

THE CHINESE COMMUNIST ARMY IN SINKIANG



Henry G. Schwarz

SINKIANG, the core of Asia, today is occupied by the largest army in its long history. Since its entry in 1949, the Chinese Communist Army has been by far the most important agent of the Peking leadership. Moreover, the scope of army activities in Sinkiang is unmatched in any other province of China.¹

Comprising an area of over 1.7 million square kilometers, Sinkiang (meaning "the new frontier") would cover most of the United States east

¹ In this article, Sinkiang is referred to as a province, although its official title given by the Communists in 1955 is "Sinkiang Uighur Autonomous Region." When comparing Sinkiang with other parts of China, the author omits Tibet, because Tibet is neither a province nor an autonomous region.

of Mississippi. In size, it is second only to Inner Mongolia among the provinces and regions of China. In terms of economic importance, it ranks near the top of the ladder.

Almost from the day they entered Sinkiang, Communist troops have been engaged in economic activities. The army has been in charge of practically all mining operations in the less accessible areas—the Altai, T'ien Shan, and Kunlun Ranges (Figure 1).²

² Regarding place names, in most cases Chinese transliterations are used. Alternate names and spellings are shown in the chart which accompanies the article. Also, of those names in either Chinese or Chinese transliteration, most but not all are spelled according to the Wade-Giles system. The major exception is Sinkiang; Wade-Giles spelling would be Hsinchiang.

Regular army units plus public security forces—which are under army command—supervise an unknown but probably large contingent of political and criminal prisoners in those mining sites. The army uses prisoners in building and repairing roads away

the province. In terms of number of personnel used and time spent, the army's main economic activities have been in agriculture. Land reclamation and farming have been concentrated in nine major centers operated by a segment of the army called the Produc-

