



THE ROLE OF NATURAL RESOURCES IN THE TERRITORIAL CONFLICTS OF XINJIANG AND TIBET IN THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

José Antonio Peña-Ramos¹, Adrián García Peña², Chiara Olivieri³
Universidad de Granada, Universidad de Cádiz

Abstract:

More than 1,437 million people inhabit China. More than 91% are ethnic Han, leaving the rest divided into more than fifty groups officially recognized as minority nationalities. The history of China has seen clashes between some minority groups and the State, even of a secessionist nature. Some of them reach the present day, as in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region and Tibet. This article examines the weight that natural resources and other geopolitical benefits for the Chinese State can have in both territories. The working hypothesis is that these resources and benefits are essential for China's economic and geopolitical interests.

Key Words: China, Xinjiang, Tibet, natural resources, energy, economy

Título en Castellano: El papel de los recursos naturales en los conflictos territoriales de Sinkiang y Tibet en la República Popular China

Resumen:

En China viven más de 1.437 millones de personas. Más del 91% son de etnia Han, quedando el resto dividido en más de cincuenta grupos reconocidos oficialmente como nacionalidades minoritarias. La historia de China ha visto enfrentamientos entre algunos grupos minoritarios y el Estado, incluso de carácter secesionista. Algunos de ellos llegan hasta nuestros días, como en la Región Autónoma Uigur de Sinkiang y en Tibet. Este artículo presenta el peso que los recursos naturales y otros beneficios geopolíticos para el Estado chino pueden tener en ambos territorios. La hipótesis de trabajo es que estos recursos y beneficios son esenciales para los intereses económicos y geopolíticos de China.

Palabras Clave: China, Xinjiang, Tibet, recursos naturales, energía, economía

Copyright © UNISCI, 2023.

Las opiniones expresadas en estos artículos son propias de sus autores, y no reflejan necesariamente la opinión de UNISCI. *The views expressed in these articles are those of the authors, and do not necessarily reflect the views of UNISCI.*

¹ José Antonio Peña-Ramos is Associate Professor at the Faculty of Political Sciences and Sociology, University of Granada, E-mail: <japramos@ugr.es>

² Adrián García Peña is Postgraduate Researcher in training, University of Cádiz, E-mail: <adrian.garciape@alum.uca.es>

³ Chiara Olivieri is Postdoctoral Fellow, Faculty of Philosophy and Letters, University of Granada, E-mail: <olivieric@ugr.es>

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.31439/UNISCI-174>



1. Introduction

The People's Republic of China (PRC) is a vast State of 9,596,000 km², inhabited by more than 1,437 million people as of October 2020⁴. Despite the large population, more than 91% are ethnic Han, leaving the rest divided into more than fifty groups officially recognized as minority nationalities⁵. The history of China has seen clashes between some minority groups and the State, even of a secessionist nature. Some of them reach the present day, as in Xinjiang and Tibet.

Beyond the political and cultural clashes, this article examines the possible weight that natural resources and other geopolitical benefits may have for the Chinese State in both conflicts. The working hypothesis is that these resources and benefits are essential for China's economic and geopolitical interests and, therefore, cannot be renounced making any possible secession practically impossible. In other words, the maintenance of its territorial integrity — here referred to as Xinjiang and Tibet— directly and vitally benefits its economic and geopolitical interests, or, said in its negative aspect, the damages of its rupture would be catastrophic.

First, it is worth noting a brief description of China before dealing with each situation. The country does not enjoy a homogeneous demographic distribution, (see Figure 1) and it could be divided into two parts of a similar surface each one housing 6% and 94% of the population, respectively⁶.

In addition, the State is not administratively homogeneous, but is divided (see Figure 2) into 23 provinces, five autonomous regions (including Tibet and Xinjiang in the western part), two special administrative regions, and four municipalities directly dependent on the central government⁷. In this sense, the geographical and climatic disparity of the country must also be highlighted⁸:

- On the one hand, it is formed "by a series of descending levels from the west", going from a height of about 4,000 meters above sea level in the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau to about 500-1,000 meters in the northeastern plains.
- On the other hand, while the west is generally dry, not very fertile, and with great deserts, the east collects the mouths of large rivers and enjoys fertile soils. While the rain is abundant in the green south, the northern plains are frigid with little rainfall —to the point that the Yellow River "arrives without water at its mouth half the days of the year".

The colossal size of China generates opportunities in terms of the availability of natural resources in the territory. Still, it creates a special requirement for these to respond to the needs of its large population

⁴ Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores, Unión Europea y Cooperación de España: China. Oficina de Información Diplomática, ficha país, 2022, at https://www.exteriores.gob.es/Documents/FichasPais/CHINA_FICHA%20PAIS.pdf

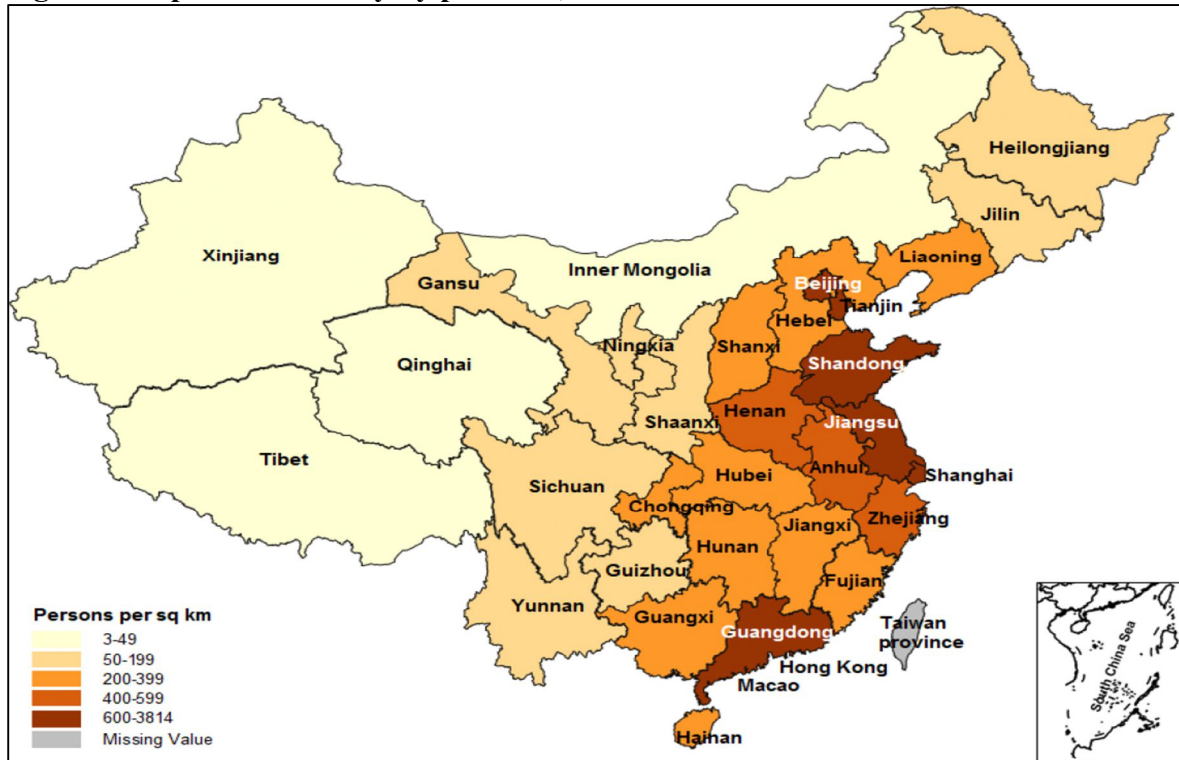
⁵ García, Carolina: "China: demografía y grupos étnicos". El Orden Mundial, 21 April 2014, at <https://elordenmundial.com/china-demografia-y-grupos-etnicos/>

⁶ Gil Lobo, Abel, "La densidad de población de China", El Orden Mundial, 26 January 2020, at <https://elordenmundial.com/mapas-y-graficos/densidad-de-poblacion-china/>

⁷ Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores, Unión Europea y Cooperación de España: *op. cit.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

Figure 1. Population density by province, 2017



Source: National Bureau of Statistics, China Statistical Yearbook, 2020.

According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC⁹, the country has "all the known minerals in the world", highlighting its reserves of coal and other materials such as iron, copper, and aluminum, also being rich in oil and natural gas. However, the second main import by China in 2018¹⁰ was made up of minerals and oil (16%), only surpassed by electrical and mechanical equipment (24%). This contradiction extends to other areas as well. For example, the Chinese ministry recognizes that, despite being one of the first nations in the world in terms of "cultivated area, forests and pastures, [...] its cultivated land is only one-third of the world average per capita". In this sense, Freitas and Bielschowsky¹¹ state the following:

“However, when examined [the resources] in light of the size of its population and economy, the picture is far from one of abundance. For example, although it concentrates 19% of the population and generates 16.5% of the world's gross domestic product (GDP), China has, respectively, 13%, 8.5%, 4%, 2%, and 2% of the world's reserves of coal, iron ore, copper ore, oil, and natural gas, in addition to 10% of agricultural land and 6.5% of fresh water. The relative scarcity was revealed in all its intensity with the accelerated growth. In the last 35 years, the Chinese GDP has grown at an average rate of 10% per year. It transformed China into the world's second-largest economy, making its production and consumption increasingly dependent on importing primary products”.

⁹ Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores de la República Popular China. “Territorio y recursos naturales”, Embajada de la República Popular China en la República de Colombia, (n.d.), at <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/ceco/esp/zg/gk/trn/t223695.htm>

¹⁰ Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores, Unión Europea y Cooperación de España: *op. cit.*

¹¹ da Rocha, Felipe Freitas & Bielschowsky, Ricardo: “La búsqueda de China de recursos naturales en América Latina”, *Revista CEPAL*, n° 126 (2018), p. 13.

Figure 2. Administrative division map of China



Source: Ramos (2015).

In other words, the abundant resources on Chinese soil alone are insufficient to sustain its enormous population and economy. In the case of energy, in 2020, China ranked first in the world among primary energy-consuming countries¹².

