



**TEACHING BITTER LESSONS: CHINA'S USE OF FORCE IN
TERRITORIAL DISPUTES 1962-1988**

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LtCol Lawrence Sullivan, USAF

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APPROVAL

The undersigned certify that this thesis meets master's-level standards of research, argumentation, and expression.

James W. Forsyth, Jr., PhD (Date)

James M. Tucci, PhD (Date)

DISCLAIMER

The conclusions and opinions expressed in this document are those of the author. They do not reflect the official position of the US Government, Department of Defense, the United States Air Force, or Air University.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Larry Sullivan graduated from the US Air Force Academy in 1999. He has been stationed in Osan AB, Eielson AFB, Misawa AB, and Nellis AFB as an F-16 Pilot. He has flown combat missions in Iraq and Afghanistan and is a graduate of and former instructor at the USAF Weapons School.

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the Chinese decision to employ force in territorial disputes using the 1962 Sino-Indo War, the 1969 Sino-Soviet border conflict, and the Chinese conflicts with Vietnam in 1974, 1979, and 1988 as case studies. Six observations about the Chinese decision to use force are drawn from these cases: 1) Fear of exploitation following domestic unrest, 2) Perceived decline in bargaining power over a disputed territory, 3) Conclusion that with time matters would continue to worsen, 4) The perceived need to deter future aggression and exploitation by changing the adversary's perception through a demonstration of Chinese strength, 5) Deliberate and reasonable risk assessment and risk mitigation efforts through close coordination of political and military objectives, and 6) The dual roles for the use of force; to deliver a psychological shock and to eliminate the threat to Chinese bargaining power along the contested border.

The central claim of this thesis is that China's stated intention of "teaching a bitter lesson" to its adversaries in these disputes accurately captures China's desire to align its neighbors' perceptions of China's strength with China's self-perception. China also acted to thwart Soviet influence in Chinese border states by testing alliances with military action. The case studies suggest that in the effort to teach a lesson, China demonstrated close coordination between political and military objectives. Chinese decisions for the use of force have been rational, risk-aware, and made in response to a changing security environment as influenced by a Chinese appreciation of its history. In each case, China acknowledged the threat of escalation, avoided it when able, and attempted to control escalation when it could not be avoided through careful preparation.

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Introduction

With a rising China, scholars and strategists are beginning to think seriously about what role China will play in the world. Will China be a supporter of the current international order, a spoiler, or a shirker? The future is uncertain, but China's behavior in past crises, particularly China's decision to use force, may inform the future.

This thesis examines the history of China's territorial disputes. It addresses the following three questions: What led China to use force in territorial conflicts? How did the Chinese fight these wars? Might China's use of force in previous territorial disputes inform the future?

This thesis examines Chinese decision-making and military action in the 1962 Indo-Sino War, the 1969 Sino-Soviet border dispute, and the Sino-Vietnamese conflicts of 1974, 1979, and 1988. It will identify a pattern of behavior and deduce a strategy for crisis-resolution. These cases cover the Chinese use of force to settle territorial disputes with foreign nations and for reasons of brevity and clarity exclude a study of the Chinese use of force on behalf of an ally, within its borders, or against its own people.

Previewing the Argument

The central claim advanced here is that China's stated intention of "teaching a bitter lesson" to its adversaries in these border disputes accurately captures China's desire to align its neighbors' perceptions of China's strength with how China sees itself. The case studies suggest that in the effort to teach a lesson, China demonstrates close coordination between political and military objectives. Generally, Chinese decisions for the use of force have been rational, risk-aware, and made in response to a changing security environment as influenced by a Chinese appreciation of its history. In each case China acknowledged the threat of escalation, avoided it when able, attempted to control it when it could not be avoided, all through careful preparation. China planned to terminate the conflicts as soon as an acceptable, pre-determined political result was achieved.

The cases presented here provide evidence in support of the central claim. In nearly all cases, Chinese behavior demonstrated the following traits:

1) Fear of exploitation following domestic unrest, 2) Perceived decline in bargaining power over a disputed territory, 3) Conclusion that with time matters would continue to worsen, 4) The perceived need to deter future aggression and exploitation by changing the adversary's perception through a demonstration of Chinese strength, 5) Deliberate and reasonable risk assessment and risk mitigation efforts through close coordination of political and military objectives, and 6) The dual roles for the use of force; to deliver a psychological shock and to eliminate the threat to Chinese bargaining power along the contested border.

The accuracy of the assessments China has made about its own strength and the strength of its adversaries has been the primary factor in the success of their use of force.

Scope of Research

This thesis does not examine the Chinese use of force in Korea. During the Korean war China did not commit troops to settle a territorial dispute but to fight alongside an ally and check American power in Asia. Although there are disputed regions on the Chinese-North Korean border, neither side has resorted to the use of force.¹

This thesis does not look at China's consideration for the use of force in Hong Kong, Macao, or Taiwan. These cases are excluded because the people living there consider themselves Chinese, and the issue is one of legitimate governance instead of territory or nationality. The case studies in this thesis instead focus on conflicts pitting Chinese interests against those of ethnically and nationally distinct adversaries such as India, the Soviet Union, and Vietnam.

Literature Survey

The research for these case studies relied primarily on western scholarship and accounts of these conflicts. Maxwell Neville's "India's China War" provided a foundation for the first case study. Allen Whiting's "The Calculus of Chinese Deterrence" was relied on throughout the thesis, and

¹ Daniel Gomà, "The Chinese-Korean Border Issue: An Analysis of a Contested Frontier," *Asian Survey* 46, no. 6 (December 1, 2006): 867, doi:10.1525/as.2006.46.6.867.

Edward O'Dowd's "Military Strategy in the Third Indochina War: The Last Maoist War" was the starting point for the final case study. Peter Fravel's 2008 book: "Strong Borders, Secure Nation: Cooperation and Conflict in China's Territorial Disputes" established a broad overview of the Chinese use of force and an analytical starting point for the conclusions drawn in this thesis. His analysis of relative bargain position and claim strength was the genesis of two of this thesis's key observations. Additional sources, specifically the collective works of John Garver, provided added context for these conflicts, as did Henry Kissinger's writing about China and geo-politics.

Overview

Chapter 1 briefly describes the history of Chinese land and sea borders, and the transition from the era of kingdoms, colonial rule, and nation-states. This history still influences China and helps explain its tendency to identify a dispute as a crisis sooner than others might. Chapter 2 examines the Sino-Indo War fought over two uninhabited regions of the Himalayan range from 1959 to 1962. China's success in this conflict serves as a template for future border disputes. Chapter 3 examines the Sino-Soviet Border war of 1969, when China ambushed a Soviet patrol on a small, remote island in the Ussuri River east of Manchuria. This conflict resulted in Chinese acquiescence to Soviet terms following nuclear coercion. Chapter 4 will present a case study of the Sino-Vietnamese territorial conflicts of 1974, 1979, and 1988. This chapter is divided into three sections, focusing on the disputed Paracel Islands, the major land war in northern Vietnam, and the conflict over the Spratly Islands. Although these disputes have different characteristics, the Chinese decision to use force in each one share elements with the other case studies. Chapter 5 will synthesize these cases, identify common elements, and describe a pattern of conflict in the Chinese decision to use force over territorial claims.

