Beijing's March West: 'One Belt, One Road' and China's Continental Frontiers into the 21st Century

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Introduction

Francis Fukuyama recently argued that President Xi Jinping's 'One Belt, One Road' (OBOR) strategy 'represents a striking departure in Chinese policy' whereby Beijing is 'seeking to export its development model to other countries' (Fukuyama 2016). The OBOR's emphasis on 'on massive state-led investments in infrastructure' to facilitate trans-Eurasian economic interconnectivity, he notes, contrasts with the largely neo-liberal development model espoused in the West (and by international institution such as the World Bank and the IMF). For Fukuyama, the OBOR, if successful, will determine 'the future of global politics' by transforming 'the whole of Eurasia from Indonesia to Poland' and generating 'immense prestige' for China's form of authoritarianism. Fukuyama briefly notes that 'there are important reasons to question whether One Belt, One Road will succeed'. Most notably, while China's infrastructure-led development model has succeeded domestically as the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) 'could control the political environment', Beijing will not have this luxury across broad swathes of Eurasia 'where instability, conflict and corruption will interfere with Chinese plans' (Fukuyama 2016).

What is striking about Fukuyama's analysis is his failure to acknowledge the fundamentally problematic nature of Beijing's development model within China itself, particularly in the context of the country's traditional frontier regions such as Xinjiang, Tibet and Inner

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Mongolia. This omission is especially striking given the outbreaks of opposition and violence that have recently occurred in Xinjiang and Tibet (e.g. 2008 Tibetan protests and ongoing incidents of terrorism in Xinjiang). Yet Fukuyama is not alone here. The People's Republic of China's (PRC) ethnic diversity is a factor that is often regularly overlooked in contemporary analysis of the country's 'rise' in international affairs. In the discipline of International Relations (IR) this is perhaps not unexpected given the dominance of the neo-realist paradigm (and its numerous variants) and its focus on the effects of structural factors (e.g. systemic anarchy) on relations between a rising China and the United States.[2] Yet even those who are not constrained by such paradigmatic concerns have also tended to bypass consideration of the impact of China's ethnic minorities on its foreign policy. David Shambaugh, for example, while presenting a persuasive case as to why China is neither as powerful nor influential as the 'conventional wisdom' would have us believe in his recent work, *China Goes Global: The Partial Power,* contains but a few passing references to Beijing's challenges in Xinjiang and Tibet (Shambaugh 2013).

This is perhaps due to the fact that the Han Chinese, according to the 2010 census, constitute some 91.51% of the country's total population of 1.339 billion *(*National Bureau of Statistics of China 2011). Although China's fifty-five officially recognised non-Han ethnic minority groups account for a seemingly insignificant 8.49% of China's population, it nonetheless amounts to some 113.79 million people – more than the populations of many other nation-states. The importance of China's ethnic minority populations can also be gauged by noting that they are concentrated in 64.3% of the country's total land area and 90% of China's border regions. They thus have an importance beyond what basic demographic data would suggest. In

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[2] For a recent representative sample of this literature see, Art 2010; Friedberg 2012; Liff and Ikenberry 2014; and Glaser 2015.

fact one of the enduring themes of China's history has been the unsettled relationship between its centre and its ever-changing continental periphery. The PRC now includes 31 provincial–level administrative units (22 provinces, five autonomous regions and four municipalities) and eight of these units—Liaoning, Jilin, Heilongjiang, Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, Xizang (Tibet), Yunnan and Guangxi—form a daunting 22,147km land border with 14 other nation states (Zhu and Blanchford 2006, 330). No other country's land border stretches as far, and only Russia can equal the number of neighbouring states. Indeed, the issue of Han-ethnic minority relations, if not carefully managed, holds the potential to generate domestic instability, complicate Beijing's relations with its neighbours and even threaten the territorial integrity of the PRC given the concentrations of non-ethnic groups along its frontiers. These factors, combined with some of China's ethnic minorities' recent history of opposition to the state, are often seen as driving Beijing's hard-line repressive policies toward such minorities as the Uyghurs or Tibetans.

Yet, as Gray Tuttle has provocatively argued in a recent issue of *Foreign Affairs*, these factors (i.e. the demographic and geographic characteristics of China's non-Han populations), are increasingly compounded by an emerging narrative of Han Chinese superiority. He suggests that, 'Beijing's hard-line policies are not merely a reflection of the central state's desire to cement its authority over distant territories but also an expression of deep-seated ethnic prejudices and racism at the core of contemporary Chinese society' (Tuttle 2015, 39). Tuttle argues further that while this may seem unimportant when placed alongside tensions in the South China Seas or Xi Jinping's anti-corruption campaign, 'Beijing's inability (or unwillingness) to confront this problem poses a long-term threat to the central state' as the 'long term exclusion of the country's ethnic minorities will undermine Beijing's efforts to

foster a 'harmonious society' and present China as a model for the rest of the world: (Tuttle 2015, 39).

