

# Chinese Historical Experience in Settling Territorial Issues on Land and the Implications in Handling Maritime Territorial Disputes<sup>\*</sup>

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Maritime territorial disputes between China and some of its marine neighbors have turned increasingly salient recently, and they form a linkage relationship with the remaining land territorial disputes between China and some of her land neighbors. More importantly, disputes over maritime rights and interests often impact China’s peripheral situation and major power relations, particularly the relations between China and the US, at the same time. The focus

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<sup>\*</sup> The article is originally written in Chinese.

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of China's national security strategy has been locked on the southeast coast. It is therefore necessary to view from multiple perspectives and think about how to respond to the current disputes over maritime rights and interests, including those over maritime territories. In this regard, China's historical experience in handling land territorial disputes serves as the most valuable frame of reference.

With a decades-long endeavor after its birth, the People's Republic of China managed to solve territorial disputes with most of its land neighbors, signing border treaties or agreements with 12 of the 14 neighboring countries on land. These borders it shares with the 12 countries and which had been settled and had boundary markers erected account for about 90% of the total length of China's land borders. For the unsettled parts, China has come to agreements with its neighbors concerned on maintaining peace and stability in the border areas, with effective mechanisms for management and control being established.<sup>1</sup> During the process, China accumulated rich and profound experience, of which some of the strategic thoughts and practical steps are inspiring and of referable significance.

## I. COMPLEXITY OF THE TERRITORIAL DISPUTES ON LAND AND THEIR STATES OF SETTLEMENT

### 1. Complicated territorial issues on land

China is a country with vast territory, both on land and at sea. She boasts a land border about 22,000 kilometers in length, a dominion with multifarious natural conditions, and a people with complex historical and cultural backgrounds. In the early days after the founding of the PRC, she shared land borders with 12 countries (now 14). Most of China's frontier regions are enclaves of ethnic minorities: four out of five ethnic autonomous regions in China lie by the national borders, and most of the over 50 minority ethnic groups inhabit the provinces by the land boundaries, and some of them reside across borders. The domestic circumstances of China's land neighbors vary significantly, such as political regimes, levels of social development, compositions of ethnic groups, religious backgrounds, and cultures. Their relations with China have also

gone through warm and cool periods throughout history.<sup>2</sup>

Looking from an historical perspective, the concepts of territory, sovereignty and border in the modern sense of the "nation state" only formed gradually after 1840. The historical domain of China shrank during its process of transition from an ancient empire to a modern nation state. This was the result of the constant invasion and gnawing of Western powers on the one hand, and of the lack of clear boundary consciousness and effective administration in spite of an "eyes to the borderland" tradition in old China on the other, resulting in "frontier regions without borders". After its birth, the Republic of China (1912-1949) established the principle of inheriting the territory of the late Qing Dynasty. However, most of the boundaries between China and its neighbors were still undefined even in the last days of that regime, and many of the frontier regions were not effectively administrated. During that process, the ROC government used to cover up actual losses of territories with border marks on the map, and sometimes enclosed regions which had never been ruled by China into Chinese territory, resulting in a number of conundrums left for its successors to deal with.

The government of the People's Republic of China inherited a messy situation in terms of the state of the country's borders, among which three general categories could be found. First, there were borders agreed upon through treaties, which could be further divided into two kinds – those that had been settled, and those that existed in theory within treaties but had not been settled in practice, or had been settled but had become clouded over time; the second category consisted of "traditional customary boundary lines", formed through historical administrative boundaries without a treaty; and the third category comprised "lines of actual control", formed between the area occupied by respective countries and the area of China's actual administration.<sup>3</sup>

In a nutshell, the land border issues are legacies of history. Land border disputes bothering the PRC after its founding matter not only for China's sovereignty and territorial integrity, but also for China's national security, including the improvement of the security environment in neighboring areas and stability in frontier regions within China's border.