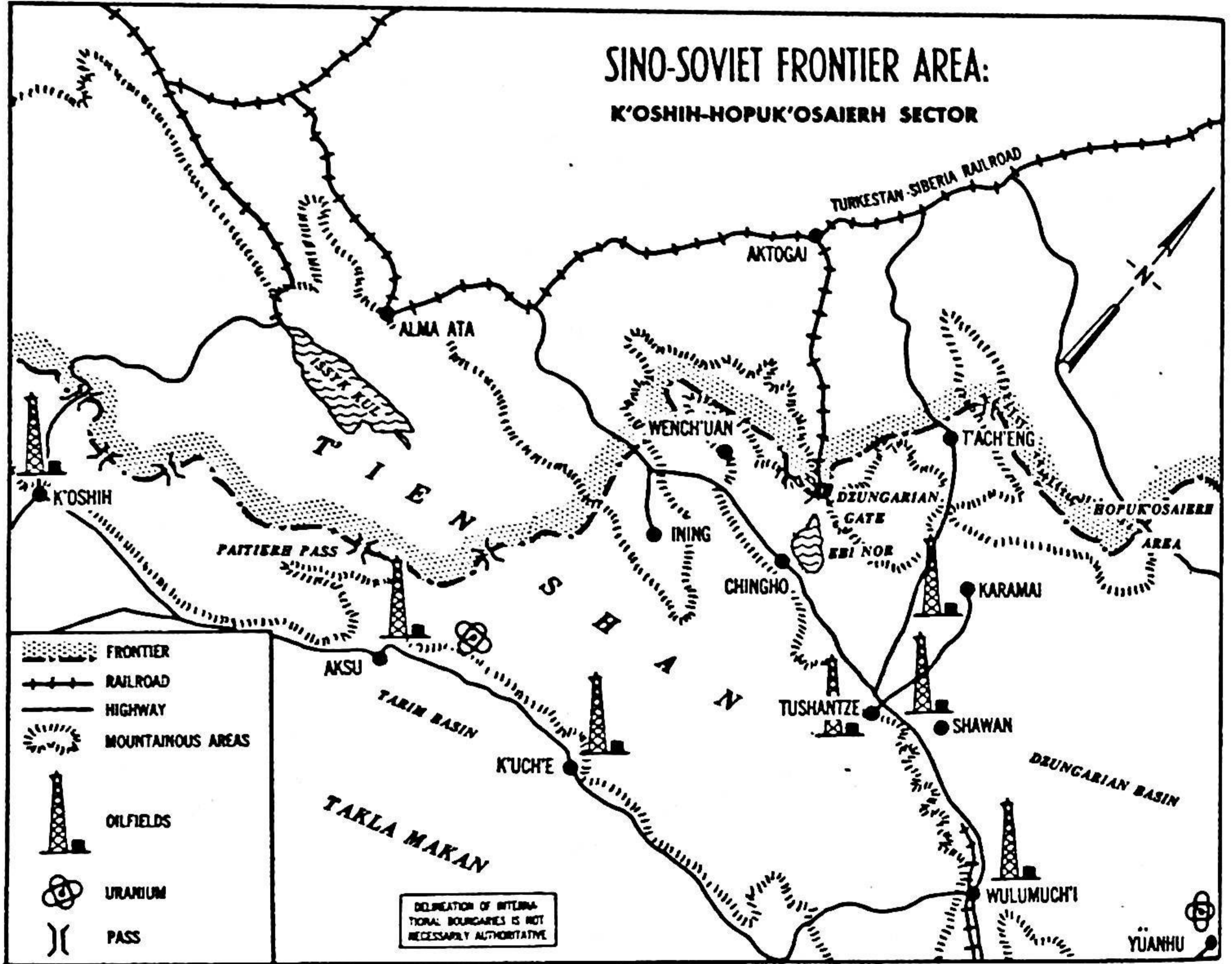


Figure 1.

from the population centers, and operates many factories, not only ordnance works, but also agricultural machinery plants. The army is also building the one railroad track leading into

tion and Construction Corps (PCC) formed in December 1954.

Sinkiang is also important to the central leadership for propaganda purposes. Because almost all minority populations in Sinkiang belong to the Moslem and Buddhist (Lamaist) faiths, actions taken by the central government in the province have much more influence in other areas of the world where these religions are practiced than the remoteness of Sinkiang and its small population would other-

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wise suggest. If the Peking leadership can create an impression in other countries of a benevolent policy toward religion in general, and of fair and equal treatment of ethnic minorities in particular, it could gain much-needed support among Buddhists and Moslems throughout Asia and Africa.

Army's Role

The army has played the major role in trying to bring about the peaceful acceptance of Chinese rule by the people of Sinkiang. Probably no army could achieve this goal and the Communist Army has fallen far short of it. The Chinese force which entered Sinkiang had two strikes against it from the beginning.

Sinkiang is the only Communist Chinese province which has an overwhelmingly non-Chinese population. Despite the massive migration of Chinese into the province, today they still constitute only about 30 percent of the estimated seven million inhabitants.

In the cities north of the T'ien Shan is found one of the most complex ethnic populations in the world; practically every one of the dozen or so ethnic groups in Sinkiang can be found there. In the countryside, as well as in the cities south of the T'ien Shan, populations tend to be more homogeneous.

The approximate location of some ethnic groups is shown on Figure 2. The largest group, Uighur, is concentrated in the string of oases girding the Takla Makan. All important centers except Wulumuch'i, the capital, are dominated by the non-Chinese.

To make the army's tasks even more difficult, the people of Sinkiang have a long history of struggles against Chinese rule. When the Communist Army entered Sinkiang in 1949, it

had been only five years since the suppression of the famous Ili revolt. Faced with deep-rooted antipathy, and charged with the task of rendering Sinkiang secure for the new government, the Communist Army took up positions near population centers, but mostly on wasteland so as not to impose on the population and thus rekindle old animosities. The army also tried to win popular support by helping out at harvest time, by mingling with the people during "Love the People" campaigns, and by learning minority languages.

Colonial Force

Such positive actions must be balanced against certain aspects of the way in which the army conducted itself in Sinkiang. Much relevant information has been made public in complaints voiced by non-Chinese during the brief "hundred flowers" period of spring 1957, and by refugees.

It appears that the Chinese Army operates in Sinkiang quite like a colonial force and treats the local population at times little better than chattel. In Wulumuch'i, for example, army units "improved" relations with the civilian population in 1957 by giving up certain practices. The tannery and cooked food workshops of the army's "August 1" cooperative were moved from the Moho irrigation canal because they polluted the civilian population's drinking water. The army slaughter house was removed from the residential area because it was offensive to the largely Moslem population. And a stop was put to the practice of random requisitioning of horse-drawn vehicles.

These few facts, quite trivial in themselves, are remarkable when one considers that the army's practices had been carried on for seven years.

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It is, of course, possible that they were resumed sometime after 1957.

