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Xinjiang in Postwar China's Frontier Politics, 1945-1949: A Reassessment

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Abstract This study will demonstrate that, as early as the end of the Sino-Japanese war in summer 1945, both Han and non-Han Chinese bureaucrats who dominated China's northwest were already undertaking political activities of their own, relatively independently of intervention by the Nationalist central government. In other words, during the initial stages of the postwar interregnum, an ostensibly "KMT-ruled" Xinjiang province was behaving not unlike other Chinese ethnic frontier regions, such as Outer Mongolia and Tibet. The Nationalist leaders in the northwest borderlands, like their Tibetan and Mongolian counterparts, appeared to be following their own independent policy line, a line that might eventually have led them away from the political, diplomatic and military orbit of metropolitan Nationalist China. Postwar China's Central Asian political landscape was thus more intriguing and complicated than one might imagine.

Keywords Kuomintang, Chinese Communist Party, Nationalist China, Xinjiang

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1. Introduction

The Nationalist-Communist power struggle in the post-World War II interregnum (1945-49), a period usually depicted as the "Chinese civil war", is an important topic of Chinese historical research, and one that continues even today to attract much scholarly attention. Research into this critical period is considered significant because it helps explain why the Chinese Communists, whose military and political might immediately after the end of the Sino-Japanese war (1937-45) was by no means comparable with that of the American-backed Nationalist (Kuomintang or KMT) regime, were able to overturn the entire political landscape within four years. Moreover, an investigation of postwar Chinese history enables us better to understand how the Communists managed to take over China's far-flung territories in such a speedy manner, thus bringing the whole of the nation under their control. In reviewing existing literature, however, we notice that most works on this topic have focused on mainstream domestic politics and military confrontation between the two parties on the main battlefield of China proper, placing the Chinese civil war in the international context of the postwar Soviet-American rivalry in East Asia. Susanne Pepper, for example, analyzes how the ruling Nationalists lost the civil war not just militarily, but also by alienating the civilian population through corruption and incompetence. (Pepper, 1978). Odd Arne Westad explores major development leading up to the Chinese Civil War from the traditional perspectives of the Chinese Communist Party, Kuomintang, United States, and Soviet Union. His basic arguments are that the Chinese civil war had originated with the emergence of the Cold War and set the terms for the American and Soviet intervention in global domestic conflicts over the next four decades (Westad, 1993; Westad, 2003). Accordingly, while previous authors did excellent works on the interpretations of the chaotic history of China's civil war, they have narrated only a partial history. Received wisdom covers only the eastern half of China; yet the Communist "liberation" of China's vast western border territories, largely inhabited by non-Han Chinese minorities, remains veiled in shadow.

Indeed, the political landscape of China's postwar periphery is an intellectual unknown quantity still awaiting the study it deserves. Consider the situation in the strategically significant Central Asian province of Xinjiang, to which Chinese Nationalist authority triumphantly returned in 1942-43. Why did the provincial government in Ürümqi (Tihwa), then still in the hands of KMT-appointed officials, hastily declare political allegiance to Mao Zedong on September 25, 1949, before the new Communist regime in Beijing had even been officially inaugurated? Why did this group of KMT bureaucrats in the far Northwest, still in effective command of more than 100,000 well-equipped Nationalist forces, capitulate to the Communists in Beijing in such a hurried fashion before any resistance could be launched? Why did the Nationalist military leaders in Xinjiang, considerable numbers of whom were die-hard anti-Communists, simply give up fighting the slowly approaching People's Liberation Army (PLA) at a moment when the latter were still battling inconclusively and laboriously with Muslim cavalry formations thousands of miles away in southern Gansu, Shaanxi and Qinghai provinces? The political behavior of the Xinjiang provincial authorities on the eve of the Communist takeover is even more puzzling and problematic when we discover, from recently declassified archival materials, that at this critical juncture both the United States and Soviet Union seriously considered supporting the establishment of a regional bloc in order to slow down, if not entirely prevent, the entry of Communist influence into northwest China (Kesaris ed., 1982, reel 1; *FRUS*, 1949, Vol. IX, 520-523, 1039-1040).

Drawing extensively on official printed documents and unpublished primary sources, particularly a huge body of Nationalist Chinese archival material recently made available to scholars, this paper seeks to reevaluate postwar Xinjiang from the perspective of Nationalist China's intriguing ethnopolitical frontier agenda. In addition to the published diplomatic papers of the United States and secondary literature, this research specifically consults a variety of archival materials from the British National Archives, the British Library, the Academia Historica (Taipei), and the Archives of the Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica (Taipei). This study will demonstrate below points: First of all, as early as the end of the Sino-Japanese war in summer 1945, both Han and non-Han Chinese bureaucrats who dominated China's northwest were already undertaking political activities of their own, relatively independently of intervention by the Nationalist central government. Secondly, during the initial stages of the postwar interregnum, an ostensibly "KMT-ruled" Xinjiang province was behaving not unlike other Chinese ethnic frontier regions, such as Outer Mongolia and Tibet. Thirdly, the ruling Nationalist leaders in the northwest borderlands, like their Tibetan and Mongolian counterparts, appeared to be following their own independent policy line, a line that might eventually have led them away from the political, diplomatic and military orbit of metropolitan Nationalist China. Lastly, this paper argues that postwar China's Central Asian political landscape was thus more intriguing and complicated than one might imagine. It is hoped that this study will serve as the first step towards reconstructing a clearer history of this hidden facet of the Chinese civil war.

