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Tracing the Link between China's Concept of Sovereignty and Military Aggression

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The modern concept of territorial sovereignty dates at least to the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, a set of agreements to end one of Europe's bloodiest wars, but its relevance to international politics shows no signs of waning. This is especially true when it comes to understanding the rise of India and China, and the fraught bilateral relationship that exists between them. Before 2020, India-China relations were largely a

mixture of cooperation and conflict. Since last year, however, the relationship has undergone a sea change. In India, voices in favor of cooperation have been swept away by Chinese aggression along their shared border.

Over a year since the deadly clashes of May-June 2020, the Chinese army still occupies Indian-claimed territory and refuses to budge. At the same time, however, Chinese leaders tell their Indian counterparts not to let the boundary issue—in India's view, China's violation of Indian territorial sovereignty—affect overall bilateral.¹ On its face, this is a puzzling treatment of sovereignty issues from Chinese officials, seemingly ignoring the strength of feeling inside India that the border dispute must be resolved in a just fashion. The question presents itself: What exactly is the Chinese understanding of territorial sovereignty? Is China's appetite for territorial expansion growing, whether in the South China Sea, vis-à-vis Taiwan, or in Central Asia? And does China's understanding of territorial sovereignty breach with that of the rest of the world? An analysis of China's approach to the Sino-Indian border can help answer these questions. Over time, China's emphasis on securing its borders has changed in line with prevailing

domestic and international conditions. This is important for understanding the tactics China has used at the border, from the 1962 border skirmish to the latest deadly conflict at Galwan.

China's position on issues of territorial boundaries and sovereignty is often portrayed as being rooted in China's experience of Western and Japanese imperialism from the middle of the nineteenth century. Indeed, the idea of inviolable territorial sovereignty has been a key component of Chinese nationalism since this period. Although the concepts of sovereignty and nationalism have been used differently across time periods, one common theme is that Chinese leaders portray violations of the country's borders as shameful acts; preserving territorial integrity is therefore a matter of national pride. Whenever China's borders are placed in jeopardy, the central authorities tend to cast China as a victim of unprovoked foreign predation—a pattern of external threats that they trace back to the colonial era.

China invoked the victim narrative to describe the 2020 conflicts along the line of actual control (LAC). This is despite China flouting its prior undertakings to respect the LAC at Galwan,² and despite the barbaric methods used to kill

Indian personnel, which included the use of nail-studded rods. China's invocation of the victim narrative fits a pattern of how Beijing has long described its territorial disputes with India and other neighboring states. To illustrate how longstanding this tendency is, consider the transcript of a meeting between Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev and Chinese leaders including Mao Zedong and Chinese Premier and Foreign Minister Zhou Enlai.³ The meeting took place on October 2, 1959. In that year, after India granted asylum to the Dalai Lama after the Tibetan uprising, there had been a series of skirmishes between India and China. When Khrushchev asked why Indians had been killed at the border, Mao replied that India attacked first and fired for 12 hours. Khrushchev then asked how, if India had attacked first, no Chinese had been killed yet numerous Indians had lost their lives. Zhou responded that Chinese Communist Party leaders were not involved in managing the incident at the border, and that it was local authorities who had undertaken all the measures there, without any authorization from the center. Zhou appeared to contradict Mao's confident assertion that India had been the aggressor—an early instance, perhaps, of China reflexively “playing the victim” when it came to

Sino-Indian border disputes.

China's reliance upon the victim card is closely linked to its official usage of the concept of sovereignty. China's foreign policy pronouncements often use narratives like the Century of Humiliation, lost glory, rejuvenation, glorious past, and other such ideas. When Chinese figures use these narratives, they are alluding to China's historical stature as the Middle Kingdom—when several kingdoms from across Asia kowtowed to the Chinese Emperor. During that period, China as the Middle Kingdom saw itself as the center of the world, enjoying a formidable stature in regional affairs owing to its dominance of the Silk Road trade. It was only with the weakening of the Qing Dynasty that China lost this stature and external security, becoming vulnerable to the imperial forces of Britain, Japan, Russia, Germany, and others.

In the twenty-first century, China wants to avenge the humiliation that was inflicted upon it. Chinese leaders seek rejuvenation and to recreate the glorious past of the Middle Kingdom. However, the Middle Kingdom did not operate according to modern (Westphalian) concepts of territorial sovereignty. On the contrary, recreating the Middle Kingdom of old would

require China to violate the territorial integrity and sovereign authority of several neighboring countries. However, Chinese leaders do not seem to empathize with foreign counterparts who fear their own territorial claims being undermined by China's rise and assertiveness. At least along the Sino-Indian border, Beijing has shown itself willing to use force to seize territory that it sees as its own.

How can China enforce its own territorial claims while denying those of other countries? There are obvious problems with this approach. First, an overly aggressive stance would seem to jeopardize China's claims to be a responsible member of the international system. Second, Chinese aggression would complicate domestic justifications for fighting border wars. To solve this problem, perhaps, Beijing has habitually grasped for the victim card, invoking the historical narrative of Chinese territorial dismemberment to justify the contemporary use of force against foreign states—including, in the case of the Sino-Indian border, the forcible occupation of territory claimed by India.

The example of the Senkaku Islands, a Japanese-administered territory claimed by China as the Diaoyu Islands, illustrates how

discrete territories have been made part of China's narrative of national territorial integrity. Aside from 1945 to 1972, when it was administered by the United States, the archipelago has been controlled by Japan since 1895. As some observers have noted, the People's Republic of China only began pressing the question of sovereignty over the islands in the latter half of 1970, when evidence relating to the existence of oil reserves surfaced.⁴ This suggests that interests other than reclaiming Qing territory are at play. China's economic growth and increasing appetite for energy might lead to more such territorial claims going forward. Indeed, there are some parallels with the contested territories along the Sino-Indian border.

In conclusion, the Chinese concept of sovereignty is different from how the concept is understood by the rest of the world. It is not conducive to mutual respect and shared understanding. What is common between China's understanding and that of the rest of the world, however, is that territory can be an important index of power. To this end, China is willing to use all tools at its disposal to keep increasing its territorial reach. China uses anti-imperialist narratives to portray itself as the victim in all its active territorial disputes, a

necessary way to justify its uncompromising stances to external and domestic audiences. In this sense, the Chinese concept of sovereignty is a tool of diplomacy and statecraft; a way of preserving China's international image as an historical victim of foreign conquest even as it pursues its territorial disputes with growing confidence and power. ■

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Notes

¹ TNN, "Keep border dispute & bilateral ties separate, China tells India," *Times of India*, 5 August 2020, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/keep-border-dispute-bilateral-ties-separate-china-tells-india/articleshow/77362414.cms>.

² "India-China clash: 20 Indian troops killed in Ladakh fighting," BBC News, 16 June 2020,

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-53061476>.

³ See Sriparna Pathak, "The Chinese Concept of Sovereignty and the India-China Border Dispute," in *Re-imagining Border Studies in South Asia*, ed. Dhananjay Tripathi (New York: Routledge, 2021).

⁴ Seokwoo Lee, "Territorial Disputes Among Japan, China and Taiwan concerning the Senkaku Islands," *Boundary and Territory Briefing* 3, no. 7 (2002), 11.