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ABSTRACT

The importance of Xinjiang Province in China's Eurasian connectivity initiative—the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB)—has received some coverage in the media. However, these news articles offer only a cursory view of China's primary motive in pursuing the initiative, that is the ethnic unrest in Xinjiang. This paper argues that the conflict in Xinjiang is a main driving force to pursue SREB and that the initiative is congruent with a broader economic development strategy that aims to improve the economic conditions in the province. The paper also discusses the vulnerabilities of such strategy.

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INTRODUCTION

Chinese President Xi Jinping first announced the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB)¹ initiative in his address at Kazakhstan's Nazarbayev University in 2013. The project has since garnered much interest from policymakers and strategic-affairs analysts. Being the land-based corridor of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the SREB involves a series of infrastructure projects that seek to improve China's connectivity with Central Asia and, eventually, Europe (or the larger Eurasian region). Beijing envisions six economic corridors that will link the Eurasian Silk

Road with the Maritime Silk Road. These developments, according to some scholars, are indicative of China's hegemonic ambitions.²

The SREB's scope has expanded since its inception and now incorporates various multilateral political and financial institutions, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank (AIIB). Existing scholarship on the subject outlines a connection between China's domestic considerations and SREB. While the external dimensions of the SREB has received considerable coverage in the news, the strategic aspect remains understudied. This paper argues that Beijing's push for greater economic connectivity between Xinjiang and Eurasia is motivated by the need to pacify the Uyghur discontent in Xinjiang. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is hopeful that SREB would complement the economic development plan for the Western provinces which seeks to address the prevailing economic disparity in the region.

The paper is divided into three sections. The first section discusses the international character of the SREB initiative and argues that China's concerns over Xinjiang influences its foreign-policy strategies. The second section outlines the underlying causes of ethnic unrest in Xinjiang, locating the SREB within China's developmental strategy for the relatively underdeveloped Western provinces. The final section discusses the challenges that confront the SREB.

CHINA'S NEW 'SILK ROAD'

The term 'Silk Road' was coined by the German geologist, Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen, and gained traction in the 19th century.³ Approximately 15,000-km long, extending from Japan's west coast to the Mediterranean Sea, the Silk Road was a popular trading route between Asia and Europe.⁴ From China's perspective, however, the 'Silk

Road' dates back to the Han Dynasty (206 BC–AD 220) and was reflective of China's international connections. It established a trade route, passing via Xinjiang's Tarim basin, between the Eastern Chinese city of Xian and Anatolia. The rail route plotted by Baron Richthofen traverses Xinjiang's Tarim basin and then enters present-day Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan.⁵

China's SREB initiative is much broader in scope and theory than the ancient Silk Road. The SREB is seen as part of China's comprehensive national development strategy that aims to advance the economic development of the Western provinces including Xinjiang, and address the developmental gap between the western and the coastal provinces.⁶ Moreover, owing to the infrastructure investments accompanying the SREB, the initiative could potentially have a transnational developmental impact.⁷ If successful, the SREB project will span over 60 emerging markets with a population of more than four billion, and will account for more than 65 percent of the land-based production value of the global total.⁸

Even as the economic ramifications of the SREB are being assessed, it is evident from China's national-level policy documents and diplomatic efforts that both the BRI and the SREB are crucial for the country. President Xi Jinping's address at the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) 19th Congress Session in 2017 reflected the party's commitment to the initiative.⁹ Further, China's state-owned banks and enterprises have shown interest in SREB-related projects. China's major state-owned commercial banks—such as the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (ICBC), Bank of China, and the China Construction Bank—have offered funding of over US\$200 billion in credits to the BRI countries.¹⁰ The China Development Bank and the Export and Import Bank of China have also extended loans to the SREB projects. The AIIB, unveiled in 2014, is another financial institution

(largely seen as an extension of China's growing economic clout) that will provide funds for the SREB. In December 2014, China established the Silk Road Fund, worth US\$40 billion, to be managed by the People's Bank of China.¹¹ Contributors to this fund include China Investment Corporation, China Development Bank, and the China State Administration of Foreign Exchange.

