Undesired Outcomes: China’s Approach to Border Disputes during the Early Cold War

Abstract

This article will explore the evolution of China’s border policy through the 1950s and 1960s. Drawing on newly available archival sources and recent secondary literature, it will argue that during the early Cold War, the PRC leadership lacked a clear sense of the concept of national sovereignty, and often attempted to use territorial negotiations with China’s neighbours to bargain for broader foreign policy objectives. The article will also examine the historical and political assumptions underlying Mao Zedong’s approach to border questions, suggesting that Mao combined longstanding imperial assumptions about universal emperorship with the modern, Marxist idea of a world revolution.

Key words: China, Mao, Asia.

China’s management of relations with neighbouring states, especially where shared borders were disputed, was a crucial aspect of its Cold War foreign policy. The borders of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) are unusually extensive and complex. The PRC has the longest land and maritime borders of any country in the world, in excess of 18,000 kilometres and 22,000 kilometres, respectively. Russia’s borders, by comparison, extend 19,990 kilometres; Brazil’s 14,690 kilometres and India’s 14,100 kilometres. China’s frontier regions also cover an enormous area. Nine mainland provinces and autonomous regions are situated along China’s land borders (Liaoning, Jilin, Heilongjiang, Inner Mongolia, Gansu, Xinjiang, Tibet, Yunnan and Guangxi); ten along its maritime borders (Liaoning, Hebei, Shandong, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Fujian, Guangdong, Guangxi, Tianjin and Shanghai), in addition to the island of Hainan. In total, these provinces occupy an area of 6,770,000 square kilometres: 70% of China’s total territory (the provinces along China’s land borders alone occupy more than 62% of this total). China shares borders with more countries than any other state in the world. In the early years of the People’s Republic of China, it shared land borders with twelve other nations: North Korea, the USSR, Mongolia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Sikkim, Bhutan, Nepal, Burma, Laos and Vietnam. After India’s annexation of Sikkim and the dissolution of the USSR (and secession of Kazakstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan), China came to share
borders with fourteen other countries. China shares maritime borders with eight countries: South and North Korea, Japan, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei and Indonesia. Furthermore, China’s national minorities are concentrated in its border areas. Four of China’s five autonomous regions are located on its frontiers (the fifth being Ningxia). Most of China’s fifty-plus national minorities inhabit frontier zones, and many spill out over the country’s official borders. These “transnational” national minorities are extremely various culturally, religiously and economically, and they maintain close links with other members of the same ethnic group who inhabit areas beyond China’s borders.

For long periods of its history, China’s security, sovereignty and territorial integrity have depended on how successfully it has managed relations and resolved border disputes with neighbouring states. Yet for decades after the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the history of China’s border conflicts received little scholarly attention on the mainland (with the exception of Tsarist Russia’s erosion of Chinese territory, which generated much politically motivated research). Since the 1980s, and due in part to the creation of a Research Centre into Border History, we have seen a growth in historical work on this area. We now have access, for example, to a number of scholarly overviews of China’s historical approach to border questions and its policy outcomes. Many academics have written about imperial China’s management of its borders. Since the 2000s, moreover, due largely to the declassification of China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archives and to the opening of certain provincial and municipal archives, more substantial research on Chinese border policy during the 1950s

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1 Demographic statistics indicate that thirty of China’s national minorities (a population of some 66,000,000) spill out over national borders and operate within multiple language groups.


3 Ma Dazheng, “Ershi shiji Zhongguo bianjiang shidi yanju” (20th-century research into the historical geography of China’s frontiers), Li Shi yanjiu 4 (1996): 137-151.
and 1960s has been carried out, focusing in particular on China’s disputes with the USSR, India and Burma. Although we can also now access preliminary research into China’s disputes and differences with North Korea, Pakistan, Nepal and Afghanistan, we still lack detailed Chinese-language work on China’s border conflicts with Mongolia. Scholars outside China, meanwhile, have concentrated primarily on analyses of Sino-Soviet and Sino-Indian border conflicts. However, few non-Chinese studies of the PRC’s Cold War border issues have made full use of Chinese archival documents.

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5 See Shen Zhihua and Dong Jie, “Zhong-Chao bia

6 For reasons of space and focus, China’s border issues with Vietnam, Laos and Bhutan have been omitted from the scope of this article. China’s disputes with the USSR, India and Burma. Although we can also now access preliminary research into

7 For Russian scholarship on the history of Sino-Soviet border disputes, see: B. I. Tkachenko, Rossii – Kitai: vostokobnia granitsa v dokumentakh i faktakh (Russia – China: The eastern border in documents and facts) (Vladivostok: Ussuri, 1999); Yu. M. Galenovich, Rossiia i Kitai v XX veke: Granitsa (Russia and China in the 20th century: the border) (Moskva: Izograf, 2001); V. S. Miasnikov and
In the following study of Maoist China’s border policy of the 1950s and 1960s, we will argue – drawing on newly available primary archival sources and recent secondary literature – that during the early Cold War, the PRC leadership lacked a clear sense of the concept of national sovereignty, and attempted to use territorial negotiations with its neighbours as a bargaining chip to achieve broader foreign policy objectives. We will suggest reasons for this by discussing the specific historical and diplomatic background to Maoist China’s handling of border disputes, arguing that a serious conceptual tension existed between (on the one hand) Mao’s sense of nationalism, and (on the other) his longstanding imperial assumptions about universal emperorship and espousal of the modern, Marxist idea of world revolution. We will then summarise the shaping and implementation of policy before exploring and explaining its outcomes.

**China’s Borders: The Republican Inheritance**

Chinese scholarly consensus has identified three broad phases in the evolution of China’s frontier policy.

Across the longue durée of imperial history from the Qin dynasty (221-206 BC) to the early years of the Qing (1644-1911), China’s rulers (theoretically, at least) worked on the traditional assumption that “all land under heaven belongs to the sovereign; all people within its borders are his subjects”. According to this principle, all China’s neighbours were tributary vassal states. The Chinese empire, therefore, was concerned not with defining precise borders, but rather with ensuring that neighbouring states were submissive. As a result, the empire exercised rather erratic control over its frontier zones; borders were left vague. When the centre was weak, the empire retracted; when the centre was strong, the empire expanded once more. If neighboring vassals were “submissive”, the Chinese government would often gift them territory, as a token of imperial favour. For centuries and millennia, therefore, imperial China had frontiers, but not borders. This worldview was apparently little affected by periodic invasions and occupations by neighbouring states.