## **2. Resolution of land border disputes and related international backgrounds**

There were two periods in which China intensively resolved its land border issues. The first came in the 1960s when China signed border treaties or agreements via peaceful negotiations with six countries in total, namely, Myanmar (1960/1962), Nepal (1961), North Korea (1962), Mongolia (1962), Pakistan (1963), and Afghanistan (1963).<sup>4</sup>

The major feature of international background during that period was the Cold War, i.e. rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union, and the grave instability of security environment in China's neighboring areas. In the mid-1950s, the US devised an anti-PRC military alliance system. In the late 1950s, China was frequently entangled into border disputes with India, and eventually was forced to embark on a self-defensive counterattack in the border region between China and India in the winter of 1962. The border issue between China and India is still unresolved today, and both countries have been maintaining the status quo along a line of actual control. In the late 1960s, China was entangled in another border dispute with the Soviet Union, which led to a sizable armed conflict in the spring of 1969. However, even when faced with an austere security environment, China still solved its border issues with many neighbors according to the guidelines "plan first, then proceed step by step" established by central authorities in early 1960.

The second period came after the end of the Cold War, when China signed bilateral treaties or agreements regarding the settlement of land border issues with six countries, i.e. Russia (1991, 1994, 2004), Laos (1991), Vietnam (1999 land border only), Kazakhstan (1994, 1997, 1998), Kyrgyzstan (1996, 1999), and Tajikistan (1999, 2002).<sup>5</sup>

The main features of the international background in this period were the conclusion of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. At this stage, the situation in China's periphery was complicated but relatively stable. With less pressure on national security, China kept improving its relations with its neighbors; the collapse of the Soviet Union, in particular, offered a favorable chance for the resolution of border issues carried over from history.

The maritime territorial disputes between China and its maritime neighbors were not yet so prominent during and between these periods. In the early 1970s, in order to normalize Sino-Japanese relations, the Chinese leadership of the first generation proposed that the dispute over the sovereignty of the Diaoyu Islands between China and Japan be shelved. In the late 1970s, Deng Xiaoping coined the idea of "shelving disputes and pursuing joint development", which turned out to be the guiding policy for handling maritime territorial disputes with the country's neighbors at that time.<sup>6</sup> At this time, China and Vietnam reached the agreement on the delimitation of the Beibu Gulf, which is the only maritime territorial dispute that has been solved by diplomatic negotiations.

In general, the complexity, sharpness and arduousness of the solution of issues related to land border is no less difficult than the solution of maritime territorial disputes. The tense situation once caused by the land border disputes was also no way easier than the tense situation brought about by the current maritime territorial disputes. Indeed, the maritime territorial disputes now do differ in a number of ways from land border disputes. Yet, they are no more complicated, sharp and arduous than the land territorial disputes. There is no precedent of wavering in national security strategy, development strategy and the established foreign policies when the maritime territorial disputes turn somewhat acute.

## II. HISTORICAL EXPERIENCE IN SETTLING TERRITORIAL DISPUTES ON LAND

From the very beginning, it has been a historical process to gradually explore and accumulate experience for settling territorial disputes on land. In the early days after its founding, there were in the PRC many undertakings to be started and many things to be done. Moreover, what the government of New China took over from the government of old China was an awful mess. Regarding the settlement of the land border disputes, the new government lacked experience and expertise. Thus, the central leadership decided to implement a special transitional policy of "temporary shelving" or "keeping the status quo for now". This situation lasted until the

mid-1950s when the troops of China and Myanmar fell into serious disputes and armed conflicts. It was then a decision was made to use the settlement of the border issue between China and Myanmar as a breakthrough to gain experience for the settlement of similar issues between China and its other neighbors, once at a time.