China views the stability in Xinjiang province as a determining factor in the success of the SERB, as it envisions the province to be an economic hub that could bolster trade with the neighbouring Central Asian Republics (CARs).¹² The province shares a 1,700-km-long border with Kazakhstan, a nearly 1,000-km-long border with Kyrgyzstan, and a 450-km-long border with Tajikistan. At present, six of the eight Sino-European railways start from Xinjiang before entering the Kazakh territory. Xinjiang is also the entry point for Kazakh oil entering China via pipelines that have been operational since 2009.¹³ Xinjiang's Ili district links Kazakhstan to China via the Horgos road. The rail line between China and Kazakhstan passes through Alatau Pass, situated in Urumqi, Xinjiang. The China–Kazakhstan railway is used to transport Chinese goods to Russia and then to Europe. Moreover, the Torugrat and Irkeshatam passes in the Kizilsu prefecture in Xinjiang connect China with the Kyrgyz republic. The road through the Irkeshatam is the shortest possible to Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan and therefore is of strategic relevance.¹⁴ Xinjiang will also play a vital role in the Eurasian transit corridor, which will establish trans-Caspian connectivity. Kazakhstan's Aktau Port and Turkmenistan's Turkmenbashi Port will be linked to the Baku International Sea Trade Port (NBIST), paving the way for Europe-bound freight. In 2013, Central Asia accounted for 83 percent of Xinjiang's total exports. The province is thus a 'Eurasian crossroad'¹⁵ for China, and its stability is vital in the context of the country's relations with the CARs.

Map 1



Source: Werner Fassalabend, "The Silk Road: a political marketing concept for world dominance", *European View*, 14:2(2015), 293-302.

However, Xinjiang has historically been a source of tension for the Chinese state. Xinjiang was formally incorporated as a province of China in 1884,¹⁶ and full consolidation of the province was completed in the 1950s.¹⁷ The Chinese state, over the years, has faced resistance to its rule in Xinjiang from the Uyghur nationalist groups that have called for greater religious and cultural autonomy.

In 1944 Uyghur nationalists, supported by the Soviet Union, established the East Turkestan Republic. Beijing was able to restore its authority with the help of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in 1949. In 1954, Abudu Yimiti established the Emin group, a pan-Turkic organisation that intended to create a Muslim state. The Emin group was held responsible for the Khotan uprising of December 1954 and the subsequent attack on the prison camp in Karakash district later that year.¹⁸ During the period of Cultural Revolution starting in 1967, the Eastern Turkestan People's Revolution Party (ETPRP) was viewed by

Chinese strategists as the single largest resistance organisation operating in Xinjiang since 1949, which they claimed had received support from the Soviet Union.¹⁹ Conflict between the Uyghur population and the authorities became more evident during the 1980s and '90s. The Uyghur shared a fractious relationship with the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC).²⁰ During this period, Uyghur students too became involved in demonstrations against the prevalent racial and religious biases, as China's Religious Affairs Bureau—established by the State Council in 1954 sought to regulate all religions, including Islam.²¹ In another instance in the town of Baren in 1990, Uyghurs led by the Eastern Turkestan Islamic Party (ETIM) protested against the CCP policies on ethnic minorities. By calling for a *Jihad* against the authorities, ETIM sought to link political Islam with the demand of an independent Xinjiang. In 1995, Uyghurs demonstrated to call an end to the Chinese rule in Xinjiang's Ili region. Police stations, local government offices alongside those who were seen conspiring with authorities were attacked. This led Beijing to initiate the 'Strike Hard campaign'²²—in which Uyghurs who were seen associated with the separatist movement were targeted. Xinjiang has since seen sporadic instances of violence between Uyghur and the authorities, the most notable of which were the ethnic riots in the town of Urumqi in 2009, during a protest following the death of an Uyghur worker in Guangzhou.²³