This paper argues, however, that Tuttle's analysis has missed an important part of the picture. Beijing has in fact gradually constructed a coherent strategy toward China's ethnic minorities, and the regions that they primarily inhabit, over the past two decades and it is one that seeks to fundamentally transform the relationship between China and its traditional ethnic and geographic frontiers. Beijing's approach is defined by a concerted endeavour to remake these regions into conduits for Chinese power and influence beyond its borders, while simultaneously tying them ever tighter into the PRC through massive state-led investment and Han Chinese settlement. This constitutes an attempt to systematically consolidate China's hold over what Owen Lattimore once described as the marginal 'Inner Asian zone' of Chinese expansion – i.e. China's Eurasian frontier zones of Xinjiang, Tibet and Inner Mongolia (Lattimore 1947). The consolidation of China's hold on its Eurasian frontiers is not only important for the country's domestic stability and development, as alluded to be Tuttle, but is also emerging as crucial to China's ability to project power across its Eurasian frontiers into Central and South Asia.

President Xi Jinping's recent enunciation of the 'One Belt, One Road' (OBOR) strategy, comprising an initiative to construct a Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and a Maritime Silk Road (MSR), illustrates this. The National Development and Reform Commission's (NDRC) recent release of Beijing's blueprint for the realization of this strategy amply demonstrates the key linkage between consolidating Chinese control in its frontier regions and the projection of Chinese power. The document states that, 'In advancing the Belt and Road Initiative, China will fully leverage the comparative advantages of its various regions, adopt a proactive strategy of further opening-up, strengthen interaction and cooperation among the eastern, western and

central regions, and comprehensively improve the openness of the Chinese economy'. Moreover, core frontier regions, such as Xinjiang are specifically envisioned as playing key roles, with the document noting that, 'We should make good use of Xinjiang's geographic advantages and its role as a window of westward opening-up to deepen communication and cooperation with Central, South and West Asian countries, make it a key transportation, trade, logistics, culture, science and education center, and a core area on the Silk Road Economic Belt' (National Development and Reform Commission 2015). China's Eurasian frontiers thus need to be brought back into the forefront of analyses of the country's rise in international affairs.

Bringing the Frontier Back into Analysis of China's Rise

Much ink has been spilt over the past two decades debating the impact of the 'rise' of China on the international relations and strategic environment of Asia. Much of this debate has concerned whether China's rise will be peaceful or lead to conflict and war. The dominant narrative within this debate has been defined by neo-realist theoretical approaches to international relations and an almost exclusive focus on the impact of China's 'rise' on the Asia-Pacific geopolitical space (Friedberg 2012; Liff and Ikenberry 2015). China's increasing material power, and consequently its growing strategic and economic footprint, has also been felt too along its extensive Eurasian continental frontiers, particularly in Central Asia. With few exceptions, however, this region's interactions with China's 'rise' have largely been over-looked.[3] This has arguably been due to the United States' long-standing security and strategic alignments with many of China's Asia-Pacific neighbours and, until the events of 9/11, the relative obscurity Central Asia as a geopolitical site of international politics.

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[3] Notable recent exceptions are Cooley 2012 and Pantucci and Petersen 2012.

Another major factor as John Agnew has pointedly noted has been the tendency to construct two broad approaches to China's rise. The first see China as 'just another in long succession of great powers rising at the top of the global hierarchy', while the second perceives it to be 'a completely new phenomenon because of its singular history associated with its imperial past, communist rejection of world capitalism, and cultural peculiarity' (Agnew 2010, 570). Interpretations of China's rise as 'great power politics as normal' are widespread. International Relations scholar, John Mearsheimer, has argued for instance that China will behave as all other rising great powers have throughout history. For Mearsheimer, due to the incentives provided by the anarchical international system, China will seek security through the maximization of its power and attempt to 'dominate the Asia-Pacific region much as the United States dominates the Western Hemisphere' (Mearsheimer 2010, 389). 'Why', Mearsheimer asks:

> …should we expect China to act any differently than the United States over the course of its history? Are they more principled than the Americans? More ethical? Are they less nationalistic than the Americans? Less concerned about their survival? They are none of these things…which is why China is likely to imitate the United States and attempt to become a regional hegemon (Mearsheimer 2010, 389).

In this understanding, Chinese attempts to dominate the lands and space abutting its territorial and maritime frontiers is seen as inevitable.