How little success the army has had in its campaign to gain peaceful cooperation can be gleaned from the steady flow of reports concerning up-

More than 33,000 officers and men and some 880 army units in Sinkiang received special commendations for actions against anti-Communist guerilla movements; some of the engagements in which they participated as-

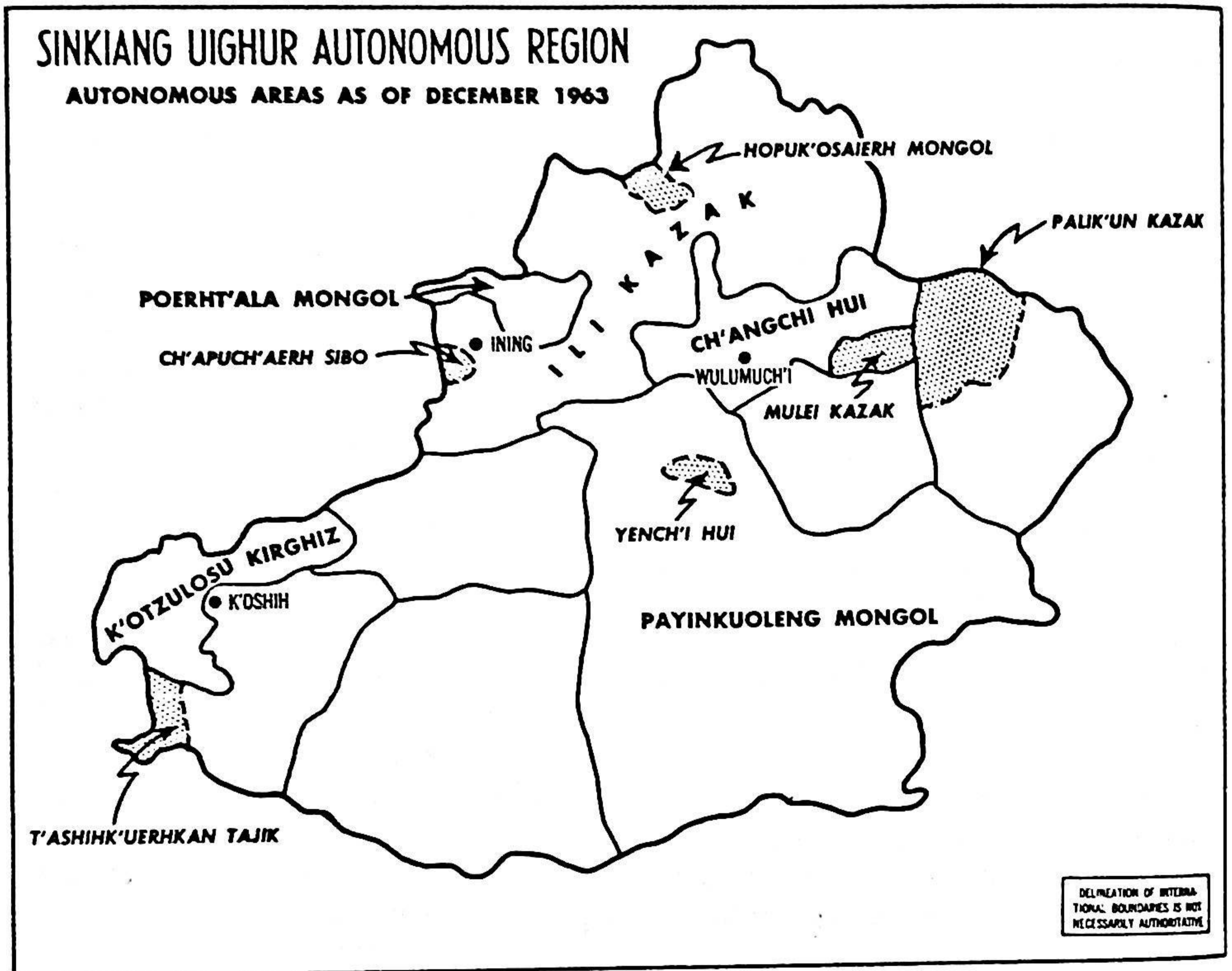


Figure 2.

risings in all parts of the province from 1949 until the present. Armed resistance against the reassertion of Chinese control was met with what was euphemistically called "bandit extermination campaigns." According to information given in a report in the provincial Chinese Communist Party (CCP) newspaper, the scope of these operations during the four years between 1950 and 1954 was quite considerable.³

³ Hsin-chiang Jih-pao, Wulumuch'i, 4 March 1954.

sumed major battle proportions. A certain battalion reportedly fought off seven "violent" attacks against the town of Iwu in Hami *chuan-ch'ü* (special district) during one 48-day period. Similar actions were reported from Hungliuhsia, Kuerhpassu, and Nanshanp'ingtap'an.