China's fear of an unstable Xinjiang is compounded by the province's proximity to the Afghanistan-Pakistan region which—according to the former commander of US and NATO forces in Afghanistan, Gen. John W. Nicholson—hosts the maximum number of terror groups in the world.²⁴ Central Asian terror groups, along with the Uyghur organisations, have earlier taken advantage of the volatile situation in the region to train, arm and consolidate supporters against China.²⁵ The

challenge posed by the Uyghur extremist groups to Xinjiang's security drives China to seek security cooperation from the Central Asian Republics. Additionally, the steady flow of Central Asians and Uyghurs to the ranks of the Islamic State (IS)—now active in the neighbouring region—magnifies the security threat faced by China in Xinjiang.²⁶

Xinjiang is therefore not simply a border province for China but a central piece of its broader Eurasian connectivity agenda. The central government's primary task is to consolidate its rule in Xinjiang.²⁷ The Chinese state is of the view that stability in Xinjiang can be achieved by pacing the economic development of the province. To this end, Chinese strategists believe that increasing the economic interdependency between Xinjiang and the CARs, would make these states dependent on China to such an extent that there would be little incentive for them to confer support to the Uyghur cause.²⁸ China realises that Central Asian republics have a crucial role in Xinjiang's stability and countering the threat of Uyghur separatism.

The role of external powers in securing Xinjiang is outlined by Chinese Scholar Xing Guangcheng, who stated that, "To a larger extent the stability and prosperity of northwest China is closely bound up with stability and prosperity in Central Asia ... China can benefit greatly from its stable and prosperous neighboring states. Only when Central Asian states are politically stable and economically prosperous can Sino-Central Asian economic cooperation be conducted effectively and smoothly. Such economic cooperation can and will speed up economic development in the Northwest China."²⁹

The volatile situation in Xinjiang had inspired China to initiate the Shanghai Five multilateral initiative alongside the Central Asian Republics in 1996; it would eventually take the form of the SCO.³⁰ By politically co-opting the CARs via a multilateral institution such as the

SCO, China seeks to establish consensus against the threat emanating from Uyghur separatism and the Uyghur advocacy groups. In 1998, the Shanghai Five joint statement unequivocally stated that member states should not allow their territories to be involved in activities that could undermine the national sovereignty, security or social order of any of the five countries.³¹ On 14 June 2001, the Central Asian Republics adopted the “Shanghai Covenant on the Suppression of Terrorism, Separatism and Religious Extremism” which aims to counter separatist groups that have sought to exploit the region’s geography and ethnic linkages against their respective states.³² The SCO, in June 2004, set up the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) mechanism, hoping to deepen cooperation on counterterrorism. China has also signed strategic cooperation agreements with the five CARs.³³

Following these developments, the CARs would appear to have become more considerate of the security threats posed by the Uyghur groups. For instance, in 2009, the Kyrgyz government dismissed a protest organised by the Uyghur Friendship Society, Ittipak, in Bishkek. It can be inferred that support to the Uyghur cause in the CARs has been limited owing to the dynamics of engagement of these states with China and in the SCO.³⁴ China is also keen to use additional means such as economic incentives, to achieve its strategic objectives with regards to the CARs. Earlier, in 2009, China facilitated a US\$10-billion loan via the SCO to help the CARs overcome the economic crisis. This was followed by another US\$10-billion loan in 2012.³⁵ During his visit to the Kyrgyz republic in 2016, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi discussed the prospects of linking the SREB with Russia’s Eurasian Economic Union.³⁶ China is keen to promote the SREB in Central Asia as its leadership is committed to the success of the initiative at the SCO summit in Uzbekistan in 2016.

The following section highlights the causes of the Uyghur discontent and discusses how China plans to use the SREB initiative to address the discontent among the Uyghurs.