2. Xinjiang returns to the Nationalist fold: 1942-1946

A vast, remote, and sparsely populated region, Xinjiang did not officially become a province of China until 1884, when the Qing court pacified the Muslim rebellion and re-conquered Central Asia. It was ethnically and culturally distinct, dominated by non-Han Chinese Muslim peoples. Xinjiang's distance from the chief centers of Chinese power and culture, together with obstacles to communication and transportation, made it extremely difficult for Chinese leaders to bind the province to the rest of the country. Between 1912 and 1928 Xinjiang was under the administration of Yang Zengxin, an ex-Qing official who acknowledged the authority of the Chinese republican government, but to all intents and purposes paid it no attention. Yang was assassinated in 1928 by his political enemies in Xinjiang, and his unpopular successor, Jin Shuren, was more corrupt but less efficient than Yang. The provincial regime under Jin was even less concerned about obeying Chiang Kai-shek's new Nationalist central government in Nanking. In the spring of 1933, Jin was toppled from power in a Muslim holy war and fled to China proper. Thenceforth, the province's strongest warlord, Sheng Shicai, seized power, and Nanking later confirmed him as the new leader of Xinjiang (Whiting & Sheng, 1958, pp. 3-20; Mackerras, 1994).

Yet, Sheng Shicai, who was of Manchurian background, also had little to do with Chiang Kai-shek and the southern KMT Nationalists. Before long, Sheng adopted a policy of close rapport with the Soviet Union, which was, in economic as well as logistical terms, closer than China's heartland. The Soviets provided Sheng's provincial regime with various kinds of technical aid and, on more than one occasion, with military support against Muslim rebels in Central Asia. Sheng ruled this vast territory with high-handed independence from 1933 onwards and, like his predecessors, gave Chiang's central regime little more than nominal allegiance (Forbes, 1986).

Nevertheless, the political landscape in Xinjiang changed dramatically during World War II. In 1942, the supposedly invincible Soviet military machine was catastrophically defeated by the invading Germans. On hearing this news, Sheng Shicai shrewdly decided to stop cooperating with Moscow and to embrace Chiang Kai-shek, who by now was receiving military, financial and diplomatic backing from the United States. The well-known Soviet 8th Regiment Infantry Force stationed in Xinjiang, along with numerous 'technicians' and 'advisors' dispatched from Moscow to support Sheng's provincial authorities, were obliged to withdraw. In their wake, the military, economic and political authority of the KMT was systematically introduced into the province, along with an American and British diplomatic presence. In the fall of 1944, Chiang replaced Sheng with one of his most trusted frontier and political advisors, Wu Zhongxin, as Xinjiang's new provincial governor. This turn of events signified the full extension of Chinese influence into the province for the first time since 1911 (Forbes, 1986, pp. 157-162; MFAA-1, 197/1, Minute of conversation dated March 7, 1950).

The Soviet Union was certainly unhappy with this development. Although it was rather difficult for the beleaguered Red Army to do anything about its declining position in the remote Chinese Central Asia, Moscow could employ at least one strategy to counterbalance the growing Nationalist and American influence in the region. Moscow covertly encouraged separatism in Xinjiang, and incited local Muslim ethnic minorities to strive for self-rule and challenge the newly arrived KMT administration. The result was a series of large-scale Muslim rebellions in Xinjiang's "Three Districts", Ili, Tachen and Ashan, in the fall of 1944, which led to the establishment of an "East Turkestan Republic (ETR)" at Kulja (Benson, 1990; Wang, 1999). The situation was no better in the southern part of the province: in mid-1945, rebel forces, consisting mainly of local Kazakh-Uighur and Kirghiz Muslims, also began anti-KMT campaigns. At one point in August 1945, the rebels captured the strategic oasis of Tashkurgan on the Xinjiang-Pamir border before advancing to besiege Kashgar, the biggest city in the whole Altishahr region of southern Xinjiang. Kashgar's possible fall caused tremendous panic among local Han Chinese officials and citizens alike (OIOC, L/P&S/12/2405, Telegram from British Consulate in Urumqi to British Embassy China, September 2 and November 1, 1945; *FRUS*, 1945, Vol VII, 1007-1008).

To consolidate the return of a KMT administration in Chinese Central Asia, Chiang Kai-shek instructed his officials to open direct negotiations with the ETR regime. In the fall of 1945, General Zhang Zhizhong, Chiang's close confidant, then serving as Director of the Generalissimo's Northwestern Headquarters, flew to Ürümqi for face-to-face discussions with Muslim rebels from Kulja. With much political sophistication and skill, the capable Zhang was able to reach a Peace Agreement with Kulja. Under this agreement, the KMT agreed to organize a Xinjiang "coalition government" including ETR members and chaired by Zhang himself. Zhang was also willing to make concessions to the Kulja members, providing that the territorial and administrative integrity of Xinjiang was guaranteed (Benson 1990, 42-66).

