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Frontiers and Borders: Military and Diplomatic Histories of China's Provinces

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Introduction

China's vast periphery has long been more than a line on a map. It is a mosaic of mountain passes and river chokepoints, oases and ports, marches and corridors where armies moved, caravans negotiated risk, and diplomats translated local bargains into statecraft. This book approaches those spaces through the lens of the province. By following military campaigns, fortifications, and cross-border negotiations one province at a time, we can see how local geographies and political economies forged distinct provincial identities that, in turn, shaped national security choices.

The approach is comparative and granular. Each chapter begins with the terrain: deserts and steppes in the north and northwest; plateaus and high valleys along the Himalayan arc; jungled ridges and river gorges in the southwest; and, to the east, an intricate littoral of bays and islands. Geography did not determine outcomes, but it created strong constraints. Beacon towers are legible in the Hexi Corridor because sightlines stretch for miles; riverine flotillas matter on the Middle Yangtze because water is the most efficient road; island airfields and coastal forts emerge as rational answers to maritime exposure. Within those constraints, provincial officials, garrison commanders, merchants, monks, and village militias improvised.

Military history in these pages is inseparable from diplomacy. Borderlands were meeting grounds where treaties and truces were tested by smugglers' incentives, monastic influence, seasonal migration, and the ambitions of neighboring states. The archives reveal consular correspondence on shipping rights in treaty ports, memorials requesting grain for frontier garrisons, and provincial gazetteers listing forts, customs posts, and courier stations. Just as often, local arrangements—market days in a river town, tax holidays for caravanserais, the siting of a ferry—did as much to stabilize frontiers as formal agreements drafted far away.

The provincial lens also highlights politics from the middle outward. Viceroys and governors-general bargained with the center for troops and silver; late-imperial banner forces were supplemented by regional militias; warlord regimes reconfigured command chains; and, in later periods, party-state institutions layered new security logics onto older infrastructures. Ethnic and religious communities—Uyghur, Tibetan, Mongol, Hui, Zhuang, Miao, and many others—were not simply governed; they negotiated, resisted, enlisted, and shaped the security landscape through institutions ranging from monasteries and banner leagues to merchant guilds and lineage associations.

Methodologically, the chapters integrate campaign narratives with infrastructural history. Forts, passes, arsenals, depots, railheads, airstrips, and telegraph lines are

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treated as actors in their own right—technologies that enabled or blocked strategic choices. Logistics and finance receive sustained attention: who paid frontier troops, how supplies moved through corridors, why some provinces could mobilize quickly while others faltered. Where possible, the analysis draws on provincial gazetteers, military maps, treaty collections, travelers' accounts, and recent archaeological and preservation work on walls, batteries, and way stations.

The book speaks to readers of military history and foreign policy alike. For the former, it offers campaign studies grounded in terrain and institutions rather than in great-man narratives alone. For the latter, it demonstrates how "national strategy" often emerges from provincial problem-solving under uncertainty. Time and again, we observe the same pattern: local officials craft workable border settlements; central authorities ratify or revise them; neighboring powers test the new equilibrium; and infrastructure—walls, roads, rivers, ports—mediates every step.

Finally, the provincial case studies invite a reconsideration of continuity and change. Some corridors—Shanhai Pass, the Hexi route, the Hanzhong gateway, the Straits-facing coast—recur across centuries as strategic constants, even as the technologies deployed upon them evolve from beacon fires to radar. The conclusion readers may draw is not that geography rules, but that institutions that learn to work with geography can project security at lower cost and with greater legitimacy. By tracing how each province confronted its particular frontier, the book advances a cumulative argument: China's borders have been stabilized less by monolithic policy than by a layered, provincial practice of security—adapted, improvised, and, at critical moments, decisive.

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CHAPTER ONE: Xinjiang: Gateways to Central Asia—Oases, Forts, and Frontier Diplomacy

Xinjiang, often called the "New Frontier," is a land of striking contrasts—vast deserts, towering mountain ranges, and fertile oases. This immense region, nestled in China's northwest, has historically been a crucial crossroads, a convergence of trade routes and migrating peoples. Its formidable geography, marked by the Tian Shan mountains dividing it into Dzungaria in the north and the Tarim Basin in the south, has profoundly shaped its military and diplomatic history. Control over Xinjiang has always been about controlling access, whether for trade, military expansion, or the flow of cultures.

The story of Xinjiang's borderlands is one of continuous adaptation. Early Chinese dynasties recognized its strategic importance, establishing military and administrative presences to secure trade routes and counter nomadic threats. The Han Dynasty, for instance, established the Protectorate of the Western Regions in 60 BCE, an administration that oversaw the numerous oasis city-states of the Tarim Basin. This was a novel approach, imposing military suzerainty without fully annexing these states, aiming to secure vital Silk Road corridors against the Xiongnu. Garrisons, often comprising a few hundred to a couple thousand troops, were strategically placed in these oases, supplemented by agricultural colonies to ensure self-sufficiency.

