

# China's Territorial Ambition in Central Asia

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## Key Points

- China's historic and aggressive territorial ambitions have re-emerged across Asia and into Central Asian States (CAS).
- The Chinese regime is trying to regain territory taken by 19<sup>th</sup> century Western powers equivalent in size to the Qing Dynasty.
- China considers CAS as its “rear area” and is willing to challenge the sovereignty of CAS nations to achieve its objectives.
- Some CAS countries are afraid that this behavior is leading to China amending the border agreements of 1997.
- The militarization and deployment of the People's Armed Police (PAP) inside and around borders projects an aggressive policy rooted in radical nationalism (chauvinism), land exploitation, and labor migration.
- In January 2021 the Chinese government implemented a new Defense Law which authorizes military force when development interests are at risk and authorizes the mobilization of Chinese nationals in a threatened area to defend it.

## **Introduction**

The COVID-19 pandemic has restarted China's revisionism along with their ambition of territorial expansion and accelerated their long-term plans. After World War II, China advanced westward and invaded Tibet in 1948 and Xinjiang in 1949. China has steadily expanded its territory not only towards immediate neighbors, but also to distant countries. In recent years, China's operations in the South China Sea, around Taiwan and on the Doklam Plateau have been framed within the regime's storyline of China overcoming the “century of humiliation.” These operations have been designed to restore its rightful place as the predominant power based on the mindset that China is at the cultural and political center of the world.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Axel Dessen, “Identifying Windows of Opportunity within China's Rise”, Military Review, October 2019, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/military-review/Archives/English/SO-19/Dessen-China-100-Year.pdf> (accessed Aug 16, 2020)

## Goals of Territorial Expansion

China's pride in its unique history and semi colonial experience in and after the 19th century is driving its national aspirations and fueling its chauvinism.<sup>2</sup> The Chinese regime is trying to regain the territory taken by 19<sup>th</sup> century Western powers, an area equivalent in size to the Qing Dynasty (Figure 1).<sup>3</sup> China thinks that in order to create new Chinese order, so called "Great Rejuvenation," (superseding the West) is normal behavior allowing for continued unilateral expansion.<sup>4</sup> China also perceives its own development and its increasing influence in the global community as predetermined and righteous. Neighboring countries believe that a stable security environment is vital, while China's vital interest is the empowerment of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). China's global and regional efforts support the "holistic view of national security" strategy to strengthen the CCP through the expansion of its geographical range and by achieving military superiority.<sup>5</sup>



Figure 1: Territories lost by China after the fall of the Qing dynasty<sup>6</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Ted S. Yoho "China's Second Century of Humiliation", The Diplomat, June 25, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/06/chinas-second-century-of-humiliation/> (accessed Aug 16, 2020)

<sup>3</sup> Christian Heller "South China Sea: China Breaks From a Century of Humiliation Real Clear Defense", Feb 04, 2019 [https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2019/02/04/south\\_china\\_sea\\_china\\_breaks\\_from\\_a\\_century\\_of\\_humiliation\\_114158.html](https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2019/02/04/south_china_sea_china_breaks_from_a_century_of_humiliation_114158.html) (accessed Aug 16, 2020)

<sup>4</sup> Bonji Obara, "China's intention in defense budget",SPF, May 27, 2020, <https://www.spf.org/spf-china-observer/en/document-detail018.html>(Accessed Aug 16, 2020)

<sup>5</sup> "Xi stresses building holistic national security architecture" ,Xinhuanet, Dec 12 2020, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-12/12/c\\_139584669.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-12/12/c_139584669.htm)(accessed Jan 15, 2021)

<sup>6</sup> "The development situation of dynasties" ,Chinese Time, May 29 2012, <http://www.chinesetimeschool.com/en-us/articles/the-development-situation-of-dynasties/> (accessed Aug 16, 2020)

## Invasion Through Other Means Than War

It is reported that China's strategy is based on the concept of “unrestricted warfare.”<sup>7</sup> Unrestricted warfare prioritizes the ‘win outside the battlefield’ and by means other than war. This concept resembles a combination of Russian hybrid warfare and the US’s multi-domain operations concept. The origins of the CCP approach to hybrid warfare extend back at least as far as Sun Tzu (500 BC).<sup>8</sup> For Beijing, the struggle against the US and its allies has been underway for a considerable amount of time. Chinese political influence operations have reached into the West’s homelands, and hybrid warfare campaigns have been conducted in key regions for several years. From the Chinese perspective, significant territorial gains and other strategic advances have already been achieved. In some locations, China accompanies its political influence operations alongside economic pressure, land acquisitions and foreign investments. In most instances, the host nation governments have accepted Chinese loans to fund infrastructure development. This is often within the framework of Beijing’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).<sup>9</sup> In order to seize or borrow territory China combines economic and political influence, using four methods:

1. **Debt traps:** Acquiring strategic assets such as land and ports by lending huge amounts of money that debtors cannot repay.<sup>10</sup> In some instances, recipient governments have had little choice but to cede elements of their sovereignty to Chinese entities in lieu of loan repayments e.g.: Hambantota Port (Sri Lanka), Guadal Port (Pakistan);
2. **Silent invasion:** Influencing the political elite of each country by occupying a strategic asset on favorable terms for China, or by changing the population composition ratio to increase the number of Chinese immigrants or Chinese students, thereby taking over local politics and enabling an influx of Chinese military and/or companies. e.g.: the Chinese infiltration of Darwin Harbor in Australia next to the US military base;<sup>11</sup> and attempts by China to build a PLA supply base for Antarctica in Tasmania, Australia;<sup>12</sup>
3. **Mapfare:** As a part of political warfare, promoting a fabricated history or map and exploiting it to declare actual control based on the fabricated propaganda. e.g.: the

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<sup>7</sup> Liang Qiao, “*Unrestricted Warfare*” PLA Literature and Arts. Publishing House, 1999, <https://all-med.net/pdf/unrestricted-warfare/> (accessed Aug 16, 2020)

<sup>8</sup> Kerry Gershaneck, “*To Win without Fighting*”, Expeditions with MCUP, April 2020. <https://www.usmcu.edu/Outreach/Marine-Corps-University-Press/Expeditions-with-MCUP-digital-journal/To-Win-without-Fighting/>. (accessed Aug 16, 2020)

<sup>9</sup> Ross Babbage, “*Stealing a March*” CSBA, July 24, 2019, <https://csbaonline.org/research/publications/stealing-a-march-chinese-hybrid-warfare-in-the-indo-pacific-issues-and-options-for-allied-defense-planners> (accessed Aug 16, 2020)

<sup>10</sup> Umesh Moramudali, “*Is Sri Lanka Really a Victim of China’s ‘Debt Trap’?*” The diplomat, May 14, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/05/is-sri-lanka-really-a-victim-of-chinas-debt-trap/>

<sup>11</sup> Clive Hamilton, “*Silent Invasion*” p112, Hardie Grant (February 22, 2018)

<sup>12</sup> Clive Hamilton, “*Polar progress: We ignore Beijing’s Antarctic ambitions at our peril*,” The Sydney Morning Herald, Feb 23, 2018, <https://www.smh.com.au/world/polar-progress-we-ignore-beijings-antarctic-ambitions-at-our-peril-20180220-h0wdc9.html> (accessed Aug 16, 2020)

claim that the South China Sea has belonged to China's territory for 2000 years before the Han Empire;<sup>13</sup> or that the Chinese discovered the continent of Australia in the 1400s;

4. **Fait accompli:** In this model China conducts an incursion into another country's territories or unoccupied areas, claiming sovereignty and gradually advancing an actual control line and area. Subsequently, buildings are installed and administrative districts implemented to secure them.<sup>14</sup> When a fait accompli is in place, China's political warfare operations are usually refocused to encourage enemy decision-makers and their publics to acquiesce and accept the "new facts" as normal. This technique has been seen in the South China Sea and along the border with India.

### **China's Territorial Interest in Central Asia**

In 1997, in order to stabilize CAS as a "Rear area" for the eastern Taiwan front, China agreed border demarcation principles with Central Asian countries. This was based on "The agreement between Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and China on Confidence Building in the Military Field in the border area."<sup>15</sup> This agreement provides for border security and confidence measures between the five parties. It calls for military disclosure when the parties are undertaking border and naval exercises, as well as the reduction of troop levels in the border areas. It also allows the parties to observe and inspect troop movements in each other's territory upon invitation.<sup>16</sup>

Energy trading relationships with Eurasian resource-rich countries have since become a valuable strategic asset for China. The Chinese have prioritized food self-sufficiency as a part of security concerns. In recent years, China has increased the amount of agricultural land rented in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan.<sup>17</sup> With Chinese workers farming these areas, the tension between local residents and farmers has escalated.<sup>18</sup>

