

SINKIANG:
PAWN OR PIVOT?

Allen S. Whiting

and

General Sheng Shih-ts'ai

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by Allen S. Whiting

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Sinkiang: Pawn or Pivot?

Bordering the Soviet Union on the north and west, Mongolia on the north-east, and Tibet on the south, the province of Sinkiang is virtually cut off from the rest of China by towering mountain ranges, and is further separated by ethnic and cultural differences. Its population is mainly Uighur and Kazakh, and Islam is the predominant religion. Because of these obstacles, Chinese control over the province has been, at best, ineffectual. However, China's problem has been Russia's gain, for the mountains that have sat as barriers to the Chinese have offered access to the Russians through passes and the Ili River Valley. In the days of the nineteenth century czarist expansion, Russian traders and settlers took advantage of these passes, and, in the twentieth century, the Soviet Union began to look upon Sinkiang as a possible gateway to China. Nor was the Soviet Union alone in this thought, for Japan, after the invasion of Manchuria, began attempts to penetrate dissident Moslem groups within Sinkiang.

Internal unrest and outside pressures turned the first three decades of the twentieth century into years of treachery and violence. Then in 1933 General Sheng Shih-ts'ai, a young Manchurian officer, restored order by taking over the government of the province. As a Marxist he collaborated with both Russian and Chinese Communists, although he professed nominal allegiance to the Republic of China. In 1942, however, he ousted all Communist influence and

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