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After the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia, European powers increasingly relied on border treaties to define the territorial sovereignty of individual states. Four years previously, the Manchu Qing Dynasty – from imperial China’s northeastern frontiers – had established itself in Beijing after the fall of China’s last ethnically Chinese dynasty, the Ming. In unifying and dramatically expanding the empire they took over, the Qing partially inherited and perpetuated traditional Chinese imperial assumptions. However, in the course of the nineteenth century, the eastward incursions of Russia and Europe and the rise of Japan eroded Qing China’s territory. As China was drawn into the modern, European-dominated world of nation-states, it could no longer maintain frontiers without borders. In 1689, China signed its first modern-style treaty, with Tsarist Russia: the Treaty of Nerchinsk. After the first Opium War (1839-42), countries such as Britain, Russia and Japan forced a weakened Chinese state to cede large portions of territory in a series of unequal treaties (such as the 1858 Treaty of Aigun; the 1860 Treaty of Beijing; the 1864 Chuguchak Protocol; the 1895 Treaty of Shimonoseki). At the same time, the states that imperial China had traditionally viewed as its vassals were progressively colonized by Britain, France and Japan (Vietnam in 1885; Burma in 1886; Laos in 1893; Korea in 1910). These new colonial powers demanded that China should clarify its borders, forcing upon China the Western concept of treaty-defined territorial sovereignty.

After the collapse of the Qing dynasty and the founding of the Republic in 1912, China in theory became a modern nation-state, with modern borders. Sun Yat-sen’s initial idea of a “Republic of Five Nationalities” (Han, Manchu, Mongolian, Hui (Muslim) and Tibetan) subsequently developed into the concept of a “Chinese People” (zhonghua minzǔ). This new sense of nationalism was an important tool in integrating the centre and periphery of the young republic, and for clarifying China’s sense of its own borders. However, the political and diplomatic weakness of the republic, added to its continual state of war, meant that the Chinese government was not only unable to ameliorate longstanding border problems resulting from decades of imperialist incursions into Chinese territory and to resolve newly arising disputes with decolonized states on its periphery, but was also forced to acknowledge or sign yet more “Unequal Treaties” that further undermined national sovereignty (such as the 1941 boundary agreement with Britain on Burma or the 1945 Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Alliance). Although

the Republic of China subscribed to the modern theory of national territorial sovereignty, therefore, its government was unable fully to realize this concept.  

In 1949, then, the government of the People’s Republic of China took over a country whose long and heterogeneous borders had been badly damaged by decades of external incursions. A nation-state’s power and ability to self-determine are symbolized by, and depend on, its ability to define the bounds of its territory. In order to establish itself as a modern nation-state, the People’s Republic needed as a matter of urgency to resolve its many territorial disputes with neighbouring states, and to define its borders and modernize its sense of territorial sovereignty, in line with international norms. However, the new government faced many obstacles in completing these tasks.  

Firstly, China had never signed a comprehensive border treaty with any of its neighbours. Most of its borders were de-facto frontiers pragmatically defined by convention, or had been dictated by overbearing imperialist powers or by the vagaries of fluctuating political control. As a result, the states concerned often observed different borders from those observed by China, a situation which inevitably generated disputes.  

Secondly, even where broad consensus about a border existed, other complexities presented themselves: treaties and the maps and surveys attached were often ambiguous; or, unbeknownst to governments, physical boundary markers were sometimes moved, or locals migrated back and forth across the border in question, until political control on the ground bore little resemblance to the theoretically agreed boundary.  

Thirdly, apart from its treaties with Russia and the Soviet Union, all China’s previous border treaties had been signed with colonial suzerain states or protectorates.
After 1949, China’s government had to negotiate with newly independent nation-states, most of them former vassals of imperial China. Memory of imperial China’s claims to regional domination doubtless added to tensions in these nations’ border disputes with China.

Finally, the twelve states sharing land borders with China were politically very various: four were socialist, thus theoretically taking China’s side in the Cold War; the remaining eight were non-socialist, and some had sided with the US in its regional encirclement of China. During the Cold War, the resolution of China’s border disputes therefore also took on a powerful ideological dimension – particularly while Maoist China was working to export its revolution to its neighbours.

Cold War China’s Initial Approach to Resolving Border Issues

On 29 September 1949, the National Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference approved as interim constitution the Common Programme. The Programme set out the following approach to foreign policy: “After careful investigation, every treaty or agreement signed between the Nationalist Government and foreign governments will either be recognised, abandoned, revised or reaffirmed.” The Common Programme did not make specific mention of border treaties, indicating that China’s new leadership had not yet recognised their particular importance in international law. Indeed, during the early years of the PRC, the leadership often seemed curiously vague in its approach to managing China’s borders. In the early 1950s, because of the lack of clarity over many existing borders and the leadership’s preoccupation with the Korean War, the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) tried, where possible, to postpone resolving border disputes with China’s neighbours. With regards to border treaties previously signed by the Nationalists, the new regime neither explicitly endorsed nor rejected such past agreements. Where it had inherited disputes from the Nationalists, it advocated a temporary preservation of the status quo. At the

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11 Jianguo yilai zhongyao wenxian xuanbian (Selection of important documents since 1949) Volume 1 (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 1992), 13.
12 The existence of numerous and diverse errors in maps of China published during this period is a good indication of the vagueness surrounding China’s borders. Examples of the mistakes highlighted by surveys carried out by the Ministries of Culture and of Foreign Affairs include: the placing of Kashmir within Indian territory; a lack of clarity over the borders between India, Bhutan and Sikkim; the placing of Nepal and Bhutan within Chinese territory; the designation of Indochina as Vietnam, and the outright omission of Laos and Cambodia. See Xuanzhuan tongzun 172 (7 November 1955): 32-34.
same time, however, the Central Committee ordered relevant departments to conduct research into border conflicts, in the interests of resolving them in the future.\textsuperscript{13} We can tentatively conclude from this general reluctance to prioritise border issues that the CCP was unprepared for the legal complexities and rigours of governing a modern nation-state.\textsuperscript{14} The Russian Communist Party, at a comparable point in its development, was more politically mature: within four years of the October Revolution, the Soviet Union set to resolving border conflicts inherited from the Tsarist government.\textsuperscript{15}

