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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 emperors 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, Kyrgystan 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.¹ 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.² Many academics have written about imperial China's management of its borders.³ 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

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.

² See, for example, Liao Xinwen, "Ershi shiji wushi niandai Zhongguo chuli ludi bianjie wenti de yuanze ye banfa" (The principles by and ways in which post-1949 China managed issues relating to its land borders) (paper presented at the conference "China in the 1950s", Shanghai, August 2004); Xu Yan, "Jiefanghou woguo chuli bianjie chongtu weiwei de huigu he zongjie (A summary of China's management of border conflicts and crises since 1949), *Shijie jingji yu zhengzhi* 3 (2005): 16-21; Gao Fei, "Jianping Zhongguo chuli lingtu zhengduan de yuanze ji linian" (A brief appraisal of the principles and concepts behind China's management of territorial conflicts), *Waijiao pinglun* 105 (October 2008): 25-31; Nie Hongyi and Li Bin, "Zhongguo zai lingtu zhengduan zhong de zhengce xuanze" (China's territorial disputes and policy choices), *Guoji zhengzhi xue* 4 (2008): 1-34; Liu Xiaoyuan, "Bianjiang Zhongguo he 1949 nian" (1949 on China's frontiers), *Zhongguo dangdai shi yanjiu* 3 (2011): 117-136; Nie Hongyi, "Ding ding guojiang: xin Zhongguo chengli 60 nian Zhongguo bianjie wenti yanjiu" (Fixing the frontiers: research into China's frontiers since the founding of the PRC) (Beijing: Falu chubanshe, 2011); Zhu Zhaohua, "20 shiji wu liushi niandai xin Zhongguo chuli bianjie zhengduan de yuanze yu shijian" (Resolution of China's border disputes in the 1950s and 1960s: theory and practice), *Suzhou keji xueyuan xuebao* 29.5 (September 2012): 1-8; Qi Pengfei, *Daguo jiangyu: dangdai Zhongguo ludi bianjie wenti shulun* (The territory of a major power: on contemporary China's land border issues) (Beijing: Zhonggong dangshi chubanshe, 2013); Zhang Qingmin, "Zhongguo jieju ludi bianjie jingyan dui jieju haiyang bianjie de qishi" (What China can learn from its land border disputes in resolving maritime border issues), *Waijiao pinglun* 4 (2013): 1-16.

³ Ma Dazheng, "Ershi shiji Zhongguo bianjiang shidi yanjiu" (20th-century research into the historical geography of China's frontiers), *Lishi yanjiu* 4 (1996): 137-151.

and 1960s has been carried out, focusing in particular on China's disputes with the USSR, India and Burma.⁴ Although we can also now access preliminary research into China's disputes and differences with North Korea, Pakistan, Nepal and Afghanistan,⁵ we still lack detailed Chinese-language work on China's border conflicts with Mongolia.⁶ Scholars outside China, meanwhile, have concentrated primarily on analyses of Sino-Soviet and Sino-Indian border conflicts.⁷ However, few non-Chinese studies of the PRC's Cold War border issues have made full use of Chinese archival documents.⁸