At the other end of the spectrum lie those that, in Agnew's terms, present 'idiographic' understandings of a rising China's impact on world politics. While works in this realm are diverse, they have in common a desire to present accounts of China as a 'unique' or indeed 'exceptional' international actor in political, economic and normative domains (Keith 2009; Ramo 2008; Kang 2010; Breslin 2011). Such 'idiographic' treatments of China's rise span serious International Relations literature to headline-grabbing punditry such as Martin Jacques', *When China Rules the World* (Jacques 2012). Within the international relations

literature perhaps the most sophisticated representation of this perspective is David C. Kang's. Kang argues, contra Mearsheimer, that China's rise has not prompted its neighbours to balance against it but rather, to varying degrees, to accommodate it. This is based upon a reanimation of a Sino-centric 'tribute system' in East Asia which Kang posits represents a return to something akin to the 'natural order' of things in the region after a relatively brief interlude of Western dominance (Kang 2005; Kang 2013).[4] Henry Kissinger's 2011 book, *On China*, also draws on such positions asserting that 'China's exceptionalism is cultural'. Beijing, Kissinger argues:

> …does not proselytize; it does not claim that its contemporary institutions are relevant outside China. But it is the heir of the Middle Kingdom tradition which formally graded all other states as various levels of tributaries based on their approximation to Chinese cultural and political forms, in other words a kind of cultural universality (Kissinger 2011, ii).

In this scenario China is portrayed as a 'natural', and often largely benign, superpower in East Asia. William Callahan has critically described such tendencies as a 'New Orientalism' characterized by an 'emerging dialect of 'Sino-speak' that employs a new vocabulary and grammar of naturalized civilization and essentialized identity to describe – and thus prescribe – China's rejuvenation to global greatness' (Callahan 2014, 29). The implication from such 'new orientalist' perspectives is that China's 'rise' should be reframed as a 'return' to a 'traditional' pre-eminence with the concomitant implication that this will not constitute an unprecedented development in the power politics of East Asia, and hence not be inherently destabilizing to that order.

Much of this debate is bedeviled by a lack of consideration of the effect of Beijing's domestic

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[4] The 'tribute system' model of China's 'traditional' foreign relations was originally enunciated in Fairbank 1968.

state-building imperatives in its core frontier regions upon both its foreign policy and its emerging vision of China's role in international affairs. It is pertinent in this respect to note that .the dynamic 'ebb and flow' between the traditional core of Han Chinese civilization and the surrounding non-Han Chinese world alluded to above was to a large degree brought to a close by the conquests of imperial China's last dynasty, the Qing (1644-1911), itself led by the non-Han Manchus (Perdue 2005). Between the mid-17th and mid-18th centuries the Qing emperors succeeded in conquering and/or absorbing China's historical frontier regions – Xinjiang (East Turkestan), Tibet, Mongolia, Manchuria, Yunnan and Taiwan – the control of which had eluded the bulk of the Qing's dynastic predecessors. By virtue of these achievements the Manchus endowed 20th (and indeed 21st century) China with a truly continental scale reaching from the Pacific to the heart of the Eurasian landmass.

Robert Kaplan's recent analysis of the geographic bases of China's rise, while not unproblematic, nonetheless acknowledges the major domestic-level dilemma that Beijing has (and continues to) grapple with in the consolidation of these frontier regions. Kaplan argues that China currently 'occupies the globe's most advantageous' geopolitical position as it's 'reach extends not only to into the strategic Central Asian core of the former Soviet Union, with all of its mineral and hydrocarbon wealth but also to the main shipping lanes of the Pacific three thousand miles away' (Kaplan 2013, 188-89). This 'fact', he continues, while 'so basic and obvious that it tends to be overlooked in all the discussions about its economic dynamism and national assertiveness over recent decades' nonetheless 'drives the political reality of China today' (Kaplan 2014, 189 and 195). For Kaplan, the 'ultimate fate' of the apparently ascendant Chinese state hinges on the question of:

> …whether the dominant Hans, who comprise more than 90 percent of China's population and live mainly in the arable cradle of China, are able to permanently keep the Tibetans, Uighur Turks, and Inner Mongolians who live in the periphery

under control, with the minimum degree of unrest (Kaplan 2014, 195).

Absent from Kaplan's consideration of this question however is a broader discussion of how the 'frontier' was conceived throughout Chinese history and how this has been transformed in the 20th and 21st centuries.