Judging by the decision the central leadership made at the time, border disputes were defined as problems carried over from history; they were neither made strategic priorities nor viewed as issues of overall significance. However, since the mid-1950s, realizing that border disputes are extremely complicated and sensitive, any mismanagement would produce significant impact on the national strategy and cause public discontent domestically, in addition to severely damaging the country's security environment internationally, Zhou Enlai and other central leaders participated in the negotiations between China and Myanmar from the outset, and established the strategic objective and guiding principles for settling border and territorial disputes, i.e. solving problems carried over from history gradually and prudently and improving China's periphery security environment by settling border and territorial disputes.<sup>7</sup> These principles are expressed in the following aspects:

**1. Settling border and territorial disputes must serve and support the national strategy, not vice versa.**

The goals and means of settling border and territorial disputes must correspond with the national strategy and the country's foreign policy, or in other words, they must be conducive to the implementation of the country's foreign policy in given periods. At the time, they must contribute to enforcing the frontier defense, pacifying the neighbors, shaping a peaceful peripheral environment, and bolstering the socialist construction. If the settlement of the border and territorial disputes caused a deterioration in the neighboring environment, it not only went against China's foreign strategy at the time but also undermined the country's strategic interests in the long run.

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Settling border and territorial disputes must serve and support the national strategy, not vice versa.

Located in the heart of East Asia, China is a country with multiple and diverse neighbors. Such a geopolitical environment defines the critical significance of "good neighborliness" for China's national security. Otherwise, the situation of "unrest surroundings and unfree hands", which the central leaders tried hard to avoid at that time, would become reality.<sup>8</sup>

The threat China faced in the early 1960s was the containment and isolation imposed by the United States. In order to break through the US policy of containment and isolation, China made certain concessions to its neighbors in border negotiations, so that these countries would not follow the anti-PRC policies of the US. Seen from a practical standpoint, the implementation of such a strategy indeed achieved for China certain diplomatic initiative and enhanced its influence among Asian and African countries. In the early 1960s, when Sino-Soviet relations deteriorated, China settled the border issues with Mongolia and North Korea in the shortest time possible to prevent all its neighboring socialist countries from swinging to the Soviet Union. The approach adopted helped stabilizing China's relations with these countries.

After China launched its reform and opening-up drive in late 1978, the nation's strategic focus shifted to modernization, and it was emphasized that the mission of diplomacy was to create a benign peripheral environment in favor of the country's economic development. The purpose of the "shelving disputes and pursuing joint development" policy was to freeze the disagreements in territorial claims among different countries, avoid conflicts and maintain peace in the border regions so as to support the modernization drive. Looking back, it could be concluded such a policy had helped creating a favorable external environment for China.

During the time around the end of the Cold War, China proposed the guideline of "keeping a low profile and making positive efforts" as a conscious reaction to the prevailing international environment and domestic strategy of development. Specifically, China took active steps in improving its relations with neighboring countries and promoting fair and justifiable settlement of pending border problems. In this regard, China made concessions to a number of

its neighbors, such as Tajikistan. Generally speaking, however, all the border issues between China and its neighbors were resolved reasonably through diplomatic negotiations in accordance with the basic principles of international law.

## **2. Peaceful settlement of border and territorial disputes accords with the norms for state-to-state relations advocated by China.**

It was a decision made by the central leadership then to uphold the basic norms of morality and justice China had consistently advocated in various aspects of the country's foreign policy, as it accorded with its fundamental and long-term interests. It was no exception in the handling of territorial disputes. Specifically, it refers to combining the settlement of border and territorial issues with promoting the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence.

The reason that the central government decided to solve border and territorial disputes with China's neighbors in 1955 was that armed conflicts took place on the border between China and Myanmar. At the time, Myanmar was a friendly neighbor to China. On the one hand, it was greatly valuable for the establishment of a united front for peace in Asia and for breaking through the military containment imposed on China by the United States. On the other, since many of the countries who shared borders with China had only recently gained independence, such as Myanmar, China's central leadership required that the settlement of border issues between China and Myanmar must be well targeted and exemplary. In the opinion of Chinese leaders, the border and territorial issues between China and its neighbors were left by the colonial ruling class, and it was not fair to let people in these countries to shoulder the responsibility. Thus, they held, in handling such disputes with these countries, it was necessary for China to guard against the chauvinistic approach, and refrain from using the settlement of territorial disputes as a means for territorial expansion, let alone resorting or threatening to resort to military force; and, before the final agreement reached, measures should be taken to maintain the status quo, and neither party should use military force to change the status quo.<sup>9</sup> In hindsight, such a policy was rather idealistic. Yet, it

was "an option without alternatives" under the circumstances then. In reality, it did help improving China's status and influence among Asian and African countries.

