

# The PRC's Changing Moral and Realist Perceptions Toward Territorial Disputes

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*Cultural and institutional norms shape state identity, which in turn determines a country's national security definition and foreign policy. In order to understand the national security and foreign policy of the People's Republic of China (PRC), we must examine the perception of the Chinese people and elite regarding their country's historical and contemporary role in international affairs. The PRC has longstanding boundary disputes with the former Soviet Union/Russia and India, and maritime territorial disputes with Japan and Southeast Asian countries. Chinese resentment against past imperialist aggression, and conceptions of what is right or natural as part of their political world-view and diplomatic discourse, must therefore be taken into account in assessing the PRC's policy toward heightening, negotiating, or settling these territorial disputes with its neighbors. This paper argues that different territorial disputes with different countries took on different saliency at different times, depending on how the PRC leadership defined and redefined its national interest. This redefinition, moreover, accords with the reordering of the state's norms and identity—from being a revolutionary power promoting a world ideology, to an Asian power reorienting toward regional interests, to a prospective world power tentatively participating in multilateral cooperation. As such, while some disputes are settled or rendered irrelevant as ideological considerations, national identity, and interest definitions change, others are magnified or new disputes may even appear.*

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## **Introduction: The Chinese World-View**

Material interests and international distribution of power are by no means irrelevant in explaining state behavior, but as Peter Katzenstein so persuasively argued, cultural and institutional norms shape state identity, which in turn affects a country's national security definition and foreign policy.<sup>1</sup> This is because political identities are constructed and understood by people living in state polities in reference to their own cultural and institutional context. Shared perception, understanding, knowledge, and expectations inform the content of state identity and interest definition, and these "ideational" factors have great autonomy in explaining interactions within and between states. Hence, realist or structuralist theories purporting to explain the approach of the People's Republic of China (PRC) to territorial disputes are likely to be incomplete if they overlook either the significance of comprehensive definitions of national security that go beyond narrow military concerns, or the legacy of the Sino-centric world system for the national security policies of the PRC and other Asian states in the twenty-first century.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, since its founding in 1949, the PRC has always been a rather large and autonomous entity in the structure of the international state system, not quite amenable to outside influences, and rather isolationistic for the first three decades of its existence.

To explain the circumstances under which a particular disagreement, dispute, or conflict arose, or predict the likelihood of new issues occurring, we must examine the strategic thinking of state leaders, especially the cultural assumptions behind their foreign policy formulation, the sources of domestic power politics and regime legitimacy, and their people's percep-

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<sup>1</sup>Ronald L. Jepperson, Alexander Wendt, and Peter J. Katzenstein, "Norms, Identity, and Culture in National Security," in *The Culture of National Security*, ed. Peter J. Katzenstein (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 52-65.

<sup>2</sup>Peter J. Katzenstein, "Conclusion: National Security in a Changing World," *ibid.*, 521 n. 59.

tion of the historical and contemporary role of their country in the changing international scene. The last is particularly important in understanding the national security and foreign policy of the PRC in general, and to account for China's policy toward heightening, negotiating, or settling its territorial disputes with neighboring countries in particular.<sup>3</sup> In short, aside from strategic or economic considerations, Chinese conceptions of what is natural or right in the political and diplomatic spheres must be taken into account as bases of inquiry into the territorial disputes of the PRC over the last forty years.

Historically, in the political world-view of the Chinese, there is no higher moral value than for the state leadership to create and maintain a unified, wealthy, and powerful China. In this political moral universe, for the state to guarantee the security of the individual's life, limb, and property, unity is preferred to division. A unified country would then provide the central government with a large tax base derived from many sources of income, which would in turn allow for the upkeep of a large military to defend the state and awe surrounding countries into a tributary relationship with China. Following this logic, Chinese today continue to believe that China's state strength should automatically translate into national prestige on the international stage. Hence the central state elite have both the right and duty to bring back to the fold recalcitrant regions or "lost territories" in order to restore China's glory, thus reuniting supreme political morality with the state's realist interests—the twin pillars on which the legitimacy of Chinese regimes has always rested. The recovery of Chinese lands, be it Taiwan or some insignificant coral reef in the South China Sea, may presently be considered one of the very few collectively shared expectations among Chinese nationals not imposed by the rulers on the ruled.

PRC leaders tend to internalize a sense of historical resentment and expect outsiders to recognize and sympathize with their unfortunate encounter with past imperialist aggression. This resentment often makes Chinese expect others to treat China right and affirm its self-image of a

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<sup>3</sup>This essay uses the terms "China" and "the People's Republic of China" (PRC) interchangeably.

gentle giant that conducts foreign policy based on "moral" virtues of justice and reciprocity, and not on "realist" concepts of self-interest and expedience. Relations can be cordial or even friendly if other states conduct themselves toward China properly with respect and circumspection, but if Beijing's claims and arguments are denied or only partially recognized, then layers of Chinese resentment may build up to a boiling point. This hypersensitivity to perceived slights, implied criticisms of internal Chinese affairs, and alleged contempt for China's territorial integrity is manifested by the Chinese with respect to matters pertaining to status and symbols, such as contesting China's claims to certain territories, no less than to substantive issues like trade disputes or military threats. As we shall see, different territorial disputes with different countries took on different saliency at different times, depending on how the PRC leadership defined and redefined its national interest. This redefinition has proceeded in accordance with the reordering of the state's norms and identity—from being a revolutionary power promoting a world ideology, to an Asian power reorienting toward regional concerns, to a prospective world power tentatively participating in multilateral cooperation.