With the worsening of Sino-Soviet relations, the frequency and intensity of army suppression activities increased. Even if only some of the stories told by refugees are credible, the resulting image is one of unprece-

dented violence and savagery by the army. In 1957 the army smashed an uprising within its PCC. In April of the same year, according to official reports, a clandestine China Peasants Party was organized which seized arms from PCC guards and was joined by members of this army organization in fighting the regular army units.

The situation in later years, especially in 1962, assumed rather catastrophic proportions. The army was said to maintain huge concentration camps for the non-Chinese, that it machinegunned to death groups of Kazaks and Uighurs in Ining, and that it systematically crushed actual and potential centers of resistance.

Reasons

All other factors being equal, there are reasons to believe that the army would not have acted quite as harshly in the eastern part of China. A good deal of the probable difference in conduct was due to the general feeling of contempt for the non-Chinese (*ta han chu-i*). Equal stress must also be placed upon certain characteristics of Sinkiang which contribute to a sense of insecurity on the part of the Chinese in general and the army in particular.

It was known that many of the non-Chinese in western China, especially in the Ili region, were Soviet citizens—a group which included not only the so-called White Russians, but also many Kazaks, Kirghiz, and other non-Chinese people. Judging from reports since Sino-Soviet relations have become strained, the Chinese leaders considered these people as dangerous elements, a potential fifth column. It has been alleged that the Chinese, after having fired from their jobs large numbers of the non-Chinese,

tried to force the latter to give up their Soviet citizenship in order to be reinstated.

Army Strength

In light of these reports, it is not surprising that the army in Sinkiang has been increased from time to time. Shortly before the fall of the Kuo-mintang administration in Sinkiang, there were said to be 193,000 troops in the province. Most, if not all, of these were taken over by the incoming elements of the Communist 1st Field Army.

In January 1950 the Chinese deputized some 110,000 officers and men to agricultural activities in Sinkiang. Because the situation there was then still far from being settled, it seems certain that only a small percentage of the entire army was detached from military duties. A conservative estimate is 50 percent which, if correct, would indicate a total armed strength of about 200,000 troops. When the Chinese leaders ordered large-scale demobilization in eastern China, there is no evidence that this also occurred in Sinkiang. On the contrary, during the serious uprisings in 1958 and 1962, the government threw in several divisions of fresh troops from China Proper. To the best of my knowledge, they have never been returned to their former bases.

Recent refugees have called Sinkiang "one vast armed camp." The Chinese Communists themselves stated in early 1960 that the PCC alone was "several hundred thousand" strong. Assuming that the PCC made up no more than 60 percent of the entire army in Sinkiang, and that "several hundred thousand" means at least 300,000, the total strength at that time amounted to about half a million soldiers. With the sharpening of ten-

sion within Sinkiang since 1960, the army undoubtedly has been bolstered. The army's total strength in Sinkiang

PLACE NAMES

As Used in Article	Alternate Names and Spellings
Aksu	Ak'osu, Aqsu
Altai (mountains)	Alot'ai
Altai (city)	Alot'ai, Ch'enghua, Sharasume
Anhsi	Ansi
Chigelik	Ch'ichilik'o
Ch'inghai	Tsinghai
Chingho	Tsingho
Fuwen	Koktogay
Golmo	K'uerhmu
Hami	Qomul, Kumul, Komul
Hsining	Sining
Ining	Kuldja
Iwu	Aturyuk
Karamai	K'olamai
K'oshih	Kashgar, Shufu
K'uch'e	Kuche, Kucha
Kurla	Korla, K'uerhlo
Lanchow	Lanchou
Manass	Manassu, Suilai, Manas
Paitierh	Bedel
Shawan	Savan
Soch'e	Soche, Yarkand
T'ach'eng	Tahcheng, Chuguchak
Tsaidam	Ch'aitamu
Turfan	T'ulufan
Wench'üan	Wenchuan, Aerhshan
Wulumuch'i	Urumchi, Tihwa, Tihua
Yench'i	Yenki, Qara Shahr

today is estimated to be approximately 600,000.

