

INTRODUCTION

THE PRAGMATIC DRAGON: CHINA'S GRAND STRATEGY and CHINA'S BOUNDARY SETTLEMENTS

By
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The rise of China has revived interest in China's territorial disputes and ambitions. Events over the past few years in the East China Sea and the South China Sea have again raised the specter of China's irredentist nationalism. China has settled all of its land boundaries with the exception of India and Bhutan, but significant territorial disputes continue in the East and South China Seas. This book explains China's boundary settlements within the larger context of strategic imperatives by highlighting Beijing's changing policy toward boundary disputes and settlements in response to international systemic constraints and balance of power concerns.

Despite the fact that irredentist views are common among China's elite, my research makes clear the correlation between the changing dynamics of the international system and the People's Republic of China's pragmatic and conciliatory boundary settlement policy. Given the rise of China, many scholars have concluded that China will adopt policies that are more aggressive. John Mearsheimer's "offensive realism" leads to the assumption that all states, when capable, seek to dominate other states and the conclusion that China will become a future menace (Mearsheimer 2002, 401-02). This view, when applied specifically to China's policy toward boundary disputes leads some China scholars to conclude that China has adopted a strategy of delaying boundary settlements "at least until the balance of power changes substantially in favor of China" and that at sometime in the future revanchist claims "*might* be pursued in more concerted form" when China has the capability to force boundary revisions "by any means of its own choosing" (Swaine and Tellis 2000, 131-33). My careful study reveals that the PRC has been much more pragmatic in approaching territorial and boundary disputes than many assumed it would be. China in fact only received less than 30 percent of the territory it claimed in the settlements already concluded based on a policy of "mutual understanding and mutual accommodation" and is only seeking 25 percent of the disputed territory in the outstanding disputes with India and Bhutan.

Territorial settlements Beijing concluded in the 1960s excluded the vast territories that Chinese believe were historically part of imperial China before they were "carved off by imperialist powers" and Beijing has not insisted on the far-reaching historical claims it initially asserted and depicted on maps. The more recent settlements in the 1990s have followed a similar pattern. This makes it clear that the "chauvinistic nationalist" posture of Chinese toward historical territorial claims did not stand in the way of pragmatic political practice in the settlements that have been reached and there is no evidence that this pragmatic policy will change in the future as China becomes more powerful. The diplomatic costs to China of adopting a more aggressive behavior compel China to continued is pragmatic policy, but a more assertive approach has been adopted in recent years.

Rationale and Scope

The *Pragmatic Dragon* is a theoretically oriented analysis of China's boundary settlements that seeks to provide new insights and perspectives on China's boundary disputes and settlements. The book adopts a theoretically informed framework to explain China's boundary disputes and settlements by analyzing the impact of the balance of power on China's approach to boundary disputes and its effect on the timing of the settlement of these disputes.

External threats, I argue, provide a strong incentive for Beijing to seek compromise settlements as a means of enhancing security by relaxing tensions in relations with neighboring states. The explanation I offer draws on realist balance of power theory that recognizes the geopolitical importance of boundaries. In the past, China's maintenance of its security has required it to offset inadequate power with the adroit use of alliances and other means including boundary settlements to ease relations with neighboring states. The increase in China's power does not necessarily mean a more aggressive policy toward its neighbors.

The central question of the book is: How does the PRC's strategic environment influence Beijing's policy on boundary disputes? Related questions are: Why has China been willing to reach agreement in some cases but not in others? What factors determine Beijing's willingness to compromise? In most cases, China agreed to negotiate a boundary settlement only after years of prolonged delay when a shift in the regional balance of power forced an adjustment in Beijing's security strategy. The international environment determined China's policies. China's domestic politics and ideology did not seem to affect Beijing's policy in any fundamental fashion.

China's policy toward boundary disputes and settlements is constrained by international systemic factors. The effect of the shifting regional balance of power on China's policy toward specific boundary disputes is the focal point of the book. Following a delineation of systemic factors, such as the shifts in the regional balance of power since 1949, I then examine how these factors influenced China's calculations and policy toward the settlement of boundary disputes in the 1960s and compare this with the approach to boundary dispute in the 1970s and more recent settlements in since 1990. I conclude that as the position of various states in the regional balance of power shifted, the PRC adjusted its foreign policy tactics and alliances accordingly; these adaptations were reflected in China's changing attitude toward the settlement of specific boundaries.

The book analyzes how the international strategic environment affected boundary disputes and settlements. In other words, boundary disputes and settlements are a "window" through which to analyze Beijing's strategic behavior. This not only results in a better understanding of the PRC's handling of boundary disputes but also illuminates how China's relations with other states influence how Beijing handles particular disputes and shows how China has used boundary settlements to further larger foreign policy goals.

