



CHINA'S EXPANSIONIST POLICY AND BORDER DISPUTES





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1. Introduction

China's growing influence on the international stage and its expansionist policies have become one of the most important geopolitical developments of today. Historically seeing itself as the centre of the world and describing other peoples as “barbarians”, China has placed this ideological basis at the centre of its expansionist strategies. This policy, deeply rooted in Confucian thought and Chinese political culture, aimed at assimilating neighbouring peoples and expanding their territories. From the Ming Dynasty to the present day, this strategy pursued by China has profoundly affected border disputes and power balances at the regional and global levels.

China's claims of sovereignty over East Turkistan and the assimilation policies it implements are seen as a part of this expansionist strategy. East Turkistan, which has been home to many Turkish states throughout history, is being systematically changed by China's demographic, cultural and economic policies. This report aims to evaluate the regional and global effects of China's strategic goals by examining China's historical and ideological background, its policies in East Turkistan and its border problems with other countries, especially India.

2. Ideological Background of China's Expansionist Policy

The ideological background of China's expansionist policy has been shaped by a series of events and strategic considerations throughout history. These policies are rooted in China's historical view of itself as the centre of the world and its characterisation of other peoples as “barbarians”¹. For a long time, China has long had a governing mentality of humiliating foreign societies and aiming to assimilate them. This idea was fuelled by Confucian ideologies and deeply rooted in China's political culture. In the historical process, China has assimilated various peoples and annexed their lands to its borders in line with this understanding².

During the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), oppressive policies against non-Chinese peoples were systematically implemented. During this period, intermarriage among non-Chinese peoples was prohibited, their surnames and dress were changed, their languages and religious symbols were banned. These policies were part of China's effort to assimilate foreign peoples and draw them into its cultural circle. In the 1890s, the prominent Chinese thinker Liang Qichao argued that the Manchu people should be assimilated, calling it the “law of history”.

In the early 20th century, Sun Yat-sen, an important figure in Chinese political thought, proposed the “Five-Nation Republic” model, aiming to unite Han Chinese, Manchus, Muslims, Tibetans and Mongols under a single nation³. However, Sun Yat-sen's understanding of nationalism contradicted his goal of assimilating these peoples into the Han Chinese⁴. In his speeches, Sun Yat-sen emphasised that these peoples should be assimilated into China and stated that nationalism should be worked on for China to become a great nationalist country⁵.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP), on the other hand, has exhibited varying approaches in its nationalities policy since its foundation. Between 1922-1937, the CCP accepted that other ethnic groups in China had the right to self-determination⁶, but between 1937-1945, this attitude changed and non-Chinese nationalities were opposed to the establishment of an independent state⁷. In 1946-1949, granting autonomy status to non-Chinese peoples was on the agenda⁸. However, by 1958, the Chinese Communist Party began to advocate the assimilation of all ethnic groups as the basis for development⁹.



3. Occupation of East Turkistan and China's Policies

East Turkistan has been home to many Turkish states throughout history and has attracted attention as a region of strategic importance. The Hun, White Hun, Gokturk and Uighur states have existed in this geography since the periods before Christ. In 840, after the collapse of the Uighur Khaganate, the Uighurs migrated to two different regions and established the Gangzhou Uighur Khaganate (848-1036) south of the Great Wall of China and the Kochu Uighur Khaganate (843-1209) in East Turkestan. In the same period, the Karakhanids State (840-1212) was established centred in Kashgar and Islam spread rapidly among the Turks with the acceptance of Islam by Sultan Satuk Buğra Khan.

In the 13th century, the Genghis Empire, followed by the Chagatai Khanate and the Yarkent Khanate, continued to rule in East Turkistan. However, in the 18th century, the Manchu Empire targeted the region and occupied all of East Turkistan in 1759. The people of East Turkestan resisted against this occupation for about a century and succeeded in removing the Chinese forces from the region by establishing the



Emirate of Kashgar under the leadership of Yakup Khan in 1865. However, after Yakup Khan's death in 1877, China reoccupied the region with the support of Russia and officially took East Turkestan under its rule with the Treaty of Ili in 1881. In 1884, the region was named "Xinjiang" and declared as a province of China¹⁰.

With the fall of the Manchu Dynasty in 1911, East Turkestan came under the control of Chinese militants. As a result of the uprisings that started in 1931, the East Turkistan Islamic Republic was established in Kashgar in 1933, but this state was bloodily abolished in February 1934 with the support of Soviet Russia. In 1944, the Republic of East Turkestan, which was re-announced in Gulca, was occupied by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1949 with the intervention of the Soviet Union and China being among the victorious states¹¹.

In 1955, the CCP declared that East Turkestan was granted autonomy, but autonomy was not granted in practice and the oppressive regime continued. During this period, many East Turkestanis had to flee from the Chinese occupation and migrate to neighbouring countries such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Egypt¹². Especially between 1959 and 1962, thousands of Uyghurs, Kazakhs and Kyrgyz Turks defected to the Soviet Union, especially Kazakhstan. The CCP's resettlement policy in East Turkestan started with the demobilisation of the People's Liberation Army in the region and the place-

ment of Han Chinese under the name of Bingtuan Forces in areas of strategic and economic importance¹³ .