Despite its large numbers, the

army has never felt secure enough in Sinkiang to permit any non-Chinese—the majority there—to hold important positions in higher army echelons. From 1949 until the present time, the Sinkiang army command has been controlled by Wang En-mao, a native of Kiangsi, who is both political commissar of the provincial military district and first secretary of the CCP Sinkiang committee. It is significant that both he and Wang Chen, commander of the 1st Field Army and commander of the Sinkiang Military District until 1952, were oldtime Communists who had worked with Mao in the Kiangsi Soviet.

It also appears that provincial affiliation of leaders is of some significance. T'ao Ch'ih-yüeh, for example, the last garrison commander of Sinkiang under the previous government, has been retained in high posts by the Communists. After 15 years he is still deputy commander of the Sinkiang Military District and commander of the PCC. Thus, his initial retention was decidedly not a temporary measure dictated by the absence of any alternative and politically acceptable officer. Rather, it is likely that T'ao has remained in high military posts because he is, like Mao, a Hunanese.⁴

Furthermore, there is no doubt that the single, most important task in the army, political indoctrination, was entirely in Chinese hands. The director of the political department was Tseng Ti, while Chang Chung-han

⁴ If this speculation is correct, it would mean that the frequently commented on phenomenon of Hunanese predominating at the highest leadership levels is also found along the periphery of the Chinese state. In extension of this line of reasoning, one might be tempted to speculate on what might happen to the present Hunanese-laden top leadership pattern at national and provincial levels after Mao's demise. If Teng Hsiao-p'ing emerges as the next undisputed leader, one might predict many crucial party posts in Peking and elsewhere taken over by fiery Szechwanese.

was deputy political commissar of the PCC until 1960 when he became Deputy Minister of State Farms and Land Reclamation in Peking.

Among identifiable non-Chinese top-ranking officers, all but one held non-political posts. A Tatar major general, Maerhkuofu, headed the Ili Military District in 1957-58 and in 1960 was deputy chief of staff of the Sinkiang Military District. There were also two Uighur officers. Apuliehtzu Muhan-mait'i was chief of the army's public security corps, but the last date that I have on him is 1954. The other, Major General Tsulung T'aiyehfu, also was a deputy chief of staff, but reportedly fled to the Soviet Union in early 1962.

The one non-Chinese who probably has some political influence in the army is Saifuting. He had joined the CCP long before 1949 and was one of the few survivors of the 1944 Ili revolt. His unimpressive military title—deputy commander of the Sinkiang Military District—gains in significance because of his concurrent posts as alternate member of the Party Central Committee and secretary of the party's Sinkiang committee.

'Second Army'

To ensure loyalty to the central leadership, the army in Sinkiang was permeated by a "second army"—the party. The latter's mode of operation was similar to that of any elite implanted within a larger organization, and periodic meetings of officers and men who were party members served to strengthen the bonds of identity as well as to transmit orders from party headquarters.

Little doubt exists that the CCP solidly controlled the army in Sinkiang, control that was quite evident at the apex of the military hierarchy

where more often than not the same man held concurrent posts in the army and in the CCP. Of the commanders just mentioned, for instance, all of the Chinese except T'ao Ch'ih-yüeh were also top-ranking party officials. By contrast, the non-Chinese military commanders—with the sole exception of Saifuting—remained outside the pale of provincial party power.

Strategic Position

Notwithstanding the fact that Sinkiang today is occupied by the largest army in its long history, that army's strategic position relative to external threats is weak.

Prior to Sinkiang's annexation to the Chinese Empire in the late 1800's, it was argued that unless the Chinese Army could secure a western frontier along the Pamir, T'ien Shan, and Altai Mountains, the non-Chinese regions—essentially Sinkiang and parts of Kansu and Ch'inghai—would remain threats to Chinese security.

As early as 1877, Tso Tsung-t'ang, who had just defeated the Moslem rebels and had secured Sinkiang for the throne, said: "To pay close attention to Sinkiang is to protect Mongolia, and to protect Mongolia is to shield Peking."

Within a strategic frame of reference which viewed as the potential enemy the various Moslem groups in Sinkiang, Tso's assessment was sound. As long as there had been no power or only a friendly power beyond the T'ien Shan, a Chinese army could reasonably hope to maintain over-all control of Sinkiang.

