



# Central Asia: the view from China

by Raffaello Pantucci

China's rise in Central Asia is not a new phenomenon. For the past decade, Beijing has gradually moved to become the most significant and consequential actor on the ground in a region that was previously considered Russia's backyard. In September last year, President Xi Jinping announced the creation of a 'Silk Road Economic Belt' running through the region. Although this declaration is the closest thing seen so far in terms of an articulation of a Chinese strategy for Central Asia, it nevertheless offered more questions than answers.

To understand China's approach to Central Asia, a wider lens needs to be applied to explore both the detail of what is going on and how this fits into a broader foreign policy strategy that is slowly becoming clearer under Xi Jinping's stewardship.

## The Long March westward

It is in the first instance important to look at the geographical link that exists between China and Central Asia. This flows principally through Xinjiang, China's westernmost province which is home to a disgruntled Uighur population, some of whom are currently locked in a painful struggle with the Chinese state. An ethnic minority in China (though almost 10 million strong, with a substantial diaspora in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Turkey), the Uighurs are closer in terms of culture and language to Central Asian

peoples like the Uzbeks. Stemming from Xinjiang (a region that covers a sixth of China's landmass but contains roughly 1-2% of its population), Uighurs have long complained that their identity is slowly being eroded by Beijing-sponsored Han Chinese immigrants. This alienation has resulted in protests, as well as violence directed against the authorities, the resident Han population, and local Uighurs seen to be collaborating with the central government. The most recent bout of serious civil unrest can be traced back to 2009, when roughly 200 people were killed during riots in Urumqi, Xinjiang's capital. In the wake of this event, Beijing's attention was drawn towards the troubled region, and a subsequent work plan laid out in May 2010 signaled a new push towards fostering development in the province.

This focus was not in fact completely new. Chinese officials had long worried about Xinjiang and the underdeveloped nature of China's western frontiers. While coastal provinces like Shanghai and Guangzhou were booming, some regions in the centre and west were left behind economically. In addition, China's foreign policy was almost exclusively focused on maritime disputes and the country's relationship with the US.

The reality is that if Xinjiang is to be developed, China needs a more prosperous region in its vicinity to trade with – and through. Far from the coast, Xinjiang's southern markets are closer to Europe or the Indian subcontinent than they are

