

Soviet Economy by Thierry Lalevée

A Central Asian Common Market?

The Soviets are trying to steal a march on a Chinese proposal to reopen the ancient Silk Route.

At a time when the Soviet republics of Central Asia are saying almost nothing about themselves these past weeks, it is the predominantly Muslim region of China's Xinkiang that is on the verge of explosion.

This is hardly surprising. The revolt has been brewing for several years and could only have been encouraged by a Chinese policy that swung between the most brutal repression and minimal concessions, the surprising result of good relations between Beijing and Teheran. Some Iranian mullahs have been authorized in the last few years to conduct religious studies. Certain carefully selected Chinese clerics, have also been sent to Iran for educational study. A few tens out of millions—but at a time when the region as a whole had been racked by a decade of wars and revolts, the region of Xinkiang, at one time the terminus of the Silk Route linking the heart of Asia to the Near East and Europe, could not remain quiet very long.

In spite of the warming of relations between Moscow and Beijing, the Soviet authorities have been at pains to hide their satisfaction, taking revenge for the Chinese policy of supporting the Afghan resistance, and the Chinese vigilance to queen their pawn at Soviet expense in the region. Moreover, a new wave of repression in Xinkiang will not fail to be denounced by the Islamic countries being courted by the Chinese regime.

Hence it is no mistake that at the moment that the People's Republic of China is confronted with its own Islamic crisis, the Russians are profiting

by retaking the offensive in the region.

In so doing, they are turning to their own advantage a few of the proposals originally put forth by Chinese diplomats. Thus, in 1987, when relations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the People's Republic of China became official, the toasts that were made were for a reopening of the "thousand-year-old Silk Route linking Iran and China, across Afghanistan and Pakistan." The geopolitical consequences of these toasts were evident: The great Asiatic power wished to become the protector of an Islamic bloc opposing its two rivals—the Soviet Union on the one side, obviously enough, and India on the other side.

In an article that appeared at the end of March in the official Soviet government daily *Pravda*, a Professor Hidoyatov from the University of Tashkent in Uzbekistan launched precisely these two proposals:

First, the creation of an Asiatic Common Market which, in addition to the Muslim Soviet Central Asian republics—Uzbekistan, Tadjikistan, Turkmenistan, and Kirghizia—would join together Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran; and, after bringing up to date the "old Silk Route," also joining with the abovementioned countries, the predominantly Muslim north of India, Xinkiang in China, and other countries such as Iraq, Syria, or Lebanon in the Middle East.

What is left out of this proposition is as important as what is mentioned: Nothing more is said of China or India as far as that goes, not to speak of Turkey.

Far from being frivolous, the proposal of Professor Hidoyatov represents quite well the ideas and plans the Soviets have in progress. It comes on the heels of several years of debate on the question, and the emplacement since the end of 1988 of various systems of commerce which have allowed countries like Iran to trade directly with their Muslim neighbors without having to go through Moscow. Large parts of the recently ratified accords by the staff of the Twelfth Soviet-Iranian Economic Commission imply that Iran will take under its charge a number of the needs of regions such as Azerbaijan.

Moscow is already further along in directly demanding that countries such as Kuwait and Saudi Arabia make large investments in the industry and infrastructure of Central Asia. The strategy could not be more clear: For Moscow, it is a question of unburdening itself of the economic weight these regions represent, which are systematically looted and underdeveloped, at the same time as maintaining their political control, which allows them to keep Central Asia as a whole as a sort of military-strategic buffer zone.

Moscow sees nothing but advantage in that. In addition to foreign investments, its prestige in the heart of the Islamic world will come out the greater. It remains to be seen if this is effectively satisfying for the regions themselves, as they become more and more tempted to follow the Eastern European model, including political and military independence.

Moscow's trump card seems to be the fact that the majority of the countries of the region are more attracted to the Soviet propositions, rather than supporting popular movements in Central Asia, which carries the risk that they could end up trying to clean a grease spot off their own clothes.