When the early People’s Republic of China \textit{did} apply itself to managing border disputes, it was largely pushed to do so by the other countries involved and was therefore unable to take the initiative in negotiations. By the mid-1950s, China adopted a foreign policy of “peaceful coexistence” with its neighbours, in the interests of creating a stable international environment for domestic economic reconstruction and of undermining US containment policy through winning support from more Asian and African nations. Consequently, the PRC now prioritised resolving any border issues that were creating tensions with neighbouring states. In April 1955, Zhou Enlai announced at the Bandung Conference that no foreign power had imported revolution into China, and that China likewise would not export its revolution beyond its borders.\textsuperscript{16} “China shares borders with twelve other countries; yet some of these borders have not been fully defined. As we work to confirm these borders with the nations concerned, we pledge to maintain the status quo, while acknowledging that the issue is awaiting resolution. We pledge to observe our borders: should a transgression take place, we will immediately acknowledge our mistake and retreat within our own borders. We will use only peaceful means to

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{13} See “Zhonggong zhongyang guanyu Zhong-Mian bianjie wenti de zhishi” (Central Party directive on the Sino-Burmese border issue), 31 October 1956, cited in Liao, “Ershi shiji wushi niandai Zhongguo chuli ludi bianjie wenti de yuanze ye banfa”.
\item \textsuperscript{14} On the eve, and in the immediate aftermath, of the establishment of CCP authority over China, Mao Zedong made a serious attempt to release (Outer) Mongolia, Xinjiang and northeast China from Soviet control, to the point that he actually forced Stalin to make substantial concessions in the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Alliance. However, at that moment Mao’s key concern was recovering territory lost by the Nationalists, so that his compatriots would not interpret his “leaning to one side’ policy as supine submission to the USSR. It is hard to say, however, whether this strategy sprang from a proper understanding of the concept of territorial sovereignty as applied in modern nation-states. For further discussion, see Shen Zhihua, \textit{Wunai de xuanze: lengzhan yu Zhong-Su tongmeng de mingyun, 1945-49} (No choice: the Cold War and the fate of the Sino-Soviet Alliance (1945-59)) (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxianchu, 2013), 102-105, 134-160.
\item \textsuperscript{15} In 1920, the Soviet Union determined its border with Finland; in 1921, it signed a border treaty with Turkey. See Lingtu bianjie zhiwu yuanze de fali huibian (Compilation of international treaties and laws regarding territorial and border affairs) (Beijing: Shiji zhishi chubanshe, 2006), 88-96, 12-16.
\item \textsuperscript{16} \textit{Zhou Enlai waijiao wenxuan} (Zhou Enlai’s selected diplomatic works) (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 1990), 123-124.
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define our borders. If talks do not succeed at the first round, we will make a second attempt at negotiations, all the while maintaining the status quo.”

Subsequent events pushed China to further expedite its resolution of disputed borders. In November 1955, following a misunderstanding, Chinese and Burmese border guards exchanged fire at Huangguoyuan.18 In February 1956, conflict developed within a Sino-Soviet joint defence team in a disputed border region in Yili, Xinjiang, with both sides firing warning shots.19 Discussion of border issues was thus promoted to the daily agenda of government business. On 16 March 1957, Zhou Enlai emphasised at the National Political Consultative Conference that maintaining the status quo on China’s borders was a stop-gap measure, and not a long-term policy.20

After conducting research into the history of the Sino-Burmese border, Zhou came up with a series of measures for resolving the border dispute with Burma.21 On 31 October 1956, the Central Party Committee issued a “Directive on the Sino-Burmese Border”, and on 16 March and on 9 July 1957 Zhou presented reports on the issue.22 These three policy statements set out the government’s broad approach to border issues, namely that disputes must be resolved in order to guarantee a stable international environment for China’s domestic economic reconstruction, to maintain peaceful relations with neighbouring countries (using negotiations and avoiding military action), and to exploit weaknesses in the imperialist blockade of China. China’s border policy must protect and promote the national interest, without being narrowly chauvinistic. In setting its boundaries, moreover, China would observe the conventions on borders laid

17 Ibid., 130.
21 On Zhou Enlai’s efforts to research and resolve the Sino-Burmese border problem, see Jin Chongji ed., Zhou Enlai zhuan (Biography of Zhou Enlai) Volume 2 (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 1998), 1292-1324.
22 The “Directive on the Sino-Burmese Border Issue” has never been published; see Liao Xinwen, op. cit., for a description of its contents; see also Gao Fei, “Jianping Zhongguo chuli lingtu zhengduan de yuanze ji linian”, 25-31. Zhou Enlai’s March report has also never been publicly released; for an outline of its contents see Zhou Enlai nianpu 1949-76 (A chronology of Zhou Enlai 1949-76) Volume 2 (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 1997), 26. Zhou Enlai’s July report was covered in Renmin Ribao, 10 July 1957, p. 1, and is also mentioned in Zhou Enlai waijiao wenxuan, 230-238. But this is not a verbatim record of the original speech; Liao Xinwen, “Ershi shiji wushi niandai Zhongguo” contains more of the original. Our own summary of the report is drawn from all these materials.
down by international law, which stipulated that when a country changes government, the new regime could choose to accept or reject all treaties with foreign states signed by the preceding administration except for agreements or clauses pertaining to borders. If the new government sought to change a border, it must first acknowledge the existing agreement before holding bilateral talks with the government in question. Arguments for border revision that cited distant historical precedent or rejected territorial concessions granted to imperialist powers, or that made appeals to nationalism or military interest, were both contrary to international law and unrealistic.

Borders inherited from the Nationalist government, and legal precedents drawn from late Qing and Republican treaties, would form the basis for all future negotiations; not a single inch of territory would be conceded. In conducting such talks, China’s new government would be historically informed, but look also to the future; the past would be reexamined from the perspective of China’s contemporary situation. Finally, China would seek to safeguard relations with its neighbours during any ensuing border talks, striving to resolve issues on a basis of equality, mutual interest and friendship.

Under the direction of Zhou Enlai, therefore, the Chinese government’s initial approach to resolving border issue was both moderate and realistic. Zhou suggested concentrating on the dispute with Burma first, then aiming to confirm other borders over the ensuing five to ten years.\(^23\)

On 25 April 1958, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a communiqué to border provinces, explaining the crucial importance of resolving border disputes with China’s neighbours and requesting that each province should appoint specialists to conduct preparatory research, focusing on disputed or unconfirmed borders.\(^24\)

On 12 July, the State Council’s Office of Foreign Affairs set up a Borders Committee, bringing together representatives from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Defence, The Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Academy of Sciences, the State Commission for Ethnic Affairs, the National Survey Department and the General Staff Headquarters. The Committee would be responsible for drawing up borders, for commissioning surveys and other relevant research, and for devising plans for negotiations. At the Committee’s first meeting, it was pointed out that over the past few years “both small- and large-scale disputes had arisen” along China’s 13,000-kilometre-

\(^23\) Guangxi Zhuang Nationality Autonomous Region Archive, X50/2/290, 5-10; Yao Zhongming et al., “Zhou Enlai zongli\(^2\)” 94, 110; Zhou Enlai’s speech given at the Historical Geography Conference, 7 August 1957, accessed through private collection.