According to the National Bureau of Statistics of China, its situation in December 2022 was as follows:

Figure 3. Energy production and imports by China in 2023

	COAL	CRUDE OIL	NATURAL GAS	ELECTRIC POWER
PRODUCTION	4.5 billion tons (year-on-year increase: 9.0%)	204.67 million tons (year-on-year increase: 2.9%)	217.8 billion cubic meters (year-on-year increase: 6.4%)	8.4 trillion kwh (year-on-year increase: 2.2%)
IMPORT	290 million tons (year-on-year decrease: 9.2%)	508.28 million tons (year-on-year decrease: 0.9%)	109.25 million tons (year-on-year decrease: 9.9%)	—

Source: Own elaboration from National Bureau of Statistics of China¹³

As the NBSC stated in its official 2022 report¹⁴, China's 2022 energy consumption increased

¹² BGR: "Ranking De Los Principales Países Consumidores De Uranio En 2019 (En Miles De Toneladas Métricas)", Statista GmbH (15 February 2021), at <https://es.statista.com/estadisticas/635411/paises-lideres-en-el-consumo-de-uranio/>

¹³ Energy Production in December 2022, National Bureau of Statistics of China 18 January 2023, at http://www.stats.gov.cn/english/PressRelease/202301/t20230118_1892302.html

¹⁴ Statistical Communiqué of the People's Republic of China on the 2022 national economic and social development, National Bureau of Statistics of China, 28 February 2023, at



by 2.9%, with coal accounting for 56.2%, up 0.3% YoY, while clean energy's share rose 0.4% to 25.9%. Crude oil consumption fell by 3.1%, natural gas by 1.2%, and electric power rose 3.6%. Key energy-intensive industries reduced their comprehensive energy consumption per unit, and carbon dioxide emissions per 10,000-yuan worth of GDP decreased by 0.8%. According to international researches, in 1996, China became a net importer of oil and, in 2007 and 2009, respectively, of natural gas and coal¹⁵. Its dependence on the outside in terms of energy is palpable, at least at present.

As if that were not enough, President Xi Jinping set out in his September 2020 speech to the United Nations to reach the maximum level of carbon emissions in the atmosphere before 2030 and to achieve carbon neutrality around 2060¹⁶. As stated in an article by the CREA¹⁷, instead, China has approved the construction of two new coal-fired power plants per week in 2021, despite its pledge to reduce carbon emissions. The country is said to have issued permits for 85 new coal plants with a combined capacity of 110 GW, which is more than the entire coal-fired capacity of Germany. The increase in coal power has been attributed to China's economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and the need to meet energy demands. This surge in coal use will have a detrimental impact on global efforts to combat climate change and urges China to prioritize renewable energy sources. It is possible to affirm that a reduction in emissions will necessarily go through, among other measures, the gradual decarbonization of the economy due to the importance of coal in its consumption (see Figure 3). Therefore, it can be foreseen that the Chinese demand for energy resources other than coal will increase enormously in the coming years.

If we add to this China's growing relative scarcity of energy sources and the increasing need to import them from abroad¹⁸, we find that its economy may be affected if there is not a revolution in its energy model soon. At a minimum, it could increase its electricity cost and affect its trade balance—which had a positive balance in 2019 of 416,000 million dollars¹⁹—and the country's enormous energy companies. Of the top 15 companies with the highest revenues in the world in 2020, three were from the Chinese energy sector: Sinopec, China State Electric Grid Corporation, and China National Petroleum Corporation, which ranked second, third and fourth, respectively²⁰.

However, the energy problem could be solved in the medium or long term through other technologies, such as those based on hydrogen or nuclear fusion, already being experimented on in the country and with the opportunity to master it and apply it in the coming decades fully²¹.

http://www.stats.gov.cn/english/PressRelease/202302/t20230227_1918979.html

¹⁵ da Rocha, Felipe Freitas & Bielschowsky, Ricardo, *op. cit.*

¹⁶ Mars, Amanda & Planelles, Manuel: “China promete en la ONU un plan para alcanzar la neutralidad de carbono en 2060”, *El País* 22 septiembre 2020, at <https://elpais.com/sociedad/2020-09-22/china-promete-en-la-onu-un-plan-para-alcanzar-la-neutralidad-del-carbono-en-2060.html>

¹⁷ China permits two new coal power plants per week in 2022. Energy and Clean Air Research Institute, 8 July 2021, at <https://energyandcleanair.org/publication/china-permits-two-new-coal-power-plants-per-week-in-2022/>.

¹⁸ China's growing demand for energy and the significant increase in coal power plants pose a considerable environmental threat, and thus the country needs to address this issue via treaties and deeper penetration in the Middle East. For instance, China could establish treaties with Iran, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia, where the latter has already demonstrated a greater willingness to engage with China than with the US. Furthermore, China's cooperation with Russia in this regard could lead to attracting hydrocarbon resources that were previously sent to Europe. By establishing such partnerships, China could reduce its reliance on coal and reduce the environmental impact of its energy production, while strengthening its ties with key players in the Middle East.

¹⁹ Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores, Unión Europea y Cooperación de España: *op. cit.*

²⁰ Merino, Álvaro: “Las empresas con más ingresos del mundo”, *El Orden Mundial*, 10 May 2021, at <https://elordenmundial.com/mapas-y-graficos/empresas-mas-ingresos-mundo/>

²¹ Zhou Mu: “Chinese “artificial sun” sets new world record”, *Xinhua News*, 31 December 2021, at



It is expected that by 2035 the first nuclear fusion reactor will already be connected to the Chinese national electricity grid²². In the meantime, more efficient and sustainable use of nuclear fission power could help balance the scales. In this sense, the Chinese Academy of Sciences²³ claims to have completed a particle beam cannon prototype that would recycle 100% of nuclear fission waste and bring the country closer to energy independence²⁴. However, Europa Press²⁵ describes this statement as misleading and states that neither the recycling of said waste is anything new, nor is it at the moment a reality at an industrial level beyond what is theoretical.

As we have seen, China is a vast country with a large population that is not homogeneously distributed. It has a variety of natural resources that are vital to its economic and geopolitical interests, including coal, iron, copper, aluminium, oil and natural gas. However, despite its resource wealth, China's huge population and economy require to import primary products to sustain its growth. China's importance lies in its large deposits of rare earth minerals, which are essential to many modern technologies, including smartphones, computers and electric vehicles. These rare earth minerals are mainly found in Inner Mongolia, Guangdong, Sichuan and Shandong. It is important to highlight the importance of rare earth minerals in China due to their significance in modern technological development. The Chinese government recognises the strategic importance of these resources and has implemented policies to ensure their control and sustainability. However, global demand for rare earth minerals has raised concerns about China's dominance of the market and its potential use as a political tool. This has led to increased efforts by the EU and the US to diversify their supply chains and find alternative sources of rare earth minerals. Nevertheless, China's control over rare earth minerals remains a critical factor in the global economy and will continue to be a key determinant of the country's economic and political power.

However, China's domestic reserves of rare earths minerals are only enough to meet the country's needs for a few years.²⁶ As a result, China is looking to secure supplies from overseas sources. This has led China to invest in mining and exploration in places such as Afghanistan, Greenland, Latin America and Africa. This investment could lead to China's having geopolitical influence in these regions.

Finally, before analyzing the specific cases of Xinjiang and Tibet, it is necessary to refer to water. China is presented as having the greatest hydroelectric potential in the world even

<http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/20211231/c4fad387ef0745c18aedee05eed1414d/c.html>. See also Kardoudi, Omar: "China afirma que tendrá electricidad ilimitada en solo tres décadas", *El Confidencial*, 23 April 2022, at https://www.elconfidencial.com/tecnologia/novaceno/2022-04-23/china-producira-energia-fusion-nuclear-en-30-anos_3412725/?utm_source=twitter&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=ECDiarioManual

²² Díaz, Jesús: "China quiere conectar la primera central de fusión nuclear a su red eléctrica en 2035", *El Confidencial*, 24 May 2022, at https://www.elconfidencial.com/tecnologia/novaceno/2022-05-24/china-central-electrica-fusion-nuclear-2035_3429926/

²³ El prototipo de acelerador lineal superconductor ADS logra un funcionamiento estable de haz continuo de alta potencia de 100 kW, Chinese Academy of Sciences, 11 January 2022, at https://www.cas.cn/jh/202201/t20220111_4821658.shtml

²⁴ Corbett, Thomas & Singer, Peter W.: China's 'Particle Beam Cannon' is a nuclear-power breakthrough, *Defense One*, 13 June 2022, at <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2022/06/chinas-particle-beam-cannon-nuclear-power-breakthrough/368082/>

²⁵ "China no tiene la tecnología para reciclar el 100% de los residuos peligrosos generados en sus centrales nucleares", *Europa Press*, 14 August 2022 at <https://www.europapress.es/verificaciones/noticia-china-no-tiene-tecnologia-reciclar-100-residuos-peligrosos-generados-centrales-nucleares-20220814175956.html>

²⁶ Lanteigne, Marc : Why China's Rare Earths Threat Matters, *Carnegie Europe - Strategic Europe*, 28 August 2020, at <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/82585>.



taking into account other factors such as its geographical and climatic disparities²⁷. However, the large population and the continuous urbanization since the early 1970s —61.4% of the urban population in 2020 compared to 17.18% in 1972— can explain why it is per capita renewable freshwater resources were 2,014.73 m³ in 2017, in contrast to the 4,225.18 m³ in 1962 or with the 5,724.52 m³ of the global average in 2017. Prospects are not bright, as, the annual growth in demand for water in most cities is around 10%, and 5% in the case of industry²⁸.

2. The importance of Xinjiang from an economic and geopolitical perspective

2.1. Introduction to Xinjiang

The territory of Xinjiang is an autonomous region in the northwest, with an area of approximately 1,600,000 km² —the largest in the country— bordering Mongolia, Russian Federation, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India. It has been part of China since the 18th century —with interruptions mainly due to population uprisings— being definitively subordinated since the mid-20th century²⁹. Historically, it has had a lower economic development than the rest of the country³⁰. About 45% of its population is of Uyghur ethnicity, mainly of Sunni Muslim religion and with a language of Turkic origin³¹. It is also populated by other Chinese, mainly of Han ethnicity, who have settled in the area over time, sometimes attracted by job opportunities — finding advantages over the native population due to their better command of Mandarin Chinese —and others as a direct result of state policies³².