Chapter 1

History of Chinese Land Borders and Sea Claims

Pre-Colonial Asia

China's border conflicts are rooted in the transition from kingdom to colonial rule, and then from colonial rule to an independent nation state. The value of clearly defined borders was different in each of these eras, as were the motivations for establishing borders in the first place. China had reached its greatest size around 1820 during the rule of the Qing Dynasty, which held vast tracts of territory that lie within the modern boundaries of its neighbors. Much of China's frontier territory was subsequently lost to European and Japanese imperial expansion during the Century of Shame and Humiliation through unequal treaties.¹ Additionally, outlying regions that were tributary states to the Qing gained a large measure of autonomy as Chinese influence diminished along the frontier, Tibet being the key example of this.² China's power collapsed in Central Asia when the Qing dynasty collapsed in the 1911 Xinhai Revolution, opening the way for colonial powers and neighboring kingdoms to exploit this weakness by seizing Chinese territory.³

Pre-colonial kingdoms, in China and in what is current-day India, did not mark their boundaries per se. The geographical transition from one kingdom to the next was defined by a preponderance of power and influence over the local population. This could be better understood as shades of influence versus clear lines on a map or markers on the ground. Geographic boundaries, such as the Himalayan mountain range, also acted as barriers and political boundaries. In the case of the Sino-Indo War of 1962, the contested lands were unoccupied high-mountain valleys incapable of sustaining agriculture or human populations, and had been regarded as frontier areas by kingdoms before the arrival of European powers. In contrast to Britain's logic of modern empire and its conceptions of sovereignty, China was a traditional

¹ J. J. Zhang, "The Great Game: Imperial Origins of the 1962 Sino-Indian War," accessed January 24, 2013, <http://www.dukenexus.org/382/the-great-game-imperial-origins-of-the-1962-sino-indian-war/>.

² Zhang, "The Great Game."

³ Steven A. Hoffmann, *India and the China Crisis* (University of California Press, 1990), 38.

empire, comfortable with loosely defined frontiers that faded into “no-man’s land.”⁴ That contrast was to come into stark relief when China suffered through a period of domestic turmoil and the collapse of the Qing Dynasty, whereupon outside powers encroached on Chinese affairs.

Colonial Influence

China’s internal weakness made it vulnerable to external pressures.⁵ China’s century of shame and humiliation, beginning with the Opium War of 1840, was an unbroken record of foreign incursion and invasion that nibbled away at the periphery of the Middle Kingdom from all sides. Beginning with the 1842 Treaty of Nanjing, signed after the Qing defeat in the Opium War with Britain, China was forced to sign a series of unequal treaties with Western powers. Britain, France, Russia, Germany, and later Japan all claimed spheres of influence on Chinese soil.⁶ No area, coastal or inland, was safe from foreign penetration and control, whether by leased concessions forced on China with gunboats, by subversion of non-Chinese peoples in Mongolia, Sinkiang, and Tibet, or by outright attack as in the case of Manchuria.⁷

In India, Great Britain was occupied with playing the “Great Game” versus its most powerful colonial rival in the region, Russia.⁸ British expansion and demarcation of borders were done with an eye toward thwarting Russian influence. The idea of a “demarcated frontier is itself an essentially modern conception, and finds little or no place in the ancient world...demarcation has never taken place in Asiatic countries except under European pressure.”⁹ Neville Maxwell notes, in his history of the Sino-Indo conflict, the logic of power drives empires to expand into their frontiers until they meet the resistance of a strong neighbor or reach a physical barrier.¹⁰ “A constant and basic British aim

⁴ Neville Maxwell, *India’s China War* (Pantheon Books, 1970), 21.

⁵ Zhang, “The Great Game.”

⁶ Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, 1st Paperback (W. W. Norton & Company, 1991), 178.

⁷ Allen Sues Whiting, *The Chinese Calculus of Deterrence: India and Indochina* (University of Michigan Press, 1975), 244.

⁸ Peter Hopkirk, *The Great Game: The Struggle for Empire in Central Asia* (Kodansha International, 1994).

⁹ Zhang, “The Great Game.”

¹⁰ Maxwell, *India’s China War*, 19.

developed: to keep the Russians as far as possible from the plains of India.”¹¹ Qing policy makers were initially unwilling to cooperate with the British desire to mark borders, and were suspicious of British attempts to create a linear boundary between them.¹²

The fact that local political entities had little influence in the boundary-making process during periods of colonial rule only made matters worse after the colonial powers left. Local disputes were never settled and would become a source of friction between China and India when both were reborn as modern nation states in the 1940s.¹³ The British, preoccupied with immediate calculations of geo-political security in the 19th century, failed to assess the local impact of their policies. British power could be leveraged across the globe to protect its interests, and border decisions were based on global calculations versus local considerations. This would become a source of contention in later disputes when China regained control over Tibet, and elsewhere along the border, as the focus returned to local concerns.¹⁴ India had a similar experience with regard to its borders as the British Empire withdrew.

Civil War and Liberation

India was no longer a Dominion of the crown after the Constitution of India Came into force in 1950. India’s independence dramatically altered its view of borders. “The boundaries of India ceased to be the pawns of the British and their ‘Great Games’ with their imperial rivals, and became the cell walls of a new national identity...henceforth they enclosed the sacred soil of the motherland.”¹⁵

The approach to borders in China changed when the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) emerged victorious from the Chinese Civil War in 1949 and began consolidating their hold of Chinese territory. In China as in India, nationalism drove the desire to place former border territories under firm central control. These two nations faced a common task as they came into existence in the middle of the century: “completion of the conversion of their

¹¹ Maxwell, *India’s China War*, 20.

¹² Maxwell, *India’s China War*, 21.

¹³ Zhang, “The Great Game.”

¹⁴ Zhang, “The Great Game.”

¹⁵ Maxwell, *India’s China War*, 67.

frontiers into boundaries. That was in fact among the first formal expressions of their new identity as modern states.”¹⁶ As pre-modern states, India and China could exist within frontiers. There were not lines but areas, zones of transition between state powers. However, modern states need demarcated boundaries.¹⁷

The People’s Republic of China (PRC) paid specific interest to the border areas and made efforts to gain control of buffer states. Chinese influence and control of Tibet, periodically an independent kingdom, fluctuated between the fall of the Qing and the emergence of the PRC. Following the Chinese Civil War, the PRC was not content with mere suzerainty over Tibet, an arrangement that was much desired by India, but instead embarked on a campaign to “peacefully liberate” Tibet in 1950.¹⁸ The People’s Liberation Army won a decisive victory over Tibetan forces in 1950 and secured the capitol Lhasa. Tibet appealed to the UN for help, but, with no international backing and the peaceful conduct of Chinese troops toward Tibetan civilians, the Tibetan government was induced to enter into negotiations with the PRC and sign an agreement declaring Tibet to be a part of China.¹⁹ Tibet, and its status as either an independent buffer state or a province of China, was to play a role in the Sino-Indo war of 1962.