The Chinese dynastic imagination understood these frontier regions as the edges of civilisation: buffer states that represented the transition between civility and barbarism—sometimes under Chinese sovereignty, sometimes not. For the Chinese literati they were always places of exile and ruin (Waley-Cohen 1991; Newby 1999; Millward 1998). For others, they were places of violence and anxiety where Chinese forces sought expansion and 'barbarian' tribes jealously sought the riches of the Middle Kingdom. Under the PRC, however, much of the historical tenuousness of the Chinese state's (both imperial and post-imperial) control over its frontiers has been purposefully occluded by an official narrative that views the relatively recent incorporation of regions such as Xinjiang, Tibet and Inner Mongolia as the 'return' of errant territories to the motherland. The Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) adherence to such a view is not new but the continuation of a long-standing discourse that reads back into history both the political unity and territorial extent of the present Chinese state, with clear implications for the governance of non-Han Chinese peoples and regions. As Diana Lary observes:

> Successive governments (imperial, Goumindang, Communist) have held devoutly to the view that the Chinese state reached close to its current extent in the early stages of the Empire (3rd Century BCE). There have followed more than two millennia of unity, broken only by the aberration of periods of disunity. The centre (wherever the Chinese capital was located at any given time) rightfully controls the borderlands, in a paternalist, one-way relationship in which benevolence comes from the centre and is gratefully received by the benighted border peoples, once referred to as barbarians, now known as national minorities (Lary 2007, 1).

Yet, this official narrative belies the inherent political, and often violent, contestation that has characterised the incorporation of China's frontiers. The example of official pronouncements with respect to Xinjiang are symptomatic here. Through a number of official White Papers on state policy in Xinjiang published by the State Council of the PRC, for instance, Beijing has repeatedly asserted that Xinjiang has not only been an 'integral' province of China since 'ancient times' but that the region's non-Han ethnic groups 'cherish dearly' their place in the 'unitary and multi-ethnic' PRC. However such assertions not only obfuscate the violent nature of much of China's physical expansion over the centuries but they also often deny the historical agency of the non-Han Chinese peoples of the borderlands (Lary 2007, 2). Yet, if we were to shift the emphasis away from a Sinocentric historiography, we can see that these border regions often played crucial roles as important commercial and cosmopolitan hubs, intimately involved in the transmission of goods, people and ideas between China and the outside world. This was particularly true not only for the land based corridors running primarily through Xinjiang that connected China's centre with Europe, the Middle East and the rest of Asia - the so called Silk Road – but also the maritime trade routes linking China's coastal provinces with South East Asia, South Asia and the Middle East (Millward 2007; Beckwith 2009; Yang 2004).

While this traffic was crucial for China's ongoing development, the spiritual centre remained in the Chinese heartland and feelings of cultural superiority saw these regions neglected, and sometimes ignored, by the national imagination. However, elite narratives about the relationship between the centre and China's frontiers for much of the historical record tended to view them as either sources of threat or strategic and/or economic liabilities. Such views, perhaps not surprisingly, correlated with the relative strength of the Chinese state at a given point with the frontiers viewed as sources of threat during times of weakness or disunity and strategic or economic burdens when the state had expanded to control the frontiers (Woodside

2007, 18-20). This 'cyclical-catastrophic, view of the borders', Alexander Woodside notes, 'faded in favour of a perspective that might be called linear-providential' by the early 20th century that 'entertained visions of frontier development in which frontiers were seen as part of a willed progress towards some emancipatory goal' (Woodside 2007, 22).

From the 'Great Western Development' to 'One Belt, One Road': Toward a Chinese 'Frontier Thesis'?

Such a 'linear-providential' view has reached its peak under the PRC with Beijing currently pursuing vast, state-led economic development programs along China's frontiers – particularly in Xinjiang and Tibet - designed not only to consolidate and solidify the centre's hold but to also remake these regions into conduits of Chinese power and influence abroad. In some ways this is an attempt to revive the historical function of such traditional frontier regions as Xinjiang, Tibet and Mongolia that, due to the convergence of ecological and geographic factors, were liminal spaces 'where cultural identities merged and shifted, as peoples of different ethnic and linguistic roots interacted for common economic purpose' (Perdue 2005, 41).

Simultaneously however Beijing's approach has also come to be defined by an approach to 'the frontier' that is reminiscent of Frederick Jackson Turner's famous depiction of the 'frontier experience' in North American history. For Turner, the essential fact of North American history from the Pilgrim Fathers arrival until the close of the 19th century was, 'The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward'. The expansion of European settlement into the American 'Great West' constituted the 'frontier' as 'the outer edge of the wave', the 'meeting point between savagery and civilization' (Turner 1921, 19-20). Thus, the ever deeper penetration of European settlement of North America went

hand-in-hand with the march of 'progress' and modernity. Moreover, for Turner, the United States owed not only its defining domestic characteristics of democracy and individualism to this frontier experience but also its then nascent emergence onto the world stage as a great power. The closing of the American frontier in the final decade of the 19th century he argued compelled the United States to seek new outlets for its dynamism. 'Since the days when the fleet of Columbus sailed into the waters of the New World', he intoned:

> America has been another name for opportunity, and the people of the United States have taken their tone from the incessant expansion which has not only been open but has even been forced upon them. He would be a rash prophet who should assert that the expansive character of American life has now entirely ceased. Movement has been its dominant fact, and, unless this training has no effect upon a people, the American energy will continually demand a wider field for its exercise (Turner 1921, 20).