A long-standing demand in this territory is to establish an independent republic: Eastern Turkestan. There are peaceful opposition organizations, such as the World Uyghur Congress — created in 2004³³—that pursue this purpose and denounce China's repressive policies against the population. Armed groups such as the East Turkestan Islamic Movement and the East Turkestan Liberation Front have also been formed, which "maintain close ties with the Taliban and Al Qaeda"³⁴. The fact that the region borders countries such as Afghanistan, where fundamentalist Islamist groups —including terrorist organizations— operate, has facilitated their actions and the transmission of ideas to a certain part of the Uyghur population, especially since the 1990s³⁵.

In Central Asia, there is a significant presence of Uyghur minorities, whose organizations have supported those of Xinjiang. The Chinese State has been very concerned and addressed the Afghan governments requesting the cessation of any kind of assistance. It obtained guarantees in this regard from the Afghan Taliban since "Uyghur groups have been

²⁷ da Rocha, Felipe Freitas & Bielschowsky, Ricardo, *op. cit.*

²⁸ Hidalgo García, María del Mar: El agua del Tibet: un recurso vital para China, (reedición), IEEE, Documento de Análisis, 12/ 2022, 18 febrero 2022, at

https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2022/DIEEEA12_2022_MARHID_Agua.pdf

²⁹ Olivieri, Chiara: "El "Viaje al Oeste" prosigue: Colonialidad territorial y geopolítica de la dominación en la Región Autónoma Uigur de Xinjiang", *Historia Actual Online*, n° 57 (2002), pp. 63-78.

³⁰ Espinosa, Victor I., Wang, William H., & Huerta de Soto, Jesús: "Principles of Nudging and Boosting: Steering or Empowering Decision-Making for Behavioral Development Economics", *Sustainability*, vol. 14 n° 4 (2022), p. 2145, at <https://doi.org/10.3390/su14042145>

³¹ Laborie Iglesias, Mario: "Compromisos e intereses internacionales para el futuro de Afganistán", *Cuadernos de Estrategia*, n° 164 (2014), pp. 55-101, at https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/cuadernos/CE_164.pdf

³² Olivieri, *op. cit.*, p. 71; Ramos, Benjamín: "Lo que China esconde: el encaje uigur", *El Orden Mundial* (18 December 2015), at

<https://elordenmundial.com/lo-que-china-esconde-el-encaje-uigur/>; also see Yin, Weiwen: "The natural resource curse in Xinjiang", *CEU Political Science Journal*, n° 10 (2015), pp. 112-140.

³³ Ramos, Benjamín: *op. cit.*

³⁴ Laborie Iglesias, Mario: *op. cit.*

³⁵ González Francisco, Luis Antonio: El fenómeno yihadista en China. El Movimiento Islámico del Turquestán Oriental (MITO), IEEE, Documento de Opinión, 97/2021, 10 septiembre 2021, at https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2021/DIEEE097_2021_LUIGON_Fenomeno.pdf



using areas controlled by Al Qaeda on Afghan soil as a sanctuary and [...] Central Asia could serve as a center for the recruitment and financing [...] of the Islamic Movement of Eastern Turkestan”³⁶.

Internally, state repression has been varied and has always been carried out in the name of combating religious extremism and secessionism: surveillance, computer espionage, persecution for openly practicing the Muslim religion or showing religious symbols, forced displacement, internment in detention camps, in "re-education" camps -forced labor camps and political and cultural indoctrination-, torture and even "mass executions and trials"³⁷. According to Vidal Liy³⁸, between 2019 and 2020, 61 re-education camps were built or modified, while 380 detention centers were discovered, many of which were clandestine or undercover. Likewise, the Australian Strategic Policy Institute estimates that “approximately 16,000 mosques in Xinjiang (65% of the total) have been destroyed or damaged as a result of government policies, mostly since 2017”³⁹. The attempt to control goes so far as to restrict the movement of Uyghurs within Xinjiang and the rest of the country⁴⁰. Not in vain, China obtained in 2022 a score of 9/100 in the Freedom House democracy index⁴¹, classified as "not free".

Along the same lines, on August 31, 2022, the United Nations Human Rights Office⁴² published an assessment of the human rights situation in Xinjiang, describing what happened as "serious human rights violations [...] in XUAR in the context of the Government's application of counter-terrorism and counter-extremism strategies". Thus, the evaluation speaks of an "anti-terrorism law system that is deeply problematic from the perspective of international human rights norms and standards".

However, in recent decades the Chinese government has simultaneously chosen to strengthen development policies in the region, whether by increasing transfers of public funds, promoting the productive fabric, or providing better public services such as education, the health system, infrastructure, and housing⁴³. The "Great Western Development Plan" of 2000 aims to turn Xinjiang into an industrial, agricultural, commercial, and energy base⁴⁴. It is well known that the Chinese government bases its legitimacy on the country's economic development and therefore seeks to combine repression with an improvement in the quality of

³⁶ Ruiz Arévalo, Javier: “La caída de Kabul (III). ¿El triunfo de China en Afganistán?”, IEEE, Documento de Opinión 03/2022, 13 enero 2022, at

https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2022/DIEEEO3_2022_JAVRUI_Kabul.pdf

³⁷ Vidal Liy, Macarena: “China combina represión y ayudas para frenar el separatismo uigur”, *El País*, 5 julio 2014, at https://elpais.com/internacional/2014/07/05/actualidad/1404563177_006419.html; see also Xu, Vicky Xiuzhong, Cave, Danielle, Leibold, James, Munro, Kelsey & Ruser, Nathan: “Uyghurs for sale”, Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), 1 March 2020, at <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/uyghurs-sale>

³⁸ Vidal Liy, Macarena: “La nueva fase de los campos de reeducación en Xinjiang”, *El País*, 26 Julio 2021, at <https://elpais.com/internacional/2021-07-26/la-nueva-fase-de-los-campos-de-reeducacion-en-xinjiang.html>

³⁹ Ruser, Nathan, Leibold, James, Munro, Kelsey & Hoja, Tilla: Cultural erasure. Tracing the destruction of Uyghur and Islamic spaces in Xinjiang, Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), 24 September 2020, at <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/cultural-erasure>

⁴⁰ Amnesty International: Como si fuéramos el enemigo en una guerra. Internamiento masivo, tortura y persecución por parte de China de personas musulmanas en Xinjiang, 2021, at https://xinjiang.amnesty.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/ASA_17_4137_2021_Summary_ES_Spanish.pdf

⁴¹ Freedom in the World 2022: Freedom House, at <https://freedomhouse.org/country/china/freedom-world/2022>

⁴² Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights: Assessment of human rights concerns in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, People's Republic of China, 2022, at <https://www.ohchr.org/es/press-releases/2022/08/un-human-rights-office-issues-assessment-human-rights-concerns-xinjiang>

⁴³ Yin, Weiwèn: *op. cit.*

⁴⁴ Clarke, Michael: “China's integration of Xinjiang with Central Asia: ¿securing a “silk road” to great power status?”, *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly* nº 6 (2008), pp. 89-111; see also Olivieri, Chiara: El “Viaje al Oeste” prosigue: Colonialidad territorial y geopolítica de la dominación en la Región Autónoma Uigur de Xinjiang, *op. cit.*, p. 74.



life of its inhabitants concerning previous times.

2.2. Geography of Xinjiang, natural resources, and other attractions for the Chinese economy

The MAERPCh⁴⁵ states that

Xinjiang is a region rich in water —90 billion cubic meters per year and the water resources per person in Xinjiang are twice that of the country as a whole— pastures —one-fourth of China's total, making it one of the nation's five major grazing areas (sunlight and arable land) —today “Xinjiang has 32,000 km² of arable land and 49,000 km² of land reclaimable for farming. Xinjiang can be developed into the most extensive production base of marketable cotton in China and a substantial production base for grain, livestock, and sugar”—, minerals —“134 varieties of mineral reserves have been discovered so far”— and energy sources: Oil, natural gas, and nonferrous metals represented by copper and gold are the most critical minerals in Xinjiang. The prospective reserves of oil exceed 30 billion tons, and those of natural gas exceed 10,000 billion cubic meters, accounting for one-third of the nation's totals.

In the case of copper, in 2017, Chinese reserves represented 3% worldwide⁴⁶, while net imports of this resource rose from 1.1 million tons in 2000 to 7.2 million in 2015⁴⁷. As for gold, in 2019, China obtained the sixth position in the world in terms of the largest reserves —four times those of the United States—⁴⁸. In 2016, it was the world leader in the production of gold mining, with a 14% market share⁴⁹. As has been seen, both metals are among the most important in Xinjiang.

Regarding rare earths and other key metals, Ganfeng Lithium Co. is accelerating the exploration and potential development of lithium, nickel and other key metals in the region.

Going deeper into the subject of fossil fuels, Yin⁵⁰ states that “Xinjiang has 40% of coal reserves, 22% of petroleum reserves, and 28% of gas reserves in the country”, adding to this, its coal is of better quality and its oil deposits are shallower and more accessible. He also highlights the importance of gas pipelines located in the area. “The West-East Gas Pipeline is now not only transferring 12 billion cubic meters of natural gas annually from Xinjiang to coastal areas [...], but also connected to the gas field in Turkmenistan [...]”. Another example is that of Russian gas. In 2014, the Russian company Gazprom and the China National Petroleum Corporation negotiated an agreement to supply gas to China for 30 years, partly through the Altai gas pipeline, which passes through Xinjiang⁵¹.

Ruiz Arévalo⁵² tracks China's interests in areas such as Afghanistan, where several companies have acquired rights to exploit oil and copper this century, plus the interests in other

⁴⁵ Xinjiang. Natural resources, Embajada de la República Popular China en India (n.d.), at <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/cein/eng/ssygd/xbdkf/Xinjiang/t166811.htm>

⁴⁶ NRCan : Distribución Porcentual de las Reservas Mundiales de Cobre en 2017, por País, Statista GmbH, 31 octubre 2019, at <https://es.statista.com/estadisticas/1064866/porcentaje-de-las-reservas-mundiales-de-cobre-por-pais/>

⁴⁷ da Rocha, Felipe Freitas & Bielschowsky, Ricardo, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

⁴⁸ World Gold Council: Ranking de Países con las Reservas de Oro Más Grandes del Mundo en el Tercer Trimestre de 2022 (en Toneladas Métricas), Statista GmbH, 11 enero 2023, at <https://es.statista.com/estadisticas/600211/paises-con-las-reservas-de-oro-mas-grandes-del-mundo/>

⁴⁹ Países Líderes A Nivel Mundial en Producción Minera de Oro en 2016, Por Cuota de Mercado, Statista GmbH, 8 mayo 2017, at <https://es.statista.com/estadisticas/601072/distribucion-porcentual-de-la-produccion-minera-de-oro-por-paises>

⁵⁰ Yin, Weiwén, *op. cit.*

⁵¹ Blázquez, Adrián: China: el sueño americano de Rusia, El Orden Mundial, 25 mayo 2015, at <https://elordenmundial.com/china-el-sueno-americano-de-rusia/>

⁵² Ruiz Arévalo, Javier, *op. cit.*



minerals, including rare earths. The country will also connect China, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Iran by rail. It should not be forgotten that in 2019 some of the world's leading oil fields were located in several of these states and others nearby, such as Kazakhstan, Iran, and Iraq⁵³. Therefore, it is not just about the resources in Xinjiang, but also about its strategic location and the use of the economic infrastructure it has built.

