



Faculty of Human and Social Sciences

Degree in International Relations

Final Degree Thesis

Triangular Dynamics at Xinjiang's Crossroads: The Interplay
between Chinese Foreign Policy and Central Asian Relations

The Voting Pattern on the discussion of The OHCHR Report on XUAR

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ABSTRACT

The People's Republic of China's security policies in Central Asia are inherently guided by domestic pressures and security concerns over separatism in the neighboring Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR). The Former Soviet Union (FSU) states - Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan - are deemed by Beijing as *strategic rear* as problems in the region could bleed into Xinjiang, ergo threatening China's vital interest of security: territorial integrity. Thus, China's engagement with the Central Asian Republics serves as a means to secure Xinjiang against Uyghur separatism by leveraging its security ties, such as with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). In doing so China creates a regional insurance to safeguard its territorial integrity, ensuring that regional governments do not support separatist movements in Xinjiang to the detriment of their relationship with China. Such was reflected by the CAR's voting against the discussion of the OHCHR Assessment on human rights concerns in Xinjiang in 2022. Ultimately, the silence of Central Asia on the Xinjiang issue stems from interdependency and triangular dynamics between China, Central Asia, and Xinjiang, which serve as the crossroads and *flashpoint* of the region.

Keywords: Xinjiang, China, Central Asia, foreign policy, security, geopolitics.

RESUMEN

Las políticas de seguridad de China en Asia Central están impulsadas por la preocupación interna y la necesidad de abordar el separatismo en la Región Autónoma Uigur de Xinjiang (XUAR). Beijing ve a los estados de la antigua Unión Soviética en Asia Central, como Kazajstán, Kirguistán, Tayikistán, Turkmenistán y Uzbekistán, como una zona estratégica para proteger la integridad territorial de China. El acercamiento de China a las repúblicas centroasiáticas sirve como medio para garantizar la seguridad de Xinjiang frente al separatismo uigur sirviéndose de sus lazos de seguridad, como la Organización de Cooperación de Shanghai. De este modo, China crea un seguro regional para salvaguardar su integridad territorial, garantizando que los gobiernos regionales no apoyen los movimientos separatistas de Xinjiang en detrimento de su relación con China. Este enfoque se reflejó en la votación en contra de las repúblicas centroasiáticas para discutir la Evaluación de la OACNUDH sobre los problemas de derechos humanos en Xinjiang en 2022. El silencio de Asia Central sobre la cuestión de Xinjiang se debe a la dinámica triangular entre China, Asia Central y Xinjiang, que es la encrucijada y el punto álgido de la región.

Palabras clave: Xinjiang, China, Asia Central, política exterior, seguridad, geopolítica.

Abbreviations

BRI: Belt and Road Initiative

CAR: Central Asian Republics

CCP: Chinese Communist Party

FSU: Former Soviet Union

HRC: Human Rights Council

OHCHR: Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights

PRC: People's Republic of China

SCO: Shanghai Cooperation Organization

XUAR: Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region

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I. Introduction

1.1. Background on the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region and its importance to China

The Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) of the People's Republic of China (PRC) is deemed by Beijing to be of utmost importance owing to its proximity with Central Asia Republics (CAR) (former Soviet Union (FSU) States, “stan” states). Xinjiang, China's most significant political unit, is the country's largest land barrier bordering eight countries that are key in the PRC's geopolitical and security policies: India, Pakistan, Russia, Mongolia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Kyrgyzstan (Falkenheim et al., 2023) [See Annex 1 & 2]. Thus, due to its geographic location, Xinjiang offers Beijing access to land routes, trade exchanges, and potential political alliances. Indeed, Xinjiang's location is particularly relevant in the Belt and Road Initiative context, which seeks to enhance connectivity and cooperation between countries along ancient trade routes [See Annex 3](Maya & Morúa, 2022).

Moreover, the region is home to abundant natural resources, with 33% of China's proven oil reserves located in Xinjiang and potential quantities of crude oil yet to be discovered (Seo & Cho, 2013, p. 307). The Tarim Basin in Xinjiang is home to China's significant petroleum reserves that remain largely untapped (Harris, 1993). In addition, Xinjiang is China's largest natural gas producer, contributing 30% of the national production. In 2013, the region was expected to be the largest coal producer, accounting for 20% of the total production (Seo & Cho, 2013, p. 307). The XUAR has a significant role in power generation in China, providing 300 billion kWh of electricity to other parts of the country in the last decade. It also has a significant capacity for wind power, a key component of China's push toward renewable energy. The installed energy capacity of Xinjiang currently stands at 92,432 billion kilowatts, making it one of the country's most significant contributors to new energy (Xinhua Español, 2020). Given China's need for energy security, Xinjiang's significance becomes even more pronounced. The region is a critical conduit for pipelines transporting oil and gas from Russia, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan, making it a key hub for China's energy needs (Seo & Cho, 2013, p. 307). Furthermore, Xinjiang is home to one of China's most important nuclear test sites, the Lop Nur Test Site (Cunningham, 2012, p. 16). This, combined with the region's

strategic location and abundant mineral and hydrocarbon resources, make it a crucial area for China's central government.

However, despite sitting over a host of resource wealth, Xinjiang, representing one-sixth of the country's geographical territory, was the poorest of the provinces (Shukla, 2022). Policies and initiatives to encourage economic development and reorient investment in the region only stem from one security strategy: to ensure control over one of China's most ethnically diverse provinces and therefore secure that the CCP's governance over the province remains a "wholly internal one" (Blank, 2007, p.130). Xinjiang is home to more than 50 ethnic minority groups (Bhaya, 2021), with Muslim Uyghur being the largest group. Effectively, CCP's "Go West" campaign follows Mao Zedong's assertion, "We say China is a country vast in territory, rich in resources and large in population; as a matter of fact, it is the Han nationality whose population is large, and the minority nationalities whose territory is vast and whose resources are rich, or at least in all probability their resources under the soil are rich" (Zedong, 1981). Such a contention is a reflection of China's twofold challenge in Xinjiang. On the one hand, it offers Beijing economic development and growth. On the other hand, it represents a threat to CCP's authoritarian one-party rule and its nationalization and modernization project: "the homogenization of the majority at the expense of the exoticized minority" (Gladney 1994, p. 95, as cited in Blank, 2007, p. 132; Nathan & Scobell, 2012, p. 204).

Indeed, the CCP maintained in the 2003 White Paper that China's mission in Xinjiang, an integral part of China since ancient times, is primarily civilizing, albeit one that has intermittently been hindered by backward tribespeople, separatists, and imperialists (Blank, 2007, p. 131). As such, Beijing has framed control over the region since the 1990s as promoting Xinjiang's full and equal participation in larger China, hence its assimilation into Chinese society, economy, and polity (Blank, 2007, p. 140). The strategy of control to placate the region's non-Han ethnic groups is grounded on accelerating economic growth, only as security and control are maintained in the authorities' view (Clarke, 2010, p. 3). Nonetheless, this economic development has, in turn, potentially exacerbated the Uyghurs' "sense of disenfranchisement" while concurrently fueling resentment among the Han Chinese populace towards the government's perceived preferential treatment of ethnic minorities (Clarke, 2010, p. 3; Nathan & Scobell, 2012, p. 204). This inevitably increases inter-ethnic tensions that could spill over Central Asia, which shares ethnocultural similarities with Xinjiang. Therein

lies China's rationale for its foreign policies towards the CAR: to eliminate "any internal or external threat to Chinese control over the territory of Xinjiang and hence to Chinese sovereignty and integrity" (Fuller and Starr, 2003, pp. 30-1, as cited in Blank, 2007, p. 140). Ultimately, Xinjiang is the meeting point, the crossroads, in Central Asia-China dynamics, creating a triangular relationship between the three.

As Stephen Blank (2007) argues, the issue in Xinjiang resembles that of other dissatisfied regions in a multiethnic state with a persistent imperial agenda. Michale Clarke (2010, p.5) from the Griffith Asia Institute contends that notwithstanding China's contemporary claim on Xinjiang as "an inseparable part of the unitary multiethnic Chinese nation' since the Han dynasty (206 BCE–24CE)", the region's geopolitical position as a "Eurasian crossroad" and the dominance of Turkic and Mongol cultures have resulted in intermittent periods of Chinese control (Clarke, 2010, p.5). In effect, during the period spanning from the 19th to the mid-20th century, there were several instances of uprisings and movements for independence by the Turkic-Muslim communities in Xinjiang, often with significant external influence from Central Asia and the Soviet Union (Clarke, 2010, p.5). Due to such a history, the CCP legitimizes its policies over Xinjiang in its leeway to enact counter-terrorism measures against Uyghur violent separatism in the region, such as the alleged re-education camps first emerging in 2014 further expanded in 2017 (Shukla, 2022). The CCP wants control over the region against Muslim extremism and separatism that could bleed into Central Asia, hindering regional security and gaining influence and support from Central Asia, thereby threatening its territorial integrity. Likewise, Xinjiang sits at the meeting point of this triangular relation because the region has historically served as a security "buffer zone" for "China Proper" against external threats (Tukmadiyeva, 2013, p.92).

1.2. Purpose and Motives

In the past decades, the XUAR has attracted international attention, particularly concerning claims of human rights violations against the Uyghur community. The securitization policies of China's Central Government in Xinjiang have been contested and denounced by human rights groups such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, religious groups, governments, and individuals, particularly from the Western world. These policies have escalated since Xi Jinping's coming to power. They are framed as a matter of the PRC's 'sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity' and of its internal affairs and do not

allow for any foreign interference. The initial impetus for this thesis arose when in August of 2022, the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights published a report on the Assessment of human rights concerns in the XUAR, the PRC, by which UN experts endorsed the implementation of the recommendations, urging for a further discussion in the Human Rights Council (HRC). The OHCHR report concluded that

“the extent of arbitrary and discriminatory detention of members of Uyghur and other predominantly Muslim minorities ... may constitute international crimes, particularly crimes against humanity” (OHCHR, 2022a, VIII. Overall assessment and recommendations, para. 148).

However, the Council dismissed the draft decision by voting 17 in favor, 19 against, and 11 abstentions (OHCHR, 2022b). None of the CAR who share ethnic and cultural ties with Xinjiang nor the Muslim-majority countries voted in favor of the decision. That is, they refused to vote against China. This decision reflects the triangular interplay between China and Central Asia, with Xinjiang as the flashpoint. Such logic stems from the argument that China’s Northwest region’s stability is closely bound to Central Asia's stability. Consequently, this thesis aims to unravel the elements of this triangular dynamics to build on the literature and research on the subject in order to fill the vacuum of recent research pertinent to the interaction and engagement between China and Central Asia regarding Xinjiang. Nonetheless, it must be noted that the purpose of this thesis is not to validate or substantiate the claims and recommendations made by the Report and, on the other hand, the PRC’s response to such a report. The only objective of this dissertation pertains to the interplay of the triangular dimension of Central Asia - Xinjiang - China.

The motive to unravel the intricacies of China’s relationship with its western neighbors stems, namely, from my specialization in security studies and, specifically, the Asian region. Particularly, Andrew J. Nathan and Andrew Scobell’s book *China’s Search for Security* (2012) ignited in me a couple of years ago a deep interest on China, the evolution of the country, and most importantly, the PRC’s ‘problems of stateness’ as portrayed in Chapter 8 of the book. Nathan and Scobell’s book drew from *The Great Wall and the Empty Fortress* (1997) by Robert S. Ross who was my East Asian Security Professor in my exchange semester at Boston College. I had previously applied Nathan and Scobell lessons to my studies and previous works, but while I had decided to focus on rather smaller Taiwan and

Hong Kong, unintentionally I had ignored large Xinjiang as another of China's Achilles heels. Similarly, while there has been thorough research in the region, especially in the early 2000s, there is a void in analysis and scrutiny of how geopolitics and the interplay between the CAR and China have evolved most recently. With increasing control and hardening of politics with Xi Jinping's government, special attention is owed to what role Xinjiang plays in this triangular dynamics. Thus, I decided to redirect the focus to, in the words of Mackinder, the Heartland, and delve into a region with great power-dynamics significance because, as Makinder's famous dictum states, "who rules East Europe commands the Heartland; who rules the Heartland, commands the World-Island; who rules the World-Island commands the World" (Mackinder 1942, pg. 28).