China faced a similar challenge on its border with Russia. Newly powerful following the resolution of the civil war, the PRC declared that treaties signed during the Chinese century of shame were unfair and no longer valid. Russia did not agree, and this difference of opinion would lead, in part, to the conflict in 1969. The entire history of the PRC has been marked by the effort to reassert power last wielded during the dynastic period. Reconciling losses to neighbors that profited from China’s earlier weakness, and preventing further losses after the civil war, became the root causes for the conflicts examined in this thesis.

In addition to China and India, the newly independent states of Vietnam, the Philippines and Brunei also desired to establish legitimacy by enforcing claims on disputed territory. Vietnam’s transition from civil war to unity under

¹⁶ Neville Maxwell, “Sino-Indian Border Dispute Reconsidered,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 34, no. 15 (April 1999): 906.

¹⁷ Maxwell, “Sino-Indian Border Dispute Reconsidered,” 905.

¹⁸ Zhang, “The Great Game.”

¹⁹ Hoffmann, *India and the China Crisis*.

the communist north in 1975 affected the timing of Chinese actions regarding disputed islands and territory. Just as China maneuvered to assert influence in the region following the resolution of its civil war, Vietnam looked to solidify claims to territory it saw as its own. The proximity of these two states, and the disputed territory common to each resulted in the use of force in 1974, 1979, and 1988.

China's perspective during the Indo-Sino war of 1962, the Sino-Soviet war of 1969, and the various conflicts with Vietnam from 1974 to 1988 was one of a former great power emerging from a century of shame and exploitation by its neighbors. The Chinese knew their own history, and memories of discreditable concessions following domestic turmoil influenced their perception in each of these conflicts. These territorial disputes resulted from Chinese efforts to prevent a repeat of the past instead of efforts to reclaim lost ground. This theme will be revisited in the following case studies.

Chapter 2

The Sino-Indo War

The major battles in the Sino-Indo War took place from October 20 to November 21, 1962. The fighting was concentrated in two geographically separated areas in the Himalayan range. The “Western Sector” was located near the Kashmir region of India, west of Nepal, on a 14,000 foot high desert plateau called Aksai Chin. The “Easter Sector” spanned the Sino-Indo border in a similarly remote region of the Himalayas between Bhutan and Burma the Indians called the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA, Reference maps in Appendix A).

The border dispute dated back to the transition of minor autonomous kingdoms to direct British colonial rule in the 19th century. Contributing to the geographic confusion were legacy treaties, questionable survey techniques and disparities between lines on a map and the associated narrative describing the border relative to terrain features. The British, at times, plotted the border in the Western Sector in 11 different locations.¹ In the lead-up to the major conflict of 1962, each side claimed as legitimate the most beneficial interpretation. Generally speaking, India occupied the majority of the contested land in the east, while China occupied the majority of the land in the west. These inhospitable tracts of land are incapable of supporting agriculture or sustaining an indigenous population. As a result, the only people in the area were soldiers manning remote outposts, or the forces sent to displace them.

This case study examines the Sino-Indo War of 1962 by first looking at the details of the military engagement between the two combatants. Following that, the case study will shift focus and examine the domestic and international political context of the war and then describe the history of the bilateral relationship between China and India. Finally, the case study will shift to the Chinese strategy and risk mitigation efforts, followed by an overall analysis of Chinese behavior during the war.

The Military Engagement

¹ Neville Maxwell, “China and India: The Un-Negotiated Dispute,” *The China Quarterly* no. 43 (July 1, 1970): 47–80, doi:10.2307/652082.

On October 16 1962, after determining Indian provocations were no longer tolerable, the Chinese decided to change their strategy and proceed with a defensive counterattack, comprised of approximately 20,000 troops, to destroy the Indian forces that were occupying the contested territory through a quick decisive battle.² The Chinese initiated a withering artillery barrage on October 20 followed by an infantry assault against Indian positions. The first Indian stronghold in the Eastern Sector was overwhelmed and captured in only 80 minutes.³ After four days of intense fighting, the Chinese had achieved all of their initial military objectives in both sectors and voluntarily halted their advance for three weeks.

From November 16-18, the Chinese began the second major offensive in both sectors. Three days later, the Indian military capability in the east was eliminated and the Chinese were in a position to press deep into India's territory, effectively unopposed. A similar advance was conducted in the Western Sector, and by November 20 all six major Indian strongholds were eliminated as Chinese forces advanced to the limits of their broadest territorial claim.⁴ China had the ability to realize and enforce whatever boundary it wanted, or continue to seize territory deep into India.⁵ On November 21, China surprised India by announcing a unilateral cease-fire and its intention to withdraw from all territory that it had seized during the fighting, as well as from all the territory it had previously occupied, pulling back 20 kilometers behind the 1959 line of control.⁶ By the time the Chinese stopped fighting, 722 Chinese and 4,885 Indian soldiers had been killed and virtually no territory had exchanged hands.⁷

Why would China voluntarily cede its gains and give up its operational advantage? What political objectives did this military action support?

² Xu Yan, *Zhong Yin Bianjie Zhi Zhan Lishi Zhenxiang (The Historic Truth of the Sino-Indian Border War)*, trans. John W. Cheng Feng (Hong Kong: Tian Di Books, 1993), 87.

³ Xu Yan, *Zhong Yin Bianjie Zhi Zhan Lishi Zhenxiang (The Historic Truth of the Sino-Indian Border War)*, 134–139.

⁴ Xu Yan, *Zhong Yin Bianjie Zhi Zhan Lishi Zhenxiang (The Historic Truth of the Sino-Indian Border War)*, 180–185.

⁵ Thomas W. Robinson, "The Sino-Soviet Border Conflicts of 1969," in *Chinese Warfighting: The PLA Experience Since 1949*, by Mark A Ryan, David Michael Finkelstein, and Michael A McDevitt (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2003), 187.

⁶ Robinson, "The Sino-Soviet Border Conflicts of 1969," 173–197.

⁷ Robinson, "The Sino-Soviet Border Conflicts of 1969," 173–197.

Domestic Political Context in China

In 1958, China began its Great Leap Forward. The Great Leap Forward was designed by Mao to transition China from an agrarian society to a collectivist communist nation. It led to one of the worst famines in human history.⁸ This internal crisis was accompanied by the political crisis of the Sino-Soviet split, China's distancing itself from a Soviet Union that it saw as expansionist, meddling, and ideologically corrupt.⁹ The split meant the withdrawal of all Soviet economic assistance in 1960, adding to the hardship imposed by the famine. China also suffered through a series of natural disasters in the same period.¹⁰

Despite all of this, the regime's hold on power was relatively secure, but external challenges to Chinese sovereign control of territory could delegitimize the leadership. The beliefs regarding Chinese sovereignty over its frontiers stemmed from the ancient notion of the Mandate of Heaven. Under this mandate, leaders were divinely selected but could be removed based on a lack of virtue or skill in governing the state. Chinese leaders felt the need to protect territory during periods of weakness to validate their claim to the Mandate.¹¹

There is no evidence to suggest that the Chinese leadership instigated this border conflict in order to distract the population from their domestic troubles and marshal nationalism and support for the government while facing an external threat. The Chinese were, however, keenly attuned to opportunistic motives of their neighbors, and eager to counter advances made on the supposition of Chinese weakness.