\(^24\) “Ministry of Foreign Affairs communiqué on border issues”, 25 April 1958, Jilin Provincial Archive, 77/4/1, 15-16.
long borders with socialist countries, “which had had a negative impact on living and working conditions on both sides of the borders in question, and also on friendly relations with the nations concerned.” The Committee proposed to “resolve the Sino-Mongolian border in 1958, and border issues with the Soviet Union, Vietnam and North Korea the following year.” Half of China’s 7,235-kilometre-long borders with capitalist countries, meanwhile, had not been defined. The Committee projected that the borders with (in the following order) Burma, India, Afghanistan and Kashmir would be agreed within two to three years; all further outstanding issues would be cleared up within five to ten years.  

On 8 August, the State Council instructed each frontier province to organise a Borders Sub-Committee, responsible for all local work on border issues. On 13 December, the CCP Central Committee issued a “Directive on Improving Border Work”, personally approved by Zhou Enlai. It emphasized that China was contending with both pre- and post-Liberation border conflicts. Boundary lines were often ambiguous and deficiencies in the government’s understanding of border issues were hindering both national security and diplomacy. China’s border problems, furthermore, concerned both China and its neighbours, and hence required a bilateral, objective approach. The government should prepare as extensively as possible for future negotiations; should the conditions or the imperative arise to resolve a particular border question, China should be ready to take the initiative in talks. Provincial and district party committees in regions bordering on non-socialist nations should prioritise work on border questions.

It seems clear that the Chinese government had not anticipated any serious difficulties in its border negotiations with non-socialist countries. As long as it prepared diligently, it felt, all issues would be resolved within five to ten years. The government was even less worried about its borders with socialist nations: a maximum of three years would be necessary to resolve any issues arising.

In the course of the next two years, however, Sino-Indian relations dramatically deteriorated, China openly split with the Soviet Union and tensions emerged in the PRC’s relations with most of its neighbours. These developments shook China’s new border policy to its very foundations.

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By 1960, the PRC’s border dispute with India had been ongoing for the best part of a decade. In 1951, India deployed forces in Mendawang, on the Sino-Indian border; around 1953, it deployed soldiers again in the zone to the south of the McMahon line; after 1954, it occupied several border zones within Chinese territory and ignored Chinese attempts at negotiation. In 1955, Sino-Indian relations improved, with both sides advocating peaceful coexistence. China hoped that the Indian government would assist in resolving the Tibet problem, while Nehru tried to persuade Zhou Enlai to acknowledge the McMahon Line. In the interests of uniting the country and stabilizing the situation in Tibet, in 1957 Zhou Enlai conditionally accepted India’s view. However, when China was unable to solve the Tibet issue as it had hoped, resolution of the Sino-Indian border issue was also shelved. While suppressing the Tibetan uprising in 1959, Chinese forces pursued fleeing rebels to the frontier with India; Indian society responded with visceral denunciations of Chinese military action, while Nehru granted refuge to the Dalai Lama. Nonetheless, as tensions proliferated, the Chinese government and Zhou still strove to resolve the border dispute, in the interests of stabilizing the frontier. At the second national-level Foreign Affairs Meeting held in March 1959, a spokesman from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs called for “diligent implementation of the government border plan. We must carry out more survey work and come up with solutions.” China’s borders with India and Burma were top priority; managing borders with socialist countries, it was anticipated, would “pose relatively little difficulty”.

In early 1960, in an attempt to take the initiative in future negotiations, the Standing Committee of the Central Party Committee’s Political Department convened several policy-making meetings during which the history of China’s border disputes with India and other neighbouring countries was extensively discussed. If border disputes with Burma, Nepal, and Laos were to be speedily resolved, the conference concluded, compromises would have to be made by both sides. In the case of India, China would need to hold further talks and offer further concessions, if the problem were to be resolved peacefully. (Indeed, China’s perceptions of and plans to resolve the Sino-Indian dispute, in combination with the instability in Tibet, influenced its approach to border issues with countries such as Burma, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Nepal. For example,

29 Luo Guibo’s speech given at the Second Foreign Affairs Meeting, 4 March 1959, Guangxi Autonomous Region Archives, X50/3/6, 99-120.
through negotiations with Burma, discussed below, China was able to state its position on issues such as the McMahon Line, and hoped to demonstrate to India that border disputes could be resolved through talks.) China’s border problems with North Korea and Mongolia were, it was judged, altogether less intractable. Given the ongoing war in Vietnam and the escalation of the Sino-Soviet split, border issues with both countries required resolution, though again these cases were seen as less urgent.30

On 14 March 1960, the State Council Borders Committee stated that in 1959 border questions had become the PRC’s most pressing diplomatic concern; the boundary conflict with India, already the cause of two armed clashes and attracting global attention, was the most critical. Pakistan and South Vietnam had also provoked a number of small-scale border incidents, which imperialists, revisionists and counter-revolutionaries “were exploiting to malign and isolate us.” The news was not all bad, however. Burma had devised a plan for solving its border disputes with China, and Nepal had sent a delegation to China to discuss the principles of a border agreement. China’s borders with socialist states were basically stable, though not entirely unproblematic. Some boundary disputes, for example with the USSR or Vietnam, had never been resolved, but had not yet become critical; the lack of clarity over the border with North Korea and the failure to implement a border agreement with Mongolia were presenting some minor problems. Border survey work in 1959 had focused on India, for obvious reasons, with surveys of other borders consequently postponed. Where surveys needed to be carried out on borders with socialist countries, the Borders Committee requested that where formal talks had not begun, such work “should be carried out secretly…to avoid unsettling communities living on the borders”. The Committee, it seems, was beginning to understand the complexity of border questions and anticipated that “in the course of the next year, there will be severe border conflicts with capitalist countries.” However, it also predicted that, beyond a few minor issues, no serious conflicts would arise with socialist countries.31

In sum, then, the government’s initial approach to border disputes (to resolve them by the principles of “Peaceful Coexistence” and in accordance with international law) was reasonable and pragmatic. But it must be underlined that the government’s key

30 Wu Lengxi, Shinian lun zhan (1956-1966) (Ten years of talking about war (1956-1966)) (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 1999), 248. Due to restrictions on space, this article will not discuss the details of Beijing’s complex reasons for its handling of border issues with these states. For further elaboration, please refer to works of secondary literature listed in footnotes.

strategic objectives in border negotiations were to weaken the US encirclement of China and to improve relations with neighbouring states – not to defend China’s territorial sovereignty. As a result, in almost all its bilateral border negotiations during the 1950s and 1960s, China either offered or felt forced to make concessions, in the hope of obtaining these objectives. Furthermore, as the international situation, and China’s domestic and foreign policy objectives changed, the government’s initial moderate approach became untenable and in some cases was discarded altogether.