### **The Changing Basis of China's Territorial Disputes**

A number of small islands and tracts of borderlands that the PRC considers to be part of its "sacred, inviolable" territory seized by foreign "imperialists" in the nineteenth century remain the subject of international disputes. The dispute over some islands in the Amur and Ussuri boundary rivers between China and the Soviet Union (now Russia) has been mostly settled, with the exception of one small island, over which both sides have agreed not to exercise sovereignty or administrative rights. However, the dispute over the Diaoyutai (釣魚台)/Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea among China, Taiwan, and Japan has been recurring over the years with no solution in sight. The on-and-off negotiation process by China and India seeking to fix a legal boundary along their disputed mountainous common border has so far failed. The many rounds of talks have, however, led to the establishment of confidence-building measures and the near-dissipa-

tion of border tension in the last decade. Official negotiations to ascertain sovereignty over the Spratly and other islands in the South China Sea have yet to be started; these islands are contested and, in many cases, occupied by China, Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Malaysia, with Brunei incorporating waters claimed by China into its two hundred-mile exclusive economic zone (EEZ).

If the former U.S. Ambassador to China James Lilley is correct in describing sovereignty as the mantra of the Chinese leadership,<sup>4</sup> then in addition to a strategic calculus, the "cultural" or "moral" basis of Chinese foreign policy posture must be taken into account, especially with regard to the management or mismanagement of its territorial sovereignty disputes, both past and present. Important to note is that despite changes in state norms and priorities which led to the rise and fall of the saliency of particular territorial disputes, the Chinese leadership has never wavered in its goal of preserving the national sovereignty and upholding the territorial integrity of the PRC. The PRC government has not, moreover, unilaterally made concessions on the legitimacy of these claims, although this may change in the future. The only change until now has been the importance attached to finding a solution for these claims. There can be no issue about dividing or relinquishing sovereignty over these claims, at least not without a corresponding concession of equal or greater value from the other side. This firm stance results from the fact that the PRC had always considered itself to have sovereignty over these claims and has never recognized any action by past Chinese governments ceding these territories to foreign countries.

While quarrels within the same socialist ideological paradigm aggravated boundary and other tensions between China and the Soviet Union in the 1960s and 1970s, having different political systems was precisely what allowed China and Japan to initiate and maintain friendly relations. With the end of the Cold War, state-to-state diplomacy on the basis of common national interests permitted both China and the Soviet Union (and subsequently Russia) to settle their outstanding border dispute. Paradoxically,

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<sup>4</sup>James Lilley, as interviewed by Ed Warner, "China on the Move," Voice of America, May 19, 1995.

the mismatching role expectations which China and Japan have of each other as political ideologies waned are creating territorial and other problems between the two East Asian states. The conflict over Zhenbao (珍寶島)/Damansky and other islands in the boundary rivers of China and the Soviet Union, which led the two countries to the brink of war in 1969, was solved or largely made irrelevant when international relations for both countries became "de-ideologized."<sup>5</sup> However, once the basis of international relations changes from ideological disagreements to conflicting nation-state interests, the thirty-year-old dispute between China and Japan over the Diaoyutai/Senkaku Islands could no longer be swept under the diplomatic carpet. Indeed, a major risk factor threatening regional stability in East Asia arises from "the suspected renaissance of historical ambitions for regional dominance between China and Japan,"<sup>6</sup> of which the Diaoyutai/Senkaku dispute may be a harbinger. It is the apprehension of this incipient rivalry that has led many smaller regional states to demand a sustained U.S. presence and commitment to the region. The South China Sea islands dispute would represent a good test case to see if or when the Chinese leadership intends to shift from its realist conceptions of bolstering state sovereignty and military-economic strength to internationalist norms of engaging regional states in multilateral cooperation and collective security.

#### *A Quest for Socialist Internationalism*

The brief but ferocious fighting on Zhenbao/Damansky Island in March 1969 was the culmination of a decade-long effort by Mao Zedong and his associates in the Chinese leadership to "shame" the Soviet Union. Mao sought to do so by revealing its leadership's alleged betrayal of the world communist movement, and then dramatizing the Chinese moral commitment to the cause of socialism by standing up to the Soviet leadership with uncompromising rhetoric. Expecting to be treated with neighborly comradeship and equality by the Soviet Union, the Chinese leadership watched with aghast as Beijing perceived the Soviet leadership under

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<sup>5</sup>Term as used by Professor Steven I. Levine.

<sup>6</sup>Wolfgang Pape, ed., *East Asia by the Year 2000 and Beyond: Shaping Factors* (A study for the European Commission) (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 223.