Turner's interpretation of the importance of the frontier in the North American experience has some resonance with China's late 20th and early 21st century approach to its frontier regions (particularly Xinjiang and Tibet) in which a Han Chinese-dominated party-state is conceived of as the transformative and modernizing agent in the 'underdeveloped' peripheries of the PRC (Sines 2002; Goodman 2004; Barabantseva 2009). This, much like Turner's argument above vis-à-vis the United States, has also carried important implications for China's foreign policy along its Eurasian frontiers. This has particularly been the case since the launch of the 'Great Western Development' (*xibu da kaifa*) campaign (GWD) by former President Jiang Zemin in 2000. This campaign refocussed the state's attention on its frontier regions for two inter-linked reasons: rising socio-economic inequalities between China's eastern and western provinces; and concern that such inequalities would exacerbate existing inter-ethnic tensions in those regions heavily populated by non-Han ethnic groups, which not coincidentally tended to be concentrated in China's interior.

The GWD targeted six provinces (Gansu, Guizhou, Qinghai, Shaanxi, Sichuan, and Yunnan), five autonomous regions (Guangxi, Inner Mongolia, Ningxia, Tibet, and Xinjiang), and one municipality (Chongqing). While not exclusively directed toward China's frontier regions, these policies nonetheless primarily aimed to stimulate regional economies through the construction of large infrastructural projects that physically linked the periphery to the centre (Becquelin 2004). In January of that year the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) considered the issue important enough to establish a 'Leadership Group' to manage western development with the then Premier Zhu Rongji as head. The key project was the construction of 'The East-West [gas] Pipeline', begun in 2002, that now supplies natural gas from the Tarim Basin in Xinjiang to the industrial and urban centres of the East coast, particularly Shanghai, Fujian and Guangdong. Importantly the network of pipelines also travels through Gansu, Ningxia, Shaanxi, Henan, Hubei, Hunan and Jiangxi providing energy for development along the way. Other state building projects included the Qinghai–Tibet railway that finally linked Tibet to the national railway grid (BBC News 2006). The Hu Jintao government energetically continued these state building policies incorporating much of the previous government's initiatives into their 'Harmonious Society' campaigns.

Despite over a decade of the GWD policies, however, inequality remains an enormous challenge for Beijing. China now ranks as the 26th most unequal country in the world in terms of wealth distribution sitting between Madagascar and El Salvador with a Gini coefficient of 47.4 (CIA World Factbook 2014). Inequality is now a chronic problem for China and the most dramatic disparities still lie between the coastal provinces and the western and northwestern border regions. Yunnan and Tibet (Xizang), for example, rate 28th and 29th out of the thirty-one provincial level administrative units mentioned above in terms of GDP per capita. The poorest three border regions, Yunnan, Xijiang and Tibet had a per capita GDP of RMB25,083,

RMB37,181 and RMB26,068 respectively in 2014. This is in stark contrast with the three richest coastal provinces Jiansu (RMB74,607), Zhejiang (RMB68462) and Guangdong (RMB58,540) (China Statistical Yearbook 2014). Recently, the two autonomous regions of Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang have gained some benefits from the recent global resource boom, but now face an uncertain future due to declining commodity prices as well as slowing national demand. Liaoning is the only border region that is regularly listed in the top 10 performing provinces in terms of GDP. Beijing elites have come to realise that national stability requires the economic integration of these poorer regions into the national economy in a more sustained and comprehensive way. It was noted in one prominent government publication that:

> If the west of China is not stable, then the whole country cannot be stable, if the living standard in the west of China is not good, then the living standard in the whole country is not good and if there is no modernization in the west of China, then there is no modernization in the *whole country*.[5]

Running parallel with the economic integration policies of the GWD has been a reinvigorated attempt to achieve the social and political integration of the populations of China's frontier regions. This state-building aims to integrate more evenly the over 100 million non-Han Chinese many of which live near the border and some, at least with strong ethnic and/or connections religious attachments across the border. Given the ongoing unrest in some of China's frontiers, Beijing has refocused its attention on (re)constructing the political, economic and cultural bonds needed to preclude any further intensification of centrifugal tendencies especially in Xinjiang and Tibet. These two regions constitute, as they have for much of the PRC's history, sites of greatest challenge to the state-building agenda of Beijing. This is due to the fact that both Uyghurs and Tibetans not only constitute coherent ethnic communities with

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[5] Qinghai sheng xibu da kaifa baogao,[Report on the Great Opening of the West in Qinghai Province]. 2005. Xining: Qinghai sheng xibu kaifa lingdao xiaozu gongshe.p.78 (emphasis added).

strong attachment to what they perceive to be 'their' territories but also retain a resilient cultural, if not political, sense of difference from the dominant Han culture of the PRC (Bovingdon 2011; Shakya 1999). The state's renewed state-building initiatives in these regions over the past decade, in part, hope to redress this through the delivery of, for want of a better term, a modernity with 'Chinese characteristics'.