Outcomes of China’s Management of Border Disputes

Between 1957 and 1962, China’s domestic and foreign policy underwent fundamental transformations. At home, with the intensification of the Anti-Rightist Campaign, Mao Zedong re-emphasised class struggle. Despite the temporary resurfacing of a more moderate line in the early 1960s, from 1962 Mao began calling for economic reconstruction to be sidelined by political campaigns and preparations for war. In foreign policy, the PRC advocated waging proxy “wars on the peripheries” with the United States, “exporting revolution” to neighbouring states, while attacking Soviet “revisionism” and vying for the leadership of world communism.32

Against this backdrop of oscillating political moderation and radicalization, of internal economic crisis (caused by the failure of the Great Leap Forward) and external insecurity (caused by ethnic conflict in Xinjiang, and tensions with India and Taiwan) the Chinese government’s efforts to resolve border conflicts led to two kinds of outcomes. Some borders were drawn up through diplomatic negotiations in which China offered substantial concessions in order to stabilize its borders: with Burma (October 1960); Nepal (October 1961); North Korea (October 1962); Mongolia (December 1962);

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Pakistan (March 1963); and Afghanistan (November 1963). At the same time, however, some unresolved border disputes led to military clashes, most notably the Sino-Indian War, which broke out in October 1962. Although a ceasefire was quickly called, the territorial dispute rumbles on today. In August 1964, China’s border negotiations with the Soviet Union broke down; in March 1969, military clashes took place on the Sino-Soviet border. In October that year, border negotiations were resumed, though the issue was never satisfactorily resolved.

China’s border dispute with Burma was complex. Both sides had unresolved territorial claims. In the early years of the People’s Republic, estimates of the area of territory disputed by both sides varied between 10,000 and 180,000 square kilometres. But by the time that the Chinese and Burmese government began talks in November 1956, the area of controversial territory had been reduced to 1,909 square kilometres. When talks concluded in 1960, China had gained only 18% of the disputed territory (and these were areas that had in any case historically always belonged to China). Most importantly, PRC negotiators gave up the rights that the 1941 agreement had given China to exploit Burma’s mineral deposits. Additionally, because the PRC accepted a British proposal to use natural frontiers as the border, the northern leg of the new Sino-Burmese border now coincided with the (previously contested) 1914 McMahon Line. This acquiescence not only signalled that the PRC government had renounced China’s territorial claims – upheld by the Qing dynasty and, for the previous half-century, the Republic of China – to territory along the Irrawaddy River, but also that the Chinese were willing to accept (at least in part) the McMahon Line. The terms of China’s agreement with Burma held to the moderate policy of accepting existing treaties, but abandoned the principle of “not conceding a single inch of territory”. The treaty generated much contemporary discontent, including among leading representatives of Yunnan’s national minorities, whom the government had to work hard to soothe. China had made such major concessions principally in order to establish friendly relations, and to sign a non-aggression treaty, with Burma, to undermine the US blockade and to gain Burma’s assistance in fighting remnant Nationalist forces based on the border between Yunnan and Burma. The treaty was also designed to be a public expression of China’s sincerity and moderation in foreign policy, in the hope that it would ease China’s border
disputes with other nation-states (especially India), in the context of ongoing unrest in Tibet.  

Before signing the border agreement, the Chinese government had perceived that “Burma was willing to expedite the resolution of the border question, but was far less enthusiastic about concluding treaties of friendship…Ne Win wants us to accept his plan for the border before he will agree to visit China”. Because of China’s anxiety to stabilise the situation on its peripheries, it accepted Burma’s terms. But things did not work out as China hoped. In the short-term, the border treaty did improve relations with Burma. But within only two years, in February 1962, Ne Win launched a successful military coup, to see off pressure from the United States and suppress the increasingly activist Burmese Communist Party. In this context, the Burmese government grew increasingly anxious about Communist China. Despite strenuous efforts by China to maintain the status quo, bilateral relations broke down completely in June 1967. And the precedent of the Sino-Burmese treaty had a negative, complicating impact on China’s subsequent border negotiations with Nepal, Pakistan and Afghanistan. It was, arguably, one of the key reasons that the Chinese government was forced to make yet more concessions in later talks.

On the Sino-Nepalese border, eleven separate territories were disputed, covering a total of 2,476 square kilometres. As talks proceeded, China grew conscious that Nepal was “seeking to grab opportunities to occupy land wherever possible, to seize hold of disputed territories and refuse to return them”; “It wants us to make many concessions.” But the PRC ultimately caved in. When a treaty was signed in October 1961, China ended up with only 6% of the disputed territory. This was not an outcome that reflected a spirit of mutual compromise. Again, China’s stance was influenced by anxiety

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34 Waishi dongtai 63 (1959), 9; 1 (1960), 2; 3 (1960), 4.


about unrest in Tibet (in 1960, after preliminary agreement had been reached, Nepal permitted Chinese strikes against Tibetan rebels in Nepal) and by a desire “to build momentum for a similar settlement with India.”

The territory disputed by China and Pakistan was in Kashmir: from a legal perspective, while the question of Kashmir’s sovereignty remained unresolved, China and Pakistan had no shared border. Nonetheless, in February 1960 Pakistan proposed border talks, but China played for time. In February 1962, due to political changes in Pakistan and in the interests of intensifying the antagonism between Pakistan on the one hand, and the US and India on the other, the Chinese government finally signaled its willingness to begin border talks. The talks focused on 8,806 square kilometres of disputed territory, 7,252 square kilometres (82%) of which were under de-facto Chinese control. After agreement was reached, China still occupied 60% of the disputed territories but had ceded 1,942 square kilometres of the land it had once controlled, while Pakistan relinquished only a small part of its territorial claims. In the course of the negotiations, therefore, China lost its previously dominant position. Yet again, China hoped to signal to India that “conducting peaceful consultations on the basis of mutual respect and goodwill is an effective way of solving international disputes.”