⁸ Frank Dikötter, *Mao's Great Famine: The History of China's Most Devastating Catastrophe, 1958-1962* (Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2010), 333.

⁹ Henry Kissinger, *On China* (Penguin, 2011), 183.

¹⁰ Whiting, *The Chinese Calculus of Deterrence*, xxii.

¹¹ Zhang, "The Great Game."

Mindful of the internal crisis, China's leaders perceived India's transition to a more aggressive border policy as an attempt to take advantage of China's domestic weakness.¹² Robert Jervis describes this as cognitive consistency, where actions are placed in the context of the pre-existing relationship, and judged in that light regardless of their objective intent.¹³

A war with India was not in the Chinese interest. China had fought the United States in Korea and faced the US Navy in the Taiwan Strait crises of 1954-1955 and again in 1958. By the early 1960s, China was faced with what it saw as a crescent of encirclement by the United States based on American military alliances stretching from South Korea to Japan, through Okinawa, to Taiwan and the Philippines. China's strategic focus, therefore, was to the east and the Western Pacific, and China could ill-afford to make an enemy of India.¹⁴

Additionally, the Chinese annexation of Tibet in 1950 was still unresolved. After initially securing the country, rebel forces outside the capital of Lhasa regained possession of territory and challenged Chinese control. China remained suspicious of Indian interference in what they saw as a sovereign possession. In mid-1957, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) began covert assistance to rebels in the Kham region of southeastern Tibet.¹⁵ The Chinese interpreted these acts as collaboration between India and the United States to challenge Chinese sovereign control over Tibet. As the crisis reached a crescendo in 1959, the rebels attempted to seize the capitol of Lasha. At that point, China cracked down with an overwhelming military response, forced the Dali Lama into exile, and reasserted control over the region.¹⁶ Following this, and leading into the 1962 border dispute with India, China was particularly sensitive to Indian efforts to establish an independent Tibet as a buffer state between the great Asian powers. The perception of Indian intent, and US involvement in Korea, Taiwan, and now Tibet, contributed to China's perception

¹² M. Taylor Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation: Cooperation and Conflict in China's Territorial Disputes*, Princeton Studies in International History and Politics (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 195.

¹³ Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976), 117.

¹⁴ Robinson, "The Sino-Soviet Border Conflicts of 1969," 179.

¹⁵ John Kenneth Knaus, *Orphans of the Cold War: America and the Tibetan Struggle for Survival* (PublicAffairs, 1999), 155.

¹⁶ Zhang, "The Great Game."

of foreign encirclement and exploitation akin to the injustices China endured a century before.

The Bi-Lateral Relationship between China and India

As China and India emerged from civil war and colonial influence, they began to interact as independent sovereign states. Their uninhabited border gained importance as a state boundary, and the lack of a delineated border became a point of contention. During the 1950s, each side bolstered its military outposts in the area and minor clashes increased in frequency. On August 25, 1959, a squad of Indian troops crossed into the Longju area in the Eastern Sector and opened fire on a team of Chinese frontier guards in a village called Migyitun.¹⁷ After this and another similar small clash, the Chinese government made the unilateral decision to withdraw twenty kilometers and separate its forces from the Indian patrols. China did not desire a confrontation, and made the decision to disengage militarily while continuing diplomatic efforts to resolve the issue. The Indian government did not respond in kind and their troops remained in the forward, contested positions.¹⁸

From the establishment of the PRC in 1949 until 1962, the Chinese premier Zhou Enlai sought to avoid war through diplomacy. Based on myriad threats besides India, China initially desired to resolve the border issue and concentrate on more pressing concerns. Zhou proposed the following compromise a number of times between 1956 and 1960: China would agree that 125,000 square kilometers of the disputed territory in the Eastern Sector should go to India, but that the territory of Aksai Chin, in the west, where China had been constructing a major road between Xinjiang and Tibet, would remain under Chinese control.¹⁹ This provision allowed the current occupants of each contested region to remain in place. It also secured Chinese access to Tibet and the associated influence and control over the rebellious province.

China was willing to accept the McMahon line, established by a British survey in the 19th century, which favored India's claims in the Eastern Sector and concede Chinese claims there to India. By doing this, China believed it was

¹⁷ Robinson, "The Sino-Soviet Border Conflicts of 1969," 177.

¹⁸ Robinson, "The Sino-Soviet Border Conflicts of 1969," 178.

¹⁹ Robinson, "The Sino-Soviet Border Conflicts of 1969," 176.

making a substantial concession that required an Indian *quid pro quo* in Aksai Chin (in the west). But India's Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru "did not agree to barter away the Aksai Chin area, under 'illegal' occupation of China, in return for China giving up its unreasonable claim to Indian territory south of the McMahon Line in the east."²⁰ Such a swap would have given each side possession of the territory already under its control and most important to each nation's security. Nehru rejected the swap proposal and insisted that China abandon its claim in the east *and* withdraw from Aksai Chin in the west.²¹ India took the hard line.

Zhou was shocked at the intransigence of India demonstrated by rejecting the offer of compromise. The Indian counter-demand of voluntary and unilateral withdrawal from all contested areas was viewed as an unnecessary provocation, and initiated a reevaluation of Chinese policy regarding the dispute. Nehru's refusal to open border negotiations with regards to the McMahon line left little room for settling the dispute over the Tawang tract. Maxwell notes, "When such an approach is applied to boundary questions it points the way to armed contention for disputed territory."²²

In addition to refusing Chinese diplomatic proposals, India transitioned to a more aggressive military posture. During early 1960, India developed the Forward Policy, the purpose of which was to change the status quo of the China-India border by placing continuous pressure and forward movement on the Chinese forces along the disputed boundary.²³ This policy was motivated primarily by domestic Indian political pressure to assert sovereign control over the territories and deliver a demonstration of strength aimed at the Chinese. As a part of this policy India deployed an infantry division to the region and established a number of new outposts in each sector.²⁴

Nehru's insistence on pushing the Forward Policy rendered ineffective China's previous policy of very limited use of force and avoidance of military

²⁰ John W. Garver, "China's Decision for War With India in 1962," in *New Directions in the Study of China's Foreign Policy*, ed. A.I. Johnston and R.S. Ross, Political Science (Stanford University Press): China (Stanford University Press, 2006), 104.

²¹ Garver, "China's Decision for War With India in 1962," 104.

²² Maxwell, *India's China War*, 75.

²³ Robinson, "The Sino-Soviet Border Conflicts of 1969," 178.

²⁴ Maxwell, *India's China War*, 255.

engagements.²⁵ The government position up to this point was resolution of the border disputes through peaceful means, but sovereignty increasingly became a critical issue for Beijing.²⁶

China perceived India's actions as a *nibbling policy*. The Chinese character for this term is that of a silk worm eating a leaf. The literal translation is *canshi*, food or forage for the silk worm. A silk worm consumes a leaf by methodically chewing the edges. The Chinese viewed the changes in India's border policy and aggressiveness as attempts to gain territory in the way a silk worm eats. Until this point China had avoided confrontation and pulled its troops back. China had offered what it saw as an equitable resolution of the disputed areas, only to be rebuffed by India. This refusal, followed by the militarily aggressive Forward Policy, precipitated a change in the Chinese response.