With Mongolia no longer a part of China, and with the worsening of Sino-Soviet relations, however, the strategic balance on China's western frontier has changed radically. For providing an optimum defense against

Soviet forces, a line around the Lanchow-Hsining perimeter would be much more advantageous to the Chinese than the present frontier in western Sinkiang. Needless to say, this alternative is not and cannot be contemplated by any Chinese government, not only for reasons of national pride but, more important, for economic reasons.

Today, the Chinese Army in Sinkiang is saddled with a topographical handicap nearly impossible to overcome. While the Kunluns and Pamirs provide good protection along Sin-

the Soviet border where the terrain permits relatively easy troop movements into Sinkiang—Aksu, Ili, the Dzungarian Gate, T'ach'eng, and Ho-puk'osaierh. Most vulnerable to an attack from the west is the Ili Valley which was temporarily annexed by czarist Russia between 1871 and 1881. This valley, of a cul-de-sac type, faces west toward the Soviet Union.

The Dzungarian Gate, historic invasion route into Sinkiang, is still of considerable strategic importance, and here the frontier is closer to the important Dzungarian Basin than in the

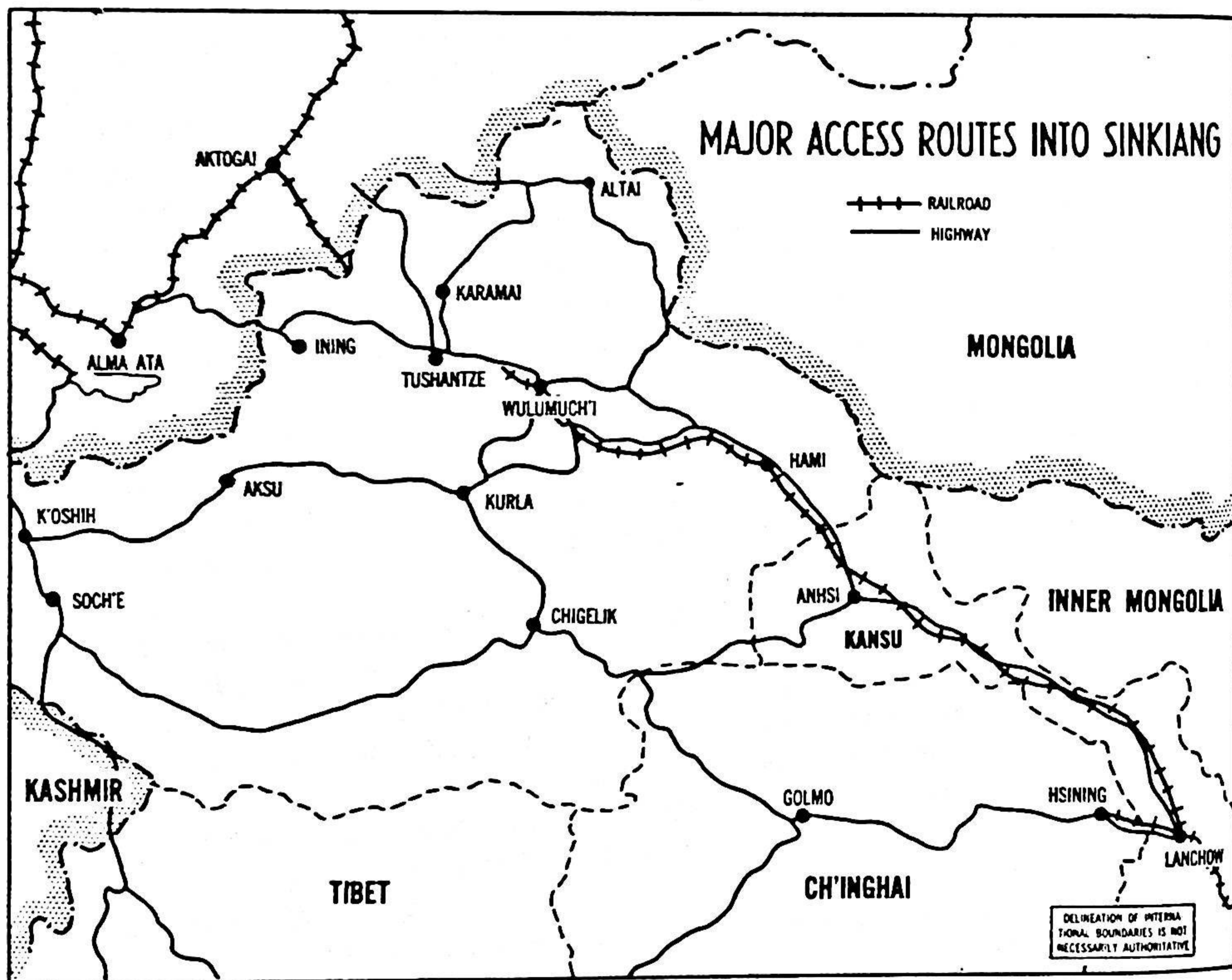


Figure 3.

kiang's southern and southwestern border, the western, northern, and northeastern frontiers remain relatively open to external threat.