The above fact shows that 22% of the country's oil reserves are in Xinjiang. This is not insignificant if we consider China's growing need for alternative energy sources to coal. The data also show that it was only the fifth largest oil producer in the world in 2021 —208 million metric tons—, far behind the top three —the United States, Russia, and Saudi Arabia, with 694, 523, and 516 million metric tons, respectively—⁵⁴. In addition, net oil imports rose from 1.2 million barrels per day in 2000 to 6.7 million in 2015⁵⁵.

Xinjiang is also a source of uranium. In 2008, the "first 10,000-tonne uranium sandstone deposit" was discovered there⁵⁶. Data show that "a third of the PRCs uranium for nuclear energy comes from extortion in the Yili basin of Xinjiang"⁵⁷. In 2019, China was the second largest consumer of uranium, buying half of the uranium production of its neighbor Kazakhstan⁵⁸. We can affirm that this territory is of great strategic importance for China as far as this resource is concerned, either in terms of production or transport. It should also be noted that the Lop Nor desert in Xinjiang was used in the second half of the 20th century as a site for nuclear tests —built with Soviet help—, both in the atmosphere and underground —45 of which were carried out between 1964 and 1996⁵⁹. Recently, China has been accused by the United States Government of preparing to reuse the Lop Nur testing range⁶⁰.

Another resource to be considered is cotton. Xinjiang cotton "accounts for 85% of Chinese production and 20% of world supply"⁶¹. However, even though China ranked second in world cotton production in 2019-2020, it was also the leading importing country —1.55 million metric tons— due to its textile industry, which represented 2018, 14% of its GDP⁶².

⁵³ Ranking de los Mayores Campos Petroleros Existentes a Nivel Mundial a Fecha de noviembre 2019, según Volumen de Crudo Extraíble (en Miles De Millones De Barriles)", Statista GmbH, 8 noviembre 2019, at <https://es.statista.com/estadisticas/1070888/crudo-extraible-en-los-mayores-campos-petroleros-del-mundo/>

⁵⁴ Ranking Mundial de los Países Productores de Petróleo en 2021 (en Millones De Toneladas)", Statista GmbH (19 March 2022), at <https://es.statista.com/estadisticas/635401/principales-paises-productores-de-petroleo/>

⁵⁵ da Rocha, Felipe Freitas & Bielschowsky, Ricardo: *op. cit.*

⁵⁶ Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores de la República Popular China: Descubren gran yacimiento de uranio en norte de China, Embajada de la República Popular China en la República Argentina, 2012, at <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/cear/esp/jrzg/t985470.htm>

⁵⁷ Rao, Tara: Nuclear imperialism in China's Xinjiang, Observer Research Foundation, 2020, at <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/nuclear-imperialism-china-xinjiang/>

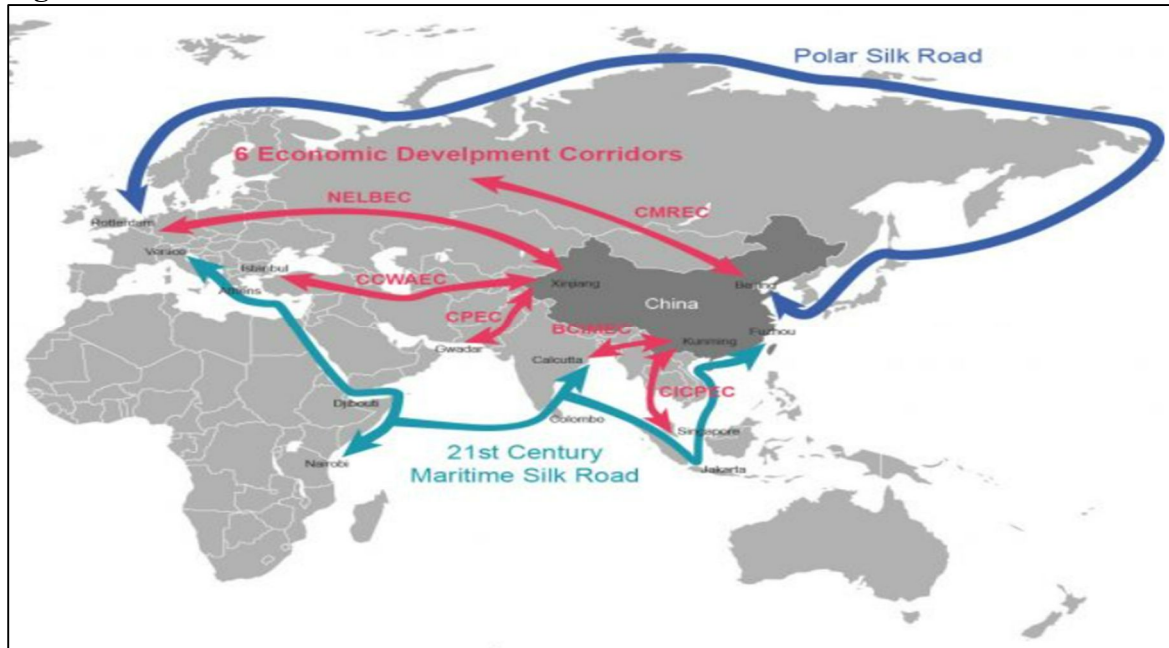
⁵⁸ Ranking de los Principales Países Consumidores de Uranio en 2019 (en Miles de Toneladas Métricas)", *op. cit.*; See also Merino, Álvaro: Los grandes productores de uranio, El Orden Mundial, 16 enero 2022, at <https://elordenmundial.com/mapas-y-graficos/los-grandes-productores-de-uranio/>

⁵⁹ Spence, Jonathan (2011) : *En Busca de la China Moderna*, Madrid, Tusquets ; see also Campos Robles, Miguel : "Los ensayos nucleares y los tratados para su prohibición", Global Strategy Report, n° 38 (2020), at <https://global-strategy.org/los-ensayos-nucleares-y-los-tratados-para-su-prohibicion/>

⁶⁰ Adherence to and compliance with arms control, nonproliferation, and disarmament agreements and commitments, U.S. Department of State, 2020, at <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Tab-1.-EXECUTIVE-SUMMARY-OF-2020-CR-FINDINGS-04.14.2020-003-003.pdf>

⁶¹ "Algodón de Xinjiang: cómo saber si tu ropa está hecha con mano de obra supuestamente esclava en China", *BBC News Mundo*, 27 March 2021, at <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-internacional-56546400>

⁶² González, Alicia: "La batalla por el algodón de Xinjiang", *El País*, 10 mayo 2021, at <https://elpais.com/internacional/2021-05-10/la-batalla-por-el-algodon-de-xinjiang.html>

Figure 4. The Belt and Road initiative

Source: The Belt and Road Initiative (n.d.).

Xinjiang's attractions to the Chinese economy are not limited to its natural resources. Before dealing with the issue of Chinese connections to the west, its strategic situation was mentioned, which is not limited to the closest states. Since 2001, the Chinese government has tried to open up its economy to Central Asia. Further, with its Western Development Plan, the Middle East and Europe, through which State transfers to the western provinces and regions of China, were promoted, seeking to develop their infrastructures and facilitating foreign and national investments⁶³. Following this path, in 2013, President Xi Jinping announced the initiative of the New Silk Road (NRS) —BRI in English— a strategy based on the old Silk Road Silk between East and West⁶⁴. This new initiative is based mainly on infrastructure —roads, railways, ports, airports, gas pipelines — and trade routes that can facilitate passage through the natural barriers that surround China to gain better access to natural resources. It needs to facilitate its exports abroad, attract investment and expand its economic and diplomatic influence. The creation of free trade areas also supports the harmonisation of customs procedures and the elimination of non-tariff barriers.⁶⁵

As can be seen in see Figure 4, Xinjiang plays a leading role in the initiative, as three of the six designed land corridors pass through it: New Eurasian Land Bridge Economic Corridor (NELBEC), China - Central Asia - West Asia Economic Corridor (CCWAEC) and China - Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The territory connects the country by land with Central Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. Müller-Markus⁶⁶ recalls that in 2016 80% of its energy

⁶³ Olivieri, Chiara: “Estepa y rutas de la seda frente al espejo de la Región Autónoma Uigur de Xinjiang. Fronteras fluidas y construcción de narrativas histórico-identitarias”, *Quaderns de Filologia-Estudis Literaris*, n° 23 (2018), pp. 23-38.

⁶⁴ “China's Massive Belt and Road Initiative”, The Belt and Road Initiative (n.d.), at <https://www.beltroad-initiative.com/belt-and-road/>

⁶⁵ Esteban, Mario & Otero Iglesias, Miguel: ¿Qué podemos esperar de la nueva Ruta de la Seda y del Banco Asiático de Inversión en Infraestructuras liderados por China?, Real Instituto Elcano, ARI 19/2015, 9 abril 2015, at <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/analisis/que-podemos-esperar-de-la-nueva-ruta-de-la-seda-y-del-banco-asiatico-de-inversion-en-infraestructuras-liderados-por-china/>

⁶⁶ Müller-Markus, Christina: One Belt, One Road: el sueño chino y su impacto sobre Europa, Notes Internacionals CIDOB, N° 148 (2016), at https://www.cidob.org/publicaciones/serie_de_publicacion/notes_internacionals/n1_148_one_belt_one_road_el



imports passed through the Strait of Malacca, something perilous for its economy. The author affirms that China intends to diversify its trade routes and partners and strengthen its essential trade with the European Union. At the same time, Pardo de Santayana⁶⁷ states that the promotion of this new route has served China "to dispose of excess industrial capacity and financial liquidity, and to reorient its production model towards innovation and high technology". It is also intended to save time on transport. The one who was secretary of the Xinjiang regional committee of the Communist Party of China in 2015, Zhang Chunxian, stated on that date that it took between 16 and 18 days to transport cargo to Europe by train, compared to about 40 days by sea⁶⁸.