Nikita Khrushchev to be sliding into the ideological decay of revisionism. The Chinese leadership became increasingly perturbed by Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin, enunciation of the theory of peaceful coexistence with American "imperialists," muted support for the Chinese shelling of Quemoy (金門) and Matsu (馬祖) held by their Nationalist foe on Taiwan, and public criticism of Mao's utopian Great Leap collectivization program.<sup>7</sup> A mere dozen years after the alliance between the PRC and the USSR was formalized in 1950, these erstwhile ideological brothers began to hate each other like mortal enemies. By 1969, China was actively turning the Soviet Union into a threat by provoking tension just short of starting a war.

As the chaos of the Cultural Revolution was nearing its peak, for political and psychological reason, finding an external target became necessary to redirect the energy of the campaign. Even while taking steps to normalize relations with the United States in the early 1970s, China continued to depict itself as a frequent victim of Soviet aggression in order to attract world sympathy. In order to keep alive tension at the border and the rest of the country, China refused to accept at least four offers by the Soviet side to acknowledge Chinese ownership of the disputed islands.<sup>8</sup> Through this refusal, the Chinese leadership was demonstrating to the world that, even at the risk of war, Beijing had the will and capability to scoff at Leonid Brezhnev's doctrine of "limited sovereignty," which justified Soviet intervention in socialist countries in order to prevent the collapse of Marxist-Leninist regimes.

In the aftermath of the Zhenbao/Damansky episode, China drew closer to the United States and Japan on the basis of mutual concern about Soviet expansionism in the Asia-Pacific. The shared perception of threat propelled the strategic and diplomatic realignment in 1971-72 of China siding with the West against Moscow. "Hegemonism" had thus definitely re-

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<sup>7</sup>For details, see Donald S. Zagoria, *The Sino-Soviet Conflict 1956-1961* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1962), passim.

<sup>8</sup>"USSR Reportedly Offered Border Islands to CPR," Foreign Broadcast Information Service, *Daily Report: USSR*, January 13, 1970, A3; Alan J. Day, *China and the Soviet Union 1949-84*, ed. Peter Jones and Sian Kevill (New York: Facts on File Publications, 1985), 144; Harold C. Hinton, *The Bear at the Gate: Chinese Policymaking under Soviet Pressure* (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1971), 17.



placed "revisionism" as the main threat to China from the Soviet Union. This was to be so until the late 1980s, when a new relationship developed between the Soviet Union and China that would replace what was left of the ideological content of bilateral diplomacy with the statist principles of noninterference in each other's internal affairs and separation of economics from politics.<sup>9</sup>

Ideology in the conduct of international relations lost saliency for the Soviet Union with Mikhail Gorbachev's "new thinking," which sought the replacement of antagonistic class relations with universal humanism, the reduction of force as a viable dimension of national power, and Soviet participation in the growing economic interdependence of Europe, Asia, and North America. Speaking in Vladivostok in July 1986, Gorbachev conceded that the riverine boundary between China and the Soviet Union could run along the middle, or thalweg, of the main channels of the Amur/Ussuri,<sup>10</sup> which in practice meant the cession to PRC ownership of the troublesome island of Zhenbao/Damansky and six hundred other islets on the Chinese side of the mid-channel. With the ascendancy of Boris Yeltsin and the collapse of the Soviet Union, even the content of Russian domestic politics became "de-ideologized," and since the Marxist-Leninist paradigm itself was discredited by the Tiananmen massacre, China was left without an ideological dialogue partner. Fearing regional instability and fragmentation, and lacking a common diplomatic language save that of state-to-state relations, both regimes thus took measures to promote "good-neighborliness" so as to enhance the economic prospects of each other. The signing of a border agreement based on the thalweg principle in 1991 and its ratification the following year by the national legislatures of both countries showed that, despite a change in one regime, relations between two countries with different ideological systems can and should continue on an even keel.

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<sup>9</sup>Ronald C. Keith, "The Post-Cold War Political Symmetry of Russo-Chinese Bilateralism," *International Journal* 49 (Autumn 1994): 772.

<sup>10</sup>"Vladivostok Speech by Mikhail Gorbachev," *Current Digest of the Soviet Press* 38, no. 30 (1986): 7.



*A Statist Conception of  
an East Asian Regional Order*

The three years between the skirmishes with the Soviet Union in 1969 and the visit of U.S. President Richard Nixon to China in 1972 were not simply a period of strategic reorientation for Beijing. These short but crucial years were also significant as they marked the beginning of China's return from a quest for socialist internationalism to a statist conception of an East Asian order, a readjustment from a strict continental imperative to a more maritime focus, and since the late 1970s, a reorientation from autarky to economic opening. From the time of normalization with Japan and the United States until the ascendancy of Gorbachev, the Chinese understood that their economic interests were heavily tied to trade with and investment from Japan, and the PRC's security posture was quite wedded to the United States in the Asia-Pacific because of a common security threat from the Soviet Union. Thus, while the Soviet Union was the target of Chinese frustration as the latter sought to replace the former as leader of the socialist camp, by the end of the Cold War, Japan had become a focal point for China's expression of sovereignty. This followed China's self-discovery of its identity as an East Asian country with regional interests and concerns.