There are five major areas along

Ili area. On the Soviet side, a railroad spur was completed in 1955 from Aktogai on the Turkestan-Siberia Railroad line to the frontier. From there it is an easy 100 kilometers to

the east-west arterial highway at Chingho.

Of the five frontier areas, only Aksu is located south of the T'ien Shan. It has, in my opinion, greater strategic importance than usually accorded by Western specialists:

- It is economically important because of tungsten, copper, oil, gypsum, and lead mined there.

- It is the halfway point on the most direct route between the great Uighur population center around K'oshih and northern Sinkiang which, in turn, is connected with China Proper by rail and highway.

- It is easier to reach from the Soviet frontier than any other point along that road. Although the terrain on the Soviet side is rugged, once sufficient forces are staged at the frontier they are in good position to sweep down to Aksu by way of the Paitierh Pass and the Kum Arik River.

Improving Position

The Chinese Communist Army evidently established its PCC reclamation centers with an eye toward improving its strategic posture vis-a-vis the Soviet Union as well as preventing the converging of dissident forces within Sinkiang. Of the nine identifiable reclamation centers, the largest are near Aksu, in the Ili Valley, Yench'i, Manass, Turfan, and Altai. Aksu and the Ili Valley have already been mentioned. Yench'i controls the vital transportation hub of Kurla, while the Manass center lies athwart the east-west arterial highway in the Dzungarian Basin.

Likewise, the troops near Turfan secure the point where the road from China Proper branches into two roads, one running north and the other south of the T'ien Shan. The Altai reclama-

tion area, established at the time of the 1958 Kazak revolt, seems to serve to anchor the defense lines erected against both the Soviet Union and Mongolia.

Strategic Factor

While the Chinese Army has improved to some extent its strategic position, a second major strategic factor—access routes to Sinkiang—is still heavily weighted in favor of the Soviet forces. Good road and rail lines across essentially flat regions in Soviet central Asia enable the Soviets to transport rapidly large military convoys to the Sinkiang border.

In contrast, the Chinese have only three highways and one railroad leading into Sinkiang from the east. The railway, constructed with Soviet assistance, begins at Lanchow and has now reached a point west of Wulumuch'i (Figure 3).⁵

Under normal conditions, it could serve to transport large forces from the interior of China. But in an anti-Soviet strategic situation, the railroad and one of the highways become highly vulnerable. Both pass through Kansu's Hohsi corridor—in the Yümen-Anhsi sector.

For several generations Chinese military strategists have been conditioned by the uncomfortable thought that this corridor is within all-too-easy reach of any hostile force stationed in Mongolia. It must be assumed that, in case of a Sino-Soviet conflict, Soviet as well as Mongol forces will strike from Mongolia. The terrain between the Mongolian frontier and the Kansu corridor is relatively flat and well suited for swift

⁵ Planned to reach the Soviet frontier at the end of 1957, it is now seven years behind schedule. Under present circumstances, the Chinese probably will not build the railroad past Wusu where, in all likelihood, a spur will be constructed to link up the oil center around Karamai with the interior of China.

mobile warfare. It would be a relatively easy task for Soviet troops to cut off both the railroad and the highway leading into Sinkiang during the first few days of hostilities.

Construction

The Chinese Communist Army command has, of course, been aware of this problem. In 1952 Chinese Army engineers started the secret construction of the Aksai Chin Highway across a portion of Ladakh. It is the only land link between western Tibet and southern Sinkiang. Intensive road construction within Tibet has resulted in a network of crushed stone and gravel roads capable of supporting heavy traffic between the eastern provinces across Tibet into Sinkiang.

This road, though, is not particularly useful in case of a major conflict in central Asia. While there is little potential danger of this road being cut off by outside forces from either Indian or Pakistani territory, it has two serious drawbacks:

- Very difficult climatic and topographical conditions throughout Tibet which make the road impassable at times.

