



# China's rise and Central Asia's security

by Martin Breitmaier

In May 2015, the former head of the Tajik special forces Gulmurod Khalimov announced his defection to the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) on YouTube and threatened to “bring slaughter” to Tajikistan. In September of the same year, several hundred Taliban fighters seized the northern Afghan city of Kunduz, freed prisoners and destroyed vital government infrastructure. And in March 2016, a suicide attack by Sunni extremist group Jamaat-ul-Ahrar killed 70 people in Lahore, Pakistan. These three events underpin growing international worries over the recent rise of militarism in greater Central Asia. According to the 2015 Global Terrorism Index, in 2014, the last year of NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mandate, deaths from terrorism in Afghanistan and Pakistan rose to an all-time high of over 9,000 in each country. Simultaneously, in January 2015, ISIL announced its expansion into Central Asia under the moniker ‘Wilayat Khorasan’. As of January 2016, up to 8,500 fighters loyal to ISIL were active in Afghanistan, while 2,000-4,000 citizens of the post-Soviet Central Asian states have joined ISIL as ‘foreign fighters’.

This surge in militarism has special significance for Beijing: with Chinese companies advancing ambitious investment projects in this volatile region, Chinese nationals and assets are increasingly at risk. Pushed by the realities on the ground, China now seems to be reconsidering its traditionally reticent security policy towards its Western neighbourhood.

## Growing stakes

China's trade with Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Pakistan was worth approximately \$61 billion in 2014. Moreover, the region has growing significance for Chinese energy supply diversification: China has built three pipelines in the post-Soviet Central Asian states and in 2014, it purchased about 53% of its imported natural gas from Turkmenistan and nearly 6% from Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Kazakhstan is also a major provider of uranium to China (65% in 2014). Finally, the region is a vital transit area of the ambitious \$890 billion ‘One Belt, One Road initiative’ (OBOR) and its offshoot, the \$46 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

With regard to security, Beijing has two main regional objectives: first, preventing an increase of violence in the restive Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR) and second, protecting Chinese nationals and assets. XUAR harbours substantive hydrocarbon resources and links China to the West. Therefore, in the words of China's Prime Minister Li Keqiang, the region is “of strategic importance for the country's overall situation”. For several years, Uighur separatists have violently challenged China's authority in XUAR and are reportedly relying on militant groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan for sanctuary. In order to fully control and develop XUAR, Beijing thus requires stability beyond its Western borders.



While none of the regional militarist movements has the resources and coherence necessary for large-scale conventional warfare, numerous small-scale attacks are hindering the development of China's Central Asian investment projects. Insurgents have repeatedly attacked the Afghan Mes Aynak copper mine and delayed exploration activities at three oil blocks in northern Afghanistan by threatening Chinese workers. In Pakistan's Balochistan province, separatists have specifically targeted Chinese assets at the Gwadar harbour and the Saindak mine. Moreover, militants have repeatedly killed or kidnapped Chinese nationals in both countries.

Although the post-Soviet Central Asian states are relatively stable, attacks frequently occur around Afghanistan's porous borders with Tajikistan and Turkmenistan and fighters occasionally succeed in crossing the frontiers. Concerns about security in the border region were showcased by large-scale troop exercises of Tajik, Russian and Turkmen militaries in March and April 2016. While the exact numbers of ISIL sympathisers and returning fighters are unknown, the recent crackdown on alleged Islamist militants in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan suggest they are numerous enough to worry regional leaders.

### Increased security commitment

Beijing is now departing from its purely economic stance and stepping up its security engagement in greater Central Asia. It is, for example, taking a lead role in diplomatic coordination with key regional actors and strengthening multilateral security cooperation while introducing reforms that allow for limited international power projection.

In 2013, Chinese international foreign investment exceeded \$100 billion and over 5 million Chinese nationals were living abroad, many of them in fragile countries. Beijing is gradually assuming more responsibility for Chinese citizens and interests, as illustrated by the evacuation of over 35,000 Chinese workers from Libya in 2011 and China's UN Security Council vote in favour of sanctioning the Qaddafi regime. This stance was further solidified by a 2013 White Paper, which for the first time listed the protection of Chinese nationals and assets abroad as a priority. The December 2015 anti-terror law equally stressed this necessity to protect and introduced the possibility of sending Chinese military and police on counter-terrorism missions abroad. Finally, the ongoing reforms of the Chinese army are boosting its capacities for overseas evacuation and peacekeeping activities.

Since the foundation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in 2001, the frequency of Beijing's exercises with Central Asian states has increased.

Apart from the SCO's relatively regular 'peace mission' exercises, China is increasingly conducting multi- and bi-lateral anti-terror exercises with Kazakhstan (2006, 2015), Kyrgyzstan (2002, 2011, and 2013) and Tajikistan (2006, 2011, and 2015). Furthermore, out of the 7,000 troops that participated in the 2014 SCO peace mission, 5,000 were supplied by China – more than in any previous Central Asian SCO exercises. Besides strengthening regional military cooperation, SCO drills serve as valuable international training opportunities for the Chinese military and help prepare it for scenarios involving global power projection.

In addition, China has recently changed its approach towards Afghanistan. During the presence of ISAF, Beijing interacted with Kabul on a mostly economic level. In July 2014, however, Beijing announced a special envoy to Afghanistan and, in a modest but clear departure from prior policy, increased its security cooperation with Afghanistan in 2015 by offering Kabul training, supplies and \$73 million in military aid. Also, in late 2014, Beijing adopted a proactive stance in Afghan mediation efforts by reviving peace talks in the 'Quadrilateral Coordination Group of Afghanistan' format, which includes representatives from the Afghan, Pakistani and US governments and the Taliban.

Further south, China and Pakistan have strong military ties and frequently conduct joint exercises. With the CPEC advancing, China has secured Islamabad's commitment to provide an army battalion of 10,000 to safeguard Chinese workers in Pakistan. A further step towards increased security engagement with the region is equally represented by China's fresh plans for a multilateral anti-terror mechanism including Afghanistan, Pakistan and Tajikistan, announced on 1 March 2016. The initiative has been welcomed by both the US and Russia, which have long called on China to raise its regional security profile.

The foreign policy implications of China's rise vary considerably from region to region. Driven by humanitarian and economic security concerns, China's initiatives in its Western neighbourhood have the potential to support or merge with existing security mechanisms such as the SCO, the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and the OSCE. Combined with its important regional investments in energy and transport infrastructure, China's increased multilateral security engagement may in the long term contribute to greater stability and prosperity in Central Asia.

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