The PRC aspires to take advantage of the economic advantages that the New Silk Road will bring to Xinjiang and the country's interior, as well as to promote the economic development of the provinces and regions that have benefited less from China's historic economic growth. With the improvement of infrastructure and connectivity, it hopes to obtain more investment from labor-intensive industries, attracted by lower labor costs than those on the coast⁶⁹. Furthermore, more significant economic development and better territorial cohesion could help legitimize the CCP and the State in places that have historically benefited less from economic growth.

All these aspects analyzed around Xinjiang —fossil and renewable energy resources, arable land, minerals, raw materials such as cotton, energy, and commercial interconnections — show China's enormous dependence on this territory, not only in the matter of natural resources and internal industrial production, but also as a strategic location in terms of infrastructure, commercial and geopolitical benefits.

3. The importance of Tibet from an economic perspective

3.1. Introduction to Tibet

The Tibet Autonomous region is located on the southwestern border and covers an area of approximately 1,220,000 km² -12.8% of China's surface. It borders Burma, India, Bhutan, and Nepal and "is a place of autonomous where the majority of the Tibetan ethnic group lives"⁷⁰.

Historically, Tibet belonged to the Mongol Empire since the 13th century and enjoyed a certain autonomy —the harshness of its geography and climate made it more accessible since it is located on a high plateau surrounded by mountains at more than 4,000 meters high. In the 19th century, it became the object of colonial desire by powers such as Russia or the United Kingdom. Moreover, Hambly⁷¹ recounts how the UK agreed with Russia in 1907 to recognize Chinese sovereignty and how the declining Chinese Empire conquered Tibet between 1908 and 1910, ending the "traditional relationship of the Dalai Lamas with the Manchu rulers of China". He also tells us that Tibet was a de facto independent country between the proclamation of the Chinese Republic in 1912 and the communist invasion in 1950. However, China always considered it an integral part of its territory. After having occupied the place, continues this author, "the Chinese began to negotiate with the Tibetans from a position of strength", which

[sueno_chino_y_su_impacto_sobre_europa/one_belt_one_road_el_sueno_chino_y_su_impacto_sobre_europa](#)
⁶⁷Pardo de Santayana, José: "El desenganche de China-EE. UU. y el año de Asia", IIEE, Documento de Análisis, 54/2021, diciembre 2021, at

https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2021/DIEEEA54_2021_JOSPAR_Desenganche.pdf
⁶⁸ Xinjiang será "centro" de Franja Económica de la Ruta de la Seda, Observatorio de la Política China 2015, at <https://politica-china.org/areas/autonomias/xinjiang-sera-centro-de-franja-economica-de-la-ruta-de-la-seda>

⁶⁹ Esteban, Mario & Otero Iglesias, Miguel, *op. cit.*

⁷⁰ Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores de la República Popular China: Geografía de Tíbet, Embajada de la República Popular China en la República Oriental del Uruguay, 2007, at <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/ceuy/esp/ztlm/zgxz/t385970.htm>

⁷¹ Hambly, Gavin (1972): *Asia Central*, Madrid, Siglo XXI de España Editores, S. A., p. 262.



explains "the Sino-Tibetan agreement of May 1951 by which Tibet was incorporated into the Chinese homeland with the granting of national, regional autonomy"⁷². Some of the conditions were as follows:

[...] the army would be integrated into China's; Instead, China promised not to alter the system of government that was traditional in Tibet and not to hinder the status of the Dalai Lama; reforms would not be imposed on the Tibetans without their consent, and religious customs would be left intact⁷³.

However, the Chinese regime did not respect what was agreed upon under the pretext of liberating Tibet from a feudal regime, leading to nationalizations and reforms that modified its political, social, and economic system. After successive riots and an armed response by the PRC, the Dalai Lama went into exile in India, considered the agreement that had been previously reached broken, and began to seek international support with the goal of self-determination. Thus, in 1965 Tibet became an autonomous region. According to García⁷⁴, Tibet in the 1960s and 1970s was a scene of a latent war against the occupying forces, carried out by the Tibetan guerrilla trained by the CIA. This framework changed in 1979 when Deng Xiaoping initiated contacts between Beijing and supporters of the Dalai Lama." The Cultural Revolution severely destroyed the area's cultural heritage, but Den Xiaoping restored religious freedom in the late 1970s.

Although it was never accepted to challenge Chinese sovereignty, the temples were reopened⁷⁵. Since 1974, abandoning the secessionist path, the Dalai Lama's position has been to seek "meaningful autonomy that allows Tibet to preserve its culture and heritage"⁷⁶. For its part, the Chinese Government⁷⁷ for its part, speaks of Tibet today in the following terms:

Tibet, a region coveted by Western nations since the Opium War in 1840, has always been an inalienable part of Chinese territory. The Tibetans have always been part of the great multinational Chinese family. The so-called "Tibet independence" issue is originally a product of the aggression of imperialist nations [...].

3.2. Tibet's geography, natural resources, and other attractions for the Chinese economy

The MAERPCh⁷⁸ collects the following geographic information about Tibet:

[T]he Tibet Autonomous Region is the main body of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau and is known as "the Roof of the World" for its average height of more than 4,000 meters. [...] The topography is divided into six types: ultra-high mountain, high mountain, medium mountain, low mountain, hill, and plain. [...] there are more than 20 rivers whose basins each have a surface area greater than 10,000 km². The rivers whose basin is greater than 2,000 km² add up to more than one hundred. [...] The place of origin of the famous Asian rivers like the Ganges, the Indus, the Brahmaputra, the Mekong, the Salween, and the Irrawaddy is there. The water source of Tibet's rivers is formed by rainfall, meltwater, and groundwater. The flow is fabulous but with little

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 268.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ García, Carolina: "China: demografía y grupos étnicos", *op. cit.*

⁷⁵ Pérez Ventura, Juan: Breve historia del conflicto entre Tíbet y China, 2015, at <https://vaventura.com/divulgacion/historia/breve-historia-del-conflicto-tibet-china>

⁷⁶ Westcott, Ben: "Cuando el Dalai Lama muera, su reencarnación causará una crisis religiosa. Esto es lo que odría pasar", *CNN*, 15 February 2021, at <https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2021/02/15/dalai-lama-reencarnacion-crisis-religiosa-china-tibet/>

⁷⁷ Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores de la República Popular China: "Invasiones británicas: causa del separatismo tibetano", Embajada de la República Popular China en la República del Perú (2008), at <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/cepe//esp/ztl/zgxz/t423776.htm>

⁷⁸ Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores de la República Popular China, Geografía de Tibet, *op. cit.*

sand and the water is of good quality. [...] there are 1,500 large and small lakes, of which Nam Co, Selin Co, and Zaxinam Co each have an area of 1,000 km². There are 47 lakes with an area of more than 100 km². The lake area [...] accounts for about one-third of the total area of lakes in China.

Dams built along the Mekong River have been crucial in controlling the flow of water and generating hydroelectric power, contributing to the economic growth of countries in the region. However, these dams have also produced significant impacts on neighboring countries, particularly Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. The flow of the Mekong River affects the livelihoods and food security of millions of people living downstream, particularly farmers and fishermen and the dams have altered the natural flow of the river, impacting the quality and quantity of water available for agricultural purposes, the flow of sediments and affecting fish populations. This has resulted in tensions and conflicts among the countries involved, as well as concerns about the environmental impact of these dams.

Figure 5. River Mekong’s Mainstream Dams in 2020



Source: Eyler Brian: Mekong Mainstream Dams, Stimson Center⁷⁹

By 2020, China operated “11 of the world’s largest dams on the upstream portions of the map

⁷⁹ The author states that “this map does not show six other mainstream Mekong dams planned for China’s most upstream portion of the river and also does not show more than 400 dams planned or already constructed on the Mekong’s tributaries”.



which combined store more than 47bn cubic meters of water and can generate 21,310 MW of electricity. 11 more dams are slated for the lower Mekong mainstream in Laos and Cambodia. In 2,020 Laos completed the first two of its mainstream dams, the Xayaburi Dam and the Don Sahong Dam. Three others, Pak Beng, Pak Lay, and Luang Prabang have completed review processes mandated by the Mekong River Commission and could begin construction any time⁸⁰. However, pressure from environmental groups and serious reports has led countries such as Cambodia to announce in March 2020 a moratorium on its two planned mainstream dams to after 2030⁸¹.

As the demand for energy continues to increase in the region, it is essential to strike a balance between the benefits of hydropower and the potential negative impacts on downstream countries and their contribution to increasing the restriction of the flow, severely impacting in drought periods to million people who live off the resources provided by the Mekong River⁸².

As can be seen, Tibet is a strategic location thanks in part to its water resources. China has 20% of the world's population but only 7% of fresh water, so the country "estimates a drinking water deficit of about 200,000 million m³ by 2,030"⁸³. One of Tibet's water sources is its glaciers. Data collected on more than 100,000 km² of glaciers in "the mountainous complex of the Himalayas"⁸⁴, which includes the Tibetan plateau, "contains the third largest reserve of fresh water, behind the Arctic and from Antarctica" (Idem) and warns that "global warming is particularly evident in the Himalayan region, where the increase in temperature is melting glaciers and reducing snowfall with very negative consequences for the rivers that flow through Chinese territory"⁸⁵.

If Tibet's water resources are such an essential part of China's resource pool, climate change poses a serious threat to the country's and the region's water security. Not only because of the potential for future water shortages, but also because of the implications for the use of hydropower infrastructure in the area, to which China has been heavily committed in recent decades.

Thus, Tibet's water is key to its security and regional security and influence as it is the source of many vital regional rivers: "Controlling the Tibetan Plateau is not just a strategic issue of territorial integrity; it is the source of China's hydro hegemony"⁸⁶. Thus, the Asian giant finds a position of strength over its neighbors controlling the waters of Tibet.