**3. It is necessary to correctly define the nature of border and territorial disputes.**

Border and territorial issues had been defined as "problems carried over from history" in line with the actual conditions ever since the day when the Chinese government set about to settle them. In other words, they were not new disputes with China's neighbors arising after the founding of the People's Republic of China.

First, the borders had been gradually formed throughout a complicated historical process; disputes over border demarcation had remained in the category of problems carried over from history, and the finalization of borders had to be sealed by the signing of legal agreements with neighboring countries. When the PRC was founded, the bilateral borders between China and its neighboring countries were mostly undetermined. The smaller determined part was mostly agreed upon by the Chinese government of the late Qing Dynasty and colonial rulers of given neighboring countries, leaving a tiny part being agreed upon by the nationalist government of the Republic of China with respective neighbors.<sup>10</sup> There were lines of actual control based on traditional areas of jurisdiction where borders had not been formally demarcated. The border disputes arose mostly for discrepancies between the lines of actual control, treaty borders, or traditional custom lines between two countries.

Second, the attitude China has adopted towards historical issues is: recognizing historical facts and never breaking with history while paying attention to development; and analyzing history in view of the practical situation and national policies.<sup>11</sup> In the negotiations, China took into consideration actual conditions of itself and the neighboring countries concerned, and addressed all matters on the basis of equality, mutual benefit and goodwill. The leaders of New China stressed repeatedly that China and most of its land neighbors were countries recently casting off the rule of Western powers to win independence and, therefore, it was necessary for China to,

on the one hand, uphold and safeguard the legitimate interests of the Chinese nation, and on the other set an example in “anti-chauvinism”. However, since territorial and border issues were regarded as crucial national interests by all the neighboring countries after their independence, and as issues touching on national feeling and dignity, their settlement turned extremely sensitive. In fact, it was not easy to resolve them with mutual compromises and mutual concessions.

#### **4. Stable and improved bilateral relations are conducive to the settlement of border disputes.**

Territorial sovereignty is one of the crucial components of modern nation states, and no country would easily compromise on or concede its territorial sovereignty. Meanwhile, it is also invalid of any unilateral claim on border and territory. Any resolution of disputes regarding territorial sovereignty between neighboring countries calls for unanimous consent and agreement of both sides, and the final settlement must be confirmed by both sides through signing formal treaties and agreements. Border disputes can never be solved by military force.

Historical experience reveals that the settlement of border and territorial disputes is usually achieved after bilateral relations are stable or relatively improved. Normally, border and territorial disputes are not the main causes for the deterioration of relations between China and its land neighbors. In fact, the escalation of such disputes, even to military conflicts, is more often than not the result or salient expression of the deterioration of relations between China and a neighboring country concerned.

The definition of land borders between China and relevant neighboring countries in the early 1960s was all settled by peaceful and equal negotiations against the background of sound development of bilateral relations. After the end of the Cold War, the Chinese government took advantage of the rifts in the international structure caused by the disintegration of the Soviet Union to improve relations with countries like Vietnam and Laos, achieving a smooth transition from Sino-Soviet relations to Sino-Russia relations and quickly establishing diplomatic relations with

newly independent neighbors in Central Asia. All these major diplomatic moves prepared very favorable conditions for quick and successful settlement of some lasting border disputes mainly by way of peaceful negotiations.

