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Periphery Control and China's Territorial Disputes

Abstract

Since the foundation of a unified China by the Qin Dynasty in 221 BCE, various regimes have followed different approaches to peripheral control and border defence. Since that period, there have been constant changes in state boundaries and state capacities. This paper looks at the territorial disputes of the latest iteration of the Chinese regime i.e. the People's Republic of China (PRC) [henceforth China] and the role of the Chinese concept of peripheral control in settling them.

Key Points

- China's concept of peripheral control is based on the idea of a "core" and a "periphery".
- China's approach to territorial disputes has evolved over time, but it has always been driven by the goal of maintaining peripheral control.
- The CCP's approach to territorial disputes has been largely cooperative, but it has also been opportunistic. In the first phase of settlements, China ceded land to weaker countries, but in the second phase, it gained territory or maintained the status quo.

Introduction

With the formation of the PRC in 1949, the Communist Party of China (CPC) declared that it would reassess treaties signed by its predecessors and foreign countries and "reorganise, abrogate, revise, or renegotiate them".¹ The declaration effectively put China into territorial disputes with all its neighbours. Since then, China has settled disputes with ten of its neighbours. However, these settlements have not been sporadic and have followed a pattern.

China settled its territorial disputes in two waves. The first wave saw disputes settled with Myanmar (1960), Nepal (1961), Afghanistan (1963), Mongolia (1964) and North Korea between 1960-1965. The second wave of settlements saw disputes resolved with Russia (1991), Laos (1992), Kazakhstan (1994), Tajikistan (1998), and Vietnam (1998) between 1990-1998. This paper explores the role of China's 'Peripheral Control' in dispute settlement. The paper finds that

China has settled its territorial disputes in two phases viz. 1960-1965 and 1991-1998. These settlements have come in the backdrop of peripheral instability and internal disturbance.

Territorial Disputes

A territorial dispute between two states arises when they disagree over where their common borders should be fixed or when a country disputes the rights of another country to “exercise sovereignty over some or all of its homeland”. In the post-colonial period, territorial disputes have revolved around five situations:²

- One country does not recognise the existing boundary line with another country. In contrast, the neighbouring country perceives the existing line as the border based on a treaty or document signed in the past.
- No historical precedent or treaty establishes the boundary line, and both countries have differing perceptions of where it should lie.
- One country occupies the territory of another country through conquest and refuses to vacate the area despite calls from the other country to relinquish control.
- One government does not recognise the “independence and sovereignty” of another country and seeks to arrogate to itself, some or all parts of that country.
- One government does not recognise another country's “independence and sovereignty” and seeks to arrogate some or all parts of that country.

Territorial disputes have been the principal factor in International politics in the post-colonial period. Contemporarily, more than 1/3rd of the world's land boundaries can be classified as disputed.³ While in the 17th century, Europe had been the focal point of territorial disputes, The Treaty of Westphalia resolved that to a greater extent. Since 1945, Asia has been more prone to territorial disputes than any other part of the world, accounting for the most interstate wars and border militarisation⁴, with China being involved in maximum number of disputes.

Peripheral Control

Since the emergence of ‘unified Chinese state’ around 200 BCE, different regimes have believed in the concept of ‘core’ and ‘periphery’. Core were the areas inhabited by Han Chinese and directly governed by the regime. Periphery were the remote areas with exiguous population and were indirectly governed by the regime. Succeeding Chinese regimes believed it was necessary to have a stable periphery to protect the core. Therefore, successive regimes paid great importance to control the periphery. China's ‘Peripheral Control’ has contained four main features:⁵

- Protection of the “core” through border defence.
- Expansion and contraction of state boundary due to oscillating state capacity because of constant fragmentation and civil war.
- Regular use of force against external actors, fundamentally for protection of core and periphery control. The use of force was often exercised based on its effect and relative power.
- Use diplomacy or non-coercive measures, especially when the state is ‘weak’ and unable to militarily dominate the periphery.

China’s pattern of settling territorial disputes align with the features mentioned above—— they inform us of China’s rationale behind settlements and the approaches that they followed. The two identified patterns i.e. from 1960-1965 and 1990-1998, show that China’s periphery and core were unstable during the two periods, stemming from weakened state capacity and peripheral vulnerability that led China to use non-coercive measures to settle disputes.

Dispute Settlements: Phase One (1960-1965)

From 1960-1965, China made progress in settling almost all its territorial disputes. During that period, China settled disputes with Myanmar (1960), Nepal (1961), Afghanistan (1963), Mongolia (1964) and North Korea. Two incidents of internal vulnerability viz. the Lhasa Uprising and Three Lean Years, brought on this wave of dispute settlement.

The Lhasa uprising in March 1959 proved to be one of China's most significant internal challenges since 1949. While China annexed Tibet in 1951, it could not integrate it with the central government due to Tibet’s strong socio-cultural and economic ties with India and Nepal. Lack of direct control over Tibet led to several armed uprisings, and the revolt reached its zenith between 1957 to 1959. During this period, the rebels controlled large parts of Tibet along with major highways connecting Tibet to the mainland.⁶ The revolt threatened China’s control and access to its strategically relevant border region with India, Nepal, and Myanmar, leaving the borders virtually undefended. In the aftermath of the Lhasa uprising, China quickly moved to establish its complete authority over Tibet and to consolidate control over the border regions ——China started negotiations with Myanmar and Nepal. The dispute between the two countries was finally settled in 1960 and 1961 respectively.