Although the Chinese had on the whole welcomed financial assistance and technological transfers from both the Japanese government and multinational corporations, they were also resentful of Japan's role in promoting China's economic development. Japan's help in bringing China out of its self-imposed isolation and back into the East Asian politico-economic order was perceived by many Chinese as explicitly or implicitly denying China's natural role as leader or "big brother" of the region. Even before the showcase Sino-Japanese Baoshan (寶山) Iron and Steel joint venture at Shanghai collapsed in the early 1980s, the Chinese were already blaming the Japanese for supposedly reneging on their promise to transfer enough capital and high-technology to keep the project working.<sup>11</sup> When a

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<sup>11</sup> See Kokubun Ryosei, "The Politics of Foreign Economic Policy-making in China in the Case of Plant Cancellations with Japan," *The China Quarterly*, no. 105 (January-March 1986): 19-44. Other reasons for the collapse of the Baoshan project include the following:

reported revision of Japanese school textbooks took place in 1982 which termed the Japanese invasion of China as an "advance," and when Yasuhiro Nakasone became the first serving Japanese prime minister to visit the Yasakuni shrine for the war dead in 1985, the Chinese loudly protested against a revival of Japanese "militarism."<sup>12</sup> Militarism, as defined by the Chinese, is incompatible with China's concept of a just world—based on familial relations involving neighboring nations of the same cultural and racial stock—which would make the more ancient civilization of China the "elder brother" to Japan. This latest display also reminded the Chinese of a time when China was helplessly pillaged by the "top dog" of the "East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere," a sentiment not assuaged by Japan's repeated refusal to issue a formal apology for atrocities committed during World War II against the Chinese.

Historical tensions between China and Japan are especially intractable because they exist between peoples, not governments. As such, occasional ventures by Japanese nationalists to plant their national flag, construct lighthouses, or place boundary markers on these uninhabited Diaoyutai/Senkaku Islands (usually accompanied by Japanese coast guard vessels) are perceived on the Chinese side as actions encouraged by "right-wing" elements in the Japanese government designed to sabotage Sino-Japanese friendship and assert Japanese superiority and dominance in East Asia. When faced with such provocation, the PRC authorities would come under pressure by homegrown nationalist activists and those in Hong Kong and Taiwan to forsake China's customary diplomatic forbearance and take an assertive stand on the sovereignty of the Chinese nation—at least in terms of official rhetoric—or risk anti-Japanese protests and demonstra-

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(1) China's program of capital construction was overextended, and foreign exchange reserves severely depleted by the border war with Vietnam, which led to the retrenchment of 1979-80; (2) domestic energy supplies could not support the simultaneous development of so many projects; (3) questions of technological applicability, proper siting, and environmental pollution could not be settled; and (4) the fall of Hua Guofeng, the leader most responsible for pushing through the Baoshan project. See Laura Newby, *Sino-Japanese Relations: China's Perspective* (London: Routledge, 1988), 31-32.

<sup>12</sup>Hidenori Ijiri, "Sino-Japan Controversy Since the 1972 Diplomatic Normalization," in *China and Japan: History, Trends and Prospects*, ed. Christopher Howe (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 64-73.

tions getting out of control.<sup>13</sup>

The original dispute arose from 1970 to 1972 as a result of contending national claims to oil deposits discovered under the seabed adjacent to the Diaoyutai/Senkaku Islands. However, the issue was soon magnified by Taiwanese student demonstrators in North America protesting against their own government for engaging in joint development talks with Japan and South Korea while the issue of sovereignty over the islands was yet to be settled.<sup>14</sup> These student activities were the beginning of a trend of popular protests over the controversy by Taiwanese, Hongkongers, and overseas Chinese. The next major incident erupted in 1978 when anti-PRC Liberal Democratic Party members in the Japanese Diet tried to pressure the Chinese government into conceding sovereignty over the Senkakus in exchange for agreeing to an "anti-hegemony" clause in the proposed Sino-Japanese Peace and Friendship Treaty directed at the Soviet Union.<sup>15</sup> To assert Chinese sovereignty, the PRC authorities dispatched armed "fishing junks" into the waters of the Diaoyutai Islands,<sup>16</sup> and a Japanese right-wing group, the Seirankai (Clear Storm Group), retaliated by erecting a beacon on the largest of the islands, before the affair died down once more.<sup>17</sup> Another incident occurred in 1990 as a result of the Japanese government recognizing the beacon in its official navigational charts and allowing another Japanese nationalist group, the Nihon Seinensha (Japan Youth Federation), to repair the beacon.<sup>18</sup> This action invited the attention of Taiwanese athletes and journalists, who attempted to ascend the islands with a torch, but were driven away by the Japanese coast guard.<sup>19</sup> The noisiest and most

<sup>13</sup>Chien-peng Chung, "The Diaoyu/Tiaoyutai/Senkaku Islands Dispute: Domestic Politics and the Limits of Diplomacy," *American Asian Review* 16, no. 3 (Fall 1998): 135-64.

<sup>14</sup>*Diaoyutai shijian zhenxiang* (The truth of the Diaoyutai affair) (Hong Kong: Qishi niandai, 1971), 17-18, 24-34.

<sup>15</sup>Daniel Tretiak, "The Sino-Japanese Treaty of 1978: The Senkaku Incident Prelude," *Asian Survey* 18, no. 12 (December 1978): 1241.

<sup>16</sup>Editorial, "Concrete Actions Gladden Hearts," *Ming Pao* (Hong Kong), April 14, 1978.