The rich underground resources of East Turkestan have also been at the centre of China's occupation and settlement policies. The region is home to 78 per cent of the mineral diversity in China, and most of the minerals extracted from here are transported to the interior regions of China. These resources include important minerals such as chromium, salt, iron, copper, gold and coal. By exploiting these riches, China has oppressed the people of East Turkestan both economically and culturally and implemented various strategies to change the demographic structure of the region¹⁴ .

3.1 Forced Assimilation:

China's assimilation policies in East Turkestan are systematically aimed at systematically separating the indigenous people of the region from their cultural identity and turning them into individuals loyal to the Chinese Communist Party. This policy has its roots in the occupation of the region in 1949, but became more radicalised after Xi Jinping came to power in 2012. In 2017, Uyghur and Kazakh were banned in all schools in East Turkestan, and education in these languages was completely abolished. This step reached its peak in the process that started in 1950 when Chinese was added to the curriculum and made a compulsory subject in all primary schools in 1985.

The Chinese regime has gradually popularised Chinese-language education policies in East Turkestan since 1950, issued decisions encouraging bilingual education in 2004¹⁵ and introduced additional regulations to accelerate this policy in 2008. However, in practice, this process has led to the complete elimination of Uyghur and Kazakh Turkish from the education system. Since 2000, successful Uyghur students have been taken to schools in the inner regions of China and started to be educated under military discipline and completely deprived of their mother tongue. In 2017, mother tongue classes were completely abolished and the use of Uyghur and Kazakh in schools was banned.

These forced assimilation policies left deep traces not only in the field of language, but also on cultural identity and education system. Uyghur and Kazakh Turks were deprived of the right to receive education in their own language, children were raised according to Chinese ideology, and the indigenous people in the region were aimed to be cut off from their cultural roots. These policies of China are part of a comprehensive assimilation process aimed at destroying the identity and culture of the Turkish-Muslim people in East Turkestan¹⁶ .

3.2. Surveillance and Repression:

The concentration camps and surveillance system implemented by China in East Turkestan is one of the most radical and brutal examples of repressive policies. This policy is rooted in the Chinese regime's insecurity towards the people of the region and its desire to protect its strategic interests. Starting in 2014, one of the first concentration camps, the "Education Transformation Base", was established in Konasheher district of Kashgar province. Although these camps are officially promoted as de-extremisation camps, they are actually designed to systematically assimilate the Muslim Turkic people of East Turkestan and turn them into individuals loyal to the Chinese Communist Party¹⁷.

The appointment of Chen Quanguo as CCP secretary to East Turkestan in 2016 further radicalised this policy. Chen moved the repressive methods he had previously applied in Tibet to East Turkestan, rapidly increasing the number of concentration camps and expanding their capacities. In 2017, a massive 55,000 square metre camp was built in Peyzavat district of Kashgar at a cost of 103 million RMB¹⁸. According to a 2021 Newlines Institute report, the number of concentration camps in the region has reached around 1300-1400. In these camps, approximately eight million East Turkestanis are subjected to all kinds of torture and systematically tried to be separated from their cultural identity¹⁹.



Another face of this oppressive system is the children camps. Forcibly separated from their parents, children are placed in so-called boarding schools and tried to be raised according to Chinese ideology. According to a report published by the California-based RAND organisation in April 2020, 562,900 children were separated from their families and placed in 4387 boarding schools across East Turkestan in 2017. Since 2017, the number of children in these schools has increased by 76.9 per cent. These children are

usually between the ages of 1 and 10 and are taken away from their families and educated in line with the ideology of the Chinese Communist Party²⁰ .

A 2019 New York Times report revealed that approximately 500,000 non-Han Chinese children in East Turkestan were forcibly placed in boarding schools. This practice should be considered not only as physical oppression, but also as a psychological and cultural extermination policy. By separating these children from their families, the Chinese regime alienates them from their cultural roots and accelerates the process of assimilation. As a result, these camps and repressive policies are part of China's genocide policy in East Turkestan and represent serious human rights violations that should attract the attention of the international community²¹ .

3.3. Demographic Change:

The Chinese regime has been changing the demographic structure of East Turkestan by settling Han Chinese immigrants in the region since 1949, ignoring the fact that the original owners of East Turkestan are Muslim Uyghurs and other nations. After the Han migration, which was actively encouraged in the 1950-1980 periods, the Han population in East Turkestan, which constituted approximately 6% of the total population in 1947, constituted 40.6% of the total population in 2000²² .



	1945	1982	1996	2008	2010
Han%	6.2	40.3	41.1	39.2	40.4
Uyghur ⁰ %	82.7	45.7	50.6	46.5	45.8
Hui%	2.8	4.3	4.9	4.5	4.5
Kazakh%	1.1	6.9	8.0	7.1	6.5
Other%	7.2	2.8	2.8	3.1	2.6
Total million	3.6	13.1	16.8	21.3	21.8

The forced assimilation policies implemented by China in East Turkestan aim to detach the people of the region from their cultural identities and change the demographic structure through various oppressive methods. The Family Planning Policy, which has been implemented since 1971, started to be implemented more harshly in East Turkestan in 1986. Since 1986, it has been forbidden to have more than three children in rural areas and more than two children in cities, and since 2017, a one-child policy has been imposed²³. Birth rates in Kashgar and Khotan regions decreased by more than 60% between 2015-2018. In the same period, forced abortion and sterilisation practices became widespread, and 7,100 women were subjected to forced abortion in Khotan in 1990-1991²⁴.