- The Khamba tribesmen and other dissident forces operating in central and eastern Tibet; with some additional outside help, they could well be in a position to interrupt the flow of troops and war material from China Proper into Tibet and ultimately to Sinkiang.

Evidently, the primary significance of the Aksai Chin Road is its use as a means to shuttle garrison troops stationed in western Tibet into Sinkiang and vice versa.

In comparison, the third road is, from a strategic point of view, most important. Reportedly, the Communist Chinese Army has improved the

trail which ran from Golmo in Ch'inghai to Chigelik in eastern Sinkiang. At present, there exists a continuous road connection between Hsining and K'oshih via the Tsaidam Basin. This road has one great advantage over the other two—there is a virtual absence of any outside threat. It is farthest removed from the frontiers and the population in the western part of Ch'inghai is still extremely sparse.

Main Emphasis

Despite the relatively secure Golmo-Chigelik Road, the over-all strategic posture of the Chinese Army in Sinkiang will remain poor in the foreseeable future. It is for this reason that the army maintained in Sinkiang since the sharpening of tension with the Soviet Union is far larger than ordinary security requirements would seem to require.

The army's strategic contingency plan in Sinkiang appears to call for sufficient forces on hand to stem any initial attack long enough—perhaps as much as three to four weeks—for massive reinforcements to be brought in from eastern China. There is no evidence of any possible alternative plan, such as a temporary strategic withdrawal to the Lanchow-Hsining perimeter. On the contrary, army road construction in Sinkiang suggests that the main emphasis is laid on north-south rather than east-west mobility.

In a recent report, it was claimed that the traveling time between the city of Altai in the north to Soch'e at the southern rim of the Takla Makan has been reduced to 15 days. This significant reduction still makes the north-south routes relatively slow in comparison with the main east-west artery between Hami and Ining. Nonetheless, this statement, plus the known

fact that Chinese Army engineers, assisted by countless prisoners of the PCC, have continuously repaired and improved the mountainous road between Wulumuch'i, Kurla, and Chigelik, are clear indications of Chinese strategic intentions.

In the event of major hostilities between China and the Soviet Union, the two chief Chinese objectives would probably be the blocking of the east-west artery, preferably west of Tushantze to protect the oilfields, and the rapid transfer of troops from the north to the south and vice versa as the tactical situations demanded. It is to meet the second requirement that the almost feverish activity on the Wulumuch'i-Kurla-Chigelik Highway gains in significance. Surely, from a purely commercial point of view, such large efforts and expenditures are uncalled for.

The chief commercial and agricultural areas of southern Sinkiang are concentrated in the K'oshih-Soch'e region and the speediest and most direct route to Wulumuch'i is by way of the K'oshih-K'uch'e Road. But in case of hostilities, this road's Aksu-K'oshih sector is quite vulnerable because of its proximity to the Soviet border. Therefore, by establishing a major road between Kurla and Chigelik, the Chinese Army has considerably increased its maneuverability under adverse conditions within Sinkiang.

As noted earlier, Chigelik is also the western terminus of the road leading from Golmo and ultimately from Hsining-Lanchow. Thus, the newly completed road between Chigelik and

Kurla would permit the relatively rapid and safe infusion of troops from eastern China into Sinkiang in both northern and southern—or more accurately, southwestern—directions.

If China is ever to hope to achieve full industrialization, she must rely heavily on Sinkiang. Many of the most crucial materials are found in appreciable amounts only there. China, not particularly well endowed with any raw materials except coal, suffers an enormous oil shortage.

When Sino-Soviet relations were still cordial, China was supplied with all types of petroleum products and the latest petrochemical equipment. Since then, the oil shortage has become so critical that the once mighty air force is almost completely grounded. Besides the older Yümen fields in Kansu's Hohsi corridor and those near Mangyai in Ch'inghai, the major oilfields are located around Karamai and Tushantze in northwestern Sinkiang. Secondary fields are near Shawan, Wulumuch'i, K'uch'e, Aksu, K'oshih, and Tsep'u.

Tungsten, another element indispensable for industrialization, is primarily found in Sinkiang, especially around Fuwen and Wench'üan. The only known desposits of uranium are located in the Pamirs, north of Yüanhu and northeast of Aksu, all in Sinkiang. Besides, the most important gold mines in China are in the Kunlun Range in southern Sinkiang.

It is patently clear, then, that one of the army's main tasks is to render secure one of China's most important sources of raw materials.