<sup>17</sup>Shintaro Ishihara, as quoted in "Senkaku Issue a Litmus Test for the United States: Shintaro Ishihara, Writer," in *Sankei Shimbun*, November 5, 1996.

<sup>18</sup>*Fengyun de niandai* (Tumultuous age), second edition (Taipei: Linking Publishing Company, 1991), 315.

<sup>19</sup>Phil Deans, "The Diaoyutai/Senkaku Dispute: The Unwanted Controversy," (Unpublished manuscript, University of Kent, United Kingdom, December 1996), 4, 10 n. 49.

eventful flareup of the dispute took place in the fall of 1996 over an attempt by Seinensha to build and subsequently repair a lighthouse on one of the islands. In this dispute, a protester from Hong Kong drowned while trying to swim to the island from his boat.<sup>20</sup> Smaller-scale demonstrations to reclaim the disputed islands have subsequently taken place in Hong Kong and Taiwan, usually around the anniversary of the death of the Hong Kong protester.

The PRC's preferred strategy in dealing with outstanding territorial issues is to keep all options open while emphasizing a stable international environment conducive to China's open-door economic growth policy. However, in this age of Chinese statist nationalism, China's leaders cannot afford the public perception that they are vulnerable to economic pressure from Japan by failing to react if Japanese forces were to make a bold grab for the disputed islands. China will not be able to convince others that the PRC is a power to be reckoned with if it cannot even resist a minor and nominal violation of China's sovereignty claim. The increasingly active role played by a more powerful, sophisticated, and maritime-oriented People's Liberation Army (PLA) in deciding and executing Chinese foreign policy, combined with the PRC's search for military influence and seabed resources in China's littoral seas, only makes it all the more difficult for Chinese leaders in the twenty-first century to ignore or deprioritize touchy territorial issues.

While China's need to assert an equal leadership role with the Soviet Union in the socialist camp aggravated a minor territorial issue into a near incident of war between the two countries, the PRC's abandonment of any aspirations for ideological influence with the end of the Cold War thus helped to settle this boundary dispute. On the other hand, because relations between China and Japan cannot be defined according to socialist or any other ideological principles, the relationship tends to take on statist, even

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<sup>20</sup>For Chinese reaction to the 1996 dispute, see Yojana Sharma, "East Asia: China Turns the Guns on Japanese Militarism," *International Herald Tribune*, September 4, 1996; Todd Crowell, "United in Rage," *Asiaweek*, September 20, 1996; "Commentary," *People's Daily*, September 21, 1996; Charles Hutzler, "China to Japan: Back Off Claim," Associated Press, September 30, 1996.

nationalistic, norms. Presently, by reclaiming its role as an East Asian regional power and denouncing the strengthening of the U.S.-Japan security framework, the PRC will be extremely sensitive to real or perceived slights to its national dignity, interests, or sovereignty. There is a danger that Sino-Japanese relations will fall into a trap of the Chinese trying to extend the PRC's influence as best as they can while preaching a moral tale of caution by warning Japan against any collusion with the United States that would seek to check the seaward expansion of Chinese power and keep Taiwan independent from the PRC. Nationalistic rhetoric may be increasingly directed against Japan in order to shift attention from domestic economic troubles, human rights violation, or ethnic agitation arising from the existing ideological vacuum and widespread corruption in China. This could only drive an irritated Japan closer to the United States in security posture.

#### *Norms of Multilateral Cooperation?*

The Chinese may still possess some lingering respect for Russia's size and military might, and may grudgingly concede some measure of equality to the Japanese due to their economic strength. However, a deep-seated "middle kingdom" mentality makes the Chinese generally ignorant of, and indifferent to, the fears and aspirations of their Southeast Asian neighbors—former tributaries who continued to dwell in China's maritime "South Seas" periphery.<sup>21</sup> This can be seen from the actions of the PLA navy in ejecting Vietnamese forces from the Paracel Islands and the Spratly's Johnson Reef in 1974 and 1988 respectively, and the Chinese military's occupation of several contested islands and the Philippines-claimed Mischief Reef in the Spratly group in 1992 and 1995 respectively. Consternation and anxiety felt by officials, scholars, and journalists in Southeast Asian countries due to China's actions in the last two incidents soon replaced any initial enthusiasm and optimism over the rise of China. South-

<sup>21</sup> China still calls its Asian neighbors "periphery countries" (*zhoubian guojia*), and since the early 1980s has sought to devise a regional policy, known as *zhoubian zhengce* ("periphery policy"), principally with two goals in mind: one is to settle land and maritime territorial disputes, the other is to prevent alliances between its neighbors and outside "hostile" powers. See Suisheng Zhao, "China's Periphery Policy and Its Asian Neighbors," *Security Dialogue* 30, no. 3 (September 1999): 335-36.

east Asian countries became rather wary of what they perceived to be "creeping assertion" on the part of the PLA navy to bolster China's claims—seizing a reef here and building a radar installation there, but ready to back off temporarily if these actions are discovered and the international outcry is loud enough. Regional concerns deepened after the PRC's National People's Congress (NPC) passed a territorial sea law in 1992 stipulating by name that the Pratas, Paracels, Spratlys, Macclesfield Bank, and all other disputed shoals, atolls, reefs, and islets in the South China Sea, and also the contested Diaoyutai/Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea, belong to the PRC. Apart from exploring for oil in their disputed waters, China is still trying to resolve a longstanding maritime dispute with Vietnam over the division of the Gulf of Tonkin.

