From Planned Allocation to Development-Oriented Cooperation: The Transition of China's Aid-to-Xinjiang Work (1978-1995)

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Abstract: After the launch of reform and opening up in 1978, China's aid-to-Xinjiang work entered a transitional stage connecting the past and the future. The aid work from 1978 to 1995 continued the historical practice since Xinjiang's peaceful liberation in 1949 and laid the material foundation for the full launch of the paired-aid policy in 1996. In institutional reconstruction, economic development, paired assistance, and stability maintenance and anti-secession, this stage formed a distinctive practical logic and notable stage characteristics. From the perspective of frontier governance, reviewing this historical practice helps to understand the evolutionary logic of paired aid to Xinjiang in the new era and provides historical experience for advancing the building of the community for the Chinese nation.

***Keywords*:** aid-to-Xinjiang work, development-oriented assistance, border governance

1. Introduction

Since 1949, aid to Xinjiang has been an important practice of border governance. After 1978, as reform and opening-up became the main theme of the era, aid-to-Xinjiang work entered a stage of adjustment and transition. Guided by the second-generation central leadership with Deng Xiaoping at its core, it upheld both bringing order out of chaos and safeguarding stability and, continuing the pre-1949 tradition of supporting Xinjiang[1], moved from planned allocation of materials and manpower towards market-oriented cooperation, intellectual support and institutional empowerment. Taking 1978-1995 as its window, this paper examines how institutional repair, economic transformation and paired assistance unfolded, arguing that the work completed a threefold institutional, economic and organizational transition.

2. Institutional reconstruction: rebuilding the foundation of border governance and aid work

Institutional reconstruction was the primary task of this period, centring on restoring the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC) and improving regional ethnic autonomy to consolidate the institutional foundation of border governance.

2.1 Restoration of the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps

During the decade of turmoil, the XPCC was severely damaged and abolished in 1975, weakening border defence. In the early reform period the Party Central Committee decided to restore the XPCC. In June 1981, Wang Zhen wrote to Deng Xiaoping, stressing the corps' value in safeguarding national unity and border stability and urging its restoration. On 1 July Deng Xiaoping instructed that its restoration be studied; in August he inspected Xinjiang and noted that "the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps must be restored" as "an important force for stability".[2] In December 1981 the central authorities issued the Decision on Restoring the Corps, and it was formally restored. With sustained central support, it recovered its capacity and became a core force in border development and stability maintenance.

2.2 Legalization of the system of regional ethnic autonomy

The central government also accelerated the legalization of regional ethnic autonomy. In 1984 the Law on Regional Ethnic Autonomy was promulgated. Article 61 requires higher-level state organs to support economically developed areas in cooperating economically and technologically with ethnic autonomous areas and to help raise their management and production technology.[3] This gave legal force to such support.

3. Economic construction: from "blood transfusion" to "blood-making"

Economically, drawing on Xinjiang's resource endowment and locational advantages, the central government explored

a development-oriented aid model through policy preference, infrastructure investment and industrial support. Aid was no longer a mere fiscal transfusion; it activated Xinjiang's own potential, marking a transition towards blood-making.

3.1 Opening-up policies and the gateway to the west

Given Xinjiang's remote northwest location and weak opening-up foundation, in 1988 the State Council issued special policies to support its opening-up, simplifying local import procedures, opening the Khorgos and Turugart ports to third-country personnel, and supporting Xinjiang in building a gateway to the west.

3.2 The "one black and one white" strategy and industrial cultivation

At the industrial level, the central government supported the one black and one white strategy[4] - focusing on petrochemicals and cotton. It coordinated nationwide oil exploration to intensify oil and gas development in the Tarim and Junggar basins, making Xinjiang a strategic energy base, and allocated improved cotton seeds and technologies from the interior, building a national high-quality cotton base supplying the textile industry.

3.3 Infrastructure construction

Infrastructure was the focus of economic aid. Concentrating nationwide engineering forces and materials, the central government completed the Korla-Kashgar railway and the Turpan-Urumqi-Dahuangshan expressway and expanded Urumqi Diwopu International Airport, improving Xinjiang's transport and logistics.

4. Initial exploration of the paired-assistance mechanism

4.1 The proposal of the paired-assistance mechanism

In April 1987, transmitting its Report on Ethnic Work, the CPC Central Committee and the State Council pointed out: "Vigorously developing horizontal links is an important way to accelerate the economy of ethnic minority areas... Developed areas should continue to provide paired assistance to ethnic minority areas."[5] Paired assistance was thus explicitly proposed nationally, and Xinjiang, as a key border ethnic area, was included in the national layout of paired assistance. Thereafter, inland provinces and cities built regular mechanisms of economic and technological cooperation and two-way personnel exchange with Xinjiang, the developed east providing industrial and managerial assistance while Xinjiang pursued complementary cooperation.

4.2 Educational aid to Xinjiang

Educational aid was an important lever of intellectual support. Given Xinjiang's weak higher education, the State Education Commission launched a plan for inland universities to support its universities in faculty training and research cooperation[4]; in basic education, the interior sent teachers to ease grassroots shortages and expanded inland enrolment for Xinjiang students.

4.3 Medical aid to Xinjiang

Medical aid advanced in parallel: inland medical institutions established paired relationships with grassroots hospitals in Xinjiang, sending key personnel to work and train local staff, improving grassroots capacity. Although paired assistance was not yet a fully covered, institutionalized cadre-based system, it accumulated practice and paved the way for the comprehensive cadre-based assistance of 1996.

5. Stability maintenance and counter-separatism: the baseline guarantee of border security

In the 1980s, ethnic separatist tendencies in Xinjiang resurfaced and illegal religious activities intertwined with destructive activities, threatening border stability. The central government therefore treated stability as the baseline task of aid work and the premise of development. Inspecting Xinjiang, Deng Xiaoping stressed that "the fundamental question in Xinjiang is whether to establish a republic or an autonomous region", and that "stability in Xinjiang is the overall interest; without stability nothing can be accomplished".[2] In July 1981 the Secretariat of the CPC Central Committee discussed Xinjiang work, proposed the two inseparables as a principle for ethnic unity, and called for training and promoting ethnic minority cadres.[6] Under its unified deployment, the political-legal, public security and state security systems supported Xinjiang in force building, equipment and training, enhancing its capacity to combat separatist activities, creating a safe and stable environment for Xinjiang's development.

6. Conclusion

This paper examined 1978-1995, a critical transition period in New China's aid to Xinjiang, which followed an internal logic of institutional reconstruction, economic transformation and mechanism exploration. Rather than focusing on the 1996 turning point or a single domain, it treats this period itself as its object and highlights its pivotal, connecting role. Issues remain, such as measuring aid effectiveness and the micro-mechanisms of educational and medical aid; future research may draw on archival materials and quantitative data.

Acknowledgments

This paper is a research achievement of the Major Project of the National Social Science Fund of China "Collation and Research on Oral Data of the Spirit of Aid to Xizang and Xinjiang from the Perspective of Forging the Consciousness of the Chinese National Community" (Project No.: 23&ZD207); it is also a phased achievement of the 2026 Key Project of Postgraduate Scientific Research Innovation and Practice of Xizang Minzu University "Thirty Years of Research on Zhejiang and Liaoning's Aid to Nagqu from the Perspective of Forging the Consciousness of the Chinese National Community" (Project No.: Y2026188).

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