China’s border with Afghanistan was very short (only 92 kilometres) and undefined by treaty. Negotiations between the two countries began in June 1963; agreement was reached after only two weeks, with China agreeing to uphold the existing, conventional line. In November, when the treaty was signed, all disputed territories were ceded to Afghanistan (7,281 square kilometres in total). China thus carelessly relinquished another set of historical claims to frontier zones. The agreement with Afghanistan, the leader of the Chinese negotiating delegation commented, “will become another example for all neighbouring countries to settle problems between them peacefully through negotiations.” But the PRC was to make even greater concessions on its northern borders with North Korea and Mongolia.

37 Fravel, Strong Borders, 91-92.
39 Fravel, Strong Borders, 117-118.
40 See Zhonghua renmin gongheguo bianjie shiwu tiaoyueji, Zhong-A, Zhong-Ba juan (Collected border treaties of the PRC: China, and Afghanistan and Pakistan), 1-20; Wang, Zhonghua renmin gongheguo waijiaoshi Volume 2, 104-105; Fravel, Strong Borders, 324-325.
41 Fravel, Strong Borders, 119.
Since the Ming and early Qing dynasties, China’s major border dispute with Korea had centred on the Jiangyuan region near the Tumen River. The Gando Convention of 1909 had allocated to Qing China parts of the Changbai mountain range, including Heaven Lake on Paektu Mountain, even though the Koreans had long considered this to be their most sacred mountain. Until early 1960, the Chinese government seemed outwardly unconcerned by the uncertainty surrounding the Sino-Korean border: the existence of the Gando Convention, it was assumed, would prevent the eruption of any major disputes. The PRC was also confident that solutions could be found to a host of more minor border quibbles (caused, for example, by boundary rivers changing course). In reality, the Chinese government had anticipated that drawing a border through the Changbai mountain range might generate intractable disputes. To avoid adversely affecting relations with North Korea, the Chinese government decided for the time being to concentrate on subsidiary issues, without coming to an integrated solution.

In 1959, North Korea’s leadership stated that “for the time being, it was not the right moment to resolve” the border problem, perhaps assessing that they would not achieve their desired objectives at that point. Although China wanted further discussions of the border at the time, it acquiesced in the postponement of the issue. In February 1962 – taking advantage of China’s economic weakness and international isolation, following the Sino-Soviet split and worsening tensions with India – North Korea suddenly asked to settle the issue through secret negotiations, anticipating that China would be more compliant. China immediately agreed, in the hope of winning North Korea’s support in the dispute with the USSR, and in April of that year bilateral talks began. Because China had underestimated the magnitude of the problem, it was underprepared for negotiations and was outmanoeuvred by North Korean proposals. But because it saw North Korea as a comrade nation, the PRC felt that the Sino-Korean border was an “internal” rather than an “external” matter, and took a correspondingly relaxed approach. Six months later, China and North Korea agreed a 1,334-kilometre-long border that included the Changbai range, together with islands and sandbanks in the Yalu and Tumen Rivers. As a result, China renounced its claims to the stipulations of the Gando Convention and basically accepted all North Korea’s territorial demands. A large stretch of territory within the Changbai mountain range was ceded to North Korea; 54.5%
of Heaven Lake (almost 10 square kilometres) was also granted to North Korea.\footnote{According to a map-based estimate, China ceded some 500 square kilometres of territory. See Dae-sook Suh, *Kim Il Song: The North Korean Leader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 200.} When it came to deciding jurisdiction over border rivers, the treaty ignored the conventions of international law (drawing the border along the mid-point of the main channel) but instead stipulated that both sides would have joint possession and joint administration. Of the 451 islands and sand banks in the river, China took 187, while North Korea received 264. The agreement over the territorial sea beyond the mouth of the Yalu river also favoured North Korea.\footnote{See Liaoning Province Revolutionary Committee Office of Foreign Affairs ed., “Zhong-Chao tiaoyue, xieding, yidingshu huibian 1954-1969” (Collection of Sino-Korean treaties, agreements and protocols, 1954-69), January 1971, 4-27; Jilin Provincial Revolutionary Committee Foreign Affairs Office ed., “Zhong-Chao, Zhong-Su, Zhong-Meng youguan tiaoyue, xieding, yidingshu huibian” (Collection of Sino-Korean, Sino-Soviet and Sino-Mongolian treaties, agreements and protocols), June 1974. See also Han Wen trans., “Hanguo dongbeiya lishi caituan disan yanjiushi bian” (Collection of materials edited by Korea’s third research bureau into materials on the northeast Asia financial group) Neibu ziliao 3 (December 2007): 11-13, 17-54; Luo Guibo’s speech at the Second Foreign Affairs Work Conference, 4 March 1959, Guangxi Archives, X50/3/6, 99-120; Shen Zhihua and Dong Jie, “Zhong-Chao bianjie zhengyi de jiejue”, 34-51; Fravel, *Strong Borders*, 321-322.}

In August 1945, China and the Soviet Union acknowledged the immediate independence of Mongolia and the current border. However, neither side carried out a survey of the border zone or produced a map confirming the line. After 1949, Sino-Mongolian relations were regularly plagued by border disputes and in 1956, Mongolia took over 720 square kilometres of disputed territory previously occupied by China. After talks, the two sides decided to resolve the issue diplomatically. Consequently, however, Mongolia increased its demands. In July 1958, it insisted on a new border that far exceeded the line agreed in 1945 and that would expand Mongolia’s existing territory by a total of 43,876 square kilometres (of which Mongolia had already occupied some 17,490 square kilometres). At the same time, Mongolia stepped up pressure on the Altay region, in north Xinjiang, harassing Chinese border populations and forcibly occupying Chinese territory. The Chinese government tolerated all these provocations. The Mongolians then demanded the fastest possible resolution of the border issues between the two countries. China began surveying the border zone in 1958, but in April 1962 still felt that more time was needed to research fully the history of the frontier. But as Sino-Soviet relations continued to deteriorate, China felt it had no choice but to conciliate Mongolia by accepting its demands, also hoping that a negotiated settlement would, in the words of Liu Shaoqi, help China “settle its boundary question with other socialist countries on the basis of the same principles” (presumably referring to the USSR).\footnote{Fravel, *Strong Borders*, 112.} In
October 1962, China and Mongolia began talks in Ulan Bator and concluded a treaty by December. In the course of the negotiations, China relinquished most of its demands that Mongolia should return territory that it had forcibly occupied; China received only 35% of the 16,808 square kilometres of disputed territory.45 This outcome strayed far from the PRC’s initial insistence that existing lines of jurisdiction should form the basis of border negotiations and on “not conceding a single inch of territory”.

