identities and the relations between former empires and imperial subjects. The region now has eight states and within those eight states a number of significant regions of rising importance. The states are Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, China and Mongolia. Regions of significance are particularly the Inner Asian provinces of China, which can be variously defined but typically Xinjiang, Tibet, Inner Mongolia, Ningxia, Gansu and Qinghai.

The dynamics across Inner Asia between these states and regions are now interwoven with influences from external states, drawn towards the region by a number of interests in security and economics, and of course their need to manage their relations with each other. Of these external powers the most important are the US, Russia, India, Turkey, Iran and the European Union. China is in a unique position since it is the only state that is both internal and external to Inner Asia: it is internal on account of its Inner Asian provinces, but it has been historically and culturally external since the vast proportion of its population, economy, government and security focus has traditionally been in East Asia not Inner Asia. Therefore China's role in Inner Asia deserves special attention. The status of being both inside and outside of Inner Asia presents the rising power of East Asia with unusual opportunities and

risks. As part of the Inner Asian region it must have concern for the transnational politics of the region; as an international actor it must concern itself in the dynamic between internal and external powers, and in particular the ambitions of the US, Russia and India.

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China's diplomacy towards Inner Asia is a complex mix of the new and old. In terms of tradition China's diplomacy is as old as the frontier itself, and has taken typically three forms. From time to time it was necessary to conduct campaigns of punishment or extermination to pacify the

frontier. More often China sought to organize and enrich the frontier societies since this was a far more economic means of securing the frontier than continuous warfare. Lattimore as ever states this most elegantly in his study of the Qing government's frontier diplomacy towards the Mongols which favoured subsidy and sedentarisation:

*The system was one of the standard expedients in Chinese history, whatever the ruling dynasty, and by no means a Manchu invention. It kept the peace at an expense that was very small compared with the cost of frontier wars, and it stabilized the nominally nomadic society of the Mongols, because the regular payment of subsidy according to a classification of greater and lesser chiefs demanded a fixed habitat for each chief and his tribe. This promoted the demarcation of tribal boundaries, converting what had once been tribal followings into territorial principalities, in which the chiefs were no longer leaders of war-bands, but hereditary wardens of the "peace and order" which is always the frontier fetish of the central governments of great empires.<sup>1</sup>*

This system of managing peace and order on the frontier by enrichment and social organization had important normative aspects; by which I mean that Chinese diplomacy was strongly focused on forms of social and ethical propriety and ritual, including through the naming of things and people. This ordering by norms, naming and enrichment was always considered more desirable and economic than full-scale eradication which was only reserved for the most intransigent of cases.<sup>2</sup> In this way the creation of the frontier was quite a different thing from the creation of a boundary. The Empires, Russian and Chinese, Ottoman, Persian and Mughal, did want to demarcate their territories - the Empire's property rights - but these boundaries were laid upon an Inner Asian frontier that was more mobile and governed in China's case by subsidy, by social organization, and by acculturation to Chinese norms. The reason why some parts of Inner Asia came inside the Chinese Empire and some parts were allocated to other Empires was a result of both kinds of politics. As this suggests China's diplomacy has conventionally mixed organizational power of economy and security with forms of normative power that sought to repress unwanted ideologies and political movements and promote instead a narrative of China as a benevolent and civilising leader for the region and its diverse peoples.<sup>3</sup> Following the none too successful attempt to create organizational and normative power for China under socialism, China has returned to this conventional mode of promoting 'peace and order' at the frontier and seeking expansion of China's influence beyond the frontier. This engagement of the frontier allows China to expand its influence outwards, even as it agrees to demarcation of territorial rights with the former Soviet states and attempts to do this with India.

China's ambition to create new organizational and normative frontiers for itself in the

West is an important test case of China's new great power status, therefore. This is particularly the case because if China can expand to the West then it can claim to be a Eurasian great power for the first time, and not just an East Asian power. Two points need to be emphasized, however. First, we are still in the era of China's emergent power: the organizational mode of expansion - by trade, aid, investment, resource extraction, logistical corridors, civilian and military infrastructures, and bureaucracies of an economic or security nature - are in the first stages of development. This is even more true of China's normative power. Those who say that China is already a superpower need to accept that not only would China need to have more organizational power than it presently does, but we would have to have a much more clearly defined idea of China's normative purposes. These are arguably more important than the organizational structures of China's power since it will be China's normative character that will shape what the organizational power is used for.<sup>4</sup> It is best to say that at present the normative shape of China's power is opaque, which is precisely why this space is open to such vastly different interpretations from peace and order to threat and instability. The second critical point to note is that the new Inner Asia is quite different from the old. Empire has been the conventional form of government for Inner Asia but this cannot now come back. The interaction between the new geopolitical character of Inner Asia and the social changes within Inner Asian societies will shape the context of China's power; and of course it will bring it into contact and competition with the organizational and normative resources of the other ambitious powers - Russia, America, India, and others - none of whom can afford to leave the new open frontier to be dominated by China. Therefore, China's power in Inner Asia is undetermined within an undetermined region. China has new frontiers, new ambitions but also new challenges to meet. The rest of this paper will set aside the organizational prospects of China, which are being debated at length in other publications, to consider China's role in the new normative politics of Inner Asia.