In this sense, 'under-development' of such frontier regions as Xinjiang and Tibet, and the non-Han people's that inhabit them, has come to be viewed by both Beijing and regional governments as the root cause of China's ongoing ethnic problems (Moneyhan 2002/03; Freeman 2012). This, in turn, has fed into a debate within the CCP regarding the need for a 'second generation' of ethnic minority policies. As Barry Sautman, James Leibold and David Tobin have detailed, this debate has been brought to a head by the perceived failure of the Party's 'first generation' of ethnic minority policy - based on the 'three planks' of identification of ethnic groups, a system of regional autonomy, and a system of preferential policies - in the wake of continued anti-state violence and inter-ethnic conflict in Lhasa in May 2008 and Urumqi in July 2009 (Leibold 2013, 4-7; Sautman 2010; Tobin 2014). These events, which saw Tibetans and Uyghurs attack ordinary Han rather than representatives of the state (e.g. police, party officials etc), provided those advocating radical change in the state's approach to ethnic issues with ample 'proof' of the failure of existing policy. In addition, it is also clear that these two events have hardened popular Han Chinese views that the Uyghurs and Tibetans are 'ungrateful' for the economic development and modernity that the Chinese state has brought to their regions.[6]

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[6] Emily Yeh (2013), for example, illustrates how many Han Chinese conceive of the state's economic development projects in Tibet as a 'gift' to the Tibetan people rather than as instruments of power and control.

For critics such as the prominent sociologist Ma Rong, the 'first generation' of ethnic minority policy based on the Soviet model, has politicized and institutionalized ethnic identity as it connects, 'each ethnic minority to a certain geographic area, provides these groups with political status, administrative power in their 'autonomous territory', and guarantees ethnic minorities the potential to develop at a higher speed' (Rong 2007, 214). Ma argues that this policy framework emphasizes 'equality between ethnic groups' rather than 'equality between citizens', and as such it has strengthened ethnic consciousness and entrenched inter-ethnic barriers (Ibid).[7] In contrast, as Leibold has detailed, Ma advocates a reformist agenda that draws upon classical western liberal thought that stresses the importance of individual over group rights that, in brief, seeks to take the 'ethnic minority' out of ethnic minority policy. Thus for Ma, as Leibold explains, 'The growing economic and social gap between Han and minority communities means that the Chinese state must continue to play a leading role in subsidizing marginalized communities – but these programs should be *minzu*-blind [i.e. ethnically-blind] and instead target localities and individuals in need' (Leibold 2013, 18).

Yet, while the strategy of using development to pacify restless frontier regions is not unique to China, and has its roots in modernization theory's assumptions about state building, it has also not proven historically to be effective in either quelling dissent or assimilating minority groups. Furthermore, depending upon how such development is implemented, it frequently has the reverse result of aggravating already discontent populations. As the experience of state-led development among indigenous minority groups around the world has demonstrated, such negative results are predictable when the development efforts do not take into consideration local people's attachment to their historical homelands, to their cultural traditions, and to their

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[7] For an excellent discussion of Ma's arguments and influence in this debate see Leibold 2012, 14-21.

language. Certainly, in the context of both Xinjiang and Tibet, for example, it has been a long standing grievance of both Uyghurs and Tibetans that their cultural traditions (including their religious practices) and language have not been adequately protected. This has been compounded over the past three decades by a perception of widening inter-ethnic socio-economic inequality between such ethnic minorities as the Uyghurs and Tibetans and the Han Chinese majority (Roberts 2016; Bovingdon 2011; Yeh 2013).

Two factors, however, have complicated the developmental strategy embodied in the GWD. First, and as noted above, much of the GWD policies took a domestic focus with state-led investment targeting projects that linked China's western provinces with the existing centres of production in the east. A significant problem, of course, was the lack of direct access to international markets that had proved so successful for the eastern provinces. Many of the countries adjacent to China's land borders were perceived as underdeveloped, with poor governance, embryotic infrastructure and difficult terrain. Consequently for China a crucial element of any border initiative was to 'break the connectivity bottleneck', which had seriously thwarted development both for the border regions in China and their adjacent states (Chen 2014). Second, many of China's neighbours were anxious about, or even hostile to, China's rise. For the developmental strategy to succeed and put China on the path to fully integrating its frontier regions, there thus had to be a complementary, outwardly focused strategy to facilitate greater economic integration across China's continental frontiers and address neighbouring states' concerns about the impact of China's growing power.