Related Research

Paul Huth and John Vasquez articulate the relevance of this research to the general field of international relations. They conclude that boundary disputes are a "fundamental cause" of war and remain a primary cause of rivalry between states. Territorial disputes persist around the world and in the future, many are likely to erupt into armed conflict (Huth 1996b, 3-4). These disputes over contiguous territory "are the source of conflict most likely to end in war" because

territorial differences are “intractable, [and] they tend to give rise . . . to the foreign policy practices of power politics, which can lead to . . . war” (Vasquez 1993, 123-24).

Douglas Gibler concludes that while enduring rivalries over territory are a central cause of war between states, how states deal with such disputes critically affects the likelihood of war. If states are able to resolve these territorial disputes, they will avoid war and in many cases, boundary settlements even pave the way to an alliance or non-aggression treaty (Gibler 1999, 183). These observations seem especially relevant to China, a country that has contiguous land boundaries with fourteen countries and maritime boundary disputes encompassing numerous islands with other countries in East and Southeast Asia.

Previous Research

Earlier studies of China’s boundary disputes and settlements made little use of the theories and methodology of international relations to enhance our understanding of China’s behavior (Fisher, Rose, and Huttenbeck, 1963; Lamb, 1964; Doolin, 1965; Van Eekelen, 1967; Maxwell, 1970; An, 1973). More recent studies have analyzed China’s boundary disputes and settlements from different theoretical paradigms by adopting constructivist and domestic politics perspectives.

Allen Carlson examines the Chinese concept of sovereignty in order to probe the influence of evolving international norms on Beijing’s attitude toward territorial sovereignty. He argues that as the reform era unfolded in the 1980s, despite China’s “historically conditioned sovereignty-centric values,” normative pressures on China resulting from its policy of reform and opening brought a change in Beijing’s posture on sovereignty. As Beijing relaxed its heretofore more rigid stand on territorial sovereignty as it became more confident and valued international acceptance, it was more willing to compromise and sought legalistic resolutions of its territorial disputes. While this shift did not lead to the immediate resolution of the most intractable disputes, it did result in an unprecedented relaxation of tensions along China’s borders. Although Beijing has not pushed revanchist claims, Carlson concludes that Beijing has nevertheless insisted on “maintaining and reinscribing conventional boundaries” and this “reflects the strict limits on its willingness to cooperate and compromise with its continental and maritime neighbors” (Carlson 2005, 3, 50, 90-91).

Chien-peng Chung focuses on the cultural and domestic sources of Beijing’s behavior. Tracing the influence of domestic variables, he analyzes territorial disputes from the perspective of “bargaining space in the presence or absence of certain domestic, institutional and leadership factors.” This approach attempts to explain China’s boundary settlements thorough analysis of China’s domestic politics and its influence on the foreign policy making process, implying that domestic politics is the major determinant of Beijing’s negotiating approach toward boundary disputes.

Chung reduces his analysis to one based on culture and the so-called “moral” basis of China’s foreign policy, ignoring the systemic determinants of Beijing’s foreign policy but relies instead on ideological and Sinocentric variables to explain China’s negotiating behavior. He argues that “China’s self-perceived notion of ‘centrality’ and traditional desire for diplomatic freedom of maneuver in dealing with countries bilaterally” determines Beijing’s foreign policy. Chung concludes that Chinese have a sense of “historical resentment” and translate this into a “claim of entitlement” which overshadows Beijing’s approach to boundary disputes and settlements (Chung 2004, 165, 169-70, 173). However, Chung admits, such an approach “cannot

explain when or why a disagreement, dispute or conflict arose . . . or for that matter its duration, let alone predict future occurrence of such disputes or conflicts” (Chung 2004, 163).

M. Taylor Fravel’s analysis also adopts a domestic politics driven foreign policy analysis but focuses on Beijing’s concerns over regime insecurity as the causal mechanism motivating China to seek compromise boundary settlements. Focusing on ethnic conflict and regime insecurity, Fravel argues that Beijing is “willing to cooperate with other states in exchange for assistance in countering [its] domestic sources of insecurity” and “trades territorial concessions for assistance from neighboring states” to quell domestic unrest. He concludes that in the absence of threats to regime security, Beijing has delayed boundary settlements but once domestic unrest threatened the regime’s control over border regions, China has compromised in order to facilitate a boundary treaty and cooperation with neighboring states to dampen ethnic unrest (Fravel 2005, 49-50, 62). Fravel’s analysis offers a domestic politics dimension from which to explain China’s negotiating behavior in terms of a correlation between internal threats and efforts to reach boundary settlements.