Indian accounts of the war concur with Neville Maxwell's assessment of the Forward Policy as the trigger for conflict.²⁷ In retrospect, Indian scholars identified India's unwillingness to negotiate with Zhou on the border areas and the escalatory and provocative signals delivered by the Forward Policy as actions that contributed to the war. India did not see these policies as risky, and did not anticipate China's reaction. This failure "clearly showed that the basic assumption behind the Forward Policy decision [that the Chinese would withdraw rather than use force] was no longer valid, and a serious reappraisal of the new situation should have been undertaken" by India.²⁸ "This reappraisal, however, never took place and the situation was allowed to drift," according to the official Indian history.²⁹

As the situation deteriorated, the Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai conferred with his envoy to India, and decided to elevate their concerns about India's aggressive turn to Chairman Mao. "At least we made the greatest effort for peace," Zhou reportedly commented. "Nehru's forward policy is a knife. He

²⁵ Garver, "China's Decision for War With India in 1962," 114.

²⁶ Robinson, "The Sino-Soviet Border Conflicts of 1969," 179.

²⁷ Maxwell, *India's China War*, 238.

²⁸ Sinha, Dr P.B. and Athale, Col A.A., *History On The Conflict With China, 1962* (History Division, Ministry of Defense, Government of India, 1992), 20.

²⁹ Sinha, Dr P.B. and Athale, Col A.A., *History On The Conflict With China, 1962*, 20.

wants to put it in our heart. We cannot close our eyes and await death."³⁰ China recognized the strengthening military posture of India as a threat to China's negotiating position. China's bargaining power relative to India was weakening, and would continue to weaken unless China responded. India, through the Forward Policy, disrupted the relatively stable status quo and replaced it with an incentive for the Chinese to arrest what would be a continually weakening position.

Chinese Political Strategy

The implication for Chinese leaders was that outsiders were seeking to profit from China's internal difficulties and believed China lacked the resolve to defend its territorial interests. Viewed through this lens, the political costs of inaction would soon outweigh the risks of starting a war with India. Zhou noted; "They reckoned that our famine was very serious, and the rebellion unsettled. When you have not room for retreat and you do not counterattack, that is really showing weakness and they will believe that you are easily cowed."³¹

The Chinese leadership seemed to believe that a state should be more willing to use force against the first opponent that openly threatened its territorial claim in order to deter any subsequent challenges from other states with which it disputes territory.³² China had a number of unresolved border issues in 1962, and their response to India's nibbling would set the tone for interactions along the rest of their contested borders.³³ The Forward Policy elevated this concern to a time-critical decision.

The Chinese reached a point of inflection with regard to their strategic policy towards India. The cost-benefit equation now favored action versus the current tactic of delay and diplomacy. India did not recognize or expect this change in Chinese policy and would suffer for it on the battlefield. Mao said to his war council regarding India: "Our border conflict with India has gone on for

³⁰ Xu Yan, *Zhong Yin Bianjie Zhi Zhan Lishi Zhenxiang (The Historic Truth of the Sino-Indian Border War)*, 187.

³¹ Garver, John W., tran., *Zhou Enlai Waijiao Wenxuan [Selected Diplomatic Papers of Zhou Enlai]* (Beijing: Zhongyang wexian chubanshe, 1990), 472.

³² Barbara F. Walter, "Explaining the Intractability of Territorial Conflict," *International Studies Review* 5, no. 4 (Winter 2003): 149–150.

³³ Garver, "China's Decision for War With India in 1962," 103.

many years. We do not want war and originally sought to solve it through peaceful negotiations. But Nehru is not willing to talk and has deployed considerable forces, insistently demanding a fight with us. Now it seems not to fight is not possible. If we fight, what should be our method? What should the war look like? Please everyone contribute your thoughts on these policy issues.”³⁴ His assessment of the situation would prove to be accurate, and his solicitation of ideas from among his council is noteworthy.

This collective decision making process and Mao’s openness to inputs regarding Chinese strategy indicate a rational approach to the problem as they understood it and give no indication of expansionist tendencies or an inclination towards belligerent conquest. For some time now scholars have argued over the attributes and accuracy of the rational actor. In what remains a definitive text, Allison argues that most statesmen do not behave rationally.³⁵ This case does not imply that the Chinese decision-makers do behave rationally, but does suggest that they tend to behave reasonably. In fact, China’s leader’s reasoning on strategic issues can be described as thoughtful, deliberative, and risk aware.

Mao said, “We cannot give ground, once we give ground it would be tantamount to letting them seize a big piece of land. Since Nehru sticks his head out and insists on us fighting him, for us not to fight with him would not be friendly enough.”³⁶ Mao was influenced by Chinese history, and in 1840 the disarray caused by the collapse of the Qing Dynasty prevented China from responding to colonial encroachment and exploitation. Mao identified this as a failure of deterrence, and attributed the Century of Shame to inaction and weakness.

Mao concluded the meeting with an assessment of the geopolitical risk associated with a military offensive in the border area. He warned that China would find itself isolated internationally during the coming war, but that this

³⁴ Sun Shao and Chen Zhibin, *Ximalaya Shan De Xue, Zhong Yin Zhanzheng Shilu (Snows of the Himalaya Mountains, the True Record of the China-India War)*, trans. Garver, John W. (Taiyuan: Bei Yue wenyi chubanshe, 1991), 96.

³⁵ Graham T Allison and Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York [etc.]: Longman, 1999).

³⁶ Xu Yan, *Zhong Yin Bianjie Zhi Zhan Lishi Zhenxiang (The Historic Truth of the Sino-Indian Border War)*, 198.

would not be the decisive factor. The United States and the Soviet Union would, of course, oppose China's action. So too would many other "uninformed countries."³⁷ Chiang Kai-shek might "adopt measures." But China needn't fear this isolation, Mao said. As long as the front line troops fought well, "We will be in an advantageous position. It's better to die standing, than to die kneeling. If China fights successfully and in an awe-inspiring way, this will guarantee at least thirty years of peace" with India.³⁸

In response to China's seeming aggressiveness, it is important to draw a distinction between their identification of an incident as a crisis, and their deliberation over methods of resolution. China was prone to conclude that a threat required a forceful response, and then spent a considerable amount of time debating the best course of action. In September 1962, China issued its final diplomatic statement, saying, "shooting and shelling are no child's play and he who plays with fire will eventually be consumed by fire."³⁹ Mao said "You wave a gun, and I'll wave a gun. We'll stand face to face and can each practice our courage."⁴⁰ China dealt with this strategic decision through analysis, careful preparation, attention to psychological and political factors, a quest for surprise, and rapid conclusion.⁴¹

China's Military Strategy and Risk and Mitigation Efforts

Before China could resort to the use of force to resolve the developing border dispute with India, it had to assess the likelihood of third party intervention by the great powers. The risk associated with the United States or Soviet Union siding with India in a border conflict was too great to ignore. China was also concerned about the chances of a Nationalist invasion staged out of Taiwan, or launched through Laos or another country on its southeastern flank. China used diplomatic channels to query the US and USSR

³⁷ Sun Shao and Chen Zhibin, *Ximalaya Shan De Xue, Zhong Yin Zhanzheng Shilu (Snows of the Himalaya Mountains, the True Record of the China-India War)*, 100.