China's diplomacy in the specific geopolitical environment of Central Asia, most clearly, has demonstrated the centrality of China's frontiers to its foreign policy. After the Soviet collapse China was not (and arguably is still not) perceived to be a 'natural' player in the region. It was

Russia, even in its enfeebled post-Soviet incarnation, that remained the dominant extra-regional power throughout the 1990s while China remained a peripheral, if emergent, regional power. To some observers in the 1990s, China's position in Xinjiang, and indeed other frontier regions such as Tibet, was not perceived to be an asset for Beijing but rather to be a hindrance to its rising power. Andrew Nathan and Robert Ross, for example, asserted in 1997 that China's geopolitical situation, possessing at once major continental and maritime frontiers, would temper its 'rise' by rendering it a 'vulnerable power with limited opportunity to be expansionist' as Beijing would be confronted by 'antagonists who are numerous, near and strong' (Nathan and Ross 1997, xiii).

Yet such dismissals have given way over the past decade to references not only to growing Chinese influence throughout Asia but even to an emergent Chinese hegemony in Central Asia. What has fundamentally changed this equation has been the progress and success of China's integration of Xinjang. Xinjiang is no longer an ethnically and geographically liminal zone between Chinese and 'Inner Asian' peoples/civilizations, with the region's population now divided almost equally between the Turkic Uyghurs and Han Chinese (Clarke 2011, 140-148). Moreover, decades of state-led investment and development have also transformed Xinjang from an outpost of Chinese civilization into a dynamic frontier zone through which Chinese power and influence is flowing into Central Asia. In Central Asia, China has capitalized in on the strategic and economic potentialities of Xinjiang to forge a role as an ascendant power, overtaking Russia as the region's major external economic partner and the prime mover of the region's major multilateral organization, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) (Cooley 2012, 78-81).

Conclusion: China's 'March Westwards' as its 'Pivot' to Asia?

China under Xi Jinping's leadership has also signalled its intention to further entrench its growing power and influence in Central Asia. President Xi's plans for the construction of a SREB, although linked to Beijing's desire to secure Xinjiang's economic development, also has an important function to play in China's foreign policy in the context of the Obama administration's 'pivot to Asia'. Prominent Chinese scholar Wang Jisi, has argued in this context that China's 'march westward' is thus a 'strategic necessity' as the 'eastward shift' in strategic focus of the Obama administration (i.e. the 'pivot') threatens to lock Sino-US relations into a 'zero-sum game' in East Asia. If China's 'march westwards' succeeds 'the potential for US-China cooperation' across a variety of fields will increase and 'there will be almost no risk of military confrontation between the two' (Wang 2012, 7-8). For most of its history, Wang notes, the PRC was strategically oriented to the east due to the 'traditional development advantages' of the country's eastern provinces and the fact that the major strategic and military threats to the country emanated from its maritime frontiers. Now, however, a 'march westwards' is a 'strategic necessity' in order to ensure that: 'harmony and stability' in Xinjiang (and Tibet) are not threatened by 'extremism, terrorism and other hostile external forces'; 'the supply channels for oil and other bulk commodities to the west of China's borders remain open'; and China can expand its economic cooperation (including the provision of economic aid) with 'all West Asian nations' (Wang 2012, 3-4).

In a similar vein, Li Yonghui, Dean of the School of International Relations at Beijing Foreign Studies University, drawing on historical analogies to the United States' rise as a great power, perceives Central Asia as China's Latin America – i.e. a 'strategic supporting peripheral belt' that will serve as a 'buffer, source of growth, and a platform and channel' for the expansion of Chinese influence (Li 2013, 66). Finally, Yuan Peng, Vice President of the China Institutes for

Contemporary International Relations, conceives of Central Asia as playing a vital linking role between what he identifies as three geographically-defined 'rings' of China's contemporary diplomacy. For Yuan, China's contemporary diplomacy is best viewed as operating across three rings: an 'inner ring' related to Beijing's relations with its 14 direct neighbors; a 'middle ring' that encompasses Beijing's relations with nations within East Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, the Middle East and the Pacific; and an 'outer ring' encompassing Beijing's relations with nations far beyond its geopolitical neighborhood. In this context Central Asia straddles the inner and middle 'rings' and holds the potential to facilitate the expansion of Chinese power and influence into the 'outer ring' – i.e. to the truly global level (Yuan 2013, 59-60). Common to each of these recent Chinese views is a tendency to downplay the challenges to the expansion of its influence in Central Asia and a seeming internalization of a Kaplan-esque analysis of China's favourable geographic endowment straddling continental and maritime Asia.