In this book, I argue that the primary motivation for Beijing was the shifting balance of power and its objective was to enhance or maintain its security vis-à-vis its primary adversaries. I demonstrate how Beijing sought to reduce tension in bilateral relations and facilitate alliances with its neighbors to enhance its security in the face of an adverse shift in the balance of power. In the early 1960s, China’s fear of being surrounded by a hostile United States, the Soviet Union, and India motivated Mao to seek an improvement in relations with many smaller neighboring states in an attempt to break China’s isolation and to shift the balance of power in a positive direction. This is the deeper strategic rationale for the settlements, or attempted settlements, in the early 1960s. The same strategic context is adopted to explain China’s handling of boundary disputes in the 1970s and settlements during the 1990s when significant shifts in the balance of power were underway. China is motivated or constrained by strategic considerations. In the early 1960s, Beijing sought to weaken Soviet or Indian influence in neighboring states and to enhance China’s security by developing alliances to counter growing Soviet or Indian power and the perceived American threat. In the 1990s as the balance of power underwent a significant change, Beijing moved quickly to solve outstanding boundary disputes with Russia, Vietnam and the newly independent Central Eurasian states in response to the changing international environment. A distinguishing characteristic of the PRC’s boundary settlements is that larger strategic concerns seem to motivate China to seek a settlement. When necessary, China has proved to be very pragmatic and willing to compromise in order to establish legitimate boundaries through peaceful negotiations, even ceding territory believed to belong to China historically. I argue that in light of political and geographical realities China has adopted a pragmatic approach to boundary dispute settlement in the past and this pattern is likely to continue in the future with the few outstanding territorial disputes.

Methodology

Adopting the deductive theory of neorealism, I assume that China’s policy toward boundary disputes is “shaped by the very presence of other states as well as by interactions with them” (Waltz 1979, 65). According to John Gittings, “the whole development of modern China . . . has been circumscribed by its external environment, and . . . this wider setting has continued to preoccupy the Chinese leadership” since 1949 (Gittings 1974, 267). A state’s foreign policy may be limited by domestic considerations but it is largely determined by international strategic

constraints. This international structure conditions China's calculations, interactions with other states, and its approach to boundary disputes and settlements (Ng-Quinn 1983, 203-04).

My approach is a comparative historical case method that permits an observation of a general pattern in behavior across cases. I use a historical analysis of general variables for the purpose of description and explanation of the outcome in each case. Variables with significance are identified (Lijphart 1975, 158-77). Scrutiny of these variables determines whether a "causal nexus" exists between the structural constraints of the international system and China's approach to the specific boundary dispute and eventual settlement. The individual case studies support generalizations within the larger systemic framework of international relations and this makes it possible to "speak back" to the larger debates in the field of international relations.

Although I adopt a neorealist deductive theory to explain China's approach to boundary disputes and settlements, I am sensitive to China's historical legacy and its impact on China's foreign policy. To bridge the gap between theories that make a hard distinction between explanations that focus only on domestic determinants of foreign policy or international systemic causes, my analysis focuses primarily on the shifting balance of power and how this influenced China's policy toward boundary dispute settlement. However, I make a causal link between the shifting balance of power and China's foreign policy elite's perceptions and willingness to seek a boundary settlement. Other scholars' research on boundary disputes settlements has demonstrated that the potential costs of continued confrontation "implies that leaders will think . . . in terms of what the security implications will be of worsening relations" with neighboring states and this "provides incentives [for leaders to] . . . reduce the levels of diplomatic and military conflict in a dispute in order to secure the continued support" of these potential allies (Huth 1996a, 14-15).

Chapters and Cases

Following the introduction, Chapter 1 establishes a historical perspective. A historical vantage point is important because a major determinant of a state's perception of the world is its own historical experience, and this seems to be especially the case with China. Chapter Two takes up the general issues of the geopolitics of territorial disputes and boundary settlements along with a discussion of China's policy toward boundaries. The following chapters are detailed examinations of each boundary dispute. The fifteen cases studied are not organized chronologically, but rather thematically based on how they were influenced in the 1960s by China's relationship with India and the Soviet Union. Later settlements after 1990 with Russia, Vietnam and the post-Soviet newly independent states of Central Eurasia are placed within the analytical framework of the post-Soviet changes in the balance of power. Also included is a chapter on China's territorial disputes in the East China Sea and the South China Seas. The Conclusion draws on the case studies to generalize China's policy toward boundary disputes and settlement and analyze the implications of China's behavior for the yet unresolved disputes and the policy significance for China's relations with Japan and the Southeast Asian nations.

Chapter Titles:

Introduction: Grand Strategy and Boundary Settlements

Chapter 1 The Historical Legacy

Chapter 2 Sino-Indian Relations and Boundary Disputes

Chapter 3 The Sino-Burmese Settlement

Chapter 4 Boundary Settlements with Nepal, Sikkim, and Bhutan

Chapter 5 The Sino-Pakistan Boundary Settlement
Chapter 6 The Sino-Afghanistan Boundary settlement
Chapter 7 Sino-Soviet/Russian Relations and the Boundary Settlement
Chapter 8 The Sino-Mongolian Boundary Settlement
Chapter 9 The Sino-Japanese Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands Dispute
Chapter 10 The Sino-Vietnamese Territorial and Boundary Settlement
Chapter 11 Boundary settlements with Eurasian States
Chapter 12 The South China Sea Territorial Disputes
Conclusion

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