### **Kazakhstan**

In March 2016, there was a law amendment announced that extended the limit of agricultural land lending to foreign companies from 10 to 25 years. Following this announcement there were large-scale

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<sup>13</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the People's Republic of China "*China Adheres to the Position of Settling Through Negotiation the Relevant Disputes Between China and the Philippines in the South China Sea*" ,July,13, 2016 [http://www.china.org.cn/government/whitepaper/node\\_7239601.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/government/whitepaper/node_7239601.htm)(accessed Aug 16, 2020)

<sup>14</sup> David Santoro, "*Beijing's South China Sea Aggression Is a Warning to Taiwan*" FP, September 16, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/09/16/beijings-south-china-sea-aggression-is-a-warning-to-taiwan/>(accessed Aug 16, 2020)

<sup>15</sup> United Nation, "Agreement between Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and China on Confidence Building in the Military Field in the Border Area" ,26 Apr 1996, [Agreement between Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and China on Confidence Building in the Military Field in the Border Area | UN Peacemaker](https://www.un.org/peacekeeping/operations/peacemaker/operations/26apr1996/agreement-between-russia-kazakhstan-kyrgyzstan-tajikistan-and-china-on-confidence-building-in-the-military-field-in-the-border-area)(accessed Aug 16, 2020)

<sup>16</sup> Thrassy N. Marketos "*China's Energy Geopolitics*" Routledge, 9 May 2016 <http://opac.lib.idu.ac.id/unhanebook/assets/uploads/files/1fad6-012.china-s-energy-geopolitics.pdf> (accessed Aug 16, 2020)

<sup>17</sup> Raffaello Pantucci, "*China's Complicated Relationship With Central Asia*" ,The Global Observatory, November 8, 2019, <https://theglobalobservatory.org/2019/11/chinas-complicated-relationship-central-asia/> (accessed Aug 16, 2020)

<sup>18</sup> Bradley Jardine, "*Why are there anti-China protests in Central Asia?*" Washington Post, Oct. 16, 2019 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/10/16/why-are-there-anti-china-protests-central-asia/> (accessed Aug 16, 2020)

protests by residents who thought it was a move toward depriving Chinese people of land, causing the revision of the land law to be placed on hold.<sup>19</sup>

In April 2020, China's major portal site "Sohu" published an article titled, "Why Kazakhstan is eager to return to China."<sup>20</sup> The article questioned the legitimacy of Kazakh's sovereignty and included statements such as "the present Kazakh territory was historically a land that should belong to China." The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan protested to the Chinese stating, "the report on such content is contrary to the spirit of permanent and full strategic cooperation between the two countries, which was declared in the joint declaration by the two leaders in 2019."<sup>21</sup>

### Kyrgyzstan

People in Kyrgyzstan are frightened to lose their land to China as a result of a "debt trap."<sup>22</sup> When Chinese companies expand into Kyrgyzstan, they need large factory sites. As a result, some Kyrgyz people feel that the land available for pasture was reduced and the land was taken by the Chinese. Many Chinese have gone to Kyrgyzstan and acquired Kyrgyz nationality. Kyrgyzstan has a small population of approximately 6 million, therefore Kyrgyz feel their country will be flooded with Chinese.<sup>23</sup> It is unlikely that Kyrgyzstan will cede its territory to CCP, but it may allow the leasing of its territory.



Figure 2 : Map of the Territories Handed over from Tajikistan to China

<sup>19</sup> Annette Bohr, "Kazakhstan: Tested by Transition" Chathamhouse, Nov 27 2019, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2019-11-27-Kazakhstan-Tested-By-Transition.pdf> (accessed Aug 16, 2020)

<sup>20</sup> Kanat Altynbayev, "Kazakhstan lodges protest with China over article questioning its sovereignty", Central Asia news, Apr 17 2020, [https://central.asia-news.com/en\\_GB/articles/cnmi\\_ca/features/2020/04/17/feature-02](https://central.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2020/04/17/feature-02) (accessed Aug 16, 2020)

<sup>21</sup> Sidhant Sibal, "New Ambitions? Chinese claiming Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan part of China" ,New Delhi, May 11, 2020, <http://www.eaglespeak.us/2020/05/new-ambitions-chinese-claiming.html> (accessed Aug 16, 2020)

<sup>22</sup> Connor Dilleen, "More than just about Belt and Road: does China hold territorial ambitions in Central Asia?" The Strategist, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/just-belt-road-china-hold-territorial-ambitions-central-asia/> (accessed Aug 16, 2020)