⁴ See particularly: Li Danhui, "Tongzhi jia xiongdì: 1959 niandai Zhong-Su bianjie guanxi – dui Zhong-Su bianjie wenti de lishi kaocha (zhi yi)" (Comrades plus brothers: Sino-Soviet border relations in the 1950s – a historical investigation into the Sino-Soviet frontier issue (part 1)), *Guoji lengzhan shi yanjiu* 1 (autumn 2004): 71-102; "Zhengzhi doushi yu dishou: 1960 niandai Zhong-Su bianjie guanxi – dui Zhong-Su bianjie wenti de lishi kaocha (zhi er)" (Political warriors and antagonists: Sino-Soviet border relations in the 1960s – a historical investigation into the Sino-Soviet frontier issue (part 2)), *Shehui kexue* 2 (2007): 146-167; Sergey N. Goncharov and Li Danhui, "E-Zhong guanxi zhong de 'lingtu yaoqiu' he 'bupingdeng tiaoyue'" (Territorial demands' and 'unequal treaties' in Sino-Soviet relations), *Ersbiyi shiji* (October 2004): 110-117; Dai Chaowu, "Zhong-Yin bianjie chongtu yu sulian de fanying he zhengce" (Sino-Indian border clashes and the Soviet policy response), *Lishi yanjiu* 3 (2003): 58-79; Huang Xiangping and Qi Pengfei, "Qianxi Zhongguo zhengfu zai Zhong-Yin bianjie zhengduang zhong de weiji chuli" (Preliminary Analysis of the Chinese government's crisis management in the Sino-Indian border dispute), *Dangdai Zhongguo shi yanjiu* 1 (2006): 79-86; Qiu Meirong, "Weiji waiguozhong de guonei yinsu: yi Zhong-Yin weiji (1959-1962) wei li" (Domestic factors in crisis diplomacy: the case-study of the 1959-62 Sino-Indian crisis), *Guoji guancha* 4 (2007), 27-33; Ma Rongjiu, "Tongxiang chongtu zhilu: lun Yindi bianjie zhengce yu Zhong-Yin lingtu zhengduan" (The road to conflict: on Indian border policy and the Sino-Indian territory dispute), unpublished Ph.D. dissertation (Beijing University, 2008); Zhu Zhaohua, *Zhong-Mian bianjie wenti yanjiu: yi jindai Zhong-Ying bianjie tanpan wei zhongxin* (Research into the Sino-Burmese border question, focusing on Sino-British border negotiations from the late Qing period), (Harbin: Heilongjiang jiaoyu chubanshe, 2007); Zhu Zhaohua, "Xin Zhongguo chuli bianjie zhengduan de dianfan – jiyu Zhong-Mian bianjie de huading" (New China's model for handling border disputes, and its origins in the designation of the Sino-Burmese border), *Tansuo yu zhengming* 4 (2009): 73-76; Fan Hongwei, "Zhong-Mian bianjie wenti de jieju: guocheng yu yingxiang" (The resolution of the Sino-Burmese border question and its implications), *Nanyang wenti yanjiu* 3 (2010): 36-45.

⁵ See Shen Zhihua and Dong Jie, "Zhong-Chao bianji zhengyi de jieju", 34-51; Han Xiaoqing, "Zhongguo yu Bajisitan jieju shuangbian ludi bianjie wenti waijiao tanpan de lishi kaocha" (A historical investigation into the diplomatic negotiations leading up to the resolution of the Sino-Pakistan border issue), *Dangdai Zhongguo shi yanjiu* 6 (2011): 90-98; Zhou Shougao and Qi Pengfei, "Guanyu 1963 nian Zhong-A bianjie tiaoyue tanpan jincheng zhong de 'leng' yu 're' xianxiang yu tanxi – yi Zhongguo waijiaobu xinjin jiemi dangan wei zhu" (The 'cold' and 'hot' phases in the 1963 Sino-Afghanistan border treaty negotiations: an enquiry based on newly declassified documents in China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs), *Nanya yanjiu* 4 (2011): 16-27; Mu Ani, "Chuyi Zhong-Ni bianjie tanpan zhong de jiaodian: Zhufeng wenti de chuli" (Preliminary observations on the focus of Sino-Nepalese negotiations: the Everest problem), *Dangshi yanjiu yu jiaoxue* 1 (2013): 55-63.

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.

⁷ In China, the most influential works on the Sino-Indian border dispute are Neville Maxwell, *India's China War* (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1972) and Gupta Karunakar, *The Hidden History of the Sino-Indian Frontier* (Calcutta: Minerva Associates, 1974). Other important publications include: Allen S. Whiting, *The Chinese Calculus of Deterrence: India and Indochina* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1975); Steven A. Hoffman, *India and the China Crisis* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); S. Mahmud Ali, *Cold War in the High Himalayas: The USA, China and South Asia in the 1950s* (Richmond: Curzon, 1999); John W. Garver, *Protracted Contest: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Twentieth Century* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001); Gautam Das, *China-Tibet-India: The 1962 War and the Strategic Military Future* (New Delhi: Har-Anand Publications PVT LTD, 2009). For Russian scholarship on the history of Sino-Soviet border disputes, see: B. I. Tkachenko, *Rossia – Kitai: vostochnaia granitsa v dokumentakh i faktakh* (Russia – China: The eastern border in documents and facts) (Vladivostok: Ussuri, 1999); Iu. M. Galenovich, *Rossia and 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.