II. State of the Art

2.1. History of China's relationship with Central Asia

Wu Xinbo, Dean at the Institute of International Studies at Fudan University, is adamant that "China is still a country whose real interests lie mainly within its boundaries" (Wu, 2004, p.58). Any choice of policy still follows a careful directive and driver: to protect China Proper and ensure the government's power. What drives China's policy and development in Central Asia aligns with Beijing's interests. Due to its location, Xinjiang inevitably adopts the role of "conductor" for Chinese policies in the region, in the words of George Washington's University's Malika Tukmadiyeva (2013, p.105). This "conductor" type of role is multifaceted, as the Introduction has alluded to, but its major function has historically been and continues to be a "buffer zone" that protects "China Proper" (Tukmadiyeva, 2013, p.105). Throughout history, China has considered buffer zones, areas that provide a geographical or political barrier between a state and potential threats to be critical to its national security and territorial integrity. Regions such as Xinjiang, Tibet, and Inner Mongolia have served as buffer zones for China throughout its history, providing a layer of protection and strategic depth crucial in safeguarding the heartland - China Proper - from external threats, including invasion or rebellion. Edwin E. Moise identifies, in *China: A Modern History* (2013), China Proper as the core region of the Chinese Empire whose civilization reached the highest levels of development. Xinjiang, along with Manchuria - northeast China -, Mongolia, and Tibet, were referred to as Outer China (Worden et al., 1988, p. 699).

Although the concept of China Proper and Outer China might be more pertaining to the Manchu and Qing periods, they illustrate how provinces and regions such as Xinjiang were strategic in protecting the core and heartland of China. Particularly, Xinjiang serves as a buffer zone from what was the Soviet Union and today is Central Asia. However, it should be borne in mind that, as Lilian Harris points out, “ironically, instability in the buffer zone itself has often drained China’s resources or threatened China with contagion or conquest” (Harris, 1993, p. 115). Indeed, Xinjiang witnessed a series of instability episodes during the Soviet Union, such as the “Yi-Ta Incident” in 1962 (also known as the Yili-Tacheng Incident or Ili-Qoqek Incident), which resulted in the exodus of 60,000 Kazakhs and Uyghurs from Xinjiang in China’s northwest to the Soviet Union (Wilson Center Digital Archive, n.d.). Moreover, “in the wide sweep of Chinese history, the regional system that has posed the greatest challenge for successive rulers has been Central Asia” (Nathan and Scobell, 2012, p. 164). Effectively, Central Asia, which shares a border of 3,000 kilometers with Xinjiang, is a critical region that requires Beijing’s continuous attention and upkeep (Yau, 2022b). This is necessary to prevent the emergence of any cross-border sympathizers who may oppose China’s extreme policies in Xinjiang (Yau, 2022b).

After the fall of the Soviet Union, China had to grapple with a new reality: managing relationships with a host of independent states to its west instead of dealing with a single superpower (Tukmadiyeva, 2013, p.87). As Nathan and Scobell assert, “this post-Cold War threat was something novel: not one overly strong neighbor bent on military invasion, but several overly weak neighbors that might incubate cross-border ethnic movements that would destabilize Xinjiang” (Nathan and Scobell, 2012, p. 164). With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the longstanding competition between China and Russia for Xinjiang and the loyalty of its mainly Uyghur population came to an end (Kassenova, 2022, p.11). The fear of Soviet interference and propaganda targeting the Uyghur community was eliminated, and previously restricted economic ties across the international border were now feasible (Kassenova, 2022, p.11). In fact, amidst the Sino-Soviet split spanning the 1960s and 1970s, China’s northern and western frontiers were tense and militarized. It was only in the late 1980s that both sides of the border witnessed troop reductions (Nathan and Scobell, 2012, p. 164). As a result, Central Asia’s strategic location between Russia and radical Islamic countries like Afghanistan and Iran now plays the role of a buffer zone and a safety net for China’s security concerns (Pradhan, 2017, p.57). However, Chinese narratives often allude to ethnic unrest

and separatism in the terrain west of Xinjiang as one impetus for the collapse of the Soviet Union (Vassallo, 2021). Effectively, in the 1970s, “Central Asia was a hotbed for the kinds of separatism that would ultimately dismantle Soviet imperial rule there” (Vassallo, 2021). For Xi Jinping “similarities between Chinese and Soviet ethnic policy risked a disastrous splintering of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) authority in the region” (Vassallo, 2021). Thus, the PRC had to learn to navigate the unpredictable and unfamiliar territory of Central Asia to its west, along with the potential spillover effects of “regional Islamic and Pan-Turkic resurgence” into the separatist Xinjiang province (Tukmadiyeva, 2013, p.87).

The potential for Muslim autonomy in adjacent Central Asia has drawn the attention of dissidents, prompting China to invest in Xinjiang to foster economic interdependence with Central Asia (Blank, 2007, p.138). As Stephen Blank (2007) argues, this dependence is then used as leverage to dissuade Central Asian states from supporting insurgency. Additionally, China must prevent any suggestion of democratic reform or Western influence in Central Asia, often seeking the aid of Russia, which shares similar concerns about Islamic activism (Blank, 2007, p.138). Beijing has shown its approval and assistance towards the independence of Central Asian states, as it eliminates any potential for Russia to threaten Xinjiang, which it had done in the past (Singh, 2000, as cited in Blank, 2007, p.136). Nonetheless, one of the PRC’s ongoing concerns has been that the impact or model of Russian democratic reform during the 1990s in Central Asia might lead the region towards a pro-Western and pro-reform perspective on China’s domestic changes, with repercussions for Xinjiang and China as a whole (Blank, 2007, p.136). On the other hand, with Xinjiang as a gateway to assert its influence in Central Asia and the Middle East, China’s regional dominance is significantly reinforced by its position as a Central Asian power (Harris, 1993, p.116).

Sally N. Cummings (2012, p. 31) highlights that Central Asia “suffers from every geographical liability but enjoys one asset: its central position between the homelands of Europe, Iran, India, and China.” Hence Mackinder’s famous Heartland thesis on what he referred to as “‘half of all the land on the globe’ (Mackinder 1942, p.50, as cited in Cummings, 2012, p.28). Since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, Central Asia has gained prominence, and if Central Asia provides “reliable strategic ballast for Northwest China, then, given Central Asia’s natural wealth, it becomes a potential stimulus to the economic development and prosperity of a vital but vulnerable part of China” (Legvold, 2003, p.17, as

cited in Blank, 2007, p.136). In truth, scholars such as Swanström (2010) when analyzing security threats identify Central Asia to include “the former Soviet republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, as well as Afghanistan and the Western Chinese Xinjiang-Uyghur Autonomous Province” (Cummings, 2012, p. 31). Indeed, in 2010, renowned Chairman of the PRC and general of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF), Liu Yazhou stated that the grouping of Xinjiang with Central Asia was a “rich piece of cake given to today’s Chinese people by Heaven” (Yazhou, 2010, as cited in Pantucci, 2022). Central Asia holds symbolic value for the PRC as the CAR share commonalities in culture, history, ethnicity and language with Xinjiang, especially Kazakhstan with Kazakh ethnicity representing the third largest group inhabiting Xinjiang (Pradhan, 2017, p.54). These commonalities propell separatist movements to arise in the province of Xinjiang as they are “keen to join the Central Asia mainstream” (Pradhan, 2017, p.54).

Central Asia is regarded as significant due to its strategic position, which enables it to serve the interests of major powers in areas beyond its own sphere of influence. Thus, in the context of Great Powers, a Great Game is established whereby the prize is “no longer territorial possession, but access to Central Asia’s markets and resources and to ‘a form of neo-imperialist hegemony’” (Edwards, 2003, p.89, as cited in Cummings, 2012, p.30). China seeks to win such a Great Game and prevent ‘U.S. encirclement’ as a means to create a “bloc in Central Asia to forestall any (prolonged) appearance of U.S. military bases” or an “Asian NATO” (Kellner, 2002, p.11, as cited in Blank, 2007, p.134). In the chessboard of the ‘Great Game’ China seeks to create “a friendly and secure belt of states around the Xinjiang region” (Pradhan, 2017, p.55). Consequently, China has forged strategic partnerships with the CAR looking to increase its presence in the region. This idea of economic development was emphasized under the “go west” campaign, implemented through the “double-opening” strategy, which involved the economic opening up of Xinjiang to both the Chinese mainland and Central Asia (Shukla, 2022). In turn, the CAR have also strategically played the “Chinese card” in order to balance Russia, the United States and other powers (Aben, 2019). Ultimately, “each benefit from the legitimacy extended by others and from cooperation against domestic opponents and foreign critics” (Nathan & Scobell, 2012, p.165).

2.1.1. Economic Cooperation

Over the past three decades since establishing diplomatic relations, China's trade with the five Central Asian countries has increased over 100-fold, reaching a trade volume of more than \$40 billion (Global Times, 2022). This surge in economic exchange, along with China's direct investment of over \$14 billion in the region, highlights the growing economic ties between China and Central Asia (Global Times, 2022). To put this into perspective, in 1992, the total value of China's trade with these countries amounted to a mere \$460 million (Global Times, 2022). Since then, the relationship has flourished and deepened, exemplifying China's increasing influence in Central Asia. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a prime example of this strategic partnership for development which was announced in 2013 by Xi Jinping in Kazakhstan (Jiang, 2022). This infrastructure and connectivity initiative is not new to Central Asia, rather the Belt and Road Initiative is an attempt to revive the historical Eurasian Silk Road to reconnect Europe with Asia and Africa through the use of modern transportation (Pradhan, 2012, p.51). All five CAR in the region are participants of the BRI and amongst the primary recipients of assistance from China (Kassenova, 2022, p.11).

As early as 2010, China overtook Europe as the largest trading partner of Central Asia (Jiang, 2022). From 2013 to 2018, Asia received approximately 37% of China's total aid (The State Council Information Office of the PRC, 2021, as cited in Kassenova, 2022, p.10). Kyrgyzstan received a credit of \$7.4 million in 1994 and an additional \$14.7 million in 1998, while Uzbekistan secured a loan of \$600 million in 2005 (Wani, 2022). In 2009, China granted a \$10 billion loan for an oil agreement with Kazakhstan and extended another \$10 billion loan to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) to support its struggling economies (Wani, 2022). Similarly, in 2011, Beijing approved a \$4.1 billion loan to Turkmenistan (Wani, 2022). Furthermore, China will provide \$500 million in grants to Central Asian countries within the next three years and 50 million more doses of Chinese-made vaccines this year (Kumenov, 2022).

The Kazakhstan-China oil pipeline spans an impressive 2,798 kilometers, delivering crude oil from fields located along the Caspian shore in western Kazakhstan to Alashankou in China's Xinjiang Province (Jiang, 2022). The pipeline not only transports oil from Kazakhstan but also transits oil from Russia via a connection to the Russia-Kazakhstan-Turkmenistan pipeline. Constructed by a joint-venture company established based on agreements between

the Chinese and Kazakh governments in 2004, the pipeline has delivered more than 100 million tons of oil from Kazakhstan to China since its launch in 2009 (Jiang, 2022). It represents the first direct transnational China-Central Asia gas pipeline delivering over 334 billion cubic meters of natural gas from Turkmenistan's Galkynysh gas deposit via Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan to China (Jiang, 2022). Although the construction of Line D of the pipeline had been stagnated, it recently received a boost from the two governments during the launch of a new gas gathering station in Gadyń in June 2022 (Jiang, 2022). This pipeline project has not only facilitated the transport of vital resources between Central Asia and China but has also strengthened their economic ties.

In the wake of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, China has forged stronger economic ties with Central Asian countries, signaling its expanding influence in the region (Arduino, 2022; Jiang, 2022; Sharifli, 2023). The significant growth in China's trade with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, which was three times higher and 32.5% higher, respectively, in the first half of 2022 compared to previous years, is a clear indication of China's growing economic clout in the region (Sharifli, 2023). China's investment in critical infrastructure projects in Central Asia, such as the \$15 billion agreement with Uzbekistan and the construction of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway, further highlights its rising economic influence (Sharifli, 2023).