In the process of settling the border disputes with its neighbors, China had once turned to military actions against certain individual countries. Except in 1974 and 1988 when China's military actions against Vietnam achieved some obvious practical results, other military conflicts China got involved in failed to recapture any occupied territory and solve any dispute; rather, they caused further deterioration of the bilateral relations and made it more difficult for the settlement of border issues. In the end, China still has to resort to the peaceful means and eventually resolve the problems fundamentally through diplomatic negotiations, just like in the case of the demarcation of the borders between China and Vietnam and between China and Russia, as well as the ongoing negotiations for demarcation of the borders between China and India and between China and Bhutan.

### III. SUGGESTIONS FOR HANDLING DISPUTES ON MARITIME RIGHTS AND INTERESTS

Disputes on maritime equities between China and its neighbors at sea share similarities and differences with the land border and territorial disputes. Based on China's relatively successful historical experiences in solving land border disputes, this author proposes the following reflections and policy suggestions:

#### **1. It is necessary to correctly define the nature of maritime territorial disputes.**

It is the starting point of any policy to correctly define the nature of maritime territorial disputes, as well as the basis for publicity and implementation of the policy. Thus, it calls for careful deliberation.

Most of the maritime territorial disputes involving China can be defined as "problems carried over from history"; they touch on China's national interests and have their historical origin. Generally speaking, the strategy, principles and policies China adopted for

solving land border issues in the past are also applicable for solving current maritime territorial disputes. Nevertheless, specific analysis should be made of a specific problem. The international political situation in the Asia-Pacific and the domestic situation in countries concerned are much more complex than in the past, and maritime territorial disputes are endowed with more, sometimes much acute, political significance. For example, although the disputes over the sovereignty of South China Sea islands are problems carried over from history, their gradual intensification in the recent three decades, even to the level of white hot close confrontation now, is directly touched off and driven by the Third United Nations Conference on the Law of the Sea and the implementation of provisions related to the baseline of the continental shelf in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea passed at the conference. Thus, effective countermeasures can only be found by dealing each case on its merits.

It will not do to blindly list the position of maritime territorial disputes in China's overall national strategy for security and development. Just like the settlement of land territorial disputes, resolving and controlling maritime territorial disputes should be consistent with the policy discourse of the central leadership, considered from the height of the country's national strategy for development and foreign policy, and combined with the country's national maritime strategy of building a maritime power, protecting the country's maritime rights and interests, and developing a marine economy. These disputes should not be treated and handled solely from the perspective of the maritime claims, nor be escalated directly to the level of safeguarding core national interests and fierce confrontation. At least in terms of international communication, it is necessary to remain calm, restrained and cautious.

## **2. Solving the problems by non-peaceful means leads nowhere.**

Like the settlement of land territorial disputes, the final settlement of maritime territorial disputes shall be achieved by peaceful means when the relations between China and the neighboring countries concerned are friendly and stable. Tetchy relations are impossible to help the resolution of maritime disputes, including

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issues regarding the sovereignty of islands and boundary delimitation at sea; rather, they will make things more complicated.

Judging by China's past experience in addressing land territorial disputes,

almost all problems carried over from history involving itself and its neighbors have been solved by way of peaceful negotiations when the bilateral state-to-state relations develop soundly. An example is the border dispute between China and India, which had stayed out of the agenda of Sino-India relations since the border war between China and India in 1962. This situation lasted until more than two decades later when the two sides signed an agreement on maintaining the status quo in the border region concerned and, under the condition that the situation in the region remains stable, established the political guiding principle for settling the border dispute.

Moreover, great changes have taken place in the international environment. In the international community today, the legal basis has gone for acquiring territory and changing the status quo of the boundary by means of force; it has become rare in the practice of international relations to change the status quo of territory and boundary by means of force. Greater store has been set by the role of the international court in resolving border and territorial disputes. This is especially so since the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea was put into effect. This practice has been supported and observed by more and more countries. It is a trend that is developing. For China, in settling disputes over maritime rights and interests, it is necessary to not only show respect to principles embodied in international law, but also learn to make full use of these principles and take advantage of relevant "rules of the game" fully and legitimately.