The Tang Dynasty later continued this tradition, establishing the Anxi Protectorate in 640 CE, initially headquartered at Gaochang (Turpan) and later at Qiuci (Kucha). This protectorate oversaw the "Four Garrisons of Anxi"—Kucha, Khotan, Kashgar, and Karashahr—which served as crucial fortified outposts. These garrisons were vital for projecting Tang power, securing the northern and southern Silk Road routes, and responding rapidly to nomadic incursions and local unrest. The Tang's expansion into Central Asia reached its zenith in the 660s, extending influence to Transoxiana and Tokharistan, facilitating cross-cultural exchanges and bolstering economic prosperity along these safeguarded trade routes.

However, maintaining control over such a distant and diverse region was a perpetual challenge. The Tibetan Empire frequently contested the Tang's hold over the Western Regions, with ownership of territories often switching between the two powers. The An Lushan Rebellion in 755 CE significantly weakened the Tang's ability to maintain its western outposts, leading to the gradual decline and eventual dissolution of the Anxi Protectorate around 790 CE. This ebb and flow of control demonstrates the inherent difficulties of governing a remote frontier, highlighting how internal political stability often dictated the reach of imperial power.

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Centuries later, the Qing Dynasty, after its conquest of the Dzungar Khanate in 1759, again asserted control over the region. The Qing referred to this newly acquired territory as "Xinjiang," meaning "new dominion" or "new frontier." To maintain order, the Qing implemented military rule, stationing a substantial number of troops—between 25,000 and 45,000 initially, growing to over 80,000 by the late 1880s—across Xinjiang. These garrisons, composed primarily of Manchu bannermen, Solon, and Xibe soldiers, secured key oases, trade routes, and borders, while also engaging in agricultural development through the *tuntian* system, where soldier-farmers reclaimed land to supply their garrisons.

The Qing's approach to governance in Xinjiang was initially a blend of direct military oversight and indirect rule through local Turkic and Mongol officials known as Begs and Ambans. This system, while seemingly tolerant, was designed to integrate the region administratively while leveraging local leadership. However, this delicate balance was shattered by the Dungan Revolt in the mid-19th century, a widespread Muslim uprising that severely weakened Qing authority in Xinjiang. Taking advantage of the turmoil, an adventurer named Yaqub Beg, from the Khanate of Kokand, established an independent state known as Kashgaria, controlling much of southern Xinjiang from 1865 to 1877.

Yaqub Beg's rise coincided with the "Great Game," a geopolitical rivalry between the British and Russian Empires for influence in Central Asia. Both powers saw Kashgaria as a potential buffer state or a foothold for their own ambitions. The British, fearing a Russian invasion of India through Xinjiang, were particularly interested in a friendly independent state in the region and recognized Yaqub Beg's authority, even signing a commercial treaty with Kashgaria in 1873. The Russians, too, established trade links and signed a commercial treaty in 1872. This period illustrates how provincial politics and local power vacuums could become entangled in larger international power struggles.

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The Qing court, however, was not prepared to cede Xinjiang permanently. General Zuo Zongtang, a formidable military leader, was tasked with reconquering the region in the late 1870s. Zuo's campaign was a logistical marvel, moving men and supplies hundreds of miles across arduous terrain. His forces, which included Dungan (Hui) Muslim troops, systematically defeated Yaqub Beg's forces. The reconquest culminated in 1877, and in 1884, Xinjiang was formally established as a province, a "new frontier" indeed, fully integrated into the Qing administrative structure. This move marked a significant shift from the previous, more indirect forms of governance, reflecting a stronger assertion of central authority over the borderland.

Even after provincialization, Xinjiang remained a complex frontier. Russian influence continued to be a factor, particularly in the Ili region. Russia had occupied the Ili Valley in 1871 during the Dungan Revolt, ostensibly to ensure stability, and only returned it

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to Qing control after diplomatic negotiations and the Treaty of Saint Petersburg in 1881. This diplomatic maneuvering underscored the persistent external pressures on Xinjiang's borders. The influx of Russian merchants and, later, White Russian émigrés after the Bolshevik Revolution, further diversified the region's demographics and economic ties.

In the early 20th century, with the collapse of the Qing Dynasty, Xinjiang again experienced periods of semi-autonomy under various warlords. The region became a strategic pawn in the Chinese Civil War and even saw the establishment of two short-lived East Turkestan Republics, supported at times by the Soviet Union. These episodes highlight how central weakness could empower provincial actors and external powers to exert influence, transforming Xinjiang into a dynamic arena of competing interests.

Modern Xinjiang continues to be a crucial borderland. It shares extensive and often challenging borders with multiple Central Asian states, including Mongolia, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) maintains a significant presence, with the Xinjiang Military District being a special military area directly under the Joint Staff Department of the Central Military Commission. Border defense units patrol thousands of miles of mountainous terrain, often in harsh environments, working alongside local herdsmen in a "six-in-one" border defense system that integrates military, police, militia, and civilian efforts.

The Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC), a unique paramilitary and development organization, also plays a significant role in the province's security and economic landscape. Established in 1954, the XPCC comprises demobilized soldiers and their families who engage in agricultural and industrial activities, effectively forming a "state within a state" that contributes to both development and border defense. This multi-layered approach to security, combining traditional military garrisons with economic and social development initiatives, reflects the enduring challenges and strategic importance of this vast and complex frontier.

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