E. D. Stepanov, *Granitsy Kitaia, Istoriia formirovaniia* (The borders of China: a history of formation) (Moskva: Pamiatniki istoricheskoi mysli, 2001).

⁸ Probably the best work in recent years by an Anglophone scholar is M. Taylor Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation: Cooperation and Conflict in China's Territorial Disputes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

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 minzu*).⁹ 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

⁹ See Suisheng Zhao, *A Nation-state by Construction: Dynamics of Modern Chinese Nationalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004) on the emergence of modern Chinese nationalism.

the Republic of China subscribed to the modern theory of national territorial sovereignty, therefore, its government was unable fully to realize this concept.¹⁰

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.

¹⁰ For further discussion on the above, see: Zhong Hongnian, "Qingdai fanshu guanning de bianhua yu Zhongguo jiangtu de bianqian" (The concept of vassaldom during the Qing dynasty and the transformation of China's frontiers), *Qingshi yanjiu* 4 (2006): 17-27; Bi Aonan, "Lishi yujing zhong de wangchao Zhongguo jiangyu gainian bianxi – yi tianxia, sihai, Zhongguo jiangyu, bantu wei li" (An analysis of imperial China's concept of the frontier in historical context: 'All Under Heaven'; 'The Four Oceans'; 'The Middle Kingdom'; 'Frontier Zones'; 'Territory' as keywords), *Zhongguo bianjiang shidi yanjiu* 16.1 (2006): 1-13; Zheng Wen, "Lun gudai Zhongguo de guojiaguan yu tianxia guan: bianjing yu bianjie xingcheng de lishi zuobiao" (Ancient China's concept of state and empire: the historical coordinates of China's borders), *Zhongguo bianjiang shidi yanjiu* 17.3 (2007): 16-23; Liu Xiaoyuan, "Zhongguo de minzu, bianjiang wenti ji qi lingtu shuxing de jindai zhuanxing" (China's national and border issues, and the modern transformation of its territoriality), in Li Xiaobing and Tian Xiansheng eds., *Xifang shixue qianyan yanjiu pingxi* (Research into the frontiers of Western historiography) (Shanghai: Shanghai cishu chubanshe, 2008), 1-23; Liu Xiaoyuan, "Chongsu Zhongguo xingzhuang: er zhan qijian Meiguo zhanlue siwei yu Zhongguo shaoshu minzu bianjiang" (Reconstructing China's outlines: American strategy between the World Wars and China's frontier national minorities), *Lishi jiaoxue wenti* 5 (2010): 15-20; Feng Jianyong, "Goumian minzu guojia: xinhai geming qianhou de Zhongguo bianjiang" (Constructing a nation-state: China's frontiers before and after the 1911 Revolution), *Zhongguo bianjiang shidi yanjiu* 21.3 (2011): 63-72; Li Dalong, "Shilun Zhongguo jiangyu xingcheng he fazhan de fenqi he tedian" (Phases and features of the development of China's frontiers), *Zhongguo bianjiang shidi yanjiu* 21.3 (2011): 22-32; Liu Xiaoyuan, "Bianjiang Zhongguo"; Zhu Zhaohua, "20 shiji wu liushi niandai xin Zhongguo chuli bianjie zhengduan de yuanze yu shijian," 1-8.

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."¹¹ 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.¹² 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

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 *Xuanchuan tongxun* 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.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.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.¹⁵

When the early People's Republic of China *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.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

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”.

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, *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.

¹⁵ In 1920, the Soviet Union determined its border with Finland; in 1921, it signed a border treaty with Turkey. See *Lingtu bianjie shiwu guoji tiaoyue he falü huibian* (Compilation of international treaties and laws regarding territorial and border affairs) (Beijing: Shiji zhishi chubanshe, 2006), 88-96, 12-16.

¹⁶ *Zhou Enlai waijiao wenxuan* (Zhou Enlai's selected diplomatic works) (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 1990), 123-124.