In the face of external provocations and contentions now, it is necessary for China to take effective steps to strengthen the management and control of the islands and territory under China's actual control, including strengthening military infrastructure and preparedness and creating necessary conditions for settling the issues through negotiations. Meanwhile, it is necessary for

us to see that the settlement and control of border disputes, and finally delimitation of the borders call for overall improvement of relations with countries concerned. Moreover, a number of countries have such disputes with China, and the disputes are not limited to the sea. As such, any action taken by China could possibly give rise to a chain reaction, or even impact the overall situation. Thus, China should never give up the stance of solving border and territorial disputes through diplomatic negotiations.

**3. It is necessary to combine safeguarding maritime territory with the long-term strategy of developing China into a maritime power.**

Settlement of disputes over maritime territories bears on national sovereignty and territorial integrity, but has its own unique strategic logic and must be subject to more farsighted strategic planning to both prevent any infringement of national sovereignty and territorial integrity and be conducive to safeguarding the long-term and fundamental national interests.

Historically speaking, the purpose of solving land territorial disputes lies in clarifying and protecting China's territory. As for disputes over maritime territory, it is necessary to evaluate the value from a strategic perspective, and give due emphasis to the unique strategic logic of maritime development. For example, land territory can be easily defended, but the territory at sea entails a much larger price to be defended. More importantly, a genuine maritime power should, while settling any dispute over maritime territory, pay attention to ensuring full freedom of navigation at sea, acquiring maritime strategic fulcrums by itself or with support from its allies and friends, and seizing the initiative in maritime rulemaking, in as large a range as possible. It will not do to simply apply the concept of "land enclosure" to settling maritime territorial disputes.

**4. It is necessary to create political conditions at home facilitating the settlement of disputes over maritime rights and interests.**

Most of land border problems carried over from history had been solved either during the Cold War or in the early years after

its conclusion. At the time, the speed and scope of information dissemination was limited, so were the public knowledge of related matters and the scope of interests involved in land border demarcation. Today, against the background of profound development of information technology and globalization, an increase is seen in stakeholders of the delimitation of maritime boundaries. The settlement of the issues bears on the complicated balance between short- and long-term interests, and between local (partial) and overall interests. Public opinion is also pluralistic.

At present, it is urgently necessary to establish explicit schemes and policies, strengthen coordination of domestic and foreign endeavors to form synergy, and build greater consensus and win more extensive support by paying due attention to the interests of all sectors, so as to eventually achieve the most important national interests. Moreover, it is necessary to guide positively the public and cultivate a healthy national mindset to avoid falling into the shadow of a "victim mentality" as sometimes seen in some other countries. In particular, it is necessary for us to prevent the kidnapping of the country's foreign policy by populism and the "pathos of history". With the significant increase of our comprehensive national strength and the particularity of maritime issues, at present it is particularly necessary to guard against the erroneous expansionist trend in society which may likely deviate our policy away from established goals.

China's peaceful development is now at a crucial stage which urgently calls for a stable and peaceful peripheral environment. Naturally, China's disputes with some neighboring countries over maritime territory show their gravity and call for an urgent solution. The maritime strategy of China displays great and far-sighted goals. Thus, it is necessary for China to draw on its experience gained from addressing the land border disputes, and properly settle the disputes over maritime territory that constrain the development of the relations between China and its neighbors by taking into consideration the new characteristics of "maritime territory" to remove or effectively control the crisis in a planned and prioritized way step by step, so as to ensure that the country's strategic goals will be achieved in this precious period of strategic opportunities.

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<sup>7</sup> See Liao Xinwen, “A Model for Settling Border Issues: Zhou Enlai and the Negotiations on Sino-Burma Borders”, in *CCP Archives*, Issue No. 4, 1996.

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