SREB: COMPLEMENTING CHINA'S STRATEGY FOR XINJIANG

According to Stephen Blank, Xinjiang's strategic significance to China is similar to that of Tibet's. He states, "Xinjiang like Taiwan and neighboring Tibet, is a neuralgic issue for China, which desperately needs internal stability in that predominantly Muslim, resource rich and strategically important region. Beijing's strategic and energy objectives are based on stability in Xinjiang, and its Central Asian policies grow out of its preoccupation with stability there."³⁷

The threat of civil unrest further adds to Beijing's apprehension regarding Xinjiang where the Uyghur population, which accounts for 45.8 percent of Xinjiang's total population of 21.8 million, shares a troubled relationship with the Han ethnic group (who make up 40.5 percent of Xinjiang's total population). Though a minority in China, the Uyghurs constitute the largest ethnic group in Xinjiang.³⁸

Despite Xinjiang being declared a multinational state in 1949, the Communist Party's policy in 1957 opposed any "local nationalism" such as that of the Uyghurs.³⁹ Religious minorities were further suppressed during Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution of 1966–77. The revolution particularly targeted religious texts and minority ethnic languages. The Uyghurs' demand for greater cultural and religious autonomy is thus incongruent with the 'Sinocentric' belief of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which has so far prioritised the Han ethnic group. While Uyghur nationalism is not homogenous and is not driven by a single agenda—some Uyghur groups advocate for a separate statehood, while

others have asked for greater autonomy within the Chinese state⁴⁰—the phenomenon has become an inextricable part of China's domestic political discourse and, by extension, its foreign policy.

While China's National Minorities Policy released in 1999 outlines generous treatment towards minorities, it does little to assuage the racial and ethnic tensions between the Uyghurs and the Hans.⁴¹ The CCP fears that acceding to Uyghur demands could have a cascading effect on other national minorities in border regions, such as Tibet and Inner Mongolia. Discontent among the national minority could lead to civil unrest and eventually challenge the legitimacy of the CCP.

For the CCP therefore, Xinjiang, along with Yunan and Heilongjiang, is the focus of its strategy for the frontier provinces. It aims to pace the economic development of the provinces by turning them into bridgeheads, to tap into proximate regions such as Central and South East Asia.⁴² While traditionally, Beijing considered Xinjiang's geopolitical position as a strategic liability that limited the region's economic integration,⁴³ since the 1980s, China began to see the province's geopolitical position as an asset. During the inspection tour of former premier, Li Peng, Xinjiang was identified as a 'Eurasian Continental Bridge' that would connect the Chinese economy with those of Central Asia, South Asia and the Middle East.⁴⁴ Former Chinese President Hu Jintao, during his instruction tour in 2006, reiterated that Xinjiang should become a bridgehead to Central Asia.⁴⁵

Border regions, Xiabao Su argues, are not simply a frontier of cultural affinity or economic connection but can be mobilised as important spaces of transnational cooperation, in accordance with China's other developmental strategies. According to Xiabao, "Chinese state creates a preferential geopolitical milieu to engineer transnational regionalization to help Chinese firms to open up to overseas markets."⁴⁶

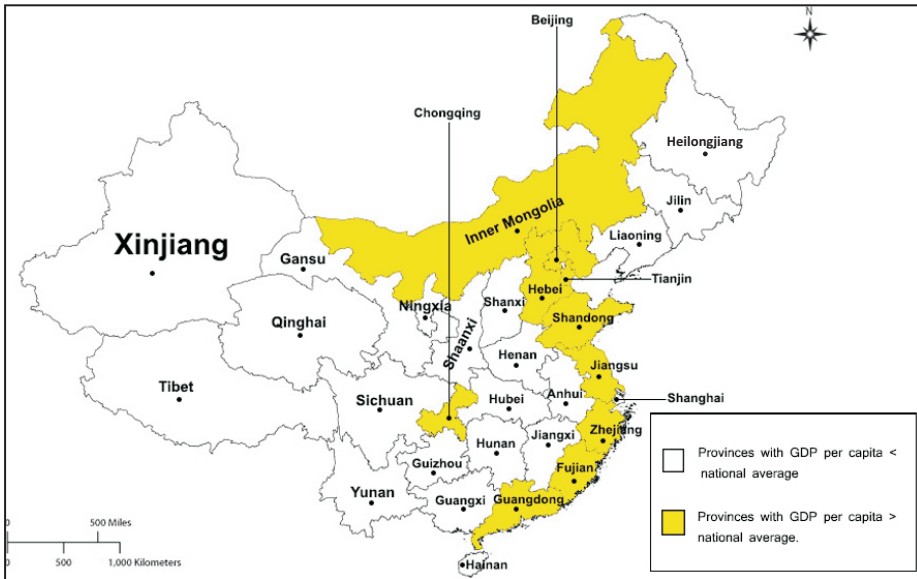
In line with such an approach, Xinjiang is being developed as a Cross-Border Region to function as an outlet for the surplus capital and investments. G. Arrighi argues that cross-border regions provide China with an opportunity to accelerate economic development by re-centring the focus of regional economy on China.⁴⁷

