

# Central Asia- China Relations

## Zhōngyà gèguó hé Zhōngguó de wàijiāo guānxi 中亚各国和中国的外交关系

**China has complicated relations with the central Asian nations that became independent of the Soviet Union after 1991. Issues include boundary disputes, population growth, economy, nationalism, and separatist movements.**

**A**fter the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991 China faced the challenge of managing bilateral relations with the newly independent nations of central Asia. The independence of these nations worsened long-simmering ethnic unrest in China's Xinjiang Autonomous Region, which borders several central Asian nations. China, after establishing relations with the central Asian nations in early 1992, signed with them more than twenty agreements on boundaries and cultural and economic cooperation within a short period.

### Unequal Treaties

The boundary between China and central Asia was originally established by so-called unequal treaties—the 1860 Treaty of Beijing, the 1864 Protocol on the Northwest Boundary, the 1881 Sino-Russian Treaty of Ili, and the 1884 Sino-Russian Treaty of Kashgar. According to China, these treaties gave czarist Russia 440,000 square kilometers of land at the expense of China. After the central Asian nations became independent, China was

willing to accept the unequal treaties as the basis for new boundary agreements.

After several years of negotiation, on 4 July 1996 China reached a boundary agreement with Kyrgyzstan. Kyrgyzstan and China have since reached agreements to open new border crossings and to build a railway linking the two nations. On 4 July 1998 leaders of China and Kazakhstan signed a boundary treaty that settled lingering questions about the 1,700-kilometer Sino-Kazakh boundary.

China and Tajikistan settled their historically complicated boundary dispute in 2002. China claimed that Russia violated the 1884 Sino-Russian Kashgar Boundary Treaty in 1892 and occupied 28,000 square kilometers of Chinese territory in the Pamir Mountains and that the boundary remained undefined. Nevertheless, the two nations negotiated many agreements, including one to open a road connecting China and Tajikistan to ease border trade before settling the boundary dispute. In the final settlement, China received approximately 1,000 square kilometers of its original claim.

### Demographic and Economic Threat

The central Asian nations view China as a demographic and economic threat. One of their concerns is China's dramatic increase in population. Central Asia, with its vast territory and rich natural resources, is a logical area for China to covet. More than 300,000 Chinese have settled in central Asia, and that number may increase to 500,000 by the end of 2010. In fact, officials in Kazakhstan



worry that if the flood of Chinese coming into their country continues, Chinese could overwhelm Kazakhstan by 2020. In addition, Chinese traders have bought considerable amounts of real estate in Kyrgyzstan.

For its part China is apprehensive about instability along its border. After a summit in Shanghai, on 26 April 1996 Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan signed an agreement with China concerning confidence-building measures along the border. On 24 April 1997 the nations agreed to withdraw military forces 100 kilometers along the 3,500-kilometer boundary. A third agreement, signed on 3 July 1998, stressed cooperation to lessen ethnic unrest in the region. Each nation promised to fight arms smuggling and not to allow its territory to be used to undermine the national sovereignty, social order, and security of any of the five nations.

## Nationalism and Separatist Movement

Ethnic unrest in Xinjiang Autonomous Region has been a major concern for China since the independence of the central Asian nations. A continuing source of stress in China–central Asia relations has been the sensitive subjects of pan-Turkic nationalism and the Xinjiang separatist

movement. China historically has struggled to maintain central government control over that region. Recent issues have been Russian and Soviet intrigue and local independence movements. In 1944 the short-lived East Turkistan Republic was established in what is now Xinjiang Autonomous Region; it had a national anthem and a national flag—a white crescent and star against a blue background. The Uygurs of Xinjiang, led by Islamic scholars, wanted a homeland free of Chinese influence. China in 1962 put down a revolt by thousands of Kazakhs, who then fled across the border to Soviet Kazakhstan. China now feels that the simmering independence movements in Xinjiang Autonomous Region are the main threat to stability in western China.

A central point in most discussions between China and central Asian nations is a commitment not to support separatist movements. Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, with 80,000 and 200,000 Uygurs, respectively, have agreed to suppress such movements. Several separatist movements have migrated from Kazakhstan to Turkey, and Kyrgyzstan has suppressed organization of an ethnic Uygur political party. The Uygur nationalist groups that continue to operate in central Asian states remain a major source of tension in their relations with China.

Nations that have fundamentalist Islamic orientations are a factor in fomenting ethnic unrest in the region.

For example, the Jamaat-i-Islami, based in Pakistan, has encouraged Islamic activism in Xinjiang Autonomous Region, as have other Islamist movements such as the Taliban (when it was in power in Afghanistan). Uyghurs receive religious training in Pakistan, and Islamic and Afghan militants have smuggled arms into China. The number of Islamic schools in China has increased rapidly; in 1997 the government shut down as many as three hundred “illegal” schools. Some neighborhood mosques have become the focus of anti-Chinese activity. China has clamped down on what it considers to be illegal religious activities and has closed many mosques.

The increase in ethnic unrest and pro-independence demonstrations and other activities has deep religious and historical roots and will continue for the foreseeable future. Many leaders are not simply religious fanatics but rather are pan-Turkic nationalists. Support for their movement comes from neighboring Turkic-speaking countries. In spite of a pledge by Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan not to support the Xinjiang separatist movement, supporters of the movement openly operate from these two countries. Uyghurs living in Turkey also support the movement. Anti-Chinese colonialism and pan-Turkic nationalism are important sources of the unrest. Uyghurs are attempting to preserve their cultural identity and to resist the large influx of Chinese settlers into their region.

## Increasing Border Trade

During the 1990s central Asia quickly became an important focus of China’s economic attention. Border trade is a vital part of growing economic relations. In 1989 Xinjiang Autonomous Region’s trade with Soviet central Asia totaled only \$118.5 million. In 1995 total trade between China and central Asia was estimated at \$718 million, of which \$500 million was border trade. China since 1991 has become the second-largest trading partner for central Asian nations, significantly displacing Russian influence in the region. Kazakhstan’s major trading partner is now China, and one-quarter of Kyrgyzstan’s foreign trade is with China. As of 2008 trade with China (including oil exports) has increased to account for 60 percent of the region’s foreign trade.

The development of gas and oil is an area of vital strategic economic cooperation. China and Turkmenistan in 1994 signed an agreement to build a Turkmenistan-China-Japan gas pipeline. In 1997 China won the bid to develop Kazakhstan’s Uzen oil field and to build a 3,000-kilometer oil pipeline from Kazakhstan’s Caspian oil fields at Tengiz to Xinjiang Autonomous Region and then to China’s east coast. China also signed agreements with Kazakhstan to develop the Aktyubinsk oil fields along the Russian-Kazakh border. China’s total investment in developing oil resources in Kazakhstan is estimated at \$9.7 billion. That is equivalent to 50 percent of Kazakhstan’s gross national product. Such agreements indicate that China and central Asia are developing an important economic and strategic relationship. China not only is seeking to ensure its energy security for the future but also is seeking to shift the focus of central Asia’s global vision toward China and away from Turkey and Russia.

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