Ultimately, the foreign aid the PRC is exercising in the region follows a narrative of "gift giving" drawing on "the Chinese nation's ideal of universal harmony" (Kassenova, 2022). Despite such rhetoric, the undeniable reality is that this assistance carefully follows a hierarchical system where China is the dominant power and benefactor (Kassenova, 2022). China's foreign aid assists in addressing inadequacies in governance of the CAR, enhancing their standing among their populace, and strengthening their own prospects and well-being (Kassenova, 2022). This cooperation may be limited because the CAR are unable to hold their end-of-the cooperation and match Chinese assistance. Nonetheless, their contribution is of great value to Beijing as they return the assistance by supporting China's political objectives, such as upholding the One China principle and pledging to combat ethnic separatism, religious extremism, and terrorism (Kassenova, 2022).

2.1.2. Security Cooperation

I. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization

The cooperation between China and the CAR is multifaceted and greatly driven by economic incentives. Nonetheless, “if the imperatives of economic development clash with those of maintaining power and/or the integrity of China then those other imperatives will probably prevail.” (Blank, 2007, p.127). Indeed, Jiang Zemin advocated that foreign policies - such as with the CAR - should be guided by the principle of safeguarding sovereignty security (Wang, 2003, p.347, as cited in Blank, 2007, p.127). And as Cummings (2012) explains “Beijing is often seen to be promoting its national security aims through the promotion of multilateral security” (pg. 31). The epitome of this multilateral security lies on the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) established in 2001 which comprises Russia, India, Pakistan and the CAR (Gorst, 2007; Blank, 2007; Clarke, 2010; Tukmadiyeva, 2013; Feng, 2018; Wani, 2022). The SCO’s broad geographic coverage, spanning 26.6% of the Earth’s total area, and vast population, representing 44% of the world, positions it as a critical player in international affairs, transcending its importance in Eurasian affairs (Muratbekova, 2019). As Nathan and Scobell argue “The SCO has paid dividends for China”, namely by focusing “the attention of Central Asian States on preventing threats to Chinese control of Xinjiang, a policy that is also in their interests because these weak states are also subject to threats from ethnic minorities and Islamist movements” (Nathan & Scobell, 2012, p.165).

Following various violent incidents in volatile Xinjiang and the 9/11 attacks, China was able to capitalize on the international situation and redefine its policy on the Uighur issue. Effectively, in a telephone conversation with the Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov on October 10th [2011], China’s Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan asserted that his country was also a victim of terrorism at the hands of Uighur separatists (Dillion, 2002, as cited in Tukmadiyeva, 2013, p. 93). To implement counter-terrorism measures and bolster security along the border between Central Asia and China, the PRC established a “regional security initiative” with three CAR under the Shanghai Five in 1996, including China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan– that became the predecessor to the 2001-Shanghai Cooperation Organization (Gorst, 2007; Shukla, 2022). The ruling elites of the CAR were aligned with Beijing's efforts to combat the three evils “ethnic separatism, religious extremism, and terrorism,” (Tukmadiyeva, 2013; Feng, 2018; Shukla, 2022; Arduino, 2022)

which became the central agenda of the Shanghai Five group of countries (Kassenova, 2022). In 2001, with the inclusion of Uzbekistan the Shanghai Five group underwent a renaming process and emerged as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (Kassenova, 2022). The Shanghai Five, ultimately, laid the foundation for a collective security agreement in the region (Shukla, 2022). In effect, with the CAR, China conducted its first joint exercise with another country on foreign soil and its first multinational military exercise on Chinese territory in 2002 and 2003 (Nathan & Scobell, 2012, p. 165). These consisted of bilateral counterterrorism exercises with Chinese and Kyrgyz soldiers under Russian, Kazakh, and Tajik observers (Nathan & Scobell, 2012, p. 165).

China has leveraged its increasing strategic and economic influence in Central Asia to garner the support of the governments of the Central Asian nations, both through bilateral and multilateral engagement via the SCO, towards its stance on the Xinjiang and Uyghur issue (Clarke, 2010, p. 98). Certainly, the CAR have aided President Xi Jinping in defending his policies concerning Xinjiang and other minority regions during international forums (Wani, 2022). Abigail Grace, a research associate at the Center for New American Security, a think-tank in Washington, voiced that “what undergirded the organization’s relationship was a fixation on China seeking opportunities to ensure that Central Asia states were enlisted in its own goals in controlling Uighur activity,” (as cited in Feng, 2018). Effectively, one of Beijing’s major concerns has been and continues to be the threat that the Uyghur issue represents, ergo the Uyghur diaspora of 1.m.-1.6m. which Grace explains has always been more present in Central Asia (Feng, 2018).

During the early stages of the SCO, the meetings were characterized by a ritualistic pattern. Whenever a Central Asian leader met with their Chinese counterpart, the former would issue a statement that emphasized the long-standing friendship between the two nations, reaffirmed their One China policy (framed as acknowledging Beijing’s One China principle), and expressed a shared commitment to combating terrorism and extremism, in addition to expressing appreciation for China’s financial and economic aid (Kassenova, 2022). The member states of the SCO reached several agreements on intelligence sharing, the denial of asylum, and extradition of individuals sought by other member states. In 2002, an anti-terrorism structure was established, which serves as a platform for the creation of blacklists and the exchange of intelligence (Nathan & Scobell, 2012, p. 165). Consistently, the 2009 updates to the anti-terrorism convention of the SCO enabled the transfer of suspects

and their extradition between member states and authorized the deployment of agents from one SCO state to another for investigative purposes (Feng, 2018). Chinese private security companies (PSCs) have been increasing their influence as a security alternative across Pakistan and Central Asia, particularly in situations where Beijing is hesitant to send the People's Liberation Army beyond its own borders (Arduino, 2022). These elevated their role, initially, as means of protecting Chinese personal and infrastructure along the BRI. And they continue to perform their role of ensuring CAR's compliance in regard to the Uyghur issue.

II. Terrorism Influence and Concerns

Beijing has historically sought and continues to seek the expansion of its security footprint in the region. Particularly, Central Asia is perceived to be interrelated with an extra-regional security threat: the unstable situation in Afghanistan (Aben, 2019). Indeed, the related challenge that may have potential security implications for China and Xinjiang, ergo Central Asia, is the returning Central Asian nationals from "hot spots" like Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, where they fought for ISIS and other extremist groups (Aben, 2019). Uran Botobekov (2016) wrote in the Diplomat that returning militants, even if they do not directly engage in hostilities with their home countries' authorities, have the potential to establish dormant cells that can be activated for terrorist activities at any given time. It is evident that such a phenomenon menaces Central Asia, but by the token of regional security, it also imperils China through fickle and mercurial Xinjiang where the PRC is already apprehensive about terrorism. Thus, in the CAR cooperation with China against terrorism, the CAR governments have categorized most Uyghur groups as terrorist organizations (Yau, 2022b). Likewise, Central Asia was the third-largest source of Salafi jihadists in Syria and Iraq (Aben, 2019). Moreover, according to a report by INSS in 2016, over 4,000 individuals from Central Asia who share the ideologies of ISIS, Al-Nusra Front, and other terrorist groups have enlisted in their forces since 2012 (INSS, 2016, as cited in Aben, 2019). A significant number of surviving fighters remain committed to spreading extremist ideologies and engaging in jihad within their own nations, albeit ISIS being largely suppressed. In fact, since the return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan, ISIS-K (Islamic State Khorasan) forces have directed their threats against "Chinese imperialism" in Central Asia (Aben, 2019; Escalonilla, 2022).

2.2. Prior research on the geopolitics of Central Asia and Xinjiang

A great aggregate of scholarly and academic research on the triangular interplay between Beijing, the CAR, and Xinjiang was published in the early 2000s and 2010s. The reason being the change in geopolitics of the region with the fall of the Soviet Union, the emergence of the CAR, and the new great game of politics to which China both wanted and needed to partake in. Subsequently, China's involvement in the region was due to a rise in separatist activities and attacks defined as terrorist in neighboring Xinjiang. James Millward (2004) from Georgetown University and the East-West Center Washington conducted a critical assessment on violent separatism in Xinjiang. Indeed, the author contended that Xinjiang was witnessing a terrorist crisis yet since the 1990s the threat greatly diminished, in contrast to the general exaggerated claims that it had escalated (Millward, 2004). Moreover, Millward (2004) identified that upon closer examination, the evidence presented in both media and official sources, that suggested the existence of an organized, unified, and violent Uyghur movement, is problematic, despite the catalog of incidents that appear to support it. Furthermore, with regards to Central Asia, the scholar (2004) presented numerous allegations of Uyghur involvement in terrorist activities in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan since 1998. These included the abduction of a Chinese businessman (2000), an assault on a Chinese delegation in Bishkek (2000), and the murder of a senior Chinese diplomat in the company of a Uyghur businessman and purportedly a stash of forged passports (2002). Millward argued that despite the government's frequent accusations against Uyghurs for committing these murders, as well as for bus bombings and bazaar fires, the reports were often inconsistent and lacked a convincing explanation for why Islamist Uyghur militants would target Uyghur merchants or leaders (Millward, 2004).

Within the literature review on the geopolitics of Central Asia and China, there exist notable scholars whose work has garnered significant recognition, offering valuable insights for the application to this dissertation. Namely, Stephen Blank (2007) whose main thesis contends that "an examination of China's Central Asian policies reveals that they are essentially external projections of Beijing's vital interest of internal security in neighboring Xinjiang". Thus, a meticulous examination of China's policies towards Central Asia indicates that these policies are interrelated with China's broader domestic and foreign policy strategies, the latter commonly known as the peripheral policy (Blank, 2007, p. 123). The scholar recollects arguments advanced by others to infer that if the states in Central Asia experience instability,

the resulting chaos could spill over into Xinjiang, and China's apprehension of terrorism justifies its acquiescence to this reasoning. Conversely, the success and stabilization of these countries would inevitably fuel stronger aspirations for self-governance in Xinjiang (Van Kemenade 1997, p.345; Harris, 1993, p.125; as cited in Blank 2007).

Malika Tukmadiyeva (2013) concurs with Blank's fundamental claim, asserting that the "aspiration to pacify the restive northwestern region of Xinjiang constitutes the key factor that defines Chinese government with and presence in Central Asia". Indeed, her work presents a literature critique from which it can be concluded that the imperative role of Central Asia in ensuring the stability, economic progress, and territorial integrity of China's Xinjiang region has led to China's strategic engagement with the region, driven mainly by internal security concerns (Zhao, 2007, as cited in Tukmadiyeva, 2013). Michael Clarke (2010), expert on the history and politics of the XUAR, has also greatly contributed to the subject matter. The Australian National University scholar's major premise is that "it has been Beijing's own approach to Xinjiang domestically and its handling of the Uyghur issue in its diplomacy that has contributed to the internationalization of the issue" (Clarke, 2010). Ann McMillan (2004), PhD Doctorate student from Griffith University also wrote on the interdependency in the Xinjiang-Central Asian region. Her key argument states that as an integral part of the rapidly developing region, China's XUAR holds immense importance not only for the growth of the Chinese economy but also for the interdependent relationship that is evolving with neighboring Central Asian countries (McMillan, 2004). Thus, she calls for a widened focus in the analysis of the region to include the CAR and warns that the failure of individual governments to address issues such as border demarcation and transboundary water diversion between China and its neighboring states due to concerns about upsetting China may result in simmering tensions that pose a threat to future regional stability (McMillan, 2004).

An in-depth examination of these arguments assists in establishing a comprehensive and critical framework for the hypothesis and research questions that are subsequently presented and analyzed in this dissertation.