In making such huge concessions to North Korea and Mongolia, China’s aim was to win their support in the Sino-Soviet dispute, and also to hasten the resolution of the border disputes with India and the Soviet Union. But their policy of munificence accomplished neither objective. While North Korea was striving to recover Mount Paektu, it assiduously courted China and cold-shouldered the Soviet Union, even to the point of openly criticizing the latter. But the Koreans were fickle: two years later, following Khruschev’s fall, the Soviet Union began successfully wooing North Korea back. After China’s radically leftward turn during the Cultural Revolution, an open rift developed between China and North Korea.46 Historically, Mongolia had relied heavily on the Soviet Union for support. During the Sino-Soviet Split, it briefly took up a neutral position, but only to obtain short-term benefits from China. On the very evening that the Sino-Mongolian border treaty was signed, the visiting Mongolian leader Yumjaagiin Tsedenbal sat down to an explosive evening of talks with Zhou Enlai. When Zhou mentioned the Sino-Soviet Split, Tsedenbal declared his unswerving support for the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. After the meeting, Tsedenbal openly told his


entourage that the signing of the border treaty would not improve Mongolia’s relations with China.47

Both Sino-Indian and Sino-Soviet relations, meanwhile, reached a dead-end in the course of border negotiations of the 1950s and 1960s. Sino-Indian tensions steadily intensified after China’s suppression in 1959 of the Tibetan uprising. India adopted an aggressive, forward policy, while China strove to maintain the status quo. After the initial outbreak of hostilities, China voluntarily withdrew its forces twenty kilometres behind the border and proposed negotiations. Visiting India in April 1960, Zhou Enlai offered various concessions in the hope of a peaceful, stable resolution of the frontier dispute: India, he suggested, could occupy 90,000 square kilometres south of the McMahon Line, while China would take the 33,000-square-kilometre Aksai Chin district on the western stretch of the McMahon Line. India responded with greater aggression, until in October 1962, the Sino-Indian War broke out, at a time of heightening radicalisation of China’s domestic and foreign policy. After securing military victory, the Chinese government called for a ceasefire and again withdrew its army twenty kilometres behind the de-facto border of 1959. But negotiations were stalemated by the Indian government’s refusal of China’s demands.48 China at the time was more preoccupied by its eastern than by its western front and was optimistic that the straightforward exercise of forbearance would stabilise the border with India. The opposite ensued. When China gave an inch, India’s government responded by taking a mile. The latter’s overbearing stance sprang in part from the pressure that the Indian rightwing was putting Nehru under at the time. But Indian aggression was also encouraged by China’s earlier, apparently open-handed approach to border issues; India’s foreign policy-makers concluded that tough-talking would reap dividends; ultimately, it pushed China into military action. After 1960, Mao’s own increasingly radical foreign policy had condemned the Indian government as “reactionary”, thereby ruling out any further territorial concessions.

Although China had a long history of border disputes with Russia/the Soviet Union, both sides avoided the issue during the 1950s, the golden age of Sino-Soviet relations. When in 1958, China took steps to resolve the border question, Sino-Soviet

47 Minutes of the meeting between Qierwonianke and Cebogemide, 1 January 1963, Archive of Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation, collection 0100, inventory 56, folder 495, file 7, 1-19.

relations were already under strain and fresh border conflicts were not slow to develop. China’s own position on border negotiations also took on a tougher, ideological dimension. Even before specific issues could be discussed, China wanted the Soviet Union to acknowledge that all previous treaties had been “Unequal Treaties”. In February 1964, when Sino-Soviet border negotiations formally began, the first two rounds of talks bogged down in meaningless ideological debates; it was not until the third session that either side began discussing practical problems. But because both sides agreed to follow international law in drawing the border along the mid-point of the main channel of border rivers, the eastern border question was quickly resolved, except for the issue of jurisdiction over the Bolshoi Ussuriisk Island in the Amur River. The Soviet Union also agreed, on the strength of this principle, to cede to China some 400 disputed islands (including Zhenbao – Danansky – Island) and 600 square kilometres of disputed waters; an island of about 200 square kilometres in the Argun River was also ceded to China. However, on 10 July – while the Soviet delegation was relaxing in Beidaihe, during a break in negotiations – Mao Zedong told a Japanese Socialist Party delegation that he still wanted to settle accounts with the Soviet Union over Russian occupation of Chinese territory a century earlier, and raised the question of China recovering (Outer) Mongolia. Mao’s comments destroyed the hard-won harmony of the ongoing border negotiations: the Soviet delegation broke off talks halfway through and returned home.49 Naturally, Mao Zedong had no real intention of reclaiming Chinese territory lost to the Tsarist government; he just wanted to infuriate Khruschev. His plan was deliberately to sabotage Sino-Soviet border negotiations, to ensure that relations with the USSR did not improve. He needed the USSR to remain a target of revisionism, to be struggled against in his Cultural Revolution. For Mao, it seems, the Sino-Soviet border issue was little more than a tool in a broader ideological conflict.50

Conclusion

The PRC State Council’s initial, moderate approach to resolving border disputes in the early Cold War period was over time discarded or (in certain cases) never implemented. In every treaty signed through negotiations, China (to a greater or lesser extent) made

49 See Li, “Zhengzhi doushi yu dishou”.
50 For more details on Mao’s desire to challenge the Soviet Communist Party for the leadership of global communism, see Shen, Wunai de xuanze, 637-657.
concessions. The only treaty in which China won concessions (the draft Sino-Soviet border agreement) was never ratified because Mao deliberately sabotaged it.

There are two broad explanations for this policy failure. Firstly, negotiations took place at a highly unpropitious moment for China. China focused on border issues between 1960 and 1963, at a time of domestic economic crisis and international diplomatic setbacks. China’s relative internal and external weakness meant that it was unable to take the initiative in border talks. Secondly, China’s principal objective in holding border talks was to obtain security and friendship on its peripheries through offering territorial concessions. In other words, it was focused not on protecting and enhancing national sovereignty, but rather on easing diplomatic difficulties. It hoped to barter territory for favourable foreign policy outcomes.