The Three Lean Years (1959-1962) and the 'Xinjiang migration' instigated another window of vulnerability for China. 'Three Lean Years' were the famines caused due to Mao's campaign of 'Great Leap Forward' (1958-1962). The famine brought about great political upheaval and instability in the periphery. Similarly, the mass migration of over 100,000 Uighurs from Xinjiang to the USSR from 1954-1963 destabilised the periphery.⁷

These two events compelled China to settle the borders with Afghanistan and Mongolia because China could not commit forces to man these borders. According to the Internal History of the Party, only ten frontier defence stations consisting of 136 troops, from Afghanistan to Mongolia, existed during that time. Therefore, to quench the unrest in Xinjiang, to stop its spillover in the already unstable core, and to assert control over the borders, China moved to settle dispute with Mongolia and Afghanistan in 1962 and 1963.

Historically, China has always faced problems on its western and northern frontiers due to them being remote and far away from the core. China realised that in the era of modern states with defined borders, the instability in Tibet and Xinjiang would make it difficult for them to control or defend their frontiers. Thereby, China actively pursued dispute settlement with Nepal, Myanmar, Afghanistan, Mongolia, and North Korea. The settlements often involved China forsaking its claims to settle the disputes. With Myanmar, China signed the border agreement in 1960. It bequeathed its claim over Namwan Tract in exchange for a much smaller territory of 59 square miles. Not only that, but China also accepted the part of the "McMahon Line" that ran into Myanmar.⁸ With Nepal, China signed the border agreement in October 1961. It involved both sides sharing their perceptions of the border and exchanging maps. Eventually, a joint commission was set up to investigate the contested areas.

The Commission followed the approach of equal distribution of contested areas, and Mt Everest/Qomolangmo was divided equally between the two sides.⁹ With Afghanistan, China signed the border agreement in 1963. Here China did not claim any area and agreed to the border decided by the Anglo-Russian Agreement of 1895.¹⁰ With Mongolia, China signed the border treaty in June 1964. The China-Mongolia border agreement is one of the most comprehensive agreements ever that demarcates every aspect of the border and consists of "678 cement and rock markers, has 68,000 words and 105 maps".¹¹ With North Korea, there is no public record of negotiations or settlements. However, both sides have not yet asserted claims on other lands, thereby indicating a tacit understanding of their border perceptions.

Dispute Settlements: Phase Two (1990-1998)

Like the first phase, China faced two internal vulnerabilities that threatened its internal and peripheral stability. The first was its international isolation brought on by the Tiananmen Square massacre (1989). The second was the unrest in Xinjiang that was exacerbated by the disintegration of the Soviet Union wherein China got new frontiers that were initially part of the Soviet empire.

The Tiananmen massacre presented a lethal challenge to the Party's legitimacy. The Party got hugely unpopular within China and internationally. In such a situation, it was necessary for it to build trust and to appear as a rationalist actor to the international community. By settling its remaining disputes, China hoped to build internal trust and end international isolation, as foreign investment was a crucial part of Deng Xiaoping's strategy of 'opening and reform'. Therefore, China settled disputes with Russia and Vietnam to show the world that it was a responsible nation and that the Tiananmen massacre was just an incident, and not a cold and calculated measure to sequester dissent.

Consequently, the unrest in Xinjiang was a significant challenge for the Party. There had already been a migration of 100,000 Uighurs to Kazakhstan between 1958 to 1962. The nature of porous borders and fear of support to Uighur "rebels" from Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, due to similar ethnicity and religion, compelled China to settle the dispute with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan.

China and Russia started negotiations after the Soviet Union ceased to exist, which led to the 1991 agreement between China and Russia to set up demarcation work. Under the agreement, China got to keep bulk of the regions it had claimed historically.¹² With Kazakhstan, China signed the border agreement in 1994. Kazakhstan inherited the disputed territory east of Lake Zhalanshkol from the Soviet Union, which it signed over to China with the agreement¹³. With Tajikistan, China signed the border agreement in 1998, however, it was only ratified in 2011 by Tajikistan. Tajikistan inherited the dispute from the Soviet Union between the Amu Darya and Yarkand Rivers. In the Treaty, China gave up claims on about 28,000 km² of land, and Tajikistan gave up 1400 km² of the Pamir Mountains¹⁴. With Laos, China signed the border agreement in 1992. Since, neither side had contested claims, hence the border was demarcated based on the historical frontier.¹⁵ China's dispute settlement with Vietnam was part of its effort to project itself as a rational actor, as the two countries had fought a war in 1979. The two sides agreed to the previous border set up in 1887 and 1891 as both the countries had no contested claims.¹⁶

Conclusion

China has thus adhered to the 'Peripheral Control' concept in settling territorial disputes. All its settlements have happened in the wake of internal and peripheral disturbances. However, this observation has two limitations in the name of India and Bhutan. In its two phases of border settlements, China has negotiated with weaker countries like Myanmar and Nepal and stronger countries like Russia. In contrast, the dispute has not been settled with a peer i.e. India and a weaker country, i.e. Bhutan. Ironically, China tried to unilaterally change the border with Bhutan and India in 2017 and in 2020 using force. While China largely followed a 'give- and- take cooperative approach' in both periods of negotiations, the results have been vastly different. In the first phase, China followed a give-and-take approach, ceding land to Myanmar, Nepal, and Mongolia. In the second phase, there was only one instance of ceding land to Tajikistan, with the rest resulting in China gaining territory or maintaining the status quo. This is probably explained by China's increasing economic and military strength. During the first phase, China was weaker economically and militarily; however, during the second phase, it had entered the period of high growth (1990-2010) backed by the West along with rapid military advancement due to increasing economic strength that helped China negotiate from a position of strength.

End Notes

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