### The New Politics of Inner Asia

As noted China traditionally has governed the Inner Asian frontier by a mix of norms, subsidy, assimilation by culture, and repression of hostile forces; and it continues to employ these mechanisms in the new era of Inner Asia. The Beijing government defines those hostile to its rule in the Western regions of China as 'three evil forces'; these evils being terrorism, religious extremism, and splittism.<sup>5</sup> The claim of terrorism is directed against armed militants said to be attacking government agencies and civilians. The claim of religious extremism is directed against groups rejecting the Chinese government's right to define, monitor and control religious activities, particularly of Muslims and Buddhists. The claim of splittism is directed against those who promote self-government, typically Tibetans, Uyghurs, and Mongols who say

that they are not ethnic minorities of a Chinese nation (Zhonghua minzu) but proto-nations entitled to self-determination. These forces are not unique to Chinese Inner Asia and are typical of political conditions in other parts of the region. Many political elites say they are battling against militants, against religious extremism, and against ethno-national separation, though the extent of these movements varies considerably and in a number of cases is being exaggerated by elites to justify authoritarian government and the use of repression and violence to maintain themselves in power, the Karimov regime in Uzbekistan being the obvious case.<sup>6</sup> The extent to which the new politics of Inner Asia is generating militancy, radicalism and independence pressures and the extent to which these are responses to authoritarian and arbitrary government is hard to determine. In Tibet and Xinjiang as in other Inner Asian societies what the government defines as the cure for political radicalization can often seem to be its cause. Nevertheless, China can use the common problems that elites face from anti-regime radicalism to create a channel for its diplomacy. This is, for example, one defined function for its multilateral forum for Inner Asia, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, founded in 2001 with Russia, China, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan as members; and India, Pakistan, Iran and Mongolia as observers.

The point that is rarely mentioned by China and its partners is that a lot of the new politics of Inner Asia is democratic, in the sense that it emerges from a new civil society that is seeking autonomy and self-organisation following the long period of hibernation in socialist society. Broadly speaking three types of consciousness are rising in Inner Asia - national, religious and democratic - and these combine in different ways. Sometimes the national and democratic combine giving rise to what are known as the 'colour revolutions'; sometimes the religious and democratic combine as groups in society push for freedom of religious expression; and sometimes the national and the religious combine as Muslims and Buddhists use religious solidarity as a driver for national solidarity. Of course, not all of this consciousness can be classed as civil and democratic; some of it is xenophobic, and even violent.<sup>7</sup> It is important to remember that xenophobia means fear of the strangers we know - or at least think we know - and not fear of the unknown. In Inner Asia different ethnic and religious groups have histories of mistrust as well as histories of coexistence. Nearly all Inner Asian societies are multi-ethnic (Mongolia is an exception) so rising ethnonational consciousness can exacerbate traditional ethnic phobias within and across societies. This problem then mixes with another stemming from the imperial past. Since Inner Asia was governed in history largely by Empires the horizontal xenophobias between ethnic groups can be cross-cut by vertical xenophobias between former imperial subjects and imperial rulers. In this sense imperial rule casts a long shadow over regional identities. The political



contentiousness of Inner Asia is multi-faceted, therefore. It exhibits rising religious, national, and democratic consciousness within societies and the challenge this poses to ruling elites. It also embraces problems of xenophobia on lines of either horizontal ethno-national cleavage or vertical post-imperial cleavage. Managing this complex contentiousness has become an issue in international, as much as, national politics.