<sup>23</sup> Connor Dilleen, "Central Asia's simmering anti-China sentiment," The Australian Strategic Policy Institute, May 2, 2019 <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/central-asias-simmering-anti-china-sentiment/>

## Tajikistan

In January 2011, Tajikistan ratified a border demarcation agreement that ceded approximately 1,100 square kilometers of the Pamir Highlands to China. However, it was reported in Tajikistan that, without ceding the territory, they could not withstand the pressure of China.<sup>24</sup> Since 2016, China has also agreed to build security outposts and training facilities in the border areas. At present, as many as 40 outposts have been completed.<sup>25</sup>

## **Intrinsic Anxiety About China's Territorial Ambition of Central Asian Countries**

The development of China's BRI Project in Central Asia is part of a global strategy to establish security of resources and food. Through this effort, China will request more land and management rights for agricultural development and resource development. China is also likely to continue to use these projects as a 'release valve' for its own workforce.<sup>26</sup> If that happens, the movement of the Chinese labor force into Central Asia will have greater influence in the region. In particular, BRI projects in CAS are sometimes considered as a part of the 'colonial' operation by China. The type of operation is seen as a significant influence in the region, with the associated exploitation of land and labor migration.<sup>27</sup> An example of China combining development projects with border expansion is when the People's Liberation Army (PLA) utilized Chinese pre-invasion-built roads and infrastructure to support its military actions in Tibet.<sup>28</sup>

As a result of China's growing global influence, regional nations are worried China could change the border agreement signed in 1997.<sup>29</sup> Under the 1997 agreement, the Chinese cannot deploy new military units within the limits of a 10-kilometer-wide zone along the border. Currently, China is ignoring this part of the agreement, as many well-equipped PAP units are deploying along CAS borders. Employment of PAP is a violation of the 1997 agreement as it was placed under the control of the Central Military Committee in 2018.<sup>30</sup> This was done without a modification to the current border agreement. The number of PAP deploying, within the buffer zone, is unclear.

In recent years, tension has increased in US-China relations fueled by the growing competition and the salient normative divergence between the Chinese politico-economic systems and their Western counterparts. However, the Chinese government's international standing has plummeted during the

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<sup>24</sup> Assel Bitabarova, "Contested Views of Contested Territories" 2015, [https://eprints.lib.hokudai.ac.jp/dspace/bitstream/2115/60806/1/EBR6\\_1\\_004.pdf](https://eprints.lib.hokudai.ac.jp/dspace/bitstream/2115/60806/1/EBR6_1_004.pdf) (accessed Aug 16, 2020)

<sup>25</sup> United States. "Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2020 Annual Report to Congress." Office of the Secretary of Defense, Sep 1 2020, <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Sep/01/2002488689/-1/-1/2020-DOD-CHINA-MILITARY-POWER-REPORT-FINAL.PDF> (accessed Aug 16, 2020)

<sup>26</sup> Philip S. Davidson, "Central Asian countries regret allowing PRC infrastructure investments" ,IPDForum, November 08, 2019, <https://ipdefenseforum.com/2019/11/central-asian-countries-regret-allowing-prc-infrastructure-investments/>

<sup>27</sup> Dr. David F. Gordon, "China's BRI: The Development-Finance Dimension" ,IISS RESEARCH REPORT, 30th March 2020 , <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/research-paper/2020/03/beyond-the-myths-of-the-bri> (accessed Aug 16, 2020)

<sup>28</sup> Ross Babbage, "Which Way the Dragon? Sharpening Allied Perceptions of China's Strategic Trajectory" , August 6, 2020, <https://csbaonline.org/research/publications/which-way-the-dragon-sharpening-allied-perceptions-of-chinas-strategic-trajectory> (accessed Aug 16, 2020)

<sup>29</sup> Philip S. Davidson, "Central Asian countries regret allowing PRC infrastructure investments" ,IPDForum, November 08, 2019, <https://ipdefenseforum.com/2019/11/central-asian-countries-regret-allowing-prc-infrastructure-investments/>

<sup>30</sup> Liu Zhen "China's armed police sees leadership overhaul under reform designed to tighten Communist Party control" [China's armed police sees leadership overhaul under reform designed to tighten Communist Party control | South China Morning Post \(scmp.com\)](https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/2020/08/16/china-armed-police-sees-leadership-overhaul-under-reform-designed-to-tighten-communist-party-control) (accessed Aug 16, 2020)

COVID-19 pandemic and public opinion about China has decreased in Western countries.<sup>31</sup> The Chinese government recognizes its position in an increasingly hostile international environment. In order for CCP to increase its appeal to their citizens, and raise China's state-encouraged nationalism to a new high, Chinese diplomacy has taken on unprecedented assertiveness over territorial issues with neighboring countries.