Unlike the disputes over ideology and prestige which underlay the threat construction from the Soviet Union during the Cold War, China's present difficulties with Japan, Taiwan, and the countries of Southeast Asia have to do with conflicting ideas and competing claims about historical perceptions, national identities, and territorial completeness over contested space. A self-prescribed notion of "centrality" and a traditional desire for diplomatic freedom of maneuver in dealing with countries one-on-one make the Chinese reluctant to subscribe to the norms of any multilateral regional forum or regime. Nonetheless, China participates in collective security arrangements like the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) or the annual workshops organized by Indonesia on the Spratly Islands in order to limit their scope to non-sovereignty issues and ensure that China's interests would not be compromised in its absence. Historical fear of collusion by foreigners at its expense, especially over the last one-and-a-half century, makes China distrustful of third-party mediation over issues of territorial sovereignty disputes. The international community is moving from preserving absolute sovereignty of the nation-state and a unilateral state-centric security posture to adopting norms of multilateral cooperation, collective security, and even humanitarian intervention. The PRC's behavior of defensive obscurantism in regional security forums over the Spratly Islands incidents thus cannot inspire confidence in Southeast Asians and others who want to believe that China cares more about maintaining international peace and cooperation than just deriving economic advantages

from the world trading order.<sup>22</sup>

*"A Problem Left over by History"*

China's territorial dispute with India was neither the product of an ideological quarrel nor a manifestation of aggrieved state nationalism. The Chinese leadership has always considered this issue a "problem left over by history," in this case, by the British in India. An opposing ideological dimension would have meant the border dispute would have been quickly resolved toward the end of the 1980s with the waning of ideology as a discourse of interstate relations. However, this was not the case. The aftermath of the Sino-Indian War of 1962 fought over the border dispute saw communist China evolving a strategic partnership with anticommunist Pakistan in response to democratic socialist India's growing military alliance with the Soviet Union. If the conflict over the ill-defined boundary was the result of, or resulted in, aggrieved state nationalism, then that was more so the case with India than with China. The Indians had tried to move their military forces to the outermost reaches of the contested border, only to be defeated by the Chinese in the war that followed. The Chinese then returned all conquered territories to India as a "magnanimous gesture" to encourage bilateral talks aimed at a comprehensive settlement of the boundary issue, which finally went ahead in the 1980s.

Despite the eventual failure of border talks, confidence-building measures and troop withdrawals have taken place at the boundary "line of actual control" between China and India since then Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's visit to Beijing in December 1988.<sup>23</sup> These measures

<sup>22</sup> According to PRC strategic analysts, China's national interests in the post-Cold War era include national survival, political recognition, economic interests, international domination, and contribution to the international community, forming a hierarchy with concern for "national survival" at the top and "contribution to the international community" at the bottom. See Yan Xuetong, *Zhongguo guojia liyi fenxi* (An analysis of China's national interests) (Tianjin: Tianjin renmin chubanshe, 1996).

<sup>23</sup> "China and India Paving Way for Peace," *Beijing Review* 36, no. 38 (September 20, 1993): 6; "Agreement between the Government of the Republic of India and the Government of the People's Republic of China on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquillity along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border Areas," *China Report* 30, no. 1 (1994): 101-3; Swaran Singh, "Sino-Indian CBMs: Problems and Prospects," available at <<http://www.idsa-india.org/an-jul-4.html>>.



should go some distance toward resolving the mutual security threat, or at least greatly reduce the perception of such a threat. However, China still maintains excellent military and civil relations with Pakistan, and intends to reserve for itself a role in mediating the Indo-Pakistani dispute over Kashmir, if not a naval presence in the Indian Ocean sometime in the future. As China and India have traditionally not been part of each other's world or regional order, India thus feels that China's continuing involvement in subcontinental affairs as a putative Asian hegemon is incompatible with India's own self-image as the preeminent power in South Asia. Regardless, unless China decides to fight any of Pakistan's future wars with India, or a future Indian government were to press the Chinese too hard on the issues of Tibetan human rights or political autonomy, the border dispute will remain largely a disagreement on paper involving national claims over tracts of territory where neither country can improve on the position it has found itself in without incurring high costs or destabilizing the region.

### **Of Ritual and Symbolism:**

#### **China's Negotiating Behavior on Territorial Issues**

As anyone acquainted with Chinese history will know, in past Chinese diplomatic practices, princes and emissaries from surrounding "barbarian" countries would ideally be so "moved" by the prowess and virtue of the universal ruler of China that they would feel obliged and honored to come forth and acknowledge his majestic presence. This they did by performing the ceremonial "kowtow" or prostration, bringing tribute, and in return, receiving the right to trade with China or some other imperial largess. We are of course no longer in the era of the "kowtow-tributary" relations between the Middle Kingdom and lesser "barbarian" entities. Foreigners and neighbors alike have anyway been far less convinced of the "moral" force of China's cultural greatness; they are more mindful of its past "realist" deployment of brute force to extract territory, hostages, and tribute from surrounding states. Still, in the minds of many Chinese today, there should be nothing to prevent neighboring states from paying proper respect to China as a reemergent economic and military power. These same

Chinese do not seem to appreciate that, for regional countries and the rest of the world, China's understanding of its own greatness and international role may not coincide with other countries' political and economic interests, and may even diverge to a significant extent. For many outside observers, the PRC's attempts to recover "lost territories" are clear indication that China is not a "status quo" power, but a "revisionist" one seeking to upset the regional and even international distribution of power based on U.S. military and economic dominance. Southeast Asian and other developing countries also worry that they would have trouble competing with the PRC for markets and investments, given the generally competitive nature of their foreign trade pattern. Still, the PRC has not always been nonamenable to finding solutions to outstanding border problems, nor has China prevented others from coming up with them.