The Brahmaputra, Indus, and Ganges rivers are other major transboundary rivers in the region, and their flows significantly impact the livelihoods and economies of the countries through which they pass. As in the case of the Mekong River, these rivers provide water for irrigation, transport and hydropower generation. However, upstream developments, including the construction of dams, have significantly impact the flow of water downstream, affecting agriculture, fisheries, and other sectors. Cooperation and responsible management of these transboundary rivers are essential to ensure sustainable development and avoid very serious conflicts over water resources, considering the alarming predictions of drought and water availability not only in China, but also in Pakistan, India and Bangladesh, based on climate

⁸⁰ Eyley Brian: Mekong Mainstream Dams, Stimson Center, 23 June 2020, at <https://www.stimson.org/2020/mekong-mainstream-dams/>

⁸¹ Citowicki Philip: "China's control of the Mekong", *The Diplomat*, 8 May 2020.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ Hidalgo García, María del Mar, *op. cit.* p. 7.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 8.



change modelling on Himalayas and the Tibet Plateau and the dramatic melting of glaciers.⁸⁷

The topic of hydroelectric power is crucial to understanding the impact of the present water management in downstream countries. As it was mentioned, it is essential to recognize the significance of this issue as it affects the environment, economy, and livelihoods of people in the region. The development of dams for hydroelectric power has negative impacts, such as reducing water flows downstream and altering ecosystems. Sustainable and responsible development of water resources is essential to address the concerns of both upstream and downstream countries. This requires cooperation and collaboration among all countries to ensure equitable distribution and sustainable use of water resources. It is essential to emphasise the need for responsible management of water resources to minimise negative impacts on downstream countries and to promote the sustainable development of the region.

In addition to agriculture or livestock, other sectors such as construction make water a valuable resource for the Chinese economy since it is essential for cement production. In 2019, China was the leading country in cement production worldwide —2.2 billion metric tons, followed by India, with 300 million⁸⁸. With these and the previous data, we can affirm that a significant reduction in available water could seriously affect its economy.

Tibet is also a territory abundant in other resources.

“Chromium, copper, boron, lithium and many other rare earth minerals are found in Tibet. A large number of deposits varying in sizes, amounting to more than 120 minerals, including precious metals like uranium and gold have been found in the region”⁸⁹.

China official media reported that geologists discovered 102 types of mineral deposits in over 3,000 mine beds with an estimated value of about USD 100 billions of US \$.⁹⁰ (See Figures 6 and 7).

Rodríguez Aranda⁹¹ for his part lists some of its reserves:

“Chromium, copper, boron, magnesium, sulfur, diamond and white mica”. It provides interesting economic data: “[t]he production of chrome represents more than 90 percent of the national total [...], the iron reserve is more than 200 million tons, and the lithium reserve occupies more than half of the world reserves”.

Again, we cannot take our eyes off the relative scarcity that China is suffering or will suffer in terms of raw materials. If we look at the case of iron and copper, their net imports grew, respectively, “from 44 million fine tons in 2000 to around 580 million in 2015” and “from 1.1 million fine tons in 2000 to 7.2 million in 2015”⁹². For example, it was the third-world producer

⁸⁷ Since the beginning of this century, several studies and research groups, including the IPCC reports, have warned of the serious consequences of the rapid melting of glaciers in the Himalayas and Asia in general. See Marquina Antonio: “Environmental Security in India”, in Zajaczkowski Jakub; Schöttli Jivanta; Thapa Manish(ed.) (2014): *India in the Contemporary World*, London, New York, New Delhi, Routledge

⁸⁸ Países Líderes en Producción de Cemento a Nivel Mundial en 2019 (en Millones de Toneladas Métricas), Statista GmbH, 30 December 2021, at

<https://es.statista.com/estadisticas/600158/paises-lideres-en-produccion-de-cemento-a-nivel-mundial-2010/>

⁸⁹ Col Vinayak Bhat (Retd): “Mineral exploitation, forced labour: How China continues to strangle Tibet”, *India Today*, 24 September 2020, at <https://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/mineral-exploitation-forced-labour-how-china-continues-to-strangle-tibet-1725041-2020-09-24>

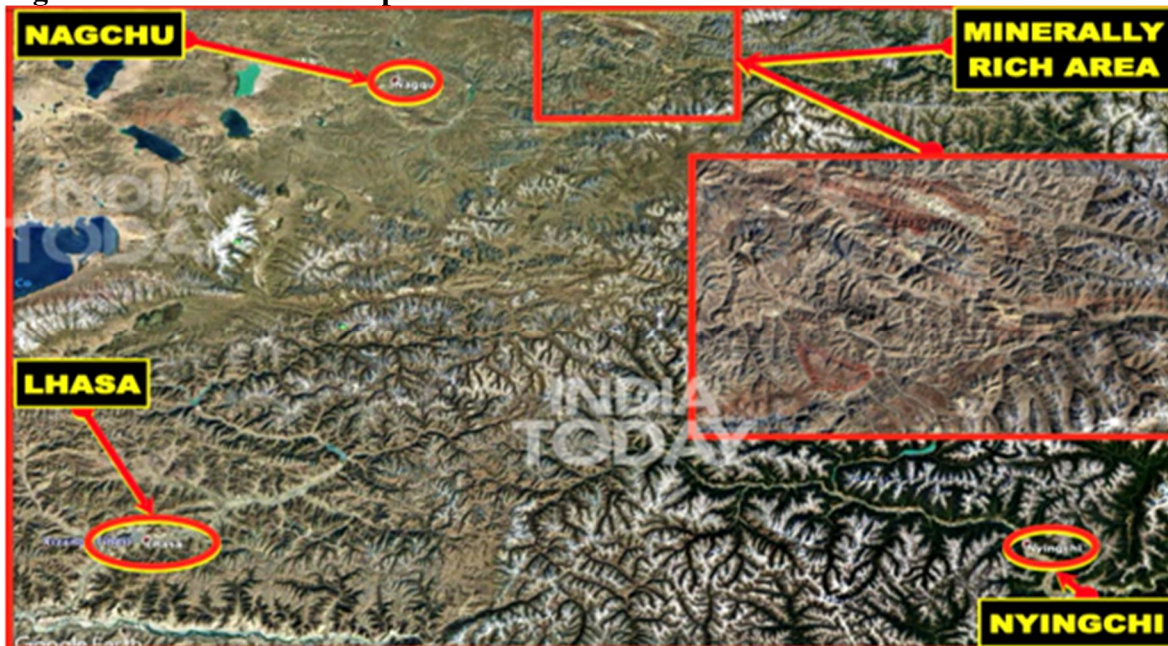
⁹⁰ “Now, China finds \$100bn mineral deposits in Tibet”, *The Times of India*, 6 December 2020, at <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/china/Now-China-finds-100bn-mineral-deposits-in-Tibet/articleshow/7053179.cms>

⁹¹ Rodríguez Aranda, Isabel (2010): *Continuidad Política y Cambio Económico en la China del Siglo XXI*, Santiago de Chile, RiL editores, p. 211.

⁹² da Rocha, Felipe Freitas & Bielschowsky, Ricardo, *op. cit.*

of iron in 2020⁹³.

Figure 6. China Mineral Exploitation of Tibet: Overview



Source: India Today

Figure 7. China's Mineral Exploitation of Tibet: Driru



Source: India Today

The MAERPCh⁹⁴ also states that Tibet has geothermal lands in Yangbajain, "whose experimental exploitation is already included in the key projects of the State, [...]. It is the largest electro-geothermal power plant that has started to explode in China."

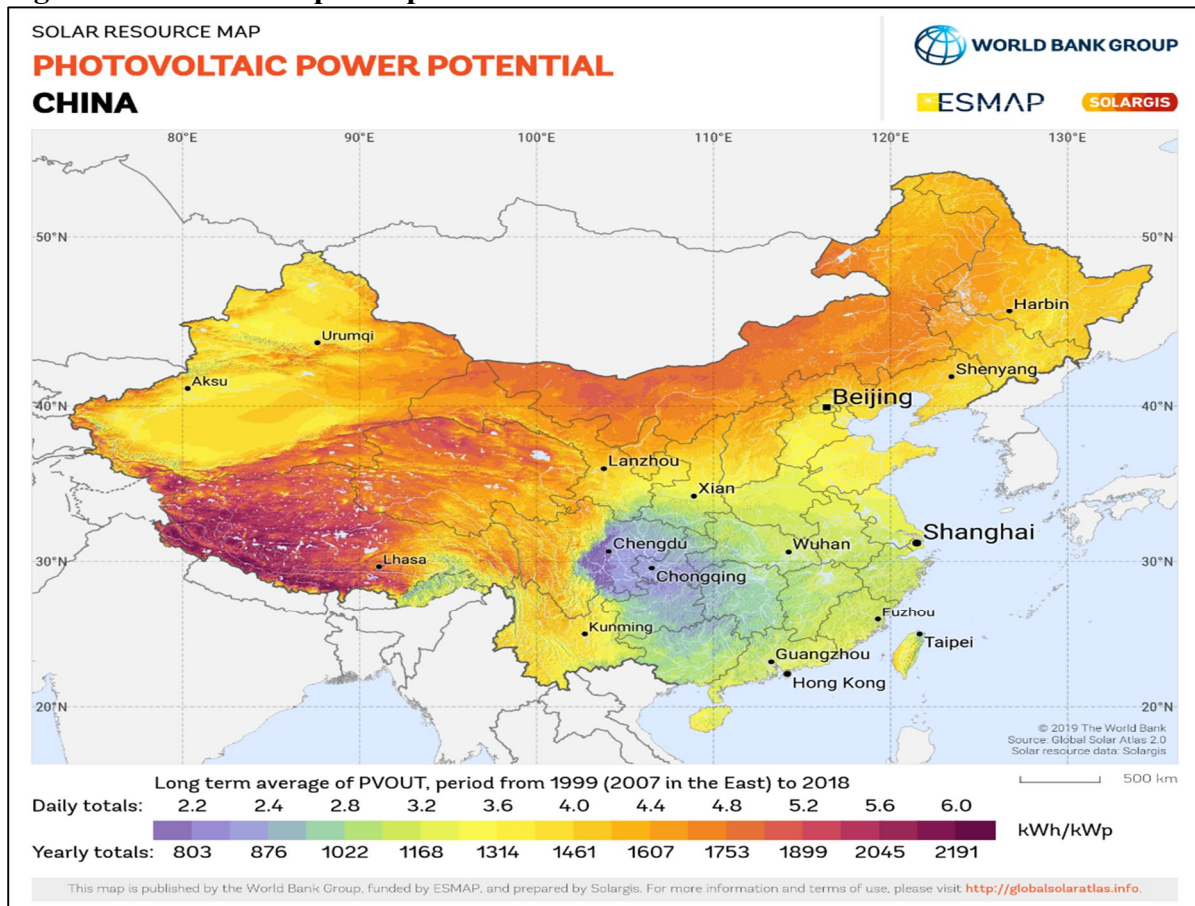
⁹³ Ranking de los Principales Países Productores de Mineral de Hierro a Nivel Mundial en 2020 (en Millones de Toneladas Métricas)", Statista GmbH, 31 enero 2022, at <https://es.statista.com/estadisticas/600165/paises-lideres-en-la-produccion-de-mineral-de-hierro-a-nivel-mundial/>

⁹⁴ Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores de la República Popular China: Geografía de Tíbet, *op. cit.*

In addition, it highlights Tibetan importance concerning the use of solar energy: "[T]ibet is a place with the highest solar radiation in China". According to the Global Solar Atlas⁹⁵ and as seen in see Figure 8, the Tibetan territory has the most significant photovoltaic potential in China.