This was in some ways an understandable strategy. But there were two prerequisites for its success. Was this approach in harmony with China’s long-range national interests? And what guarantees did China have that offering territorial concessions would maintain long-term security and friendship on its peripheries? If you sell out long-term interests for short-term gains and, in so doing, encourage intransigence in antagonist nations, such a strategy will fail. As Lord Palmerston put it: “Nations have no permanent friends or allies, they only have permanent interests.” While the international environment remains unfavourable, a nation is best off postponing the resolution of border disputes. China enjoyed much greater success when it managed to sideline direct discussion of sovereignty issues: consider, for example, its handling of the Diaoyu question with Japan in the 1970s,51 or again the peaceful border agreements that China signed in the 1990s with India and Bhutan.52

China’s handling of border policy in the early Cold War was also weakened by its leadership’s inadequate understanding of the fundamental principles involved. When considering territorial issues, China’s leaders often failed to behave like rulers of a modern nation-state. Their thinking was influenced by, on the one hand, the imperial ideal of China comprising “all under heaven” and, on the other, the imported Marxist theory of “world revolution”.

In October 1935, Mao Zedong, in his poem “Kunlun”, revealed the historical imprint of imperial China’s vague, universalist approach to territoriality on his own political thought:

To Kunlun now I say,  
Neither all your height  
Nor all your snow is needed.  
Could I but draw my sword o’ertopping heaven,  
I’d cleave you in three:  
One piece for Europe,  
One for America,  
One to keep in the East.  
Peace would then reign over the world,  
The same warmth and cold throughout the globe.\(^33\)

After he became leader of China, the romantic imprecision about borders that Mao expressed in this poem came to shape practical policy. To see this in action, consider Mao’s own comments about the Sino-Korean and Sino-Indian border disputes.

On 25 November 1958, Mao told Kim Il-sung (who was visiting China at the time) that “historically, China has not behaved well towards North Korea; our ancestors treated your ancestors badly…[If your ancestors could speak to you now] they would say that the Liao River used to be Korea’s border, but now the Chinese have pushed you [Kim Il-song] back to the Yalu.” When Kim Il-sung visited Beijing again at the end of May 1963, Mao told him that he saw all of China’s northeast as North Korea’s strategic hinterland. Once war broke out again, Mao would make it entirely over to Comrade Kim, to “be ruled as one territory”.\(^34\)

While Zhou Enlai rushed to deal with the 1959 military crisis on the Sino-Indian border, Mao in November of that year received the General Secretary of the Indian communist party and a delegation sent by the Indian communist party. The conversation got onto the subject of the Sino-Indian border conflict. Once the Indian People have

\(^34\) Minutes of Mao Zedong’s meeting with the North Korean delegation, 25 November 1958, accessed through private archival collection; interview with Zhu Liang by Li Danhui and Shen Zhihua, January 2010 (Zhu Liang was the Minister of the CCP International Liaison department between 1985 and 1993).
seized power, Mao told his visitors, China will not only acknowledge the McMahon Line, but will also cede 90,000 square kilometres south of the line to India.\textsuperscript{55}

Such remarks recall the open-handed attitude of Chinese emperors to their frontier territories. In 1728, the King of Annan petitioned for 120 li of territory that he was disputing with the Chinese province of Yunnan. The Yongzheng emperor granted him 80 li, but the king was still not satisfied. “We control the entire universe,” Yongzheng responded a little testily. “Since Annan is registered as one of our vassal states, every square foot of it belongs to us. Why are they quibbling about forty li?” But when he learnt that the King “having regretted his transgression, was respectfully awaiting imperial orders” and had presented a memorial affirming his loyalty, Yongzheng softened his tone: “If these forty li are part of Yunnan, they are our inner territory; if they are part of Annan, they count as our outer territory. What is the difference?” With a few strokes of his writing brush, he gifted all the disputed land to the King of Annan.\textsuperscript{56}

Mao’s flexible attitude to territorial sovereignty seems remarkably similar to that of Yongzheng, fluidly merging the idea of a universal Chinese empire with the theory of proletarian world revolution. Marxist theory holds that the revolution will succeed first in a few advanced countries, then spread outward. In the course of the revolution, the machinery of the state will be smashed; the individual states in which the proletariat live will naturally wither away.\textsuperscript{57} To the leader of a genuinely Marxist party, the state is only a temporary phenomenon that will shortly be swept aside by world revolution. By the end of this process, one of the key defining features of a state – its borders – will become meaningless. Proletarian “internationalism” cannot coexist with capitalist “nationalism”.

And it was the theory of permanent world revolution that dominated Mao-era China’s foreign policy; “peaceful coexistence” was no more than a short-term strategy of the 1950s. At the same time as China was publicly seeking to stabilise relations with its neighbours through treaties and territorial concessions, its government was continually exporting revolution, encouraging and aiding anti-governmental armed struggles in neighbouring states. This intense inconsistency between official and unofficial policy inevitably generated tensions and ambiguities in China’s dealings with its peripheries.

\textsuperscript{55} Minutes of Mao’s conversation with the Indian Communist Party delegation, 13 December 1967, accessed through private archival collection.
\textsuperscript{56} Wang Zhichun, Qingchao rouyuanji (A chronicle of the Qing dynasty’s policy of cherishing distant lands) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1989), 68-69.
In short, within the Chinese “empire” (which after 1949 became one of the centres of world revolution), borders had never been a major issue – in fact, they barely existed. If a state was submissive to the “celestial empire” (or – to use post-1949 terminology – supported the world revolution), it could be granted any amount of territory because it was part of the “celestial empire” (or the world revolution). This was perhaps why in 1957 the Chinese government so casually gave Bach Long Vi Island to Vietnam, its “comrade and brother”; why in 1959 Mao Zedong told the Indian Communist Party that the “McMahon Line” had no significance to him; why in 1962 the Chinese leadership considered that its border talks with North Korea were an “internal” rather than an “external” matter. The greatest challenge that Mao-era China faced in defining the country’s borders was not external, but internal: the long-term influence of the imperial past on the leadership, together with their aspirations to foment world revolution. At least until the 1970s, the PRC’s understanding of territorial sovereignty was still a work in progress; the country’s leaders did not see China as a modern nation-state. Consequently, the PRC failed also to treat its neighbours as modern nation-states and to establish with them normalised, state-to-state relations.

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