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.”¹⁷

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.

¹⁸ See Liu Jinjie, “Zhong-Mian bianji zhong de ‘Maikemahongxian’ wenti ji qi jiejué” (The problem of the McMahon Line within the Sino-Burmese border, and its resolution), *Dangdai Zhongguo shi yanjiu* 1 (2006): 91; Feng Yue and Qi Pengfei, “Zhong-Mian bianjie tanpan shulüe” (Summary of Sino-Burmese border negotiations), *Hunan keji daxue xuebao* 9.6 (2006): 55-60.

¹⁹ “Yili Foreign Affairs Office Report on a Survey of the Sino-Soviet Border in the Yili Region,” 24 September 1960, Yili Prefectural Archives, 11/1/134: 3-14.

²⁰ Yao Zhongming et al., “Zhou Enlai zongli jiejué Zhong-Mian bianjie wenti de huihuang yeji (Zhou Enlai’s glorious record in resolving the China-Burma border question) in Pei Xianzhang ed., *Yanjiu Zhou Enlai – waijiao sixiang yu shijian* (Research on Zhou Enlai: foreign policy philosophy and practice) (Beijing: Shijie zhishi chubanshe, 1989), 95.

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: Zhongyan 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": 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.²⁵

On 8 August, the State Council instructed each frontier province to organise a Borders Sub-Committee, responsible for all local work on border issues.²⁶ 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.²⁷

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.

²⁵ “Ministry of Foreign Affairs Report on the Borders Committee’s Work”, 16 July 1958, Guangxi Autonomous Region Archives, X50/2/290, 5-10.

²⁶ “State Council Circular on the Organisation of Border Work”, 8 August 1958, Guangxi Autonomous Region Archive, X50/2/290, 4.

²⁷ “Central Party Committee Directive on Intensifying Border Work”, 13 December 1958, Guangxi Autonomous Region Archive, X50/2/258, 37-38; *Zhou Enlai nianpu* Volume 2, 194.

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.²⁸ 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".²⁹

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,

²⁸ See Yang Gongsu, "Zhong-Yin bianjie wenti de lishi zhenxiang" (The historical reality behind the Sino-Indian border issue), *Zhongguo bianjiang shi di yanjiu baogao* 4 (May 1989): 1-13; Dai Chaowu, *Zhongguo yu Yindu de guanxi (1950-1965): jiyu duoguo jiemi dang'an de yanjiu* (Sino-Indian Relations (1950-1965): Research Drawn from International Declassified Archives) (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, forthcoming).

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.

³¹ "Summary and Plan of Work for the State Council's Border Committee (1959-60)", 14 March 1960, Guangxi Autonomous Region Archives, X50/3/37, 85-89.

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);

³² See Niu Jun, “1962: Zhongguo duiwai zhengce ‘zuo’ zhuan de qianye” (1962: the eve of China’s ‘left turn’ in foreign policy), *Lishi yanjiu* 3 (2003): 23-40; Lin Yunhui, *Wutuobang yundong: cong dayuejin dao dajihuang (1958-61)* (A utopian movement: from the Great Leap Forward to the Great Famine (1958-61)) (Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2008); Chen Jian, “Geming yu weiji de niandai: dayuejin he Zhongguo duiwai zhengce de gemingxing zhuanbian” (In an age of revolution and crisis: the Great Leap Forward and the revolutionary turn in China’s foreign policy) *Lengzhan guoji shi yanjiu* 7 (Winter 2008): 45-96; Shen Zhihua ed., *Zhong-Su guanxi shigang: 1917-1991 nian Zhong-Su guanxi ruogan wenti zai tantao* (An outline of Sino-Soviet relations: an investigation into various problems in Sino-Soviet relations 1917-1991) (Beijing: Shehuikexue wenxian chubanshe, 2011), 206-374. On the subject of the CCP’s early efforts to instigate Asian revolution and its abandonment of its policy of exporting revolution in 1954-1955, see Shen Zhihua, “Mao Zedong yu dongfang qingbaoju – Yazhou geming zhudaoquan de zhuanji” (Mao Zedong and the Eastern Intelligence Bureau: the transfer of leadership in the Asian revolution), *Huadong shifan daxue xuebao* 6 (2011): 27-37.

