Few realize that China is actually building three Silk Roads, one through Central Asia to Europe; a second, maritime one, through South East Asia to India and South Asia; and third, China is building a robust commercial network through the Arctic to connect it with East Asia and what their consequences might be for Central Asians and their governments, including China's own Muslims in Xinjiang. China's plans for Central Asia are extraordinarily ambitious but there are serious problems that could undermine them.

BACKGROUND: In pursuit of these geo-economic and geopolitical goals that would bind Asia to China ever more closely through commercial means, Beijing has recently allocated US$ 40 billion dollars for the first Silk Road alone, on top of all of its previous large-scale investments in Central Asia, information systems, telecommunications, transportation, energy pipelines, and infrastructure. Indeed, China’s Silk Road is the only one, for the American program has turned out to be a bureaucratic and political bluff with few resources or any sustained high-level drive behind it. Moreover, Russia provides no real competition for the foreseeable future.

Indeed, Chinese President Xi Jinping promised Russia it could take part in China’s Silk Road, leading prominent Russian officials like Sergei Ivanov to argue, in Beijing, that the Silk Road will link to Russia’s Baikal-Amur and Trans-Siberian railroads. Nevertheless there are no guarantees that Russia will play a major role here. Thus Russia’s dream of an iron Silk Road to Asia or a north-South connection to India and Iran through Central Asia has suffered a serious blow due to lack of capital. China’s magnanimity cannot conceal its victory over Russia and Russia’s inability to compete in these domains. Russia must now resign itself to being a “junior brother” in such endeavors even while endlessly trumpeting its Eurasian great power role. Given the expansive geo-strategic benefits that will accrue to China as it realizes its Silk Road vision, the evolving Sino-Russian relationship on this issue could entail a massive and decisive Russian strategic defeat in Eurasia rendering it here, as in energy, China’s raw materials appendage.

However, the potential for future Russian resentment is not the main challenge confronting China. Rather it is the confluence of economic slowdown with stubborn unreconciled ethno-religious opposition by Chinese Muslims in Xinjiang to China’s domestic policy. Unrest has been mounting in Xinjiang among China’s Muslim Uyghur population since 1980 and China has found no solution, despite massive Han colonization and investment in Xinjiang. 15 people were killed in the most recent outbreak of violence and 96 people died in incidents during 2014. China has sent in 3,000 more troops to quell the uprising and Beijing is also considering economic-political plans that would induce Uighurs to leave Xinjiang and settle in China’s interior.

IMPLICATIONS: Both Han colonization and dispersal strategies for the natives are traditional imperial and colonial responses to the challenges of running an empire but there is no sign that either of these tactics will succeed in reconciling the Uighurs to their fate. Even if they did move voluntarily, China runs the serious risk of commingling ethnically disaffected people with socially disaffected ones at a time of slowing economic growth. But if the Uighurs refuse to move, the massive investment called for in these new ambitious Silk Roads will unlikely bring inter-ethnic harmony to the area.

Since China’s Central Asian policy has been a projection outward of a policy of massive trade and economic development – all good Leninist solutions to the nationality problem ascribed to uneven levels of socio-economic development – continued instability will raise serious questions to the viability of the new Silk Road. The confluence of slowing growth in China and the visible failure of Chinese policy to stabilize Xinjiang must give all observers of Central Asia pause. If China cannot make its Silk Road work at its originating terminus in Xinjiang and its economy slows, for how long can it sustain its growing economic clout in Central Asia or remain stable at home? Any destabilization of China or lurch towards more coercive Chinese policies entails global economic and strategic repercussions that inevitably cast a major shadow on Central Asia and the entire Silk Road project.

These are not idle questions. Obviously Beijing takes the unrest in Xinjiang most seriously as it has reinforced its forces there and the Silk Road is very clearly both a priority and the full force of China’s growing power as expressed in Beijing’s Silk Road project. On the other hand, if China cannot resolve its problem and more violence pervades Xinjiang at a time when few believe that Afghanistan or Pakistan are becoming more pacified, then Central Asian states are exposed to a whole series of other problems that will probably not go away and ensure that their neighborhood will display long-running violence at levels that cannot be accurately predicted.

CONCLUSIONS: These are daunting alternatives for any Central Asian statesman or government even if all of Central Asia’s domestic and internal security challenges were to be met, which is obviously far from the case. These observations oblige us to take a much more searching examination of the strengths and weaknesses that China brings to the table in Central Asia and what their consequences might be for Central Asians and their governments, including China’s own Muslims in Xinjiang. China may be the strongest commercial player in the region and in ascendance as its power and wealth grow but it is by no means assured of an untroubled future at home, particularly in Xinjiang. And since Xinjiang historically has had immense bearing on China’s overall security, and is the basis from which major foreign policy initiatives flow, what happens in Xinjiang will unlikely stay in Xinjiang. Finally these issues force us to reconsider the linkages between domestic stability in all of the major players currently engaged in Central Asia and their ability to project a meaningful foreign policy and power into the area. We can readily see that sad governance at home is no longer, if it ever was, merely a domestic issue. In this respect China’s potential travails highlight just how
globalized politics in and around Central Asia have become and that they are ultimately about more than just China.

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The main idea is China’s Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB). The EAEU consists of Armenia, Belarus, Russia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The first two countries are not considered part of central Eurasia, and only make a brief appearance in this book. The relationship between Russia and China is the dominant one in the central Eurasian geographical space and will continue to be so. The decision to annex Crimea and to directly challenge the US-led international order – and to pay a huge economic price for doing so – was, in Beijing’s view, irrational and against Russia’s long-term interests. China’s plan for a modern Silk Road linking Asia and Europe hit a pothole recently in Pakistan. Pakistan and China have good relations; some Pakistani officials even call China their “Iron Brother.” China has played an even bigger role in the country since U.S. President Donald Trump decided last week to suspend security assistance to Pakistan. Yet, plans for the countries to build a $14-billion dam on the Indus River were put in doubt, after Pakistan’s water authority announced China wanted to own part of the project. Hit a pothole - idiom. to face unexpected challenge (pothole: a deep, round hole in a road or some other surface (such as the bottom of a river)). Initiative - n. a plan or program. Host - n. a person who entertain guests or country that receive visitors. China’s new “Silk Road Economic Belt” and “Twenty-First Century Maritime Silk Road” will do the same, with newly built or upgraded infrastructure facilitating the flow of trade, investment, culture, and ideas – and thus supporting shared economic growth. From China’s perspective, the logic behind the strategy is clear. That promises to boost their own growth while creating space for the Chinese economy to move up the value chain, where productivity and wages – important determinants of consumption – are higher. China has already laid the groundwork for these relationships, strengthening economic cooperation and trade with countries along the “belt and road.”