In China, the total installed photovoltaic capacity in MW has increased considerably in the last decade, going from 6,718 MW in 2012 to 130,801 MW in 2017 and 306,403 MW in 2021⁹⁶, occupying the first world position. If the country continues betting on renewable energy sources, Tibet will be seen as one of the places where solar radiation is most usable; and something similar happens with the wind power⁹⁷.

Figure 8. Photovoltaic power potential in China



Source: Global Solar Atlas

As has been observed in all the aspects analyzed, such as water resources (and water hegemony in the region), energy, and minerals, Tibet appears, similarly to Xinjiang, as a vital territory for the Chinese economy and their geopolitical interests.

4. Conclusions

Despite being a vast country of 9,596,000 km² with natural resources of all kinds, it has been noted that China is in a situation of relative scarcity, with more than 1,437 million people inhabiting it and therefore unable to meet the demands of its huge population and economy. It

⁹⁵ The World Bank Group: Photovoltaic Power Potential: China, Global Solar Atlas (n.d.), at <https://globalsolaratlas.info/download/china>

⁹⁶ IRENA (2022): Renewable Energy Statistics 2022, Abu Dhabi, The International Renewable Energy Agency, at <https://irena.org/publications/2022/Apr/Renewable-Capacity-Statistics-2022-ES>

⁹⁷ The World Bank Group: "Poster maps for East Asia and Pacific", Global Wind Atlas (n.d.), at <https://globalwindatlas.info/download/high-resolution-maps/EAP>



depends on a good deal from the outside. These include fossil fuels - oil, gas, coal - minerals and metals - gold, iron, copper, rare earths- water, food and other products such as cotton.

The Chinese economy will need to make significant changes to its energy model if the government wants to effectively tackle climate change impacts, starting with decarbonization. In addition, climate change will increasingly affect the availability of water - already low per capita in China - for the population and for agriculture, livestock, construction and industry. This will also affect the use of renewable energy sources such as hydropower, making the country even more dependent on other energy sources and, at least initially, adding to the energy deficit mentioned in the article.

This article analyzed the economic advantages that both the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region and the very large Tibet Autonomous Region represent for the Chinese state and concludes that it seems unlikely that the Chinese state will change its strategy towards the two autonomous regions. The direct economic losses and the impact on the Chinese economy as a whole would be very serious. In addition, its geopolitical interests would be seriously undermined, reducing both its ability to exert pressure on other Asian states and its ability to maintain and expand its trade and infrastructure links abroad. Thus, it can be argued that the maintenance of its territorial integrity at all costs is based not only on crucial political and ideological issues, but also on the economic and geopolitical benefits derived from these territories and the expectation of increasing them. The benefits that China derives from Tibet and Xinjiang are so numerous and important - and the damage that would be caused by losing them so damaging - that it would be infeasible for the Chinese authorities to allow not only their secession, but also any formula that would prevent the Chinese state from taking advantage of their political and economic opportunities.

For all these reasons, it is foreseeable that the government of China will maintain the current position, emphasizing that both regions are historically part of China and that any claims made are driven by foreign interests. It can also be expected to continue to suppress the restive populations and dilute them through population transfers to and from these areas. In return, it will continue to seek legitimacy through greater economic development.

[This article faces the limitations of an authoritarian and opaque state in obtaining much up-to-date economic, social and political data on China in general, and Xinjiang and Tibet in particular.]

Bibliography

Adherence to and compliance with arms control, nonproliferation, and disarmament agreements and commitments, U.S. Department of State, 2020, at <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Tab-1.-EXECUTIVE-SUMMARY-OF-2020-CR-FINDINGS-04.14.2020-003-003.pdf>

“Algodón de Xinjiang: cómo saber si tu ropa está hecha con mano de obra supuestamente esclava en China”, *BBC News Mundo* (27 March 2021), at <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-internacional-56546400>

Amnesty International: “Como si fuéramos el enemigo en una guerra. Internamiento masivo, tortura y persecución por parte de China de personas musulmanas en Xinjiang”, 2021, at https://xinjiang.amnesty.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/ASA_17_4137_2021_Summary_ES_Spanish.pdf



Blázquez, Adrián: “China: el sueño americano de Rusia”, *El Orden Mundial* (25 May 2015), at <https://elordenmundial.com/china-el-sueno-americano-de-rusia/>

China's Massive Belt and Road Initiative, *The Belt and Road Initiative* (n.d.), at <https://www.beltroad-initiative.com/belt-and-road/>

“China no tiene la tecnología para reciclar el 100% de los residuos peligrosos generados en sus centrales nucleares”, *Europa Press*, 14 agosto 2022 at <https://www.europapress.es/verificaciones/noticia-china-no-tiene-tecnologia-reciclar-100-residuos-peligrosos-generados-centrales-nucleares-20220814175956.html>

China permits two new coal power plants per week in 2022, *Energy and Clean Air Research Institute*, 8 July 2021, at <https://energyandcleanair.org/publication/china-permits-two-new-coal-power-plants-per-week-in-2022/>

Clarke, Michael: “China's integration of Xinjiang with Central Asia: securing a "silk road" to great power status?”, *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly* N° 6, 2008, pp. 89-111

Corbett, Thomas & Singer, Peter W.: “China's 'Particle Beam Cannon' is a nuclear-power breakthrough”, *Defense One* (13 June 2022), at <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2022/06/chinas-particle-beam-cannon-nuclear-power-breakthrough/368082/>

da Rocha, Felipe Freitas & Bielschowsky, Ricardo: “La búsqueda de China de recursos naturales en América Latina”, *Revista CEPAL*, n° 126 (2018), pp. 9-29.

Díaz, Jesús: “China quiere conectar la primera central de fusión nuclear a su red eléctrica en 2035”, *El Confidencial*, 24 mayo 2022, at https://www.elconfidencial.com/tecnologia/novaceno/2022-05-24/china-central-electrica-fusion-nuclear-2035_3429926/

El prototipo de acelerador lineal superconductor ADS logra un funcionamiento estable de haz continuo de alta potencia de 100 kW, *Chinese Academy of Sciences*, 11 enero 2022, at https://www.cas.cn/jh/202201/t20220111_4821658.shtml

Espinosa, Victor I., Wang, William H., & Huerta de Soto, Jesús: “Principles of Nudging and Boosting: Steering or Empowering Decision-Making for Behavioral Development Economics”, *Sustainability*, vol. 14 n° 4 (2022), p. 2145, at <https://doi.org/10.3390/su14042145>

Esteban, Mario & Otero Iglesias, Miguel: ¿Qué podemos esperar de la nueva Ruta de la Seda y del Banco Asiático de Inversión en Infraestructuras liderados por China?, *Real Instituto Elcano*, ARI 19/2015, 9 abril 2015, at <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/analisis/que-podemos-esperar-de-la-nueva-ruta-de-la-seda-y-del-banco-asiatico-de-inversion-en-infraestructuras-liderados-por-china/>

Freedom House: *Freedom in the World 2022*, at <https://freedomhouse.org/country/china/freedom-world/2022>

García, Carolina: “China: demografía y grupos étnicos”. *El Orden Mundial*, 21 April 2014, at <https://elordenmundial.com/china-demografia-y-grupos-etnicos/>

Gil Lobo, Abel, “La densidad de población de China”, *El Orden Mundial*, 26 January 2020, at <https://elordenmundial.com/mapas-y-graficos/densidad-de-poblacion-china/>

González, Alicia: “La batalla por el algodón de Xinjiang”, *El País*, 10 mayo 2021, at <https://elpais.com/internacional/2021-05-10/la-batalla-por-el-algodon-de-xinjiang.html>

González Francisco, Luis Antonio: *El fenómeno yihadista en China. El Movimiento Islámico del Turquestán Oriental (MITO)*, IEEE, *Documneto de Opinión*, 97/2021, 10 septiembre 2021,



at

https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2021/DIEEEO97_2021_LUIGON_Fenom eno.pdf

Hambly, Gavin (1972): *Asia Central*, Madrid, Siglo XXI de España Editores, S. A.

Hidalgo García, María del Mar: El agua del Tíbet: un recurso vital para China, (reedición), IEEE, Documento de Análisis, 12/ 2022, 18 febrero 2022, at https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2022/DIEEEA12_2022_MARHID_Agua.pdf

Kardoudi, Omar : “China afirma que tendrá electricidad ilimitada en solo tres décadas”, *El Confidencial*, 23 abril 2022, at

<https://www.elconfidencial.com/tecnologia/novaceno/2022-04-23/china-producira-energia-fusion-nuclear-en-30->

[anos_3412725/?utm_source=twitter&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=ECDiarioManual](https://www.elconfidencial.com/tecnologia/novaceno/2022-04-23/china-producira-energia-fusion-nuclear-en-30-anos_3412725/?utm_source=twitter&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=ECDiarioManual)

Laborie Iglesias, Mario: Compromisos e intereses internacionales para el futuro de Afganistán”, *Cuadernos de Estrategia*, n° 164 (2014), pp. 55-101, at

https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/cuadernos/CE_164.pdf

Lanteigne, Marc, “Why China's Rare Earths Threat Matters”, Carnegie Europe - Strategic Europe (28 August 2020), at <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/82585>

Marquina Antonio: “Environmental Security in India”, in Zajaczkowski Jakub; Schöttli Jivanta; Thapa Manish(ed) (2014): *India in the Contemporary World*, London, New York, New Delhi, Routledge.