China has its own version of normative ordering and aspires to provide solutions for the contentious diversity of Inner Asia. Beijing seeks to promote ethnic harmony (minzu hexie) and talks about harmony within diversity (he er butong) enshrining this as one of the normative structures for the SCO process. But China also encounters resistance to its ordering along both the ethnic and post-imperial divides. One way to consider this is by contrast to the other great normative orderer on the Inner Asian frontier, Russia. Russian and Soviet rule over Inner Asia was authoritarian and brought many hardships, especially in the Stalin era; but it also brought economic development and aspects of European culture that were welcomed. Russia's normative legacy in Inner Asia is bound up with the idea of a transcultural Eurasian identity - a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional identity that blurred distinctions between Europeans, Turks, Mongols and Siberians. Russia is able to use this cultural legacy to maintain a form of normative power in Inner Asia, and compensate for the fact that its organizational capacity is at a low historical ebb. If we ask what is the Chinese equivalent of Eurasianism, it is clear that there isn't one. In Chinese Inner Asia Han Chinese and the other nationalities lead separate cultural, economic, religious and often linguistic lives.<sup>8</sup> The same is true of Chinese living beyond the border, where being Chinese is viewed as being largely monocultural in contrast to the transcultural Eurasianism that aspires to transcend and mix different cultural and ethnic heritages. As far as Chinese are present across Inner Asia, especially taking up new economic roles, this can give rise to forms of post-imperial anxiety. Part of the anxiety is no more than demographic pressure. The total population of the region is above 180 million (assuming the definition of Inner Asia given above) of whom Han Chinese are the largest ethnic group at perhaps 60 million, with other groups in excess of 5 million being: Uzbeks at 28 million, Tajiks 15 million, Pashtuns 13 million, Kazakhs 13 million, Uyghurs 10 million, Mongols 8 million, Russians 6 million, and Hui 6 million. But the frontier is now much more open than in the preceding 50 years and societies feel demographically exposed to Chinese migration. To this perception of Chinese demographic pressure must be added memories of the Chinese hierarchical system of the past. The Chinese dynastic system placed China at the centre of its known order and in a position of superiority over frontier societies. The Chinese methods of subsidy, assimilation by culture, and, where necessary, punitive campaigns can still shape public perception of China's contemporary power. None of this suggests movement towards anti-Chinese xenophobia on any scale; it does suggest that China faces resistance to its new movement into the frontier, a

movement all the more problematic because it encounters other major states moving into the same space.<sup>9</sup>

As this suggests China's normative ordering for Inner Asia is unlikely to be a matter of smooth progression. In distinction to those who see China expanding by means of normative or soft power the view from Inner Asia is either indifference to this project or actual resistance. Often Chinese normative power is seen as a potential mechanism for Chinese penetration of new nation-states that are in difficult processes of establishing autonomous political identities and have long memories of imperial subordination. The fact that key parts of West China - Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, and Tibet most obviously - appear to be participating in the new Inner Asian politics of rising national, democratic, and religious consciousness suggests that the Chinese government will be more concerned with managing the internal part of the frontier than it will be engaged in expanding into the external frontier. As with past Chinese states achieving 'peace and order' on the frontier will remain a fetish for the central government; and many obstacles, internal and international, will have to be overcome before China can become a great power in the West.

## Notes

1 Owen Lattimore, "The Historical Setting of Inner Mongolian Nationalism", *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 9, No. 3, 1936, p. 391.

2 See Perdue's account of the Qing campaign to pacify the frontier in the 18th century: Peter C. Perdue, *China Marches West: the Qing conquest of Central Eurasia*, Harvard: Belknap Press, 2005.

3 I discuss the on-going attempt to create a stable frontier between China and Islamic societies in David Kerr, "Paradoxes of Tradition and Modernity at the New Frontier: China, Islam, and the problem of 'different heavens'", in *China Orders the World: Normative Soft Power and Foreign Policy*, William A. Callahan and Elena Barabantseva (eds.) The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore for the Woodrow Wilson Center Press Washington, D.C. 2012, pp. 143-179.

4 See the essays in Callahan and Barabantseva, 2012, op. cit. for various outlines of the origins and purposes of China's normative power.

5 See the government White Paper produced in the wake of inter-communal violence in Xinjiang in July 2009: *Xinjiang's Development and Progress*, State Council of the People's Republic of China, September 21 2009, Beijing.

6 See, for example, the discussion in "'No One Left to Witness': Torture, the Failure of Habeas Corpus, and the Silencing of Lawyers in Uzbekistan," New York: Human Rights Watch, December 2011.

7 Violence can be directed towards the self as well as outwards to others. In China's Tibetan areas, which include not only the Tibet Autonomous Region but four adjacent provinces with Tibetan populations and monasteries, monks and nuns have since March 2011 been adopting the practice of self-immolation to protest at government policies, interacting with

heavy saturation of Tibetan areas by security forces. This protest strategy spread outside of China with an exiled Tibetan self-immolating in Delhi in advance of President Hu Jintao's participation in the BRICs summit in March 2012. The issue of self-immolation is addressed by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch in their open letter to President Hu Jintao of November 3 2011, available at: <http://www.hrw.org/news/2011/11/03/open-letter-president-people-s-republic-china-self-immolations-tibetan-populated-are>. An academic evaluation by Dibyesh Anand is available at: [http://zeenews.india.com/news/exclusive/tibet-self-immolation-won-t-trigger-china-spring\\_742597.html](http://zeenews.india.com/news/exclusive/tibet-self-immolation-won-t-trigger-china-spring_742597.html)

8 For a recent study of ethnic segregation in Xinjiang based on field interviews see, David Tobin, "Competing Communities: Ethnic Unity and Ethnic Boundaries on China's North-West Frontier," *Inner Asia*, 13, 2011, pp. 7–25.

9 I discuss the Central Asian dimensions of these problems more fully in, David Kerr, "Central Asian and Russian perspectives on China's strategic emergence," *International Affairs* 86: 1, 2010, pp. 127-152.