Looking at how the PRC proceeded to arrive at border settlements with Burma, Nepal, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Mongolia in the late 1950s and early 1960s,<sup>24</sup> we find a generalized pattern of negotiating behavior. In all cases, a neighboring country desiring to affirm its unsettled border with China was the first to bring up the issue with Beijing. The PRC would then deny the legitimacy of the "unequal" boundary treaties "foisted" upon China before 1949, and seek public acknowledgment from the other side

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<sup>24</sup>For PRC border settlements with Burma, see Dorothy Woodman, *The Making of Burma* (London: The Cresset Press, 1962), 455-539, 562-76; William C. Johnston, *Burma's Foreign Policy: A Study in Neutralism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963), 158-200; Frank N. Trager, *Burma: From Kingdom to Republic—A Historical and Political Analysis* (New York: Praeger, 1966), 231-55; and Ralph Peltman, *China in Burma's Foreign Policy* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1973). For PRC border settlements with Nepal, see *New Developments in Friendly Relations between China and Nepal* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1960); *U.S. Army Area Handbook for Nepal* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, 1964), 198; Leo E. Rose, *Nepal: Strategy for Survival* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1971), 226, 233, 236; and D.P. Kumar, *Nepal: Year of Decision* (New Delhi: Vikes, 1980), 186-87. For PRC border settlements with Pakistan, see Vjtuba Razvi, *The Frontiers of Pakistan: A Study of Frontier Problems in Pakistan's Foreign Policy* (Karachi/Dacca: National Publishing House, 1971), 166-93; Anwar Hsyed, *China and Pakistan: Diplomacy of an Entente Cordiale* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), 82-93; and P. Jain, *China, Pakistan, and Bangladesh* (New Delhi: Radiant, 1974), 43-94. For PRC border settlements with Afghanistan, see *Afghanistan* (Washington, D.C.: A Country Study Handbook Series, 1980), 229. For PRC border settlements with Mongolia, see Robert A. Rupen, "Mongolia in the Sino-Soviet Dispute," *The China Quarterly*, no. 16 (October-December 1963): 75-76; "The Border Dispute: Chinese, Russian, and Mongolian Views," *China News Analysis*, no. 999 (May 9, 1975): 6.

that the border problem was the result of "imperialist" legacy awaiting rectification. If this crucial diplomatic step was forthcoming, China would agree to the conclusion of a comprehensive bilateral boundary treaty to replace the one that both sides had repudiated. The injustice of China's interaction with colonial imperialists and the righteousness of its diplomatic stance on boundary issues must be recognized before such disputes could be resolved through "mutual understanding and accommodation."<sup>25</sup> All such territorial settlements revealed that China had either made very few demands for changes to the existing boundary alignment, or largely conceded to the other side's claims.

In contrast, Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru took the position in 1954 that India's northern frontier "should be considered a firm and definite one, which is not open to discussion with anyone,"<sup>26</sup> and in 1964, the Soviet Union made known that "no territorial questions exist between the USSR and the PRC, and that the Soviet-Chinese frontier has taken shape historically."<sup>27</sup> Perhaps, unlike the smaller countries around China's borders, neither India nor the Soviet Union felt the need to entertain Chinese historical sensibilities or play by China's diplomatic rhetoric. However, not doing so also meant that China was prevented from displaying its generosity or magnanimity as befitting its own politically constructed self-image as a major power by offering concessions on the border issues.

Playing to China's "morality" script thus points to one path which countries having territorial disagreement with the PRC can perhaps still take. We have reason to believe that the issue of resolving the land border dispute between Vietnam and China, which was finally settled at the end of 1999, was first brought up by the Vietnamese Communist Party General Secretary Do Muoi and Vietnamese Premier Vo Van Kiet on a visit to Beijing in November 1991, and while talks on the land border were carrying

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<sup>25</sup>Note to the Indian Embassy in China (December 26, 1959), in PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Documents on the Sino-Indian Boundary Question* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1960), 70.

<sup>26</sup>Neville Maxwell, "China and India: the Un-negotiated Dispute," *The China Quarterly*, no. 43 (July-September 1970): 50.