³⁸ Sun Shao and Chen Zhibin, *Ximalaya Shan De Xue, Zhong Yin Zhanzheng Shilu (Snows of the Himalaya Mountains, the True Record of the China-India War)*, 100.

³⁹ Maxwell, *India's China War*, 255; Whiting, *The Chinese Calculus of Deterrence*, 95.

⁴⁰ Garver, "China's Decision for War With India in 1962," 108.

⁴¹ Kissinger, *On China*, 188.

on how they would respond to a PLA offensive in the disputed areas.⁴²

In late May 1962, Premier Zhou Enlai ordered the Chinese Ambassador to Poland to ascertain US intentions regarding the Nationalist Chinese invasion then being ostentatiously prepared from Taiwan.⁴³ The Ambassador was “extremely relieved” when he heard from his US counterpart that the United States did not desire war with China and would not, “under present circumstances” support a Nationalist Chinese invasion of the mainland.⁴⁴ This information played a “very big role” in China’s decision-making process.⁴⁵

Of greater concern was the Indo-Soviet relationship. According to John Garver, “since the early 1960s, Beijing had seen Moscow and India as colluding to oppose China.”⁴⁶ On October 8, Zhou Enlai met with the Soviet ambassador while the Chinese ambassador in Moscow met with Khrushchev. Both sought to inform Moscow of China’s plans.⁴⁷ When China’s leaders made their second crucial October 16 decision for war, they were confident the Soviets would not intervene. On October 8 Beijing formally notified Moscow that India might launch an attack on China forcing China to respond.⁴⁸ On October 14, China’s ambassador in Moscow secured from Khrushchev guarantees that if there were a Sino-Indian war, the USSR would “stand together with China.”⁴⁹

The end of recent fighting in Laos, plus a US pledge not to intervene with military force in Laos, reduced the chances that US-supported Nationalist forces might attack China across the Straits of Taiwan or via Laos. This development reduced the risk in the eyes of the Chinese that a war between China and India would escalate to include additional parties.⁵⁰

In deciding for war with India, Mao acknowledged a number of dangers.

⁴² Kissinger, *On China*, 189.

⁴³ Garver, “China’s Decision for War With India in 1962,” 108.

⁴⁴ Wang Bingnan, *Zhong Mei Huitan Jiunian Huigu (Recollections of 9 Years of Sino-American Talks)*, trans. John W. Garver (Beijing: Shijie zhishi chubanshe, 1985), 85–90.

⁴⁵ Wang Bingnan, *Zhong Mei Huitan Jiunian Huigu (Recollections of 9 Years of Sino-American Talks)*, 85–90.

⁴⁶ John W. Garver, “The Indian Factor in Recent Sino-Soviet Relations,” *The China Quarterly* no. 125 (March 1, 1991): 56, doi:10.2307/654477.

⁴⁷ Garver, “China’s Decision for War With India in 1962,” 104.

⁴⁸ Garver, “China’s Decision for War With India in 1962,” 107.

⁴⁹ Roderick MacFarquhar, *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution: The Coming of the Cataclysm 1961-1966* (Columbia University Press, 1999), 314.

⁵⁰ Garver, “China’s Decision for War With India in 1962,” 110.

Nehru enjoyed ascending international status and China could suffer from negative international perceptions by attacking a popular state. India was a leader of the non-aligned movement in the early years of the Cold War. India enjoyed international prestige as an advocate of non-violent conflict resolution. The United States and the Soviet Union were courting India as an ally on the subcontinent. These costs were perceived to be worth the potential long-term gains of inflicting a severe, if limited, "war of extermination" on India's growing military presence on the border.⁵¹

Diplomatic efforts to secure the flanks demonstrate Chinese awareness of the risk associated with the horizontal escalation of the conflict, and the dangers associated with opportunistic third-party intervention. Once these assurances were in hand, China proceeded to refine its political and military strategy.

The war that China labeled "a self-defensive counterattack" was an attack designed to wipe out the Indian army in the border area and destroy its fighting capability.⁵² It was in the process of preparatory staff work for the campaign that the idea of terminating the war by a unilateral Chinese halt, ceasefire, and withdrawal was developed. In view of "practical difficulties associated with China's domestic situation," the operational plan developed by the staff proposed that after achieving military objectives, Chinese forces would disengage and end the fighting as quickly as possible.⁵³ The crux of success for the Chinese in the coming war was "concentration of local superiority to achieve a swift war and swift decision."⁵⁴ Victory in the war was a matter directly connected to the prestige of the Chinese army and nation, and the strategic objectives required a quick resolution.⁵⁵

The PLA ground offensive launched on October 20, culminating in the seizure of strategically located Tawang on October 23. In the Western Sector

⁵¹ Garver, "China's Decision for War With India in 1962," 118.

⁵² Robinson, "The Sino-Soviet Border Conflicts of 1969," 181.

⁵³ Xu Yan, *Zhong Yin Bianjie Zhi Zhan Lishi Zhenxiang (The Historic Truth of the Sino-Indian Border War)*, 96.

⁵⁴ Sun Shao and Chen Zhibin, *Ximalaya Shan De Xue, Zhong Yin Zhanzheng Shilu (Snows of the Himalaya Mountains, the True Record of the China-India War)*, 100.

⁵⁵ Sun Shao and Chen Zhibin, *Ximalaya Shan De Xue, Zhong Yin Zhanzheng Shilu (Snows of the Himalaya Mountains, the True Record of the China-India War)*, 111.

the offensive continued until October 27. Chinese forces then voluntarily halted for a three-week lull. Allen Whiting surmised that this hiatus was intended to provide an opportunity for Indian leaders to rethink their approach and abandon their Forward Policy.⁵⁶ India did not change its position during the three-week break, and domestic pressures convinced Premier Nehru to avoid concessions and keep fighting against the Chinese. The Chinese launched a second, more violent, phase of their offensive; once it became obvious the Indian government was not willing to concede.

On November 18, China launched a second offensive that soundly defeated the Indian Army and achieved its territorial objectives in three days.⁵⁷ On November 21, in a unilateral announcement, Zhou said all Chinese forces would withdraw to a line 20 kilometers behind the line of actual control along the disputed border.⁵⁸ China's political objective was to "teach a serious lesson" to Indian "reactionaries" about Chinese concern with sovereignty and territorial integrity.⁵⁹ Once the threat of the Indian forces on the border had been eliminated China had achieved the military objectives and transitioned its focus to the strategic goals.