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.³³

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.³⁴ 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 1967.³⁵ 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.³⁶ This was not an outcome that reflected a spirit of mutual compromise. Again, China’s stance was influenced by anxiety

³³ See *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo bianjie shiwu tiaoyueji*, *Zhong-Mian juan* (Collected border treaties of the PRC: China and Burma), 1-13; United Front Department ed., *Lingxun* 13 (1960), 1-5; 14 (1960), 5-7; *Waishi dongtai* 57 (1960), 10-11; Wang Shilu, “Zhong-Mian bianjie tiaoyue moshi dui jiejie Zhong-Yin bianjie wenti de yingxiang” (The form of the Sino-Burmese border treaty and its influence on the Sino-Indian border issue), *Zhongguo bianjiang shi di yanjiu baogao* 3-4 (1993): 37-48; Zhu Zhaohua, *Zhong-Mian bianjie wenti yanjiu*, 275-286 and “Xin Zhongguo chuli bianjie zhengduan de dianfan”: 73-76; Chen Saixi, “Lun zhongguo jiejie bianjie zhengduan de moshi” (On China’s model for resolving border disputes), *Guangdong waiyu waimao daxue xuebao* 20.3 (May 2009): 46-50; Fan Hongwei, “Zhong-Mian bianjie wenti de jiejie,” 36-45; Fravel, *Strong Borders*, 90, 329-330.

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

³⁵ Wang Taiping ed., *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo waijiaoshi (1957-69)* (Diplomatic History of the PRC, 1957-69) Volume 2 (Beijing: Shiji zhishi chubanshe, 1998), 54-56.

³⁶ See *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo bianjie shiwu tiaoyueji*, *Zhong-Ni juan* (Collected border treaties of the PRC: China and Nepal), 1; *Waishi dongtai* 14 (1960), 1-5; 62 (1960), 2-3; 68 (1960) 1; *Mao Zedong waijiao wenxuan* (Selections of Mao Zedong’s diplomatic writings) (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe and Shijie zhishi chubanshe, 1994), 395-397; *Zhou Enlai nianpu* Volume 2, 293-294; Qi Pengfei, “Zhong-Ni bianjie tanpan de lishi jincheng he jiben jingyan” (The history and lessons of China’s border negotiations with Nepal) *Dangdai zhongguoshi yanjiu* 2 (2011): 90-98; Fravel, *Strong Borders*, 328-329.

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.”³⁷

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.³⁸ 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.”³⁹

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).⁴⁰ 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.”⁴¹ But the PRC was to make even greater concessions on its northern borders with North Korea and Mongolia.

³⁷ Fravel, *Strong Borders*, 91-92.

³⁸ See *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo bianjie shiwu tiaoyueji, Zhong-A, Zhong-Ba juan* (Collected border treaties of the PRC: China, and Afghanistan and Pakistan), 21-38; *Waishi dongtai* 9 (1960), 6-7; 33 (1960), 9-10; Wang, *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo waijiaoshi* Volume 2, 102-104; Wang, “Zhong-Mian bianjie tiaoyue”; Han Xiaoqing, “Zhongguo yu Bajisitan”, 91-99; Fravel, *Strong Borders*, 116-117, 325-326.

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 under-prepared 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.⁴² 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.⁴³

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).⁴⁴ In

⁴² 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.

⁴³ 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 jie jue", 34-51; Fravel, *Strong Borders*, 321-322.

⁴⁴ Fravel, *Strong Borders*, 112.

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 Khrushchev'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 Tsendenbal sat down to an explosive evening of talks with Zhou Enlai. When Zhou mentioned the Sino-Soviet Split, Tsendenbal declared his unswerving support for the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. After the meeting, Tsendenbal openly told his