Mars, Amanda & Planelles, Manuel: “China promete en la ONU un plan para alcanzar la neutralidad de carbono en 2060”, *El País*, 22 septiembre 2020, at <https://elpais.com/sociedad/2020-09-22/china-promete-en-la-onu-un-plan-para-alcanzar-la-neutralidad-del-carbono-en-2060.html>

Merino, Álvaro: Las empresas con más ingresos del mundo, *El Orden Mundial*. 10 mayo 2021, at <https://elordenmundial.com/mapas-y-graficos/empresas-mas-ingresos-mundo/>

Merino, Álvaro: Los grandes productores de uranio, *El Orden Mundial*, 16 enero 2022, at <https://elordenmundial.com/mapas-y-graficos/los-grandes-productores-de-uranio/>

Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores de la República Popular China: Xinjiang. Natural resources, Embajada de la República Popular China en India (n.d.), at <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/cein//eng/ssygd/xbdkf/Xinjiang/t166811.htm>

Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores de la República Popular China; Territorio y recursos naturales, Embajada de la República Popular China en la República de Colombia (n.d.), at <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/ceco/esp/zgk/trn/t223695.htm>

Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores de la República Popular China: Geografía de Tíbet, Embajada de la República Popular China en la República Oriental del Uruguay, 2007, at <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/ceuy/esp/ztlm/zgxz/t385970.htm>

Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores de la República Popular China: Invasiones británicas: causa del separatismo tibetano, Embajada de la República Popular China en la República del Perú 2008, at <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/cepe//esp/ztlm/zgxz/t423776.htm>

Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores de la República Popular China: Descubren gran yacimiento de uranio en norte de China, Embajada de la República Popular China en la República Argentina, 2012, at <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/cear//esp/jrzg/t985470.htm>



Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores, Unión Europea y Cooperación de España: China, Oficina de Información Diplomática, ficha país 2022, at https://www.exteriores.gob.es/Documents/FichasPais/CHINA_FICHA%20PAIS.pdf

Müller-Markus, Christina: “One Belt, One Road: el sueño chino y su impacto sobre Europa”, Notes Internacionales CIDOB, n° 148 (2016), at https://www.cidob.org/publicaciones/serie_de_publicacion/notes_internacionales/n1_148_one_belt_one_road_el_sueno_chino_y_su_impacto_sobre_europa/one_belt_one_road_el_sueno_chino_y_su_impacto_sobre_europa

National Bureau of Statistics of China: Energy Production in December 2022, 18 January 2023, at http://www.stats.gov.cn/english/PressRelease/202301/t20230118_1892302.html

National Bureau of Statistics of China: “Statistical Communiqué of the People’s Republic of China on the National Economic and Social Development, 28 February 2023, at http://www.stats.gov.cn/english/PressRelease/202302/t20230227_1918979.html

NRCan: Distribución Porcentual de las Reservas Mundiales de Cobre en 2017, por País, Statista GmbH, 31 octubre 2019, at <https://es.statista.com/estadisticas/1064866/porcentaje-de-las-reservas-mundiales-de-cobre-por-pais/>

Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights: “Assessment of human rights concerns in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, People’s Republic of China”, 2022, at <https://www.ohchr.org/es/press-releases/2022/08/un-human-rights-office-issues-assessment-human-rights-concerns-xinjiang>

Olivieri, Chiara: “Estepa y rutas de la seda frente al espejo de la Región Autónoma Uigur de Xinjiang. Fronteras fluidas y construcción de narrativas histórico-identitarias”, *Quaderns de Filologia-Estudis Literaris*, n° 23 (2018), pp. 23-38.

Olivieri, Chiara: “El “Viaje al Oeste” prosigue: Colonialidad territorial y geopolítica de la dominación en la Región Autónoma Uigur de Xinjiang”, *Historia Actual Online*, n° 57 (2002), pp. 63-78

Países Líderes a Nivel Mundial en Producción Minera de Oro en 2016, por Cuota de Mercado, Statista GmbH, 8 mayo 2017, at <https://es.statista.com/estadisticas/601072/distribucion-porcentual-de-la-produccion-minera-de-oro-por-paises>

Países Líderes en Producción de Cemento a Nivel Mundial en 2019 (en Millones de Toneladas Métricas)”, Statista GmbH, 30 diciembre 2021, at <https://es.statista.com/estadisticas/600158/paises-lideres-en-produccion-de-cemento-a-nivel-mundial-2010/>

Pardo de Santayana, José: “El desenganche de China-EE. UU. y el año de Asia”, IIEE, Documento de Análisis, 54/2021, diciembre 2021, at https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2021/DIEEEA54_2021_JOSPAR_Desenganche.pdf

Pardo Delgado, José Miguel: "Hidrogeopolítica en la cuenca HinduKush Himalaya. El ejemplo del Brahmaputra”, IIEE, Documento de Opinión, 38/2021, 2 abril 2021, at https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2021/DIEEEEO38_2021_JOSMIG_Himalaya.pdf

Pérez Ventura, Juan: “Breve historia del conflicto entre Tíbet y China”, Ventura, 1 mayo 2015, at <https://vaventura.com/divulgacion/historia/breve-historia-del-conflicto-tibet-china>

Photovoltaic Power Potential: China, Global Solar Atlas (n.d.), The World Bank Group, at <https://globalsolaratlas.info/download/china>



Poster maps for East Asia and Pacific, Global Wind Atlas (n.d.), The World Bank Group, at <https://globalwindatlas.info/download/high-resolution-maps/EAP>

Ramos, Benjamín: “Lo que China esconde: el encaje uigur”, *El Orden Mundial*, 18 December 2015, at <https://elordenmundial.com/lo-que-china-esconde-el-encaje-uigur/>

Ranking de los Mayores Campos Petroleros Existentes a Nivel Mundial a Fecha de Noviembre de 2019, según Volumen de Crudo Extraíble (en Miles de Millones de Barriles), Statista GmbH, 8 noviembre 2019, at <https://es.statista.com/estadisticas/1070888/crudo-extraible-en-los-mayores-campos-petroleros-del-mundo/>

Ranking de los Principales Países Consumidores de Uranio en 2019 (en Miles de Toneladas Métricas), Statista GmbH, 15 febrero 2021, at <https://es.statista.com/estadisticas/635411/paises-lideres-en-el-consumo-de-uranio/>

Ranking de los Principales Países Productores de Mineral de Hierro a Nivel Mundial en 2020 (en Millones de Toneladas Métricas)”, Statista GmbH, 31 enero 2022, at <https://es.statista.com/estadisticas/600165/paises-lideres-en-la-produccion-de-mineral-de-hierro-a-nivel-mundial/>

Ranking de Países con las Reservas de Oro Más Grandes del Mundo en el Tercer Trimestre de 2022 (en Toneladas Métricas)”, Statista GmbH, 11 enero 2023, at <https://es.statista.com/estadisticas/600211/paises-con-las-reservas-de-oro-mas-grandes-del-mundo/>

Ranking Mundial de los Países Productores de Petróleo en 2021 (en Millones de Toneladas), Statista GmbH, 19 marzo 2022, at <https://es.statista.com/estadisticas/635401/principales-paises-productores-de-petroleo/>

Rao, Tara: Nuclear imperialism in China’s Xinjiang, Observer Research Foundation, 2020, at <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/nuclear-imperialism-china-xinjiang/>

Renewable Energy Statistics 2022, The International Renewable Energy Agency, Abu Dhabi, at <https://irena.org/publications/2022/Apr/Renewable-Capacity-Statistics-2022-ES>

Rodríguez Aranda, Isabel (2010): *Continuidad Política y Cambio Económico en la China del Siglo XXI*, Santiago de Chile, RiL editores.

Ruiz Arévalo, Javier: “La caída de Kabul (III). ¿El triunfo de China en Afganistán?”, IEEE, Documento de Opinión 03/2022, 13 enero 2022, at https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2022/DIEEEEO3_2022_JAVRUI_Kabul.pdf

Ruser, Nathan, Leibold, James, Munro, Kelsey & Hoja, Tilla: Cultural erasure. Tracing the destruction of Uyghur and Islamic spaces in Xinjiang, Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) 24 September 2020, at <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/cultural-erasure>

Spence, Jonathan (2011) : *En Busca de la China Moderna*, Madrid, Tusquets; see also Campos Robles, Miguel: “Los ensayos nucleares y los tratados para su prohibición”, Global Strategy Report, nº 38, 2020, at <https://global-strategy.org/los-ensayos-nucleares-y-los-tratados-para-su-prohibicion/>

Vidal Lij, Macarena: “China combina represión y ayudas para frenar el separatismo uigur”, *El País*, 5 julio 2014, at https://elpais.com/internacional/2014/07/05/actualidad/1404563177_006419.html

Vidal Lij, Macarena: “La nueva fase de los campos de reeducación en Xinjiang”, *El País*, 26 Julio 2021, at <https://elpais.com/internacional/2021-07-26/la-nueva-fase-de-los-campos-de-reeducacion-en-xinjiang.html>



Westcott, Ben: “Cuando el Dalai Lama muera, su reencarnación causará una crisis religiosa. Esto es lo que podría pasar”, *CNN*, 15 febrero 2021 at

<https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2021/02/15/dalai-lama-reencarnacion-crisis-religiosa-china-tibet/>

Xinjiang será “centro” de Franja Económica de la Ruta de la Seda, Observatorio de la Política China, 2015, at <https://politica-china.org/areas/autonomias/xinjiang-sera-centro-de-franja-economica-de-la-ruta-de-la-seda>

Xu, Vicky Xiuzhong, Cave, Danielle, Leibold, James, Munro, Kelsey & Ruser, Nathan: Uyghurs for sale, Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), 1 March 2020, at <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/uyghurs-sale>

Yin, Weiwen: “The natural resource curse in Xinjiang”, *CEU Political Science Journal*, n° 10, (2015), pp. 112-140.

Zhou Mu: “Chinese “artificial sun” sets new world record”, *Xinhua News*, 31 December 2021, at <http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/20211231/c4fad387ef0745c18aedee05eed1414d/c.html>