Recently, Chinese chauvinism has driven territorial claims against Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The CCP is focusing on influencing public opinion through the Social Networking Service (SNS).<sup>32</sup> This was reflected in intense propaganda campaigns and strong nationalist messaging aimed primarily at the Chinese public and immigrants in Central Asia. Beijing periodically uses nationalist propaganda to increase pressure on countries that fail to act in accordance with CPP wishes. If the challenges confronting the Chinese regime develop further, it will seek to rally the country by amplifying its nationalistic rhetoric and adopting an even higher aggressive posture. The growing likelihood of such behaviors is observable already. In January 2021, the Chinese government actually strengthened its defense laws. Under the new defense laws, if China's overseas "development interests," are threatened they can use military force. This includes mobilization of Chinese nationals already residing in the threatened area, to protect it.<sup>33</sup>

In China's 2019 Defense paper, priorities included the unification of Taiwan and investing in the development of their status as a maritime power. Moreover, Xi Jinping declares that China and the US share the Pacific Ocean. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, many of China's goals for 2049 have been brought forward to 2035.<sup>34</sup> It seems the PLA may have set a new timeline to gain military power equivalency to U.S. forces in Asia's western Pacific region by 2027, with a secondary goal of taking over the Indo-Pacific region by approximately 2030. If China achieves the prementioned goals, or cannot make further advances in the maritime Indo-Pacific, Xi Jinping will refocus his external attention. Xi Jinping will likely make his new focus China's land borders and security progress in CAS along with shifting the PLA's advancing direction into "go west."<sup>35</sup>

## Conclusion

Despite political, economic and security ties, CAS views China as having a low level of reliability. China's recent aggressive policies toward its neighbors are rooted in radical nationalism (chauvinism). These policies combined with the increasing opaque defense spending, and amended Defense Laws reinforce a negative perception of China. Once China achieves its objectives in the Pacific area, Xi Jinping is likely to refocus his attention on China's land borders and countering any resistance in the CAS. China

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<sup>31</sup> Hongying Wang, "The Global Pandemic and China's Relations with the Western World." CIGI, July 22 2020 <https://www.cigionline.org/articles/global-pandemic-and-chinas-relations-western-world> (accessed Aug 16, 2020)

<sup>32</sup> Devin Stewart "China's Influence in Japan", CSIS ,20 July 2020 [https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/200722\\_Stewart\\_GEC\\_FINAL\\_v2%20UPDATED.pdf](https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/200722_Stewart_GEC_FINAL_v2%20UPDATED.pdf) (accessed Aug 16, 2020)

<sup>33</sup> JOHN FENG, "New China Defense Law Could 'Justify' PLA Action Against U.S.," NEWSWEEK, Jan 13 2021, <https://www.newsweek.com/new-china-defense-law-justify-pla-action-against-us-think-tank-1561146>

<sup>34</sup> Katusji NAKAZAWA, "Xi floats 2027 as new milestone year" NIKKEI ASIA Dec 10 2020, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Editor-s-Picks/China-up-close/Analysis-Xi-floats-2027-as-new-milestone-year> (accessed Jan 16, 2021)

<sup>35</sup> Toshi Yoshihara, "Which Way the Dragon?" CSBA, August 6, 2020, <https://csbaonline.org/research/publications/which-way-the-dragon-sharpening-allied-perceptions-of-chinas-strategic-trajectory> (accessed Aug 16, 2020)

will continue with its regional and global strategies to achieve its goal of being the predominant world power.

**Recommendations for US/USCENTCOM:**

- Conduct Regional Cooperation exercises with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan with a scenario that assumes China's "unrestricted warfare" and "militarized PAP."
- Invite US Allies with a strategic interest in CAS to Steppe Eagle training and the State Partnership Program.
- Promote US partnerships with CAS as alternatives to those with China.
- Closely monitor the deployment of PAP and announce when China fails to comply with agreements.
- Monitor the propaganda among the Chinese immigrants in Central Asia and rising nationalism (chauvinism) among the Chinese population.
- Invite Taiwanese and Vietnamese Officers with experience and knowledge about China's political influence operations and hybrid warfare to Combined Strategic Analysis Group, CCJ5.