The motives behind Beijing's desire to build the SREB are also in some ways complementary to the interests of some of the Central Asian states. Most immediately, China's focus on greater economic interconnectivity in the region through the improvement of critical infrastructure such as oil and gas pipelines, highways, railways and telecommunications networks gels with the long-held desire of Central Asia's energy rich states (e.g. Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan) to diversify export routes for their oil and gas. Additionally, a number of the Central Asian states have also identified diversification of their economies beyond resource exports as a core priority for their future economic well-being (Weitz 2014). China's contribution of US $40 billion to a 'Silk Road Fund' to assist in the necessary infrastructural development for the SREB has also been seen by Central Asian states as a token of the seriousness of Beijing's commitment to the project. Beijing has also intensified its bilateral economic engagement with Central Asia, with Kazakhstan a particular focus. President Xi signed 22 trade and commercial

agreements during his September 2013 state visit valued at US $30 billion, while Premier Li Keqiang signed economic cooperation deals, including a renewal of a currency swap deal, during his state visit of December 2014 worth US $14 billion (Almaganbetov and Kurmanov 2015).

The SREB, in part, can also be seen as a response to the Obama administration's enunciation of its 'New Silk Road Initiative' (NSRI) in 2011. Then Undersecretary of State for Economic, Agricultural and Energy Affairs, Robert Hormats, states that the 'basis for the 'New Silk Road' vision is that if Afghanistan is firmly embedded in the economic life of the region, it will be better able to attract new investment, benefit from its resource potential, and provide increasing economic opportunity and hope for its people'. Key to this vision would be for the US to assist countries in this region to reorient their key infrastructure (such as highways, railways, telecommunications networks and so forth) southward and assist in 'removing the bureaucratic barriers and other impediments to the free flow of goods and people' (Hormats 2011). Yet the geopolitical reasoning behind the NSRI was also clear: consolidation of an amenable regime in Afghanistan would provide Washington with the capacity to develop a north-south linkages between Central and South Asia to compete against the west-east linkages being developed by China and Russia. Such a development would ultimately contribute to Washington's enduring geopolitical interest on the Eurasian continent to ensure that no one power or group of powers would dominate (Kucera 2011; Kim and Indeo 2013). One of the earliest expressions of this was the Obama administration's effort to expand the so-called 'Northern Distribution Network' (NDN), several transit corridors crucial to supplying US and NATO forces in Afghanistan. Entrenching the NDN as the 'linchpin' of US strategy in Afghanistan and Central Asia, according to a number of advocates, would assist in building a 'Modern Silk Road' that 'could

promote security, prosperity and connectivity within some of the most volatile, impoverished and isolated nations on the planet' (Kuchins, Sanderson and Gordon, 2010, 39).

Yet the SREB and increasing bilateral economic relationships with Beijing are not unproblematic for much of Central Asia. The former, despite some recent Russian protestations to the contrary, runs counter to Moscow's protectionist agenda within the rubric of its Eurasian Union as Beijing is clearly focused on facilitating freer economic interaction throughout Central Asia. One analyst has remarked in this respect that 'the real concern' for Russia vis-à-vis the SREB is 'China's business-is-business approach with others, which differs from both the West's political strings for economic intercourse and Russia's heavy doses of geopolitics' (Bin 2014, 6). Underlying China's push here, however, is its state-building imperatives in Xinjiang. As Raffaello Pantucci and Alexandros Petersen have noted, 'the web of connections that China is forging across the region is of global consequence. It is the realization of the 'New Silk Road' vision articulated by the US State Department but with the connections oriented largely toward Xinjiang' (Pantucci and Petersen 2012, 39).

Central Asia thus emerges as a strategic 'safety valve' for the expansion of Chinese influence given the perceived decline of US influence and interests in the region after its withdrawal from Afghanistan and Washington's subsequent 'rebalance' or 'pivot' to Asia (Tao 2014). A refocussing on China's land borders thus responds directly to the United States' 'pivot' or 'rebalance' to Asia, which has been widely seen in Beijing as a means of containing China. China's trade routes, especially with the energy rich countries of the Middle East remain vulnerable particularly in the Malacca straits. China is also very aware of the proximity of US 7th fleet based in Guam and Japan. In a geopolitical sense, China's refocus on its frontier regions through the OBOR strategy thus constitutes its own 'pivot to Asia' in an attempt to

secure China's overland linkages to the economies and security spheres of Central, South and South-East Asia and undergird its decades-long state-building priorities along its continental frontiers.

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