The international response was similar to what Mao had predicted. The United States and the Soviet Union were mired in the Cuban Missile Crisis during the same period, and their attention was not focused on what China and India were doing in the Himalayas. Nehru did plead with the US for assistance, which came in the form of U-2 reconnaissance flights and the deployment of a carrier battle group to the Indian Ocean. India had requested US carrier-based fighters to fly defensive air patrols over major cities in India out of a fear of Chinese bombers. The cease-fire of November 21 stopped the war before the carrier could arrive.⁶⁰

The cease-fire marked the end of major combat operations between India and China. India did not replace the units that had been destroyed during the

⁵⁶ Garver, "China's Decision for War With India in 1962," 122.

⁵⁷ Garver, "China's Decision for War With India in 1962," 123.

⁵⁸ Maxwell, *India's China War*, 417-418.

⁵⁹ Zhang Tong, *The Diplomatic Situation of New China* (Beijing: World Affairs Press, 1990), 75.

⁶⁰ John E. Peters, *War and Escalation in South Asia* (Rand Corporation, 2006), 14.

October 20 to November 21 war, but instead reestablished their border outposts in the in the 1959 locations. There was a minor skirmish between border patrols in 1986, but that was quickly suppressed by Beijing and New Delhi. Since 1981 China and India have held regular talks at the level of deputy foreign minister and border issues have been a focal point. Relations between the two countries improved greatly in the 1990s, resulting in the conclusion of two agreements: in 1993 China and India signed an agreement on Maintaining Peace and Tranquility Along the Line of Actual Control in the China-India border area, and, in 1996, signed the Confidence-Building Measures in the Military Field Along the Line of Actual Control in the China-India border disputed area.⁶¹ This effectively ended the border dispute, and it has not been an issue since.

Analysis

Chinese behavior during the Sino-Indo war of 1962 suggests the following:

1) China appeared to be risk averse in that it did not desire a conflict with India and offered reasonable compromises to secure a diplomatic solution in the seven years before the war. China had offered concessions in each frontier dispute along its land border.⁶² The dispute with India was no different. The facts of the case study do not support India's claims that China acted as the aggressor in a bid to expand its borders at the expense of India. The internal discussions and diplomatic actions of Zhou Enlai demonstrated a desire for an equitable diplomatic solution where each side made similar concessions. China instructed its border guards to avoid conflict, and pulled them back from their forward positions following skirmishes in the five years leading up to the conflict. China desired to avoid conflict and pursue a diplomatic resolution.

2) China's relative military strength (and therefore bargaining position) on the disputed border declined sharply due to provocative troop deployments by India as part of its Forward Policy. The primary trigger for the major clashes

⁶¹ Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, *China's National Defense* (Beijing: State Council Information Office, 1998), 35.

⁶² Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, 6.

of October and November 1962 was India's occupation of the disputed area. This message was targeted primarily toward India's domestic audience in an effort to legitimize the Nehru government's foreign policy.

3) China, struggling with domestic unrest, was concerned about exploitation by their neighbors and encirclement by the United States. China was acutely wary of another round of foreign exploitation following their Century of Shame and the loss of vast tracks of territory beginning in 1840. The details of the Himalayan border clashes were considered in the context of great power involvement in Korea, Taiwan, Laos, and Japan among others.

4) China feared the nibbling of its territory and wanted to deter future aggression. China's correlation between the events of 1962 and those 100 years earlier motivated them to deter aggression based on a similar association in the mind of their neighbors. A failure to respond with strength and resolve in the face of India's provocations would, in the eyes of Mao and his court, embolden additional encroachments. It would be better to "die standing" than to "die kneeling later."⁶³ The convoluted and propaganda-tinged phrase "self-defensive counterattack" used by China to describe its policy accurately captures a rational approach to the perceived problem.

5) China coordinated political and military objectives and employed well-conceived risk-mitigating diplomatic efforts and military procedures. China's political objective was a secure, fair border with India and stability in other disputed territories. Expansion and conquest were not goals. After gaining assurances of no direct intervention by the US and USSR, Chinese planners crafted a military strategy that would deliver the deterrent signal, secure the Chinese bargaining position, and terminate the conflict before it escalated.

The PLA also performed well. The Sino-Indo War of 1962 validated the lessons and experience gained by the PLA in fighting the Japanese, the Nationalists, and US/UN forces in Korea. The PLA methodically and carefully prepared for combat years before war, anticipating challenges to its sovereignty in these regions and, in the case of Aksai Chin, militarily significant, border

⁶³ Sun Shao and Chen Zhibin, *Ximalaya Shan De Xue, Zhong Yin Zhanzheng Shilu* (Snows of the Himalaya Mountains, the True Record of the China-India War), 100.

areas.⁶⁴

After achieving its political objectives of signaling resolve and stabilizing a bargaining position by destroying the Indian forces, China retreated behind the original border and resumed diplomatic negotiations, ultimately resolving the dispute in accordance with the original diplomatic proposal. The operation went as well as it could have. The threat was removed, and further nibbling by India was deterred. The diplomatic efforts and the speed of the operation prevented intervention by the US or the USSR. In hindsight, the Chinese could reasonably conclude that the deterrent message delivered by resolute military action had been worth the associated risks, risks they proactively and successfully managed. The official PLA history of the 1962 war stresses “quickly achieving peaceful, stable borders in the west” was the primary objective.⁶⁵ This was the “basic direction” of China’s border policy, to inflict a painful defeat on India and demonstrate the futility and danger of aggression. Sharp military defeat also “compelled India to again sit down at the negotiating table and solve the Sino-Indian border problem.” This resulted in “peaceful stability along the western borders.”⁶⁶

This analysis sheds light on the puzzle of China’s unilateral cease-fire on November 21 1962. China’s stated objective was to “teach a bitter lesson,” and with that lesson delivered, there was no need to risk escalation or great power intervention. The same strategic approach would be applied in later years and may be discerned in the Sino-Soviet border conflict of 1969, the Paracel Islands action in 1974, in the Vietnam incursion of 1979, and in the South China Sea action of 1988.⁶⁷ These conflicts will be discussed in the following chapters.

⁶⁴ Robinson, “The Sino-Soviet Border Conflicts of 1969,” 194.

⁶⁵ Robinson, “The Sino-Soviet Border Conflicts of 1969,” 194.

⁶⁶ Xu Yan, *Zhong Yin Bianjie Zhi Zhan Lishi Zhenxiang (The Historic Truth of the Sino-Indian Border War)*, 128.

⁶⁷ Robinson, “The Sino-Soviet Border Conflicts of 1969,” 194.

Chapter 3

Sino-Soviet border dispute of 1969

This case study examines the Sino-Soviet border dispute of 1969. It follows the pattern of inquiry outlined in Chapter Two. It first examines the military engagement between the two combatants and follows with an examination of the domestic and international political context of the war. An examination of the bilateral relationship between China and the Soviet Union follows, with a focus on Chinese strategy and risk mitigation efforts. It closes with an assessment of Chinese behavior.

The Military Engagement

Zhenbao Island, known to the Soviets as Damansky Island, is a small sliver of land, less than a mile long and 1500 feet across at its widest point. It lies in the middle of the Ussuri River, approximately 250 miles north-northeast of Vladivostok on the border between Manchuria and Eastern Russia (reference maps in Appendix A). It is often covered with water during the high season and possesses no strategic value as a piece of terrain, but disputes over this island were the *casus belli* of the Sino-Soviet border dispute of March 1969.