China's strategy for these frontiers can be viewed as an extension of the 'Go West' programme initiated in 2001 by the CCP, and is based on Deng Xiaoping's 'Two Broad Development Scopes' strategy.⁴⁸ The strategy proposes that facilitating growth in coastal provinces can pave the way for the development of inland provinces such as Xinjiang. The programme for inland development was subsequently included in the 10th Five-Year Plan from 2001 to 2005, and the 2010 perspective plan. The development of the Western provinces has become a priority for the CCP, highlighted during the 16th party congress held in 2002.⁴⁹

China's regional imbalance is partly a fallout of the CCP's Sinocentric beliefs, which is evident in the state of Xinjiang's socioeconomic life. The most lucrative sectors of Xinjiang's economy are under the ownership of the Han Chinese. There is also a significant gap in income levels of the Han and the Uyghur populations outside of the state sector.⁵⁰ Some Uyghurs have even wished for this economic gap to intensify so that there is a sufficient ground for rebellion.⁵¹

Absent any outlet to the sea trading routes, the progress of the Western provinces (including Xinjiang) has been laggard compared to the coastal provinces. This is reflected in the region's economic indicators: in 2017, the Xinjiang's average GDP per capita was US\$7,194, compared to capital Beijing's which was US\$20,356.⁵² The western region, in addition to being geographically significant, also accounts for 56 percent of the land area and 22.8 percent of the total population of China.⁵³

Map 2



Source: ORF's map, using data from Salvatore Babones, "China Quietly Releases Provincial GDP Figures", 12 September 2018, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/salvatorebabones/2018/02/12/china-quietly-releases-2017-provincial-gdp-figures/#2e0aa6fb20dc>

Thus, bringing economic prosperity to Xinjiang is a major driver in the SREB initiative. China is aware that a widening of the economic gap carries the potential of fuelling political and social unrest in Xinjiang. The country envisions that increased commerce and trade could accelerate the province's economic development. This could also help in improving the socioeconomic conditions of the Uyghurs and thus mitigate tensions between the Hans and the Uyghurs. The SREB initiative will supplement China's 'Go West' development plan, which has been a priority policy for the CCP. However, Beijing is not reliant solely on economic measures to achieve peace in Xinjiang.

VULNERABILITIES IN CHINA'S XINJIANG APPROACH

As China becomes more sensitive about the security of BRI projects, Beijing has placed greater emphasis on stabilising Xinjiang with a mix of stringent security measures and economic development. Prior to the

2009 violence in Urumqi that broke out between the Uyghurs and Hans,⁵⁴ police recruitment in Xinjiang was limited. After 2009, the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) launched its first-ever recruitment drive, intending to reduce dependency on other provinces. The period 2012–13 saw a 57 percent increase in police recruitment advertisements from 2009. This coincided with the announcement of the SREB initiative in Kazakhstan in 2013. Under what has been called the “grid style management system” introduced in 2014, China is actively using surveillance equipment. Internet and video surveillance was first introduced in Xinjiang during this phase. Moreover, China has reinforced its armed police presence in Xinjiang with high-tech surveillance gear, e.g. the facial recognition system, the collection of biometric data, use of smartphone scanners and voice analysis.⁵⁵