⁴⁵ See *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo bianjie shiwu tiaoyueji, Zhong-Meng juan* (Collected Border Treaties of the PRC: China and Mongolia), 1-2, 152-198; "Ministry of Foreign Affairs Report on Border Negotiations with the Mongolian government," 31 December 1957, Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region Archives, 252/1/51, 6-11; Luo Guibo's speech at the Second Foreign Affairs Work Conference, 4 March 1959, Guangxi Archives, X50/3/6, 99-120; "Views of the Aletai Prefectural Commissioner's Office on the Checking of the Sino-Mongolian Border and the Surveying of the Sino-Soviet Border," 7 June 1959, Xinjiang Yili Hasake Autonomous Prefectural Archives, 11/1/74, 27-28; Jiangsu Provincial Archives, 3124-0139, 5-22; *Waishi dongtai* 76 (1959): 3-4; 87 (1959): 3-4; Xinjiang Weiwuer Autonomous Region Gazetteer Editorial Committee, *Xinjiang tongzhi: waishizhi* (Xinjiang Gazetteer: foreign affairs section) (Urumqi: Xinjiang renmin chubanshe, 1995), 233-236, 266-268; Wang, *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo waijiaoshi* Volume 2, 100-102; *Aletai diquzhi* (Altay Prefecture Gazetteer) (Urumqi: Xinjiang renmin chubanshe, 2004), 945-947; *Nei Menggu zizhiquzhi: waishizhi* (Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region Gazetteer: foreign affairs section) (Hohhot: Yuanfang chubanshe, 2009), 109-110; Fravel, *Strong Borders*, 110-112.

⁴⁶ Bernd Schaefer, "North Korean 'Adventurism' and China's Long Shadow, 1966-1972", *CWTHP Working Paper* 44 (October 2004): 2-3; Chang Xiaohu, "'Zhuyi' yu 'anquan' zhi zheng: liushiniandai Chaoxian yu Zhong-Su guanxi de yanbian" (The struggle between 'isms' and 'security': the evolution of Korean and Sino-Soviet relations through the 1960s), *Waijiao pinglun* 2 (2009): 21-35; Shimotomai Nobuo, "Kim Il Sung's Balancing Act between Moscow and Beijing, 1956-1972," in Tsuyoshi Hasegawa ed., *The Cold War in East Asia, 1945-1991* (Washington and Stanford: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Stanford University Press, 2011), 122-151.

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.

⁴⁸ See *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo bianjie shiwu tiaoyueji*, *Zhong-Yin*, *Zhong-Bu juan* (Collected Border Treaties of the PRC: China, and India and Bhutan), 3-4, 51-64; "Propaganda Outline on the Sino-Indian Border Clash and the Problem of Sino-Indian Relations," October 1962, Guangxi Zhuang Nationality Autonomous Region Archives, X1/32/12, 11-29; *Waisi dongtai* 87 (1959), 2-3, and 26 (1960) 3-4; *Zhou Enlai nianpu* Volume 2, 312; Xu Yan, "Jiefanghou woguo chuli bianjie chongtu," 16-21.

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 Khrushchev. 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".

⁵¹ Zhang Xiangshan, "Zhong-Ri fujiào tanpan huigu" (A review of the resumption of Sino-Japanese diplomatic relations), *Riben xuekan* 1 (1998): 47; *Deng Xiaoping nianpu (1975-1997)* (Chronology of Deng Xiaoping (1975-1997)) (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 2004), 355; Deng Xiaoping, *Deng Xiaoping wenxuan* (Selected works of Deng Xiaoping) Volume 3 (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1993), 49.

⁵² See *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo bianjie shiwu tiaoyueji*, *Zhong-Yin*, *Zhong-Bu juan*, 51-54, 74-82, 124-126.

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.⁵³

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-sung] 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”.⁵⁴

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

⁵³ Mao Tsetung, *Poems* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1976), 20-21.

⁵⁴ 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.⁵⁵

Such remarks recall the open-handed attitude of Chinese emperors to their frontier territories. In 1728, the King of Annam 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 Annam 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 Annam, 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 Annam.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.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.

⁵⁵ Minutes of Mao’s conversation with the Indian Communist Party delegation, 13 December 1967, accessed through private archival collection.

⁵⁶ Wang Zhichun, *Qingchao rouyuanji* (A chronicle of the Qing dynasty’s policy of cherishing distant lands) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1989), 68-69.

⁵⁷ Vladimir Lenin, *The State and Revolution*, at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/staterev/ch01.htm> (accessed 23 January 2014).

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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