In Chongqing, when Chiang Kaishek had discussed with Fu his vision for the future of Chinese-Soviet relations, he told Fu that he wanted to regain control over China’s lost sovereignty in the Soviet-dominated province of Xinjiang. Under the willing leadership of the Chinese governor there, Sheng Shicai, the province of Xinjiang had long been dominated by Soviet economic controls. But in 1941, Governor Sheng saw advantage in turning his back on Moscow and supporting Chongqing. It was important that Chiang take advantage of Governor Sheng’s co-operation and reassert his sovereignty over this territory, but at the same time, he still needed Soviet support. Chiang had to play a game of balance; expel Soviet gains out of Xinjiang, yet maintain friendly Chinese-Soviet relations. In Moscow, this placed Fu in a very difficult position; he would have to take the brunt of Soviet displeasure over Xinjiang and make excuses for all the upheavals there, but at the same time try to convince the Soviet leadership, as well as the Allies, that Chongqing was being sincere in her efforts to promote good Chinese-Soviet relations. This was not an easy task – and it would be compounded further by a noticeable lack of support from the Chinese Foreign Office.

Xinjiang

Xinjiang province, situated in north-west China, is the size of Great Britain, France, Germany and Spain combined. It is 1,664,900 km in area, and surrounded on three sides by mountains. These are the Tien Shan mountains extending from west to east, dividing the province in half with the Tarim Basin in the south, and the Zungharia Basin in the north; the Altai mountain range borders Outer Mongolia, and the
Kunlun mountain range borders India and Tibet. The Tarim Basin and the Zungharia are mostly desert, dotted with oases and areas of broad steppe.

Traditionally, Xinjiang’s mountain barriers have sheltered the province from outside influence. Very few natural corridors lead to Xinjiang from China; the most convenient is the Gansu corridor, linking China proper via the Gobi desert. In the nineteenth century, Russian traders and settlers from the Soviet Central Asian Republics found relatively easier access through mountain passes along the Ili River Valley on the north-west Chinese-Soviet border. In 1930, the Turkestan-Siberian Railway was built, providing ideal opportunities to further Soviet influence in commerce and trade. Development in Xinjiang throughout the modern period, therefore, was governed by its geographical factors. Relative closeness and easier passage from the Soviet Union rather than Beijing, some 1,500 miles away, encouraged Russian rather than Chinese interests in Xinjiang’s trade and development. Xinjiang is an area of immense natural beauty and wealth. The gold mines of the Altai mountains and the fine jade of Khotan have been mined by the Chinese for centuries. Coal, oil and minerals exist in quality and abundance. In the twentieth century, huge deposits of tin, mercury, uranium, lead, copper and iron were discovered. Important mineral deposits from Xinjiang include tungsten and lithium aluminium silicate, a substance used in thermonuclear explosives. The people of Xinjiang have close historical and cultural ties with Russia, Outer Mongolia, and to a lesser extent, Afghanistan. In the 1940s, only ten per cent of subjects living in Xinjiang were Chinese. The rest of the population was a mixture of Mongols, Uighurs, Kazakhs, Sarikolis and Kirghiz. The majority of Xinjiang citizens were Muslim.

Soviet influence

At the beginning of the Second World War, Soviet dominance in Xinjiang in all areas of economic development was clearly established. Xinjiang’s provincial leader, Governor Sheng, welcomed his position as a Soviet proxy. In his own words, ‘A signal difference set apart the Soviet imperialism from that of Japan or of Great Britain. Whereas the last two forces could offer nothing to their local puppets but arms and money, Russia’s moral and ideological force among the population, as a whole, gave it a definite advantage.’ In the 1930s, Sheng had aspired to make Xinjiang a model province that might ultimately serve as a symbol for spreading the Soviet system in China. He promoted an Eight Point Plan for Xinjiang, including equality between races, religious