The Ussuri River is recognized by both nations as the boundary between them. Usually river borders are governed by the thalweg principle, which states that the center of the main navigation channel in the river determines the boundary. The thalweg principle gives the riparian states equal navigational rights on the river: in practice, it means that the river traffic of each nation has the right to navigate freely in the main channel.¹

The Chinese accept this tradition. They generally claim that wherever the boundary follows a river, the middle line of the main navigational channel (the deepest watercourse) shall be the boundary.² Possession of islands in the river is determined by the location of the main channel. Zhenbao Island is on the Chinese side of the main channel, and as a result the Chinese claimed it as their own.

¹ Neville Maxwell, "A Note on the Amur/Ussuri Sector of the Sino-Soviet Boundaries," *Modern China* 1, no. 1 (January 1, 1975): 117, doi:10.2307/188887.

² Maxwell, "A Note on the Amur/Ussuri Sector of the Sino-Soviet Boundaries," 117.

Nevertheless, prior to the 1969 border conflict, the Soviet government maintained that in the case of the Ussuri river the boundary did not lie on the thalweg but along the Chinese bank. In that situation, the whole breadth of the river and all islands within it fell under Soviet sovereignty, with China able to use them only with Soviet approval.³ This interpretation of the border was derived from the 1860 Treaty of Peking and the demarcation of the boundary on an attached map. This detail was not captured in writing but was claimed by the Soviets based on markings on a large-scale map, which showed the border on the Chinese bank of the river and not in the main channel. The Chinese government maintained that the thalweg principle of river borders applied unless there was an explicit written treaty provision for some alternative line of division and noted that there was no such provision in the Treaty of Peking. In 1964, diplomatic envoys from the Soviet Union offered to modify the treaty by applying the thalweg principle, but talks broke down and a settlement was not reached.

On the morning of March 2 1969, following months of minor confrontations with Soviet patrols on Zhenbao Island, the PLA deployed two armed groups instead of their usual single small patrol. Under cover of darkness and wearing white uniforms to blend in with the snow, the first group snuck across the frozen river from the Chinese bank and dug a series of foxholes in the high terrain on the southern end of the island.⁴

Around 11:00 a.m., a group of 20-30 Chinese began moving toward the island in the normal pattern of their patrols, shouting Maoist slogans as they came. They did not appear to be armed, just as they had not been armed during previous encounters.⁵ Seeing the Chinese move towards the island, a small Soviet patrol mounted armored cars and drove across the frozen main channel of the river from an outpost on the Soviet bank.⁶ This had been the routine for a number of months. Up until this point, the Chinese patrols had been armed only with clubs, a restriction set forth by the Chinese leadership to

³ Maxwell, "A Note on the Amur/Ussuri Sector of the Sino-Soviet Boundaries," 118.

⁴ Thomas W. Robinson, "The Sino-Soviet Border Dispute: Background, Development, and the March 1969 Clashes," *The American Political Science Review* 66, no. 4 (December 1972): 1189, doi:10.2307/1957173.

⁵ Robinson, "The Sino-Soviet Border Dispute," 1188.

⁶ Robinson, "The Sino-Soviet Border Dispute," 1188.

limit the potential for undesired escalation. On March 2, both Chinese patrols, the one in hiding and the normal patrol, were armed.

The Soviet soldiers confronted the small daytime patrol and ordered it to return to the Chinese bank. At this point the small Chinese patrol produced sub-machine guns, and the 300 hidden soldiers left their concealed positions to ambush the Soviet party.⁷ Chinese mortar and artillery positions on the Chinese bank began to deliver fires, and the Soviets were immediately outgunned and out matched. The outpost on Soviet side of the river quickly deployed reinforcements. An all-day firefight ensued, at the conclusion of which Soviet reinforcements had forced the Chinese off of the island.

Accounts differ as to the casualties on each side, but the Soviets claim the Chinese executed 19 prisoners following the initial exchange.⁸ Other accounts detail 31 Soviet border guards dead, 14 wounded, and an unknown number of Chinese casualties. Each side withdrew following the March 2 clash and immediately began plans to rearm and reinforce their positions.

The second battle, on March 15, was much larger.⁹ It was also the most vicious of the entire Sino-Soviet border conflict in 1969.¹⁰ The Soviets committed more than fifty tanks and Armored Personnel Carriers (APCs) and fired more than 10,000 artillery rounds at Chinese positions on the island river bank.¹¹ Neither side controlled the island following the battle. The Soviets laid mines around the area and both sides retreated to their respective banks of the Usurri River.

The Chinese assumed that the *status quo ante* had been restored, or at least they hoped.¹² The resumption of diplomatic talks in 1969 stopped the fighting, and the Soviets eventually recognized Chinese claims to the islands on the Chinese side of the main navigation channel.¹³ Zhenbao Island remains a Chinese possession today.

Why did China decide to ambush the Soviet patrol and escalate a dispute

⁷ Robinson, "The Sino-Soviet Border Dispute," 1189.

⁸ Robinson, "The Sino-Soviet Border Dispute," 1189.

⁹ Robinson, "The Sino-Soviet Border Dispute," 1190.

¹⁰ Robinson, "The Sino-Soviet Border Conflicts of 1969," 212.

¹¹ Robinson, "The Sino-Soviet Border Conflicts of 1969," 212.

¹² Robinson, "The Sino-Soviet Border Conflicts of 1969," 213.

¹³ Robinson, "The Sino-Soviet Border Conflicts of 1969," 210.

over a minor island on a remote frontier? What led China to start a conflict with a nuclear superpower? Why did China refuse a favorable settlement in 1964, fight over the island in 1969, and then accept the initial Soviet offer following the use of force? This chapter will examine China's decision to use force during this border dispute.

The Domestic Political Context in China

Similar to the Great Leap Forward in the late 1950s, which preceded the Sino-Indo war, domestic instability created political insecurity and a Chinese fear of foreign opportunism. Beginning in 1966, Mao initiated the Cultural Revolution as a mass movement to correct what he saw as dangerous tendencies in the CCP and the government at all levels. He allowed, and then encouraged, the criticism of leaders by students and other parts of society. This soon escalated out of control, and the PLA was called on to maintain internal stability and attempt to restore order in outlying provinces.¹⁴ The ultimate effect of the Cultural Revolution on the border dispute with the Soviet Union was to draw attention and military power away from the border, and to delay Chinese diplomatic efforts due to a preoccupation with domestic problems.

The diminished Chinese military presence on the border, and preoccupation with internal instability, again made Mao wary of the intentions of China's neighbors on the border. Building Soviet military pressure along the Chinese border suggested both a Soviet effort to profit from China's unrest and perception of a weakened China's inability to respond.¹⁵ These were the perceptions China feared, and the costs of inaction began to outweigh the risks associated with the use of force as a conventional deterrent. As China's bargaining position in the Soviet border dispute weakened during a period of internal political instability, China