<sup>27</sup>Hinton, *The Bear at the Gate*, 18.

on, the Vietnamese allowed the Chinese to manage the stretch of railway in the disputed area.<sup>28</sup>

On the question of boundary definition, the difficulty of "freezing" or "shelving" those disputes in favor of "joint development," a favorite recipe of the Deng Xiaoping leadership formulated in the late 1970s to deal with China's unresolved maritime territorial issues,<sup>29</sup> has grown immeasurably. This is because, aside from the fact that the relevant treaties underlying the current maritime disputes are themselves disputed, for China and countries in the region, territorial claims are part of a developing populist discourse. State nationalism is being promoted by the political elite to a large extent as a response to arguments made by developed countries designed to undercut the concept of state sovereignty as supreme in support of multilateralism, humanitarian intervention, human rights, and democracy. Ironically, this change has only infused territorial issues with greater saliency, sensitivity, and publicity, and has resulted in less ability by the governments involved to control the terms of the debate. In these times of discovery or rediscovery of cultural or national self-definition and self-identification, territory and its associated myths and symbols take on real power in politics; they cannot simply be dropped, retrieved, or conceded to suit the immediate priorities of the government of the day. Greater political opening and nationalistic activism by fishermen, students, or opposition politicians may sharpen policy debates and lead political leaders to take provocative action on disputed claims. The handling or mishandling of territorial issues may also become a proxy for public attacks on the perceived incompetence or unfairness of government policies. For modern China and the new states of Asia, territoriality lies at the very heart of the notion of both the integrity of the state and the effective control of the central government. The regional distribution of power is now expressed through territorial size and control, and the right to rule is still to be based at least in part on the government's ability to protect or extend the territory of the state. Even if

<sup>28</sup>Ramses Amer, "The Territorial Disputes between China and Vietnam and Regional Stability," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 19, no. 1 (June 1997): 88-91, 93, 96-98, 100, 105-6.

<sup>29</sup>Lo Chi-kin, *China's Policy Toward Territorial Disputes: The Case of the South China Sea Islands* (London: Routledge, 1989), 171-72.

issues of territorial sovereignty are either the consequences of other concerns or are "historically-contingent socially-constructed realities," a dispute over a piece of territory—no matter how tiny or insignificant—almost always takes on a life of its own.

### **"Socializing" China out of "Hyper-Sovereignty Values"?**

For the greater part of the last twenty years or so, the international community has been trying to socialize China into the prevailing norms, rules, and structures through constructive engagement and economic incentives. To outsiders, however, China's interest in multilateral cooperation seems to be as yet confined to maintaining a peaceful world environment favorable to promoting the PRC's economic growth and state strength. It is largely to free-ride on U.S. provision of security in guaranteeing the uninterrupted flow of world trade, capital, and technology that China is prepared to tolerate a "hegemonic" U.S. presence in Asian waters and to debate the West on human rights and the rule of law.<sup>30</sup> The onus is thus on China to show the world that Beijing is making a genuine attempt to move from state nationalism and regionalism to "global interdependence" and internationalism. As long as the Chinese retain their idea that "global interdependence" is a code word for the imposition of Western-dominated hegemony, that the United States will intervene in Taiwan to support a separatist regime in defiance of the PRC, and that Japan will adopt an independent and assertive military posture, they will not be able to reconcile the supremacy of nation-state sovereignty with the transparency, structure, and trust necessary for transnational and multilateral economic and security cooperation to take place.

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<sup>30</sup>In the opinion of this author, it is in response to repeated criticisms by Western human rights groups and the U.S. Congress on the PRC's human rights record and legal arbitrariness, and for fear of repercussions such criticisms can have on economic and business relations with the West, that China ultimately signed the United Nations International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) and the United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) in 1997, long after these covenants came into force in 1966 and 1976 respectively.

Perhaps a more pertinent but often neglected aspect of China's "socializability" has to do with how its people perceive others to be looking at them and how the Chinese themselves desire to be seen. Regarding their country's role in the twenty-first century, the Chinese should be convinced that the best way of achieving the goal of building a strong and prosperous China, and being respected as a country that desires just and peaceful relations with the world, is to deepen their commitment to engage in informal and formal security dialogues with regional countries, and adhere to norms and promises of cooperation made in multilateral forums. The Chinese ought to appreciate that by initiating a war to settle territorial disputes or seize natural resources, they risk certain defeat by an alliance between regional countries and other world powers. However, if they choose economic abundance through peaceful cooperation, the sea lanes will always be open to greater trade and investment between their country and the world. The Chinese must be persuaded that they have a role to play in constructing a new world trading order; that their views on curtailing ecological disasters, narcotics trade, contagious diseases, and weapons proliferation would be consulted upon on a regular basis; and that their ideas on confidence-building measures, border settlements, norms of interstate conduct, and human rights would be listened to and taken into consideration by a world community interested in promoting peace and prosperity for all humankind. The realist basis of Chinese foreign policy as manifested in the preservation of national interest and state security will then no longer be at variance with the moral aspirations of a great power seeking justice and equality in a peaceful world order. With a "mutual understanding and accommodation" based on trust and confidence, Chinese leaders will no longer anchor their security and diplomatic practices in "hyper-sovereignty values,"<sup>31</sup> and China's territorial disputes with its neighbors will then lose saliency and be solved or rendered irrelevant.

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<sup>31</sup>Alastair Iain Johnston, as quoted in Evan A. Feigenbaum, "China's Military Posture and the New Economic Geopolitics," *Survival* 41, no. 2 (Summer 1999): 75.