Under the Population Registration Programme of 2017, authorities were delegated to collect DNA samples, iris scans, and blood types of all residents between the age of 12 and 65. While the official goal of the programme is to improve the delivery of healthcare services, blood samples and iris scans are sent directly to security agencies, and all information collected is then linked to an individual’s national identification number. A report published in 2017 by the health authorities in the Ili district instructs the healthcare staff to ensure participation of the Xinjiang residents in the survey. Such a practice, according to Human Rights Watch (HRW), is inconsistent with international human rights norms, which require the individual’s consent in any medical intervention.⁵⁶ Moreover, the members of UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination in 2018 were critical of China’s treatment of ethnic Uyghurs, many of whom have been forced into re-education camps for political and cultural indoctrination.⁵⁷

Beijing's heavy-handed measures in Xinjiang could have consequences that are antithetical to its goal of stabilising the restive province. First, stringent security measures could mobilise previously separate Uyghur activist groups that have traditionally had divergent demands. Moreover, by equating Uyghur discontent with terrorism, China has invited the wrath of Islamic extremist groups, such as the IS that has absorbed Uyghur fighters into its ranks.⁵⁸ News reports underline the restrictions imposed in Xinjiang by authorities on the use of head scarfs, veils and long beards (associated with Islamic practices). Reports also point to other measures imposed by authorities in Xinjiang, such as introducing checks during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan.⁵⁹ This is indicative of China's treatment of religious minorities, an approach that invites greater scrutiny by Uyghur advocacy groups outside of Xinjiang such as the Uyghur American Association and the World Uyghur Congress that have earlier criticised the Chinese state for its treatment of Uyghurs.⁶⁰

Within a section of the Central Asian population, there exists an apparent 'Sinophobia' regarding China's growing influence in their economies. There is mistrust about China's burgeoning investments in the region, which many feel are only for its own interests. Part of the Central Asian population is also apprehensive of the increasing migration of Chinese people into their countries. Strategic thinkers in Central Asia have also been critical of their governments for what they see as indirectly allowing China to expand influence in their economies and societies, which may have an impact on local industry and demographics. Such apprehensions have led many to question whether there exists any goodwill in China's SREB initiative.⁶¹ As Liu Yanhua, a counsellor of the PRC's State Council, acknowledged in a speech at an OBOR seminar, China has faced backlash despite investing billions in infrastructure in some countries due to its lack of attention to the environment and concern for local communities.⁶²

CONCLUSION

This paper situates the SREB initiative within the context of how China's domestic considerations in Xinjiang are influencing its foreign policy in Eurasia. As this paper has demonstrated, a key focus of the SREB is to stabilise Xinjiang, in addition to the potential benefits in areas of trade and connectivity.

The paper first outlined China's interest in the SREB projects, reflected in its financial commitments and diplomatic outreach. It then discussed how Xinjiang has always influenced China's foreign policy towards the neighbouring Central Asian states, and this extends to its interest in the SREB. The paper also touched on the roots of discontent in Xinjiang province, foremost of which is the CCP's Sino-centric policies, which has led to a significant economic differential between the Hans and the Uyghurs.

The paper outlined that the SREB initiative is congruent with China's 'Go West' development strategy, which aims to improve the economies of relatively underdeveloped Western provinces, including Xinjiang. The country seeks to utilise Xinjiang's geographical ties with Central Asia. From China's perspective, the SREB offers twin benefits. First, by facilitating greater investments and trade in the frontier province of Xinjiang, it will address the issue of regional imbalance. Second, by improving Xinjiang's condition, it can pacify the Uyghur discontent that is partly fuelled by the province's relatively low economic development.

The paper examined the vulnerabilities that confront the SREB initiative including China's heavy-handed approach to pacify the Uyghur discontent that could be counterproductive. Since the announcement of the SREB initiative in neighbouring Kazakhstan in

2013, authorities in China have increased the recruitment of armed police, the use of high-technology surveillance equipment, and the collection of biometrics. Additionally, China will also have to deal with the growing discontent among the local population in the Central Asian Republics, who are suspicious of Chinese investments and the migration of Chinese citizens. That said, domestic concerns such as the Uyghur discontent in Xinjiang, is a major motivation behind China's evolving foreign policy, including its initiatives such as the SREB. 

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