III. Theoretical Framework

In quest of a theoretical framework to grasp the intricacies of China's relationship with the CAR as a bargaining chip for Xinjiang, it seems that realism - deeply affiliated with Kenneth Waltz, Hans Morgenthau, and John J. Mearsheimer - is endorsed as conventional wisdom. Therefore, the theory will be defined and analyzed to provide a framework from which to scrutinize the research questions and hypotheses proposed. Consequently, as realism emphasizes the importance of power, self-interest, and the struggle for security, a variety of key concepts must be delimited to specify the broadness of the theoretical framework within the subject matter. These key concepts are: *National interests, Power, State sovereignty, Balance of Power, Security, and Great Power Politics*. The analysis of the thesis will carefully fall under these concepts. Finally, it is also essential to unravel the concept of geopolitics and cooperation in order to make sense of the triangular dimension at play: China-Xinjiang-Central Asia. However, as Chinese policies in Central Asia are a reflection of its domestic policies and interests with Xinjiang, these definitions must be coupled with the explanation of *Innenpolitik*.

3.1. Realism

The International Relation Theory of Realism serves as a thorough analytical framework that sets out the drivers for Chinese policies both in Xinjiang and Central Asia. Realism encompasses several variations, but they typically exhibit a common set of fundamental characteristics. First and foremost, according to realists, states operate in an anarchic environment where the probability of war is real, and the risk of being subjected or annihilated must be taken into consideration. Realists believe that individuals possess political instincts and tend to form groups that discriminate against others and are often antagonistic. The unique features of national interests are largely due to the absence of a higher international authority, which creates an anarchic environment that threatens the nation's security. As security is a public good, it is typically underprovided by private actors, making it the state's responsibility to ensure its provision. Hence, most realists share the belief that fear is a basic motivation for behavior, and that security is a crucial and pressing desire. However, realist analysis must also be attentive to the balance of power as it shapes potential security threats (Kirshner, 2010).

China's policies, whether they pertain to Xinjiang and Central Asia, or their approach towards Hong Kong, Tibet, and Taiwan, as well as their competition with the United States, frequently align with realist principles. Indeed, according to realists like Hans Morgenthau and Kenneth Waltz, who argue that major powers compete for dominance in the anarchic international system, China's military expansion suggests a pursuit of hegemony (Balogun, 2016). The ascent of China has elicited apprehension in the Western world, particularly the United States, resulting in close scrutiny and monitoring of the PRC; nevertheless, China has consistently maintained that its growth embodies a "peace and development" ethos (Yang 2013, p.36, as cited in Balogun, 2016). Similarly, China has also been greatly criticized with regards to its human rights records, especially since the increase in numbers of Uyghur reeducation centers since 2017 in Xinjiang. The PRC's response to such criticism has been founded on a denunciation of western "double standards" and human rights politicization (Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the UN, 2022b). From a realist perspective, China's critique of Western countries' human rights records can be seen as an attempt to challenge the West's moral authority and legitimacy, and to position itself as a rising global power that is not beholden to Western norms and values. By rejecting Western demands for greater respect for human rights and political freedoms, China is seeking to uphold its own political order and to prevent Western interference in its domestic affairs. Furthermore, from a realist perspective, China's emphasis on state sovereignty and non-interference in other countries' internal affairs can be seen as a way to protect its own interests and maintain its own regime stability.

On the other hand, while most realists agree on the anarchic nature of the international system and the self-interested behavior of states, classical realists hold that a state's conduct is influenced by historical factors, fear, and uncertainty. According to scholars of classical realism, such as Edward H. Carr, politics, both domestic and international, as well as ideas, norms, and legitimacy, play a crucial role in shaping a state's behavior. In his article "The Tragedy of Offensive Realism: Classical Realism and the Rise of China," (2014) published in the *European Journal of International Relations*, Jonathan Kirshner (2010) argues that there is no convincing reason to believe that China, as a rational actor motivated by survival, would pursue hegemony.

With the case of Xinjiang-Central Asia, historical factors play a significant role in the region. Xinjiang has long been a site of ethnic and religious tensions, and the Chinese government

has historically viewed the region as a potential source of instability. In addition, China has historically sought to exert influence in Central Asia, given its strategic location and natural resources. This historical context has contributed to China's current policies in the region. Furthermore, fear and uncertainty also play a role in China's behavior. The Chinese government may fear the potential for Uyghur separatism in Xinjiang and view its policies as necessary to maintain stability and prevent the region from becoming a source of instability. China may also be uncertain about the intentions of other powers, such as the United States, in the region and, thus, pursues policies to protect its interests. Finally, domestic politics and ideology are also significant factors. The Chinese government is committed to maintaining stability and preventing separatism within its borders, and may view its policies in Xinjiang as necessary to achieve these goals. In addition, the government's emphasis on nationalism and the importance of the Chinese state, ultimately, shapes its approach to the region.

Neoclassical realism often begins with a fundamental yet sometimes overlooked concept that foreign policy, unlike in structural realism, is not simply a result of rational reactions from statesmen to outside factors, but rather a 'two-level game.' (Clarke, 2020, p.338). Eckhart Kehr (1977, p.23, as cited in Clarke, 2020, p.338) also noted that a foreign policy does not solely face an adversary, but also a homeland, which is primarily concerned with its own interests and needs. As a result, a state's foreign policy is not only centered on responding to adversaries but also balancing domestic considerations (Clarke, 2020, p.338). Regarding China's policies towards Xinjiang and Central Asia, the neoclassical realism perspective highlights the substantial influence of domestic considerations. The Chinese government seeks to uphold stability and thwart separatism within its boundaries, which accounts for its approach towards the Uyghur community in Xinjiang. Concurrently, China's priority on national sovereignty and territorial integrity might be impelling its approach to Central Asia, which China perceives as being within its ambit of influence.

Steve Tsang (2020), a political scientist and historian specializing in politics and governance in China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, as well as the foreign and security policies of China, advocates the adoption of a novel analytical framework called "party-state realism." This framework aims to provide a deeper understanding of how policymakers in the PRC approach foreign policy. The framework has four defining characteristics, listed in order of importance: prioritizing the Communist Party's interests in China's national interest calculation, adopting an instrumentalist approach based on this priority, adopting a

party-centric nationalism, and adhering to a neoclassical realist assessment of China's place and relative power in the international system (Tsang, 2020). The core factor is always putting the Communist Party's interests first in national interest, with changing international context and relative power becoming secondary. Such a theory is of value when analyzing the hypothesis put forth and the respective research questions. Tsang contends that despite Xi Jinping's statements that China should have a central role in global affairs given its consistent rise in power over the last two decades, the reality is that China remains hesitant to take leadership roles in global affairs that do not directly benefit Chinese interests, unlike other permanent members of the United Nations Security Council. This unique approach challenges mainstream international relations theories. In reality, Beijing employs a selective approach to the existing international system, supporting institutions that serve its interests, manipulating others for its own benefit, and undermining those that threaten its legitimacy (Friedberg, 2018, p.24-5, as cited in Tsang, 2020, p.304). Recognizing the limitations of mainstream theories, alternative explanations have been sought to understand China's foreign policy. Innenpolitik theories, which posit that internal factors like ideology and national character determine a country's behavior towards the rest of the world, offer a better fit for China's reality. However, on their own, they are not sufficient to explain China's foreign policy comprehensively. To understand China's actual foreign policy, one must prioritize regime security, which includes maintaining stability, upholding national security, and sustaining economic growth. When there is a conflict between the CPC's assessment of regime security and articulated foreign policy, regime security takes precedence (Tsang, 2020).

3.2. Realism Key Concepts

In this conception of realism, albeit different variants of it, it is crucial to delve on key concepts pertinent to the interplay of China-Xinjiang-Central Asia which are to be looked at through the lenses of realism. These offer insights into how the hypothesis and research questions will be addressed.

An exploration of the concept of *geopolitics* serves to provide an understanding of the underlying assumptions and premises of the subject matter at study. Hence, the thought of a prominent 20th century realist needs to be taken into account: Halford J. Mackinder. The preeminent figure in the field of political geography is widely recognized for his Heartland

thesis, which has been associated with environmental determinism. However, Mackinder's perspective on realism is more nuanced, blending geopolitical analysis with the influence of ideas on human behavior (Ashworth, 2010). He introduced the concept of organizer and idealist foreign policy ideal types, which predates Carr's realist-utopian dichotomy by 20 years (Ashworth, 2010). Mackinder's interpretation of international politics diverges from Morgenthau's realism. A thorough examination of Mackinder's realism reveals the connection between geopolitics and realist strategic studies, and illustrates the diversity of realist approaches in interwar international relations (Ashworth, 2010). Mackinder's thesis is particularly relevant to this study as his definition of 'the geographical pivot of history' - which was later renamed Heartland in 1919 - includes Central Asia. Mackinder's focus was not limited to Central Asia but rather on the uninterrupted landmass of Euro-Asia, which he described as comprising half of the world's landmass, excluding the Sahara and Arabian deserts (Cummings, 2013, p.28). The 'World Islam' was out of reach to sea power, yet those powers at the margins such as Russia succeeded in conquering the pivot area of Central Asia (Mackinder, 1904, pp.432-433, as cited in Ashworth, 2010). Furthermore, in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, there has been a notable resurgence in the prominence of Mackinder's concepts in both justifying and examining the contest for power and authority within the Eurasian "Heartland" (Patnaik, 2016). Geopolitics involves the categorization of the world into distinct regions that are deemed strategically significant based on factors such as their location, resource potential, and strategic significance (Patnaik, 2016). However, these geographical classifications are often constructed and utilized by powerful states as a means of justifying their interventions or actions in a particular region (Flint, 2006, as cited in Patnaik, 2016). China has justified its increasing involvement in Central Asia as a means of promoting regional stability and economic development, while also seeking to counter the influence of other major powers such as Russia and the United States. Similarly, China's policies towards Xinjiang, including its heavy-handed approach to security and its treatment of the Uighur minority, have been justified in part by the perceived threat of terrorism and separatism in the region.

The concept of *geopolitics* prompts an examination of the notion of *cooperation*, in the conception of China-CAR cooperation, even though cooperation might be associated with *constructivism* in lieu of *realism*. This cooperation is namely illustrated by the SCO and must be accounted for through the lenses of realism. Annette Boehr (2004) contends that despite the rhetoric of cooperation, the states in the region have become increasingly entangled in

conflicts with each other, encompassing a range of issues such as trade, border disputes, and divergences over the governance and utilization of water and energy resources. Since 2005, the SCO has been referred to by various names such as “A new Warsaw Pact”, “Oriental NATO”, and “Club of dictators” (Brookes, 2006; Hansen, 2008; as cited in Nicharapova, 2019). There is a divide among experts on whether the SCO is a cooperation organization or a regional integration organization, or whether it is a political-military structure or a regional security structure. While some view the SCO as a simple forum for dialogue, others believe that it is not a proper organization (Knyazev Alexandre interview, 2010, as cited in Nicharapova, 2019). It is hypothesized that the SCO, as an organization with realist objectives, is intended to benefit only the large member states, with smaller members pursuing their national interests (Nicharapova, 2019). Realists argue that institutions, including international or regional organizations, are a reflection of the distribution of power in the world and are based on the self-interested calculations of great powers (Martin & Simmons, 2002; as cited in Nicharapova, 2019). Such institutions have no independent effect on state behavior. According to John Mearsheimer, an international institution is a set of rules that stipulates the ways in which states should cooperate and compete with each other (Morgenthau, 1985; as cited in Nicharapova, 2019). The realist approach to international organizations suggests that each state in the international system aims to guarantee its own survival and maximize its relative high power position over other states. During a personal communication in 2013 with the representative of the Embassy of France in one of the Central Asian countries, it was suggested that China is the biggest winner in the SCO, with Russia being a loser and Central Asian states being big losers (Nicharapova, 2019).

Finally, to reiterate the key concepts of realism it is essential to bear in mind that contemporary realists, particularly neorealists, perceive the lack of government, or anarchy, as the foremost determinant of international political outcomes (Korab-Karpowicz, 2018). Such a contention is reiterated and explained in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (as cited in Korab-Karpowicz, 2018). The absence of a common authority for rule-making and enforcement results in a self-help system where each state assumes responsibility for its own survival, defines its interests, and pursues power. Consequently, power becomes the paramount factor in shaping interstate relations as anarchy allows every state to operate freely (Korab-Karpowicz, 2018). Moreover, realists consider security to be a critical concern in the anarchic world of states. To secure their interests, states strive to augment their power and engage in power-balancing as a deterrence mechanism against potential aggressors. Wars are

fought to impede rival nations from becoming militarily stronger (Korab-Karpowicz, 2018). An illustration of realism lies in one of the roots of realism: Thucydides and the importance of power. While Thucydides identifies the immediate and underlying causes of the Peloponnesian War, he perceives its real cause to be the changing power distribution between the two blocs of Greek city-states, namely the Delian League led by Athens and the Peloponnesian League led by Sparta. The Athenian ascendancy frightened the Spartans and threatened their security, which impelled them to initiate the war (Thucydides, 1972; as cited in Korab-Karpowicz, 2018).

3.3. *Innenpolitik* guiding Chinese Foreign Policy

Michael Clarke (2020), an internationally recognised expert on the history and politics of the XUAR, PRC, Chinese foreign policy in Central Asia, avows that Beijing's policy towards Central Asia is the result of a convergence between *Innenpolitik* (domestic politics) and *Aussenpolitik* (foreign policy). In order to elucidate this interconnectedness, Clarke uses the BRI as an example. In his view, the PRC's pursuit of this ambitious agenda is driven by a combination of domestic factors, such as the CCP's concern for legitimacy, and systemic/structural factors, like changing perceptions of the balance of power (Clarke, 2020, p.337). Thus, through the lenses of *Innenpolitik*, the construction of BRI is steered by the interplay between CCP's quest of "performance" and "nationalist" legitimacy by means of maintaining economic growth and development while also restoring China's status as a great nation. Such a reflection coincides also with general Chinese policy towards Central Asia through Xinjiang. Ultimately, the literal translation of *Primat der Innenpolitik* is "primacy of internal politics" (Clarke, 2020, p.337). Likewise, member of the Council on Foreign Relations, Gideon Rose contended that approaches based on *Innenpolitik* may emphasize various domestic independent variables, yet they are all founded on the shared assumption that a country's foreign policy can be best comprehended as a consequence of its internal dynamics (Rose, 1998, p.148 as cited in Clarke, 2020, p.337). One prime example of such an argument is Beijing not giving the same priority as the Western powers to halt the advancement of the Iranian nuclear program in the early 2000s. The reason being China wanting to "maintain good relations with Tehran so that Iran would continue the hands-off policy toward Xinjiang that it had pursued since the 1990s" (Nathan & Scobell, 2012, p. 176). Thus, in 2004 China invited Iran to become an observer member of the SCO (Nathan & Scobell, 2012, p. 176).

Steve Tsang shares Clarke's view, thereby asserting that the primary driving force behind PRC's foreign policy is consistently domestic (Tsang, 2019, p.305). Such contention contrasts with the conventional approach in most great powers and international relations theories that prioritize foreign policy considerations, relative capabilities, and state-to-state interaction. Essentially, *Innenpolitik* theories of international relations assert that a country's behavior towards the world beyond its borders is determined by internal factors such as political and economic ideology, national character, partisan politics, or socioeconomic structure. Therefore, it is crucial to explore a China-Xinjiang-CAR analysis through the theory of *Innenpolitik*. Nonetheless, as Tsang argues, on its own this theory is insufficient to explain it comprehensively (Tsang, 2019, p.305). Hence, the need to contemplate it alongside the concepts explained above.

IV. Hypotheses and Research Questions

This thesis intends to prove the validity of the hypothesis and research questions put forth. These hypotheses have, nonetheless, been delineated in the conception of previous research and thesis that explored the subject matter. Thus, the hypotheses draw on arguments previously made by both literature and scholars on the subject. By conducting a thorough investigation and analysis, this study aims to contribute to the existing body of knowledge on the topic and provide new insights into the phenomenon under investigation: the triangular relationship of China-Xinjiang-Central Asia.

Hypothesis:

China's engagement with Central Asia is driven by its aim to secure Xinjiang against Uyghur separatism. To achieve this, China leverages its ties with Central Asian states to induce security cooperation, thereby creating a regional insurance against potential support for separatist movements. The recent vote by the CAR against discussing the OHCHR report on Xinjiang and their membership to the HRC highlights the effectiveness of China's strategy. China's foreign policy in Central Asia is primarily shaped by its domestic priorities, particularly its concerns over the stability and security of Xinjiang.

In order to accomplish the research objectives, the following research questions will be employed to guide the inquiry:

RQ1: How have China's policies towards Xinjiang and the Uyghur population affected its relationship with the CAR, and what factors contribute to the Republics' silence on human rights violations in Xinjiang?

SRQ1.1: What was the voting pattern in the voting against the discussion of the OHCHR?

RQ2: To what extent does China's engagement with Central Asia reflect the influence of its domestic policies and concerns regarding Xinjiang?

RQ3: How does China's interdependence with the CAR impact their willingness to challenge China's policies in Xinjiang?

SRQ3.1.¹: How does China's interdependence with the CAR impact their willingness to challenge China's policies in Xinjiang?

RQ4: How have the recent developments related to the Uyghur issue, such as the OHCHR report on Xinjiang, affected China's engagement with Central Asia and the region's response to Chinese initiatives aimed at securing Xinjiang?

V. Methodology

To comprehensively explore the interdependent relationship between China, the CAR, and Xinjiang as its flashpoint, this thesis aims to employ multiple rigorous analysis methods. Nonetheless, the collecting of data has been a conventional one consisting of drawing from academic texts, journals and books. The overarching goal of this approach is to gain a nuanced understanding of the motivations and interests driving the security policies pursued by each actor, as well as to elucidate the complex dynamics at play in the region.

Firstly, an extensive literature review on China's security policies in Central Asia was conducted, focusing on how the policies are guided by security concerns and domestic pressures over separatism and terrorism in Xinjiang. Thus, the works of prominent scholars

¹ SRQ: Sub-research question.

with substantial expertise in the region coupled with experience and, in some cases, Central Asian and Chinese background have been reviewed. These included the works of Stephen Blank (2007) *Xinjiang and China's security*, Michael Clarke (2019) *China, Xinjiang and the internationalization of the Uyghur issue* and *China's Xinjiang Problem*, Malika Tukmadiyeva (2013) *Xinjiang in China's Foreign Policy toward Central Asia Connections*, Ann McMillan (2004) *Effects of Interdependence in the Xinjiang-Central Asian Region*, and Mahesh Ranjan Debata (2015) *Xinjiang in Central Asia's Regional Security Structure*. The thesis and content of these scholarly journals have been essential in analyzing the historical geopolitical context between China and the CAR in order to understand how the PRC sees them as strategic to its own interests. Furthermore, specific incidents that demonstrate China's engagement with the CAR, such as infrastructure projects or security cooperation have been reviewed to evaluate the effectiveness of China's regional 'insurance policy' towards Xinjiang. This has been done through newspapers and scholarly reports pertinent to the matter, such as Global Times and other PRC-state-owned news sources, as well as think tanks like the Center for Strategic & International Studies. Lastly, in order to determine the validity of the hypothesis and research questions proposed an analysis of the recent development of the interdependent relationship must be conducted. Most remarkably, with regards to the voting pattern of the CAR on the discussion of the OHCHR Assessment on human rights concerns in Xinjiang. Therein lies the crux of the matter at study and the answer to the hypothesis and research questions. Hence, sources of the Human Rights Council must be assessed as well as joint declarations by the PRC in its embassies, delegations and multilateral organizations to evaluate the effectiveness of Beijing's leverage on Central Asia.

VI. Discussion and Implications

6.1. Analysis of the recent OHCHR report on Xinjiang

The OHCHR report on Xinjiang, which was released on August 31, 2022, coinciding with the end of Michelle Bachelet's four-year term in office as UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, provides a crucial framework for examining the main hypothesis and supporting the rationale of this thesis. It is through such report, most specifically the voting of such, that we can find reasonable evidence as to how Xinjiang is connected to Central Asia and, in turn, how China holds significant leverage over the CAR. Firstly, it is important to carefully analyze the content of the report to understand the extent to which the vote bears meaning in

the triangular dimension. Such analysis will support a further exploration of the voting pattern.

The OHCHR report offers the following introduction and background to its investigation. Starting in late 2017, various civil society groups began making allegations to the OHCHR that members of predominantly Muslim ethnic minority communities, such as the Uyghurs, ethnic Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Uzbeks and Huis, were either missing or had disappeared in China's XUAR (OHCHR, 2022a, p. 1). The UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances reported in 2018 that there had been a "dramatic" increase in cases from XUAR following the introduction of "re-education" camps by the Chinese government. Since then, numerous non-governmental organizations, think-tanks, media outlets, and victims have reported arbitrary detention, including claims of torture, ill-treatment, sexual violence, and forced labor, among other allegations (OHCHRa, 2022, p. 1). In August 2018, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination expressed concern over the detention of a large number of ethnic Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities in XUAR during its review of China's periodic report. The detentions were reportedly carried out under the guise of countering religious extremism. The Government of China argued that the "vocational training centers" were established for individuals who had committed minor offenses. However, in subsequent policy papers, the government justified the centers as a means of countering terrorism and extremism while also promoting development, job creation, and poverty alleviation in the region (OHCHR, 2022a, p. 1). In 2018, considering the wide scope and seriousness of the accusations, the OHCHR sought permission to enter XUAR to verify such accusations. On March 17, 2021, OHCHR formally submitted a request for specific sets of information to the Permanent Mission of China to the United Nations, but did not receive a formal response. On July 19, 2021, OHCHR proposed a meeting with relevant government officials to discuss the legal framework pertaining to counter-terrorism and the prevention and countering of "extremism" in XUAR. The Government invited the High Commissioner to visit China in 2018, but the visit was delayed until March 2022 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. During the visit, the High Commissioner was allowed to visit XUAR after an advance team was deployed to prepare for her visit, which took place in April and May 2022 (OHCHRa, 2022, p. 1).

Ultimately, the report has concluded that "allegations of patterns of torture, or ill-treatment, including forced medical treatment and adverse conditions of detention, are credible, as are

allegations of individual incidents of sexual and gender-based violence.” (Davidson, 2022; UN, 2022; OHCHR, 2022a). Moreover, the report determines that “restrictions and deprivation more generally of fundamental rights, enjoyed individually and collectively, may constitute international crimes, in particular crimes against humanity.” (UN, 2022a; OHCHR, 2022a). The findings observed that there were “far-reaching, arbitrary and discriminatory restrictions on human rights and fundamental freedoms, in violation of international laws and standards”, which encompass limitations on the freedom to practice religion, as well as infringements on the rights to privacy and freedom of movement (OHCHR, 2022a; UN, 2022). The report ends by urging China to undertake a full legal review of its national security and counter-terrorism policies in XUAR, “to ensure their full compliance with binding international human rights law” and repeal any laws that fall short of international standards. Additionally, it recommends that the Government conduct a prompt investigation into allegations of human rights violations in camps and other detention facilities, “including allegations of torture, sexual violence, ill-treatment, forced medical treatment, as well as forced labor and reports of deaths in custody.” (OHCHR, 2022a).

According to UN Spokesperson Stéphane Dujarric, the Secretary-General, António Guterres “very much hopes that the Government of China will take on board the recommendations put forward in the assessment” and “values the system-wide cooperation between China and the United Nations on a whole host of issues. China is a very valuable partner, and we very much hope that that cooperation will continue,”. Secretary-General Guterres emphasized the importance of the Chinese response to the detailed report, stating that it is imperative for all parties to see China’s official position on the matter (UN, 2022a; Al Jazeera, 2022; Tibetan Review, 2022; Besheer, 2022).

6.1.2. Fragmented Perspectives: The PRC’s Response to the OHCHR report

The Permanent Mission of the People’s Republic of China to the United Nations Office at the Geneva and other International Organizations in Switzerland (2022) rebutted the report in an extended and detailed response as was annexed to the report. The top line of the response grants as follows:

“China firmly opposes the release of the so-called “assessment of the human rights situation in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, China” by the OHCHR. This

so-called “assessment” runs counter to the mandate of the OHCHR, and ignores the human rights achievements made together by people of all ethnic groups in Xinjiang and the devastating damage caused by terrorism and extremism to the human rights of people of all ethnic groups in Xinjiang. Based on the disinformation and lies fabricated by anti-China forces and out of presumption of guilt, the “so-called “assessment” distorts China’s laws and policies, wantonly smears and slanders China, and interferes in China’s internal affairs, which violated principles including dialogue and cooperation, and non-politicization in the field of human rights, and also undermines the credibility of the OHCHR.” (*Permanent Mission of the People’s Republic of China to the United Nations, 2022a*)

Simultaneously, the Chinese government attached to the strongly-worded response a report entitled *Fight against Terrorism and Extremism in Xinjiang: Truths and Facts* for the purpose of “refuting lies and clarifying truths” (Information Office of The People’s Government of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, 2022). The report declares that “people of all ethnic groups in Xinjiang, including the Uyghur population, are enjoying higher-level, more secure and more sustainable rights to subsistence and development, and leading happy and harmonious lives”. Consistently with China’s legitimizing narrative, the report further argues that “Pretending to care about the human rights condition of the people of various ethnic groups there, their real aim is to destabilize Xinjiang and suppress China” and contending that “such despicable plots are doomed to fail”. The report made a 4 general conclusions: 1) “Xinjiang adheres to the principle that everyone is equal before the law, and the accusation that its policy is ‘based on ethnic discrimination’ is groundless”; 2) The counter-terrorism and de-radicalization efforts in Xinjiang have been all along conducted on the track of the rule of law, and are by no means the alleged ‘suppression of minorities’; 3) The vocational education and training centers in Xinjiang are learning facilities established in accordance with law intended for de-radicalization, and are by no means the so-called “concentration camps”; and 4) The lawful rights and interests of workers of all ethnic groups in Xinjiang are protected, and there is no such thing as “forced labor” (Information Office of The People’s Government of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, 2022).

The Chinese own account of Xinjiang is a clear reflection of a realist quest for security and protection of national sovereignty and territorial integrity as evidenced by the contention that the OHCHR “interferes in China’s internal affairs”. Likewise, the PRC consistently

references the threat of terrorism and extremism to justify its policies in Xinjiang. The PRC's response emphasizes the realist concepts of power and the need to maintain a balance of power in the international system as illustrated by the criticism of the OHCHR as violating principles of dialogue and cooperation, as well as non-politicization in the field of human rights. The strong-worded response is a clear reflection of China defending its policies by attacking the Western world, as it has consistently done with other matters such as Hong Kong or Taiwan.

This line of argument is congruent across PRC official statements and even among pro-Chinese scholars. Effectively, the Spokesperson for the Permanent Mission of the PRC to the UN held the same view: "In response to the erroneous remarks made by the US Permanent Representative to the United Nations, Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield, and a few other countries on the so-called OHCHR assessment of human rights concerns in Xinjiang, the Spokesperson of the Permanent Mission of China to the United Nations issued a statement, stressing that the so-called assessment is an illegal document and a perverse product of the US and some other Western forces' coercive diplomacy." (Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the UN, 2022a). Uniformly, Shi Peipei (2022), assistant researcher with the Institute of America Studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, argued on an article published on China Global Television Network (CGTN) that the "United Nations OHCHR Xinjiang report is irresponsible [and] inconsistent with the facts". He contends that the report posits a "presumption of guilt and a patchwork of facts" concerning the alleged "crimes against humanity" by the Chinese government in Xinjiang. Shi declares as does the PRC in saying that the report "accuses the Chinese government of implementing social governance and security measures in the region while disregarding the sustained stability achieved in recent years. Moreover, it highlights the government's efforts to combat extremism while intentionally neglecting the wanton killings perpetrated by insurgents in the area. The report also decries the vocational education and training centers as human rights violations, but fails to acknowledge the government's provision of education to local ethnic minorities as a means of breaking the cycle of poverty and promoting self-sufficiency." (Shi, 2022). This view, thoroughly defended and contended by Chinese scholars, the CCP and the PRC as a whole, is quite telling of the reaction that China will have against any scrutiny or attempt to critique its policies and regime. Thus, consistently, it seems apparent that when put in a position alike this one, Beijing will most likely have its state partners, such as the SCO

members, to hold a similar view. If not, those countries might encounter the same China that charges against the OHCHR and those who question the Chinese government.

6.2. PRC leverage: the voting pattern on the discussion of The OHCHR report

In the context of the fragmented perspectives on Xinjiang, it seems evident that the international reaction, and by extent the voting to discuss such a report, would also be as divided. Uyghur and international rights groups together with over 40 UN experts have long urged for an UN-mandated monitoring mechanism on China (Viana David, 2022). Concurrently, on its Fifty-first session under its Agenda Item 2 the HRC decided to hold a debate on the situation of human rights in XUAR (UN Human Rights Council, 2022b). This consisted of a draft signed by Albania,* Australia,* Austria,* Belgium,* Canada,* Czechia, Denmark,* Estonia,* Finland, France, Germany, Iceland,* Ireland,* Latvia,* Liechtenstein,* Lithuania, Luxembourg, Marshall Islands, Netherlands, New Zealand,* Norway,* Slovakia,* Sweden,* Türkiye,*² United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and United States of America. The draft - decision to do so came together with a *Joint Statement on Behalf of 50 countries in the UN General Assembly Third Committee on the Human Rights Situation in Xinjiang*, published by the United States (United States Mission to the UN, 2022).

On the other hand, in 2021 China had delivered a *Joint statement of 69 countries at the Interactive Dialogue on High Commissioner's annual report at the 47th session of the Human Rights Council* in which they called for a “Respect for sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of states and non-interference in internal affairs of sovereign states” and declared that “Hong Kong, Xinjiang and Tibet related issues are China's internal affairs that brook no interference by any external forces” (Permanent Mission of The PRC to The UN Office at Geneva and Other International Organizations, 2021). The statement was signed on behalf of Algeria, Antigua and Barbuda, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Belarus, Benin, Bolivia, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cambodia, Cameroon, Central African Republic, China, Comoros, Congo, Cuba, Djibouti, Dominica, DPRK, Egypt, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gabon, The Gambia, Grenada, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Iran, Iraq, Kiribati, **Kyrgyzstan**, Lao PDR, Lebanon, Libya, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Mozambique, Myanmar, Nepal, Nicaragua, Niger, Nigeria, Pakistan, Palestine, Papua New Guinea, Russia, Sao Tome and

² * State not a member of the HRC (UN., A/HRC/51/L.6, 2022b).

Principe, Saudi Arabia, Serbia, Sierra Leone, Solomon Islands, Somalia, South Sudan, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Suriname, Syria, **Tajikistan**, Togo, Tonga, Tunisia, UAE, Uganda, Venezuela, Yemen, Zambia, and Zimbabwe (Permanent Mission of The PRC to The UN Office at Geneva and Other International Organizations, 2021).

It must be borne in mind that not all the signatories to both statements are member states of the 47-member body, thus the number of states eligible to vote the draft decision appears as greatly reduced. The 6th October, 2022, the Council rejected the draft decision by a vote of 17 in favor, 19 against and 11 abstentions (OHCHR, 2022b). The states who voted against were: Bolivia, Cameroon, China, Cote d'Ivoire, Cuba, Eritrea, Gabon, Indonesia, **Kazakhstan**, Mauritania, Namibia, Nepal, Pakistan, Qatar, Senegal, Sudan, United Arab Emirates, **Uzbekistan** and Venezuela (OHCHR, 2022b). Indonesia holds the largest muslim population in the world with 231,000,000 in 2021, yet it still voted against the report, and by extent, in favor of China who according to the OHCHR may be committing 'crimes against humanity' against the muslim Uyghur ethnic group (World Population Review, 2023). The second country with the largest muslim population in the world is Pakistan (World Population Review, 2023). Moreover, consistently with the hypothesis put forth and the information reviewed, the two largest Xinjiang neighbors, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan also voted in accordance with China. Later that week, **Kyrgyzstan** was elected by the General Assembly to the Geneva-based body (UN General Assembly, 2022c). Voting yes or no at the United Nations is in many ways symbolic, yet it carries great weight and meaning. Precisely, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan had previously abstained in a resolution to uphold the territorial integrity of Ukraine and denounced Russia's expedited conduct of referendums in the occupied territory (Sochnev, 2022). This means that the former Soviet States chose to lie with China's vote instead of their former motherland. Indeed, the only FSU state to back Russia was Belarus while neutral Turkmenistan did not vote (Sochnev, 2022). The CAR backed China instead.

Kazakhstan's vote against the OHCHR report has garnered significant attention given that ethnic Kazakhs are among the groups that have been subjected to China's campaign of arbitrary detentions (Sochnev, 2022). Moreover, Kazakhstan's vote also represents a shift from its 2019 stance. On July 8th, 2019, a group of 22 states signed a letter to the High Commissioner calling China to "refrain from arbitrary detention and restrictions on freedom of movement of Uyghurs, and other Muslim and minority communities in Xinjiang" and

requesting to “keep the Council regularly informed” and for the letter to be recorded in the Council’s 41st Session (UN Human Rights Council, 2019). Days later a counter letter of 37 countries was submitted in defense of China’s policies (Putz, 2019). Among the signatories the second letter were: Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Russia. The vast majority of countries that signed Beijing’s letter were BRI partner states (Hayes, 2023). However, the other three CAR remained conspicuously absent, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. This abstention, albeit not a formal vote, carries immense value. In 2019, most prominently, for Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, the Xinjiang matter evolved into a domestic concern, with demonstrations and civil society groups urging for greater attention to be paid to the camps in Xinjiang. Notably, among those detained, there were individuals of Kazakh and Kyrgyz origin and civil society organizations emerged around families with disappearing relatives in Xinjiang (Putz, 2019). Notwithstanding, the Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev expressed that he did not have any particular interest in the Xinjiang rights crisis (Rickleton, 2021; Sochnev, 2022). He claimed that human rights groups working on the subject were susceptible to misinformation and that Kazakhstan should not turn into “a territory for the global anti-China front” (Sochnev, 2022). Serikzhan Bilash, a Xinjiang-born Kazakh activist, who was arrested on charges of inciting ‘inter-ethnic discord’, spearheaded a movement which is now a lot less active than three years ago (Sochnev, 2022). It could be argued that the waning of public interest in Xinjiang together with the violent repressions of unrests in 2022, thereby ignoring international backed investigations, facilitated Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan attitude towards the vote (Sochnev, 2022). There is no denying that Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan endorsement of China’s stance with regards to the OHCHR report on 2022 stems from lobbying by Beijing. Thus, the leverage that the PRC exerts over the CAR proves effective. Furthermore, in the context of ongoing tensions with Russia over the conflict in Ukraine, Kazakhstan desperately seeks diplomatic backing and, hence, finds it in Beijing.

6.3. Mutual Advantage: the growing interconnectedness between China and Central Asia through Xinjiang

As proof of China’s engagement with Central Asia as means to leverage such ties, Xi Jinping chose Astana as the first foreign visit since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic on the way to 2022 Uzbekistan SCO Summit (Sochnev, 2022; Satubaldina, 2022). Xi expressed to Tokayev that China would “continue to strongly support Kazakhstan in defending its independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity, firmly support the reforms you are

carrying out to ensure stability and development and oppose the interference of any forces in the internal affairs,” (Hayes, 2023). The emphasis on the opposition of “interference of any forces” came after political commentators and politicians in Russia had threatened Kazakhstan over its neutrality with regards to Ukraine (Sochnev, 2022). Additionally, China had previously offered its backing to Kazakhstan in January 2022 when the country witnessed a wave of unrest to which the government responded by declaring a state of emergency (Hayes, 2023). For the occasion of Xi’s visit, Astana increased its surveillance and detentions on Xinjiang relatives groups in an attempt to thwart any potential disruption (Sochnev, 2022). Effectively, Astana escalates its state repression over pro-Xinjiang or anti-China activism in order to not get on the bad side of its giant neighbor (Asia Times, 2020). Moreover, Kazakhstan takes the necessary means for Kazakh Xinjiang Protests not to gain any international traction (Sanayeva, 2021). When Astana is faced by daily protests of relatives of ethnic Kazakhs detained in re-education camps in Xinjiang, as happened in 2021, the government opts for repression with continuous monitoring, fines, and arrests, and to not meet or comment on the matter. The reason given by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2021: the ‘non-interference in the domestic affairs of other states’(Sanayeva, 2021). Such a stance is identical to the Chinese one. However, the government's differential treatment towards ethnic Kazakhs within China versus those living abroad, referred to as Oralmans or Kandastar since 2020, and those who fought in Syria and Iraq is noticeable. While the state has facilitated the repatriation of the latter two groups, it has failed to address the predicament of ethnic Kazakhs in China (Sanayeva, 2021). Indeed, “space for Kazakhstan’s government to do anything about Xinjiang is limited due to the importance of economic relations with Beijing” (Sanayeva, 2021).

In essence, while China seeks its neighbors’ compliance on the matter of Xinjiang, it must be underscored that the CAR, namely Kazakhstan, uphold a firm control over activism concerning Xinjiang in the quest for an economic expansion. For instance, as of 2023 transactions with Xinjiang make up 40% of the trade between Kazakhstan and China (Kumenov, 2023). Similarly, in terms of foreign trade turnover, China holds a significant 18% share in Kazakhstan's economy. Furthermore, China's investment in Kazakhstan over the past 15 years has reached nearly \$23 billion. During a recent visit to Astana by Xinjiang Communist Party secretary Ma Xingrui, entrepreneurs from both nations signed commercial contracts worth \$565 million, highlighting the growing economic ties between China and

Kazakhstan (Kumenov, 2023). In February 2023, the 6,500th Central Asia freight train departed from the Urumqi International Land Port Area, Xinjiang, en route to Alma-Ata, Altyn Kol and other cities in Kazakhstan. Since its inauguration in 2015, the port has introduced 21 rail routes which give access to 19 countries and regions in Europe and Asia transporting over 200 different categories of goods from auto parts to textiles (CGTN, 2023). Routes such as this one are reminiscent of the ancient silk route that China has so tirelessly been wanting to revive through the BRI which was effectively formally launched in 2013 during Xi Jinping's visit to Kazakhstan (Foreign Affairs Committee, 2022). Additionally, as reported by China Daily in late 2022, as another BRI landmark project, Chinese workers together with Uzbeks and other Central Asian workers started building a thermal power plant covering 25 hectares of the Sirdaryo region of Uzbekistan (Xu, 2022). This venture, projected to be finalized by the end of 2023 is expected to contribute approximately 8% of Uzbek's current installed power generation capacity. It is also estimated to produce up to 10 billion kilowatt hours of electricity per year, which will effectively cater to the power demand of almost a million residents in the area (Xu, 2022). Ultimately, with operations such as this one, China bolsters its relations with Central Asia.

The OHCHR report helps to legitimize Xinjiang detainees' relatives and human rights organizations' claims. However, China has carefully spent its time catering and crafting its ties with the CAR as means to conditionally get their backing. Another prime example is Kyrgyzstan where China has heavily invested in the country's underfunded media sector to forge partnerships with local companies in an attempt to 'shape' the information landscape in Central Asia (Standish, 2022). The recently published report by Niva Yau (2022a) from the OSCE Academy in Bishkek on August 25, 2022, examines the Chinese government's methods of shaping Kyrgyzstan's media coverage. This research is part of a larger project that aims to investigate the strategies employed by Chinese state actors to promote a positive image of China while disseminating unfavorable political narratives about the United States and Western countries. Additionally, the project explores how China suppresses or undermines stories regarding its interests in Central Asia, including issues concerning the treatment of Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang Province (Standish, 2022; Yau, 2022a). Yau contends that "the Chinese whole-of-society influence building approach is becoming more and more visible in Central Asia" (Yau, 2022a, p.39). Essentially, The Chinese strategy of exerting influence is based on 'creating dependencies' between specific sectors and actors from the PRC (Yau, 2022a, p.39). Such contention is illustrated by the CAR position on

Xinjiang-Uyghur asylum seekers. In late 2019, Dirham Dilmanov, Director of the Committee of National Security of Kazakhstan, communicated that two ethnic Kazakhs who had fled Xinjiang, thereby illegally crossing the border, would be returned to China (Amnesty International, 2019). In the context of an already brewing international opinion condemning China's treatment of Uyghurs, Kazakhstan still sided with Beijing. Yet, when in 2021 Kazakhstan granted refugee status to ethnic Kazakhs from Xinjiang civil organizations, such as the one led by Serikjan Bilash, China took it as a recognition from Kazakhstan of the violation of human rights in Xinjiang. In turn, China responded by tightening customs restrictions at the Chinese-Kazakh border, stating Covid-19 measures for the reason behind such action. Indeed, China rejected 12,000 railway freight cars that carried Kazakhs goods which, ultimately, hindered the exportation of goods and, hence, caused heavy losses (KTZ as cited in Altynbayev, 2021). As a result, in 2022 when Kazakhstan was faced with the same situation it acted differently. In line with its voting on the OHCHR report, Kazakhstan was reported to detain more than 100 asylum seekers and return them back to Xinjiang by officers of the Chinese Consulate and Kazakhs police (Sultanov, 2022).

China also exerts a technological dominance in Central Asia as illustrated by the government's "safe cities" initiative which was initially designed for traffic monitoring, yet has evolved into a tool for political control, using facial recognition technology to gather information from various sources across the country (Yau, 2019). Such a technological tool has been widely used in Xinjiang, where millions of CCTV cameras track citizens' movements and a social credit system restricts their mobility based on their political behavior (Yau, 2019). In 2019, Huawei, the Chinese technology conglomerate, started to expand its market to Central Asia, signing a \$1 billion agreement with Uzbekistan. Consequently, the CAR governments together with China have been enhancing its surveillance projects. Niva Yau argues that given the persistent discourse around terrorism in Central Asia, a cross-border social credit system may be in the works, especially as China has made vague policy deals with Belt and Road countries. This system would be particularly plausible in the region, where combating Uyghur separatists remains a major agenda item between Chinese and Central Asian officials (Yau, 2019).

In effect, the reason for the CAR's silence on Xinjiang also stems from Central Asia states' own fear of a threat to their sovereignty as relatively recent independent states. Indeed, in 2022, not only was a year of widespread unrest and uprising in Kazakhstan, but Uzbekistan

and Tajikistan also witnessed violence and secessionist tendencies in the Uzbek Karakalpakstan region, and Tajik Gorno Badakshan Autonomous region (Bhaduri, 2022b). Subsequently, the military intervention of Russia in Ukraine has caused concern in the region, particularly for countries like Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. The fear of potential separatist movements on their own land has compelled both countries to refuse to recognise the independence of the Ukrainian provinces of Donetsk and Luhansk, as well as the annexation of Crimea to the Russian Federation. And with Russia occupied with Ukraine, China has recognised and taken the opportunity to assert itself in Central Asia (Bhaduri, 2022a). It seems apparent, that the CAR would not acknowledge or even entertain any notion of separatist movement within China, especially Xinjiang, as on the one hand it would hinder the economic development the FSU states have been getting from China, while on the other, it would support and strengthen the separatist tendencies already brewing within their own borders. Thus, nor would they contradict China's stance on the voting pertaining to the OHCHR report.

Such reasoning, therefore, reaffirms Willem Van Kemenade's argument (1997, p. 345) as cited by Stephen Blank (2007, p. 122) that "if Central Asia falls apart, the chaos will enter into Xinjiang, and the fear of terrorism validates Beijing's acceptance of this logic". Conversely, "if those countries stabilize and succeed however they do so, that will invariably stimulate deeper drives for self-rule in Xinjiang" (Van Kemenade, 1997, p. 345; as cited in Blank, 2007, p. 122). It can be inferred, then, that China's approachment to the CAR is a reflection of its policy projection in Xinjiang. Beijing holds the hand of the CAR when they experience "separatist" grievances and unrests in hopes that they will reciprocate China because, ultimately, "concessions in any one of its contested provinces duly opens the floodgates to a flood of "splittist, and separatist" demands from the other aggrieved provinces" (Blank, 2007, p. 128). For China that would signify a destruction of the state.

In 2007, Blank argued that China's focus on its western province and neighbors was directly linked with the PRC's need to guarantee that Xinjiang's governance remained "one not subject to internationalization and foreign debate" (Blank, 2007). The publication of the OHCHR report would attest that Xinjiang's governance has, in fact, been subject of foreign debate. Part of the reason is that, as Nathan and Scobell (2012, p. 208) put it "the exile community's main achievement has been to keep Uyghur identity alive". Clarke attributed it to China's own domestic handling, diplomacy and approach to Xinjiang (Clarke, 2010).

However, the voting result to not debate the Xinjiang issue and the report both validates and legitimizes China's claim for Xinjiang not to be a topic open for debate. Civil Organizations such as Human Rights Watch and democratic states who approved for the discussion of the report will most likely, at least at the time being, continue to condemn China's policies in Xinjiang. Nonetheless, the voting result and the specific states who voted against signals just how powerful Beijing leverage is as it increases its engagement with other nations. The case of Taiwan sheds light into this precise point: despite being a Semiconductor leader and having multiple states voice their support to the island - as has done the United States -, the Republic of China (ROC) only has 14 states that recognise it as a country with Honduras cutting its diplomatic ties after 82 years on 2023 (Sato & Varley, 2023; Davidson, 2023b). Such an attitude, inevitably, raises the probability of the same thing happening with Xinjiang. Honduras pledged that there was only one China and Taiwan was part of it in return for negotiations with China to build a hydroelectric dam in the country (Davidson, 2023a). Comparably, the CAR's silence on Xinjiang has the same underlying reality: China obtains its diplomatic backing if it invests in other countries such as Honduras, the CAR or Africa with the BRI. Such a phenomenon effectively translates into China having leverage or bargaining chips over third countries to answer to its interests. Thus, China's ambition in these countries, ergo its foreign policy objectives, are a clear reflection of the PRC domestic concerns.

VII. Conclusion

This thesis has proven and confirmed the main hypothesis put forth. China's involvement with Central Asia is motivated by its objective to safeguard Xinjiang from Uyghur separatism. In order to achieve this goal, China utilizes its relationships with Central Asian nations to promote security cooperation, thereby establishing a regional insurance against potential CAR backing for separatist activities. This thesis is heavily sustained by the recent voting on the discussion of the OHCHR report on the XUAR in which none of the CAR member states of the HRC voted in favor, thereby against China. The investments and development that Beijing has carried out in the Central Asia region are greatly telling of how much Chinese foreign policy is, essentially, influenced by its internal agenda, notably its apprehensions regarding the stability and security of Xinjiang. In turn, the CAR, looking for diplomatic backing just 30 years after their independence from the former Soviet Union, benefit from the mutual advantage in their ties with the PRC. Effectively, Central Asia refrains from upsetting Beijing by not recognising or entertaining any notion of human rights

violation in Xinjiang because, on the one hand, it would hinder economic aid and projects underway coming from China, while, on the other hand, any attempt of Uyghur separatism would, inevitably, bleed into Central Asia and support the separatist tendencies already established in their countries. Thus, both the CAR and China mutually reinforce one another's policies.

The premise that "China holds significant leverage over Central Asia" has been previously contended and argued by the scholarly body of literature that has been reviewed in this thesis. However, the majority of the research on Central Asia and China followed after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, ergo the independence of the CAR states, and, hence, the new geopolitical relations between China and its new neighbors in the 1990s and early 2000s. The fast-paced rise of China which obeys to realist principles, serves as a precondition for the ties between Central Asia and China to only have grown stronger. Upon this context, the present thesis has had per purpose to confirm that there was, in fact, an increase in the interconnectedness between the two. The most recent watershed proof of such engagement is the voting on the discussion of the *OHCHR Assessment of human rights concerns in XUAR* published in the third quarter of 2022. Nonetheless, this dissertation has also been subject to the limitations of researching on a topic with restricted data due to China's apprehension to foreign interference and the added limitation of not speaking either Chinese or the native tongues of Central Asia. It is also crucial to underscore that the objective of this dissertation has not been to prove whether the OHCHR report claims nor the PRC's response to them are legitimate or hold any validity. This dissertation has only focused on the manner and extent of China's engagement with Central Asia through Xinjiang. Moreover, while there has been substantial research on the relation between Central Asia and China, there have not been, to date, academic reports nor recent literature with regards to the 2022 OHCHR report as evidence of the leverage and grip that China holds over the CAR.

Ultimately, this thesis has highlighted the significance of the voting to discuss the report in order to emphasize how the manner in which each country voted carries crucial meaning in the development of regional and geopolitical relations. In voting the discussion of an assessment, essentially, in the defense of a muslim minority in China, none of the muslim-majority countries in the world voted in favor. Among them were the CAR which not only share a border with the Xinjiang region, but, moreover, they share culture, traditions, and, to a certain extent, identity. The blind eye they turn to Xinjiang Uyghurs, effectively, can

only stem from Beijing leveraging the economic development it has been carrying out in the region, particularly with the BRI Initiative and through the SCO. To achieve this, Beijing tirelessly defends that no other country shall interfere in its internal affairs. The CAR also uphold such a realist principle in order for Beijing to support their governments when faced with unrests, as it happened in 2022.

Finally, in envisaging future perspectives, there is a strong probability for the CAR seeing past the realist-expansionist ambitions of China and comparing them with how they once existed only under the ‘curtain’ of the Soviet Union and Russian Empire. Furthermore, Central Asia might even perceive Xinjiang as existing as they once did. For the time being, the CAR are content enough by the end of the bargain they hold with Beijing. Only time will tell if a change in government may alter the attitude Central Asia has been subscribing to in the past 30 years.

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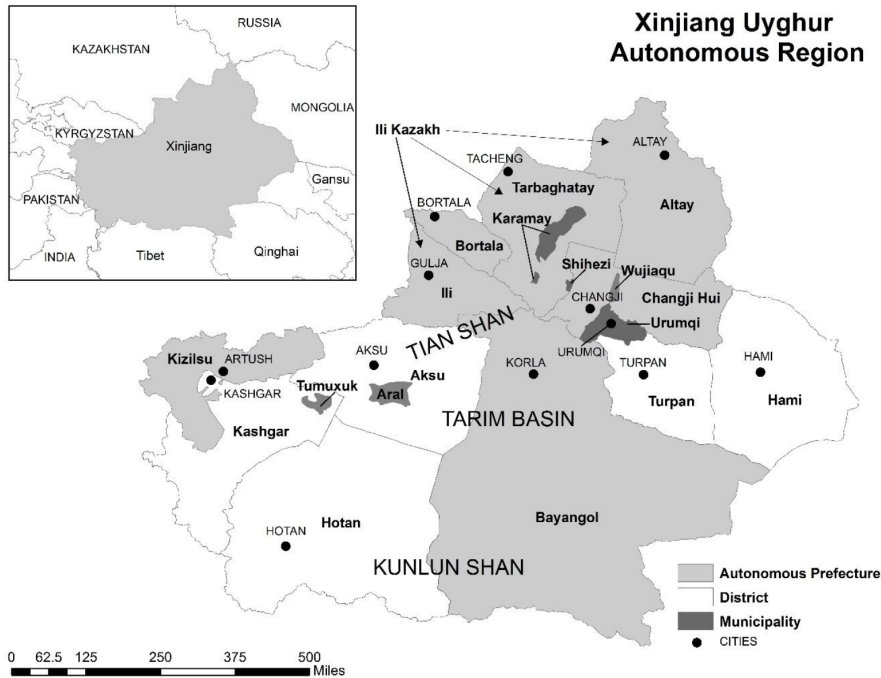
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IX. Annexes

Annex 1: Map of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) of The People's Republic of China (PRC).



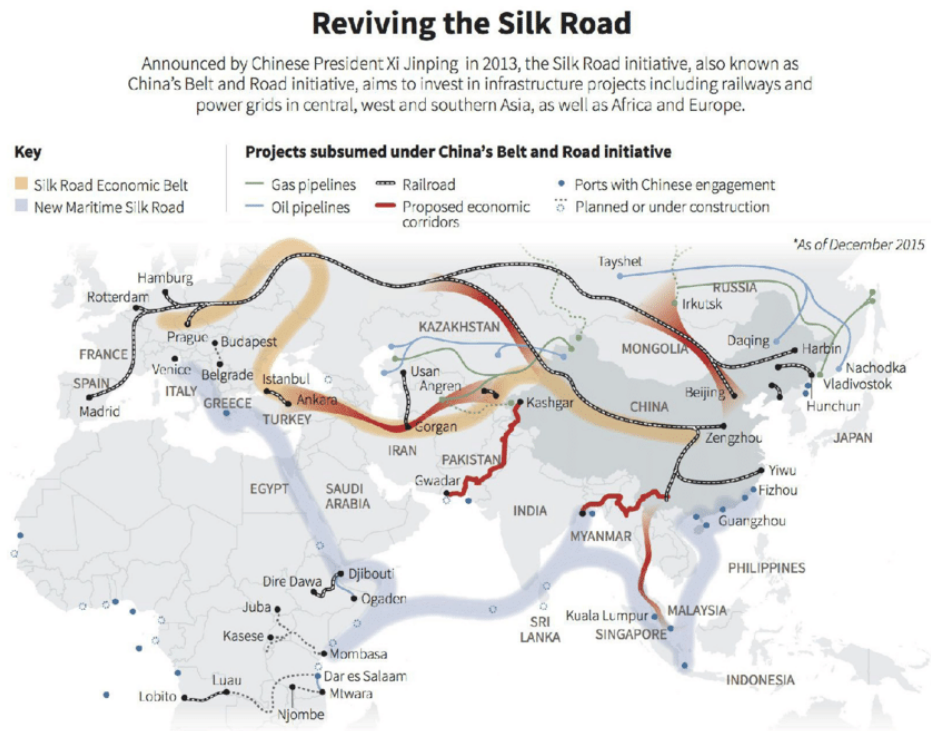
Source: Asia Research Institute, University of Nottingham, Stanley Toops, 2016. Data from Xinjiang 2010 Census, 2012, pp. 2-4.

Annex 2: Map of Central Asia and the CAR.



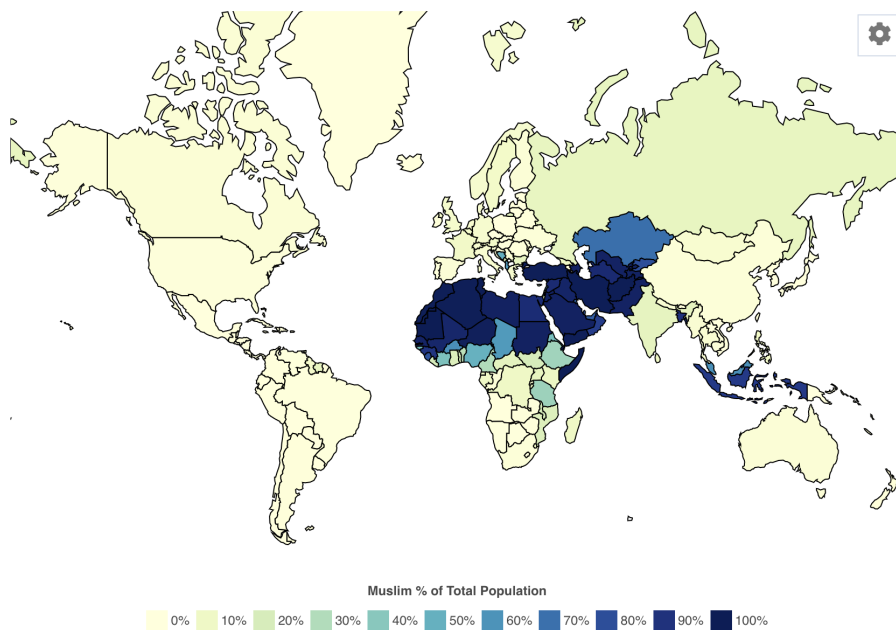
Source: Kurecic, P. (2010). The New Great Game: Rivalry of Geostrategies and Geoeconomies in Central Asia. *Hrvatski Geografski Glasnik*. 72. 21-48. 10.21861/HGG.2010.72.01.02.

Annex 3: Map of BRI regions and projects.



Source: Lu, H., Rohr, C., Hafner, M. & Knack, A. (2018). China Belt and Road Initiative: How revival of the silk road could impact world trade. 10.7249/RB10029.

Annex 4: Muslim Population by Country 2023.



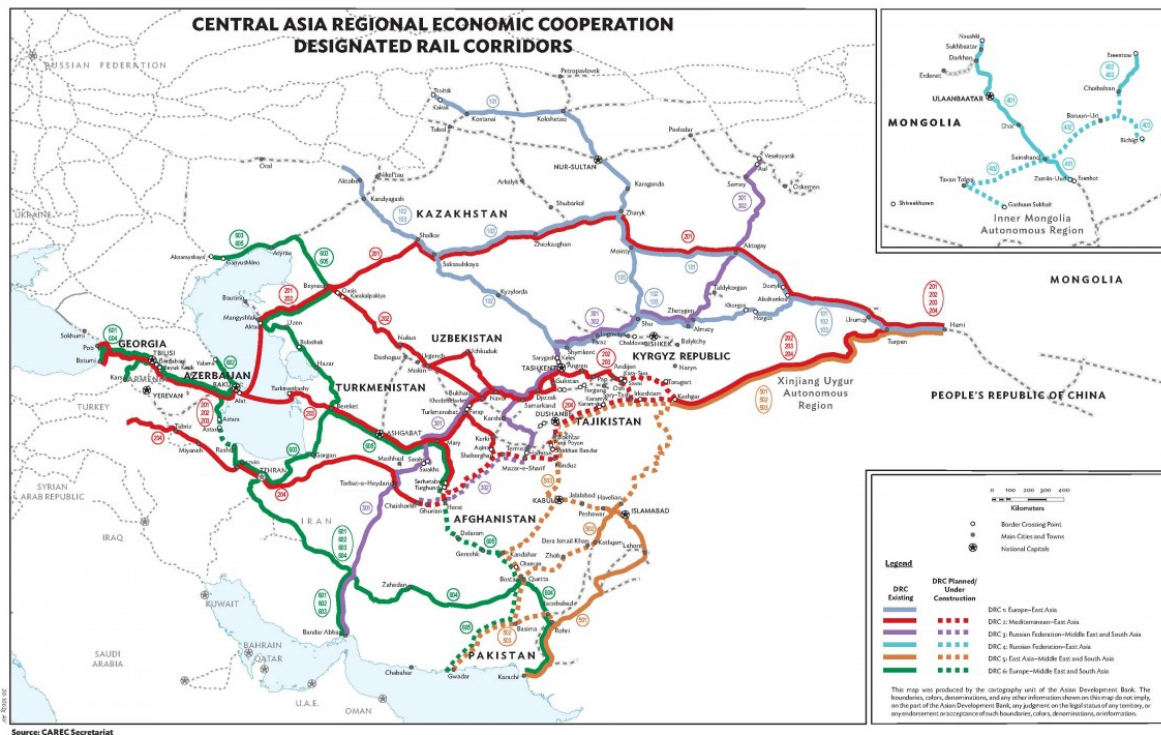
Source: World Population Review, 2023. Data from the Pew Research Center, 2015.

Annex 5: Map of Railway and Road Corridors connecting The Central Asia Regional Cooperation member countries (CAREC).



Source: Asian Development Bank. (2006). Connecting Central Asia A Road Map for Regional Cooperation, p. 9.

Annex 6: CAREC regional economic cooperation corridors.



Source: CAREC Secretariat. (2022). *Connecting CAREC: A Corridor Network*. Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC). https://www.carecprogram.org/?page_id=20

Annex 7: China Railway Express Routes.



Source: China Railway Express Construction and Development Plan (2016-20), SCMP.