Within the scope of the Sister Family Project, more than one million Han Chinese have been placed in the homes of Uyghur Turks since 2016, and the daily lives of these families have been under surveillance²⁵. At the same time, within the scope of forced labour policies, more than 80,000 East Turkistanis were forced to work in various factories of China between 2017-2019. These oppressive policies are part of a comprehensive assimilation aimed at transforming the cultural, demographic and economic structure of the people of East Turkestan²⁶.

4. Border Problems with China-India and Other Countries

Border issues between China and India have been at the centre of complex diplomatic and military disputes since the 1950s. The Sino-Indian War of 1962 was the culmination of these tensions between the two countries, creating a conflict that has persisted ever since. China's efforts to increase its regional influence and India's national security concerns have continuously escalated military and diplomatic tensions along the border²⁷. Through strategic provocations, China has aimed to weaken India's negotiating position and increase its own bargaining power. The border clashes in the Ladakh region in 2020 are an example of China's strategic provocations. These provocations have led India to increase military investments and develop strategic partnerships in the border regions²⁸.

China has border disputes with many of its neighbours other than India. China's sover-

eighty claims in the South China Sea is an important factor fuelling regional tensions. China continues its quest for regional hegemony by claiming rights over the islands and sea lanes in this region. This situation creates serious tensions especially in relations with the Philippines, Vietnam and other Southeast Asian countries²⁹. The sovereignty dispute between China and Japan over the Senkaku Islands also poses a significant problem in the relations between the two countries. Japan's rejection of China's claims over these islands affects regional security dynamics and increases tensions between the two countries³⁰. Moreover, China's border disputes with countries such as Mongolia reflect concerns over historical claims and its influence in the neighbouring regions. These border issues have both a historical and strategic dimension in China's relations with its neighbours and directly affect the overall security environment in Asia³¹.

5. China's Strategic Objectives

China's strategic objectives are fuelled by a complex set of factors with historical and ideological roots. Historically, China has been driven by an "Everything Under the Sky" mentality, keeping alive its desire to maintain its regional hegemony and expand its dominance in Asia. In the modern era, various strategies have been adopted to achieve this goal, such as military show of force, economic investments and diplomatic pressures. The construction of military bases and infrastructure projects in the South China Sea are just a few of the steps China has taken towards these strategic goals. China continues its efforts to achieve regional hegemony by controlling its relations with neighbouring countries and protecting its own interests.

Another important strategic goal of China is to gain economic control. To this end, large-scale global projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) have been developed. BRI aims to expand China's economic influence worldwide and make other countries economically dependent on China. This project serves both China's economic and strategic interests and helps it increase its influence at the global level. Energy security and control of natural resources are also among China's strategic objectives, and various investments have been made in Africa and Central Asia for this purpose.

Military superiority is another important component of China's strategic objectives. China is trying to increase its military capacity and gain superiority in the international arena through military modernisation efforts. Large investments in naval and air forces are indicative of China's strategic moves in this field. In addition, China's military strategies are shaped around modern military doctrines such as cyber warfare, space warfare and the use of advanced technologies, thus trying to increase the country's military power and international influence.

In conclusion, China's border disputes and strategic objectives affect regional and global security balances and reinforce China's growing influence in the international arena. China's border disputes with India and its problems with other neighbours are

among the key factors shaping China's strategic calculations and its role in international relations. These strategic objectives of China have the potential to profoundly affect the balance of power in Asia and global security in the long run³².

6. Conclusion

China's expansionist policies include a series of comprehensive initiatives shaped by ideological and strategic objectives with deep historical roots. These policies, which China has developed and implemented throughout history, aim to expand the country's sovereignty not only regionally but also globally. As seen in the case of East Turkestan, China aims to systematically change the ethnic and religious structure in the region through methods such as demographic change, forced assimilation, cultural oppression and economic exploitation. These policies are based on China's historical view of itself as the centre of the world and its efforts to assimilate other peoples.

China's border disputes with India and other neighbouring countries constitute another dimension of this expansionist strategy. China's sovereignty claims in the South China Sea, disputes over the Senkaku Islands and border disputes with countries such as Mongolia reveal China's efforts to maintain its regional hegemony. These strategic moves are a reflection of China's use of military, economic and diplomatic power and seriously affect the security balance in the Asia-Pacific region.

In conclusion, China's expansionist policies and strategic objectives have important implications at both regional and global levels and shape the future orientation of international relations. China's policies have the potential to change the balance of power in Asia and will have long-term effects on global security and stability. In this context, the international community needs to closely monitor China's expansionist policies and develop appropriate strategic responses.

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