While the KMT-ETR ceasefire seemed promising in the north of Xinjiang, Nationalist garrison troops, stationed in Kashgar and Yarkand since the removal of Sheng Shicai, began to use military means to pacify the Muslim rebels in the south. At first, the Muslims continued to hold most of the region between Yarkand and the Kashmiri frontier, but after a series of military operations launched by the better-equipped Chinese forces, the southern rebels gradually lost their hold on the territory. By the time Zhang Zhizhong's new provincial government was formally inaugurated in Ürümqi in July 1946, Nationalist forces had cleared the rebellion from the Pamir region and reopened the traditional Sino-Kashmiri trade route that had been sealed since the early 1940s (OIOC, L/P&S/12/2402, British Consulate General in Kashagar to Government of India, November 21, 1946; *FRUS*, 1947, Vol. VII, 678-682). From a wider historical viewpoint, the Muslim secessionist movement in Chinese Central Asia had ironically provided the KMT authorities in Ürümqi with an opportunity to move their troops into most of the oases in southern Xinjiang, and thus to firm up their previously tenuous control over the Altishahr region and the Karakoram as well as the Pamirs.

3. The Beitashan Incident of 1947

With Chiang Kai-shek's confidence and authority, General Zhang Zhizhong was able to quieten the Muslim rebels and restore relative peace and order in postwar China's northwestern borderlands. It is not therefore surprising that Zhang is widely portrayed as having played a critical role in stabilizing and maintaining the postwar KMT's territorial and political façade in Xinjiang. However, debate over the future political and administrative status of the province was not without division between the Nationalist center in Nanking and senior officials in Ürümqi, most of whom were now Zhang's loyalists. The emergence of such a division may be understood in the wider context of postwar China's shifting frontier and ethnopolitical scenario: in return for Soviet participation in the Anti-Japanese War, the KMT Government was obliged to formally recognize the *de jure* independence of Outer Mongolia, or more accurately "The Mongolian People's Republic" (MPR), in the summer of 1945 (Garver, 1988,209-230).Immediately afterwards, Chiang declared in a speech on August 24, 1945, that China's postwar policy would afford Tibeta "high-degree of autonomy." According to Chiang, if the Tibetans possessed the capacity for self-government and a strong determination to attain independence, his government would help them to achieve the same status as the Mongols in Outer Mongolia (FO 317/46212, British Embassy China to Foreign Office, August 26, 1945; FO 436/17097, British Embassy China to Foreign Office, August 29, 1945).

These political developments in postwar Outer Mongolia and Tibet would inevitably prove a great psychological boost for China's other traditional frontier communities, emboldening their leaders to seek more political autonomy from the Nationalist center. It is worth examining the previously overlooked story of how senior officials in Xinjiang endeavored to achieve this end. The Beitashan Incident of 1946 is a key chapter of this story and demonstrates clearly the political divisions between Nanking and Ürümqi in the immediate postwar era.

After Zhang Zhizhong's coalition provincial government with ETR members was formed in 1946, the ETR was still allowed to keep its administration intact in the Three Districts, where Han Chinese authority remained weak and fragile (OIOC, L L/P&S/12/2402, British Consulate in Urumqi to British Embassy China, September 24, 1946). In the summer of 1946, Osman Batur, an important ETR leader in the Ashan District, who was then at odds with other ETR elements presumably owing to internal struggles for power and local resources, decided to turn to the once-hated Han Chinese and began to move against the ETR. Secret contact ensued between Osman and the Xinjiang provincial regime; from whose top military leaders Osman was able to receive certain military aid. It has also been suggested that officials in Ürümqi might have been planning to use Osman as their 'agent' against the ETR members and thus assert their authority over the Ili-controlled Three Districts (MFAA-1, 112/82-6, Chinese Foreign Ministry memorandum, June 24, 1947; OIOC, L/P&S/12/2306, British Embassy in Moscow to Foreign Office, September 17, 1947).

In November 1946, feeling unable to remain any longer in his old power base in Ashan, Osman led his Kazakh forces to Beitashan (BaitakBogdo) on the border between Xinjiang and the MPR. In the first half of 1947, armed clashes ensued between ERT forces and Osman's Kazakh irregulars, now equipped with KMT-supported munitions (*FRUS*, 1947, Vol. VII, 557-558; MFAA-1, 112/82-1, Chinese Foreign Ministry memorandum, June 17, 1947). Meanwhile, local leaders and the people of the Three Districts quickly voiced numerous complaints against Osman. In April 1947, Osman found himself officially accused of "stealing sheep and other animals" by the ETR members at Ili, who accordingly urged the Ürümqi authorities to arrest and punish this "Kazakh bandit". Yet Zhang Zhizhong and his provincial officials took no immediate action and were instead reported to have furnished Osman and his Kazakh followers with further supplies of food, ammunition and other necessities (MFAA-1, 112/82-1, Xinjiang Provincial Government to Chiang Kai-shek, June 15, 1947).

In May 1947, the MPR government reported that a division of three hundred Han Chinese and Kazakh troops had illegally entered Mongolian territory at Beitashan and had arrested and taken away some Mongolian border guards. The MPR therefore issued an ultimatum to the Xinjiang provincial government, demanding that the arrested soldiers be returned without delay. Ürümqi did not reply to the MPR, presumably because no senior officials in Xinjiang were able to verify events in the no-man's land on the Sino-MPR frontier. On June 5, the MPR sent four planes on a surprise bombing mission against the Chinese border post at Beitashan. Bombing continued June 6, 7, and 8, and more than thirty Chinese soldiers were reported killed or wounded in the raids (FO 405/17601, British Embassy China to Foreign Office, July 1, 1947).

When Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist regime recognized the formal independence of Outer Mongolia in mid-1945, the boundary between Xinjiang and the MPR, now a national border rather than a provincial one, remained disputed and was yet to be demarcated. Parties on both sides regarded the border in the Beitashan region as "undefined and awaiting further investigation". Nevertheless, long before the formal independence of the MPR, there were guard posts in this controversial frontier zone, held by the Xinjiang provincial authorities on one side, and Outer Mongolians on the other. When Osman withdrew his group into this area from Ashan in the central Altai Mountains, he was camping on lands that traditionally had been summer grazing pastures used by both Kazakhs from Xinjiang and Mongols from the MPR. It is therefore reasonable to suggest that Osman's irregulars had unconsciously thrust beyond the de facto "line of control" in the Beitashan region, which provoked the MPR into sending forces to drive them back (FO 371/66443, Foreign Office Minute Paper, June 17, 1947; MFAA-1, 112/82-1, Chinese Intelligence Report, June 1947).

It was nearly impossible for the KMT political advisors in Nanking to discover what was really going on in this remotest corner of the Xinjiang-MPR border. Nevertheless, upon hearing of this sudden outbreak of border conflict, top Nationalist officials regarded it as an opportunity to capitalize upon the news by soliciting international support in their disagreements with the Soviet Union and the MPR. Besides, for the KMT, the Beitashan incident had the additional advantage of drawing attention away from the increasingly chaotic economic and political situation in China proper (FO 405/17912, British Embassy China to Foreign Office, March 5, 1948; *FRUS*, 1947, Vol. VII, 559-560). So from June 1947 onwards, Nanking indefatigably arranged press conferences and endeavored to convey to the whole world that "Soviet planes" and MPR ground forces had "invaded" Chinese territory. Meanwhile, still lacking a detailed account of the incident, the KMT demanded the immediate withdrawal of Mongolian troops from Xinjiang, and urged the international community, particularly the U.S. Government, to keep an eye on Soviet activities in Chinese Central Asia. Nanking's Foreign Ministry lodged several official protests with both the Soviet Union and the MPR government, insisting that Beitashan was garrisoned by loyal Han Chinese and Kazakh troops, and that Soviet actions had been aimed at intimidating the Kazakhs into becoming pro-Soviet. Enthusiastic Nanking officials organized a tour of Xinjiang with a view to sending Western journalists to Beitashan to examine Soviet activities there. To attract even wider attention both at home and abroad, Nanking hastily declared that General Bai Chongxi, then Minister of National Defense, would soon be flying to Xinjiang to investigate the whole affair (MFAA-1, 112/82-2, Chinese Foreign Ministry to Chinese Embassy in Moscow, July 8-11, 1947).

The Xinjiang provincial authorities were completely at odds with the Nanking government regarding the latter's handling of the Beitashan Incident. General Zhang Zhizhong, whose status had been elevated to "Director of the Nationalist Northwestern Headquarters", thought it extremely unwise of Nanking to protest against the Soviet Union before it had clarified whether the planes that had bombed the border area were indeed Soviet and not Mongolian. Zhang was severe in his criticism of Nanking's intention to overstate, if not manipulate, what he deemed a mere "regional conflict" that could and should be solved with the minimum of fuss (MFAA-1, 112/82-1, Xinjiang Provincial Government to Chinese Foreign Ministry, June 12, 1947). Furthermore, on hearing that General Bai was ready to set out from Nanking, Zhang immediately implored Chiang Kai-shek to cancel Bai's inspection tour, warning that his presence in Xinjiang could only complicate the already delicate political situation in northwest China, and would no doubt engender strong suspicions from the ETR separatists and Moscow alike. The consequence, warned Zhang, along with the new Xinjiang governor Masud Sabri, could be a re-divided Xinjiang. At the insistence of Zhang and other senior officials in Ürümqi, General Bai's trip to the Northwest was called off at the last minute (MFAA-1, 112/82-1, Xinjiang Provincial Government to Chiang Kai-shek, June 12, 1947).

From the summer of 1947, fighting was to continue on a reduced scale for at least another year between Osman's Kazakh irregulars and the MPR border soldiers around the ill-demarcated border in the Beitashan region. According to British sources, one of the biggest armed clashes took place in January 1948, when a Xinjiang armed detachment of up to 70 cavalry troops penetrated 75 kilometers into the MPR and attacked the inhabitants of Wienchi-Somona

KabdoskiAimak (FO 371/69631, British Embassy in Moscow to Foreign Office, February 27 and April 6, 1948). But towards the end of 1947, the whole event was generally petering out into a mutual exchange of allegations of border infringement by the KMT and the MPR. Without the cooperation they needed from Zhang Zhizhong and the Ürümqi authorities, strategists and policy planners in Nanking would be forgiven for thinking it rather difficult to continue manipulating the Beitashan Incident for their own propagandist or political advantage. Yet perhaps the higher echelons of the KMT in Nanking were more alarmed that the local authorities in Ürümqi, rather than themselves, were the ones with the upper hand in directing Nationalist China's foreign and frontier politics. The Nationalist center must have found it hard to stomach the realization that Zhang and the Xinjiang provincial regime he led could refuse one of the most influential Nationalist ministers of the day entry into his domain.

4. Xinjiang and Sino-Hunza relations: 1947-48

Senior KMT advisors in Nanking had plenty of reasons to worry about Northwestern issues. In mid-1947, the ETR at Ili still firmly controlled at least one fifth of the territory of Xinjiang and constituted a persistent threat to the provincial regime in Ürümqi, which itself sought to escape KMT central control, or so it appeared to Nanking. Two episodes around 1947-48 provide evidence that Nanking took this view. On the pretext of relieving Soviet pressure in Chinese Central Asia, General Zhang Zhizhong proposed in summer 1947 that efforts be made to introduce British influence into Xinjiang at the earliest possible opportunity. He suggested that Ürümqi should attract a number of large-scale Indian industries and commercial enterprises into Xinjiang, so as to establish British financial and economic interests in the province (MFAA-2, 172-1/0113, Xinjiang Provincial Government of Chinese Foreign Ministry, July 1 and 23, 1947).Yet Zhang's scheme, which he regarded as novel, urgent and significant, was repeatedly rejected by Nanking's foreign policy chiefs, who thought that the plan would come to nothing since apost-Raj Nehru government in India would be incapable of counteracting Soviet influence in Central Asia (MFAA-2, 172-1/0113, Chinese Foreign Ministry to Xinjiang Provincial Government, August 9, 1947).

Just when Nanking finally rejected Zhang Zhizhong's suggestion, Masud Sabri, who had succeeded Zhang as new governor of Xinjiang, broached another proposal that once again embarrassed the KMT center. Masud claimed that, in order to cope with intricate external affairs, his new provincial government should establish a Foreign Affairs Commissioner's Office at Kashgar under the joint supervision of Nanking and Ürümqi. The Nanking Foreign Ministry reluctantly agreed to this, and such a Commissioner's Office was eventually set up in mid-1948 (MFAA-1, 110/18, Chinese Foreign Ministry Special Agent in Urumqi to Foreign Ministry, August 20, 1947; Xinjiang Provincial Government to Chinese Foreign Ministry, April 25, 1948). In addition, Masud's administration seriously considered starting to manage its foreign relations without consultation with Nanking. This idea, which Masud revealed in the Xinjiang provincial government's annual report, gave rise to serious concern in Nanking. Although at one point a group of pragmatic advisors in the Executive Yuan was prepared to consider ceding more power to Ürümqi, officials in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs resolutely opposed anything that would reduce their authority over China's foreign policy planning (MFAA-2, 172-1/1340, Executive Yuan to Chines Foreign Ministry, July 12, 1948).

Perhaps the most notable indication that Nanking was gradually losing its grasp of foreign and frontier affairs in Central Asia is the story of China's abortive attempt to bolster its position in Kashmir. In early 1947, Nanking's highest officials were keenly debating China's future position in Central Asia in the aftermath of British rule in India. Fearing that the Soviet Union would take advantage of the end of the Raj and the geopolitical vacuum it created to infiltrate the Pamirs, Kashmir and Xinjiang, a group of KMT frontier policy designers proposed that China should endeavor to win over as many Muslim tribal states in Kashmir as possible (MFAA-1, 119/4-1, Chinese Foreign Ministry memorandum, February 27, 1947). In the minds of Nanking's policy chiefs, this became the first step in a grandiose plan by which China was to counterbalance Soviet influence in Central and South Asia. Moreover, by restoring 'traditional' ties with tribal states in the Kashmir and Pamir regions, such as Hunza (Kanjut), Ladakh and Nagar, China might be able to reassert its territorial claim over the historically undetermined Pamir borderlands. In March 1947, apparently with the final consent of Chiang Kai-shek, these ideas were consolidated into a concrete Chinese démarche for Central Asia (MFAA-1, 119/4-1, Chinese Foreign Ministry to Xinjiang Provincial Government, March 8, 1947).

Senior officials in Xinjiang also favored a positive policy towards Kashmir and the Pamirs, yet with rather different considerations. In Zhang Zhizhong's view, if the Xinjiang government could establish close ties with certain Kashmiri tribal groups, it could perhaps then gradually absorb these tribal territories into its administrative orbit. Thus, Xinjiang's military, financial and political interests would stretch further south into the whole of Kashmir and the Pamirs (MFAA-1, 119/4-1, Chinese Foreign Ministry to Xinjiang Provincial Government, July 12, 1947; Xinjiang

Provincial Government to Chinese Foreign Ministry, September 25, 1947). Before long, a chance presented itself to both the Nanking and the Ürümqi authorities. In September 1947, shortly after the transfer of power in India and the outbreak of armed conflict between India and Pakistan, the Mir of Hunza surreptitiously sent his envoys across the Xinjiang-Kashmiri border to Kashgar. According to the Mir himself, the uncertainty of Kashmir's political future after the British withdrawal prompted him to seek Chinese aid in case ofany threat to his tiny court. The Mir's envoys meanwhile requested the renewal of the "old friendship" between Hunza and Xinjiang, as had existed during the Qing imperial period. Specifically, Hunza would pay an annual tribute of one and a half ounces of gold sand to Kashgar, in return for grazing rights on the Sino-Hunza border (MFAA-1, 119/4-1, Xinjiang Garrison Force to Chinese Foreign Ministry and Defense Ministry, September 29, 1947).

On reading reports from officials in Kashgar of the arrival of the Hunza envoys, Chiang Kai-shek immediately summoned his top advisors for careful analysis. Based on very limited, if not biased, information about recent Sino-Hunza interactions in the distant southern Xinjiang region, KMT leaders in Nanking were convinced that a visit by Hunza's envoys was indeed a good opportunity for China to further consolidate its presence in Central Asia (MFAA-1, 119/4-1, Chinese Foreign Ministry memorandum, October 4, 1947; Chiang Kai-shek's order to Foreign Ministry and Defense Ministry, November 5, 1947).Despite doubt among KMT policy planners that Hunza was genuinely willing to place itself under China's political sway, frontier strategists drew up a detailed plan in early December 1947, along with four principles for negotiations with Hunza's envoys in Kashgar. Chiang approved these principles in person, and soon afterwards sent them to General Zhao Xiguang, then Deputy Commander-in-Chief of the Xinjiang Garrison Force, who had been authorized to deal with the Hunza issue (MFAA-1, 119/4-1, Chinese Foreign Ministry to Chiang Kai-shek, December 4, 1947):

1. Hunza's status should be confirmed as an inalienable part of Chinese territory;
2. The Hunza State should be transformed into an "autonomous district" under legal jurisdiction of the Xinjiang Provincial Government;
3. Mohammad Jamal Khan, Mir of Hunza, should continue to hold his hereditary title and should concurrently serve as Administrative Commissioner of the newly created Hunza autonomous district;
4. Whereas the Mir of Hunza would retain authority over internal affairs, control over Hunza's foreign and military affairs should be handed over to the Chinese central government.

However, at the end of 1947, just when negotiations between General Zhao Xiguang and Hunza's envoys at Kashgar were nearing consensus based on these principles, Nanking suddenly advised Zhao to shelve the issue immediately and declared that no agreement should be made without Nanking's final approval. Nanking meanwhile urged Zhao to escort his Hunza guests to Ürümqi right away and await further instructions (MFAA-1, 119/4-1, Chinese Foreign Ministry to Xinjiang Garrison Command, December 18, 1947). This abrupt change in attitude is understandable: at almost the same time, news broke of a coup in Gilgit, causing much anxiety among the Nationalist Government. On October 16, 1947, the politically capricious ruler of Kashmir announced his state's accession to India, further accentuating tensions in the Muslim-populated part of Kashmir. In early November, the restive Muslims of northwestern Kashmir besieged the residence of the Indian-appointed Hindu governor at Gilgit and forced him to surrender. A couple of weeks later, the Pakistan Government sent its own Muslim officials to administer the whole Gilgit area. Rulers of adjacent tribal states, including Hunza, reportedly expressed their desire to accede to Pakistan (OIOC, L/P&S/13/1860, India Office minute paper, December 11, 1947; MFAA-1, 119/4-1, Chinese Foreign Ministry memoranda, January 31 and February 20, 1948).

Uncertain whether the Mir of Hunza had changed his mind and had decided to join Pakistan, as the news reports said, Nanking felt it necessary to change policy and take a more cautious stance towards Hunza. This sudden shift in attitude was unacceptable to the Xinjiang bureaucrats who were dealing directly with Hunza's envoys. In a telegraph back to Nanking, General Zhao Xiguang and his colleagues in Ürümqi angrily explained that Hunza's envoys had repeatedly assured them that their Mir would accept the Nanking-proposed "Four Points." This group of Xinjiang bureaucrats therefore considered itterribly unreasonable to procrastinate further over the negotiations, which had neared completion. In addition, General Zhao went as far as to complain openly about his embarrassing status as chief negotiator representing Nanking but lacking its full trust and respect, and the associated frustration and humiliation (MFAA-1, 119/4-1, Report from Xinjiang to Chinese Foreign Ministry, December 24, 1947). Rather than following Nanking's instructions, shelving negotiations and escorting Hunza's envoys to Ürümqi, General Zhao determined to act alone. On January 7, 1948, Zhao and the Mir's envoys signed a *modus vivendi* between Hunza and

China (MFAA-1, 119/4-2, Report from Xinjiang to Chinese Foreign Ministry, January 12, 1948). The signing of this agreement, as Zhao later stressed, implied that the tribal state of Hunza was henceforth ready to come under Xinjiang's provincial administration, and to recognize China's 'suzerainty', if not sovereignty (MFAA-1, 119/4-2, Xinjiang Garrison Command to Chinese Foreign Ministry, January 12, 1948).

The signing of such a *modus vivendi* put senior KMT officials in Nanking in a rather embarrassing position. The Nationalist leaders were in the dark about the state of affairs around the remote Sino-Pamir border, but they felt forced to endorse the actions of the Xinjiang local officials. Nanking's concerns were not entirely groundless. According to the British, as well as signing a Sino-Hunza agreement supposedly based on Nanking's "four principles", General Zhao Xiguang had gone far beyond his remit as a regional military leader during the negotiations. In order to lure Hunza's envoys into signing the *modus vivendi*, Zhao was said to have orally agreed to allow the Hunza people to enter Xinjiang to graze certain ill-demarcated and disputed pastures on the Xinjiang-Pamir border. It was also reported that, without first consulting Nanking, Zhao had hastily granted the Mir of Hunza the right to issue Chinese passports for travel in Xinjiang, and pledged to grant the Mir other privileges, such as a mail runner service between his court at Baltit and Kashgar (OIOC, L/P&S/12/3303, British Office of Deputy Commissioner at Peshawar to British High Commissioner in Pakistan, February 2, 1948). Having failed to verify whether Zhao had in fact exceeded his mandate during the Sino-Hunza negotiations, Nanking was eventually left with no alternative but to tacitly accept this 'unauthorized' *modus vivendi* without making it known to the outside world (MFAA-1, 119/4-2, Chinese Foreign Ministry memorandum, January 14, 1948).

In early 1948, Nehru's new Government of India, seeking a peaceful settlement in the dispute with Pakistan over Kashmir, took the matter to the United Nations. In January and February 1948, the United Nations Security Council held at least eight meetings on the India-Pakistan conflict, in which a free and impartial plebiscite under UN observation was seriously considered as a means of determining Kashmir's political future (Dasgupta, 2002, 23-49; Bamzai, 1973, 767-770).In the face of an increasingly internationalized Kashmiri issue, and their worsening position in the Chinese Civil War, KMT leaders no longer deemed it imperative to deal with Sino-Hunza relations, and hoped to wash their hands of the matter entirely. Yet Nanking's disposition was not matched by the behavior of officials in remote Xinjiang. In later February 1948, General Zhao Xiguang dispatched Pan Guangfu, one of his senior advisors, to Baltit (FO 371/69624, Report by British Consulate-General at Kashgar, April 5, 1948). Pan returned to Kashgar in April with the Mir of Hunza's admission that he had indeed kept in close touch with the Pakistani government after the coup in Gilgit, and had even secured their firm political and military support. The Mir also informed Pan that he had mobilized his troops, now equipped with Pakistani ammunition, to join the Pakistani army's fight against India. However, the Mir had not elaborated on whether these troop movements signified an intention to join Pakistan (MFAA-1, 119/4-2, Chinese Foreign Ministry memorandum, April 8, 1948). Although the Mir had again expressed his desire to restore "old friendship" with China, he had also made it explicit that, as Hunza "had always been independent" of foreign powers, he would not agree to the unconditional submission of his state to Chinese jurisdiction (MFAA-1, 119/4-2, Letter of the Mir of Hunza Mohammad Jamal Khan, February 15, 1948).

Unwilling to admit that the nearly finalized agreement with Hunza had reached an impasse, General Zhao Xiguang again ordered a close confidant, this time Major-General Lu Gongwei, to lead a small-scale mission to Baltit. Without notifying Nanking, this unauthorized mission left Kashgar in June 1948, crossed the Xinjiang-Pamir border, and reached Hunza on August 2, with a view to pressing the Mir to ratify the *modus vivendi*. Although the Mir pledged to Lu that there had been no change of policy on his side regarding the restoration of the "old friendship" with China, he nevertheless stressed again that he could not submit his state unconditionally to external jurisdiction. When Lu ingeniously suggested signing another treaty to formally establish the relationship already agreed upon, the Mir tactfully declined (MFAA-1, 119/4-2, Xinjiang Provincial Government to Chinese Foreign Ministry, August 3 and September 1, 1948). Disheartened by the Mir's passive response, Major-General Lu returned to Kashgar by late August. Only then was his covert mission to Kashmir reported to Nanking.

5. Sino-Soviet negotiations over Xinjiang: 1948-49

In the latter half of 1948, as Chiang Kai-shek was fighting an increasingly difficult war with the Communists in China proper, Nanking's position vis-à-vis China's Central Asian affairs was also becoming more and more precarious. As it became obvious in autumn 1948 that the KMT would lose the civil war, the Soviet Union unexpectedly asked Nanking to reopen negotiations on trade and aviation rights in Xinjiang (*FRUS*, 1948, Vol. VII, 738-741). During Zhang Zhizhong's 1945-46 negotiations with the Soviet-backed ETR, he had once proposed drafting an agreement to facilitate trade, technological and economic interactions between Xinjiang and the Soviet Union, and launching

bilateral negotiations towards achieving these aims as soon as possible. Zhang apparently made this overture to win the ETR members' goodwill, yet no positive response was received from Moscow. As the KMT holdover China weakened, Moscow suddenly broached the issue of Sino-Soviet negotiations over Xinjiang. Moscow requested that talks should take place to renew the Sino-Soviet Air Agreement, which gave the Soviets a monopoly on flights between Alma Ata and Hami, and to conclude suspended negotiations for a friendly commercial treaty granting the Soviets mineral rights over Xinjiang's "colored and scarce minerals". Moscow further urged the Chinese to let it establish Soviet "trade agencies", with extraterritorial rights, in Xinjiang's major cities (*FRUS*, 1948, Vol. VII, 750-752).

Why did Moscow seek to open discussions with the Nationalist regime, which was rapidly collapsing? The U.S. government firmly believed that the Soviet Union was anxious to legalize and fortify its traditional status in Xinjiang while there was still a KMT central regime with which to deal. In addition, the Soviets were thought to be seeking to secure their special interests in Central Asia from a dwindling KMT regime rather than waiting to deal with a Chinese Communist regime that could not be relied upon to remain subservient to Moscow as it was already beginning to flex its muscles internationally (*FRUS*, 1949, Vol. IX, 1046-1047).In order to prevent the Soviets from monopolizing Xinjiang's rich natural resources and other trade privileges, the U.S. Government swiftly applied pressure on the KMT. The Nanking leadership, by then in desperate need of American support against the Communists and so anxious not to offend the U.S. Government, was therefore inclined to shelve the Moscow-proposed talks over Xinjiang. This inclination is betrayed by the fact that, from late 1948 until the spring of 1949, Nanking failed to send any official delegates to meet with the long-arrived, now impatient Soviet officials in Ürümqi (MFAA-1, 111/1, Report from Xinjiang to Chinese Foreign Ministry, March 10, 1949; *FRUS*, 1949, Vol. IX, 1058-1059).

Officials in Ürümqi by no means shared Nanking's negative stance towards the reopening of Sino-Soviet talks. In their view, since most of northern China was controlled by the Communists by early 1949, it would be very difficult for the northwestern provinces, at that point still free from immediate Communist threat, to obtain much-needed goods and supplies from China proper. Conversely, if there were a trade agreement with Moscow, a large inflow of goods could be expected from the Soviet Union, which would greatly improve financial stability in the whole of northwest China. Zhang Zhizhong and other regional officials in the Northwest therefore petitioned Nanking to send a delegate to Ürümqi to negotiate with the Soviets. If Nanking refused, the Xinjiang officials hinted, then they might think about starting talks directly with the Soviets independently of the KMT central government (MFAA-1, 111/1, Report from Xinjiang to Chinese Foreign Ministry, April 6, 1949; 119/5, KMT Northwestern Headquarters to Nationalist Government, June 12 and 13, 1949). In a reluctant face-saving gesture, Nanking sent a middle-ranking official from the Ministry of Communications to Xinjiang in late April 1949. Although the Sino-Soviet talks could now begin with Nanking's participation, Nationalist China's negotiating stance remained largely in the hands of the Northwestern bureaucrats (MFAA-1, 119/5, Chinese Foreign Ministry to Ministry of Communications, April 8, 1949; *FRUS*, 1949, Vol. IX, 1055-1057).

Within a month, the Sino-Soviet Air Agreement was renewed for five years, allowing the Soviets to retain their monopoly on flights between Hami and Alma Ata. The KMT regime, by now withdrawn from Nanking to Canton, had no alternative but to recognize the new agreement on May 31, 1949.As for trade and economic cooperation in Xinjiang, Soviet officials and the Ürümqi provincial authorities had, by the summer of 1949, worked out a draft agreement for the KMT leadership's approval. Yet Canton resolutely refused to ratify it, presumably owing to strong American pressure and perhaps the sense that there was no point in them endorsing such a highly controversial agreement in their defeated condition (*FRUS*, 1949, Vol. IX, 1061). In late August, the Xinjiang provincial government cabled Canton to make a final request for approval of the Sino-Soviet agreement, yet the KMT's uncooperative attitude remained steadfast. One month later, the whole provincial bureaucracy openly declared the shift in their political allegiance to the Chinese Communist Party: Nationalist China lost Xinjiang even prior to the inauguration of the People's Republic of China (FO 370/1933/L5649, Foreign Office memorandum, September 1949; *FRUS*, 1949, Vol. IX, 1062).

6. Epilogue

On April 1, 1949, an official delegation, sent by the KMT regime in Nanking, arrived in Peking to open peace negotiations with the Chinese Communist Party. After the decisive Communist victories in the 1948-49 winter campaigns and with its main forces catastrophically depleted, Chiang Kai-shek's regime was widely believed to be on the brink of demise. Earlier, on January 14 of 1949, the Communists issued their conditions for peace, demanding that Chiang should be punished as a "war criminal", and that his Nationalist Government be abolished. Although

Chiang declined to accept these conditions, he was nevertheless forced to resign the presidency a week later. His successor, Acting President General Li Zongren, quickly organized the peace mission to Peking, hoping that this last-minute effort would rescue his precarious regime from total collapse.

The peace mission was led by General Zhang Zhizhong, who by the spring of 1949 was deemed to be the "only hope" the Communist-besieged KMT had of avoiding annihilation by its deadly enemy, owing to his command of at least 100,000 troops in Chinese Central Asia. However, the result of the "peace negotiations" was disastrous for Li Zongren and his Nationalists. In May, Zhang suddenly announced his intention to "stay in Peking for a few more days" after the talks broke down. Zhang's decision to embrace the Communists thus became very apparent (Westad, 2003, 287-288).

With hindsight, Zhang Zhizhong's unexpected change in political attitude in the spring of 1949 seems to have been decisive in shaping a pro-Communist stance among senior officials in the Xinjiang provincial government, thus facilitating the smooth transfer of power in the region to the CCP in the early 1950s. This research does not intend to dismiss entirely such an orthodox argument. Nevertheless, as the foregoing cases and analysis have revealed, as early as the immediate aftermath of World War II, the group of KMT bureaucrats in charge of China's northwestern affairs, along with Zhang, who had cultivated them, were already trying to follow their own political, frontier and foreign policy line, ideally free from central intervention. Their view of how to manage Xinjiang's regional affairs differed greatly from how officials in Nanking viewed postwar China's frontier and foreign agenda in Central Asia. It is therefore reasonable to argue that Xinjiang submitted abruptly to the Chinese Communists, not so much because of the latter's invincible military march into northwest China. Rather, it was resulting from the fact that the KMT bureaucrats in Ürümqi, already having the upper hand in administering regional affairs, decided to make a timely switch over to Mao Zedong with a view to keeping their existing interests intact.

As can be seen from the above analyses, Xinjiang was a de facto independent region of China before 1942. It was gradually absorbed into the KMT administrative orbit after 1942-43, although the newly arrived Nationalist provincial authorities were constantly facing challenges externally and internally. For a long time in the scholarship, the center-periphery model applied to China describes a spatial, political, and economic relationship where a core region dominates a less developed periphery in China's western border regions. The thrust of this article is not to dismantle this interpretative framework. However, taking the history of China's far-flung northwestern region in the post-World War II era, it raises previously overlooked evidence that sheds new lights on the way in which the periphery (the provincial authorities in Xinjing) was able to create a favorable situation to outwit a declining center (the KMT central regime), or to find some space, albeit temporally, for political manipulation in the face of a rising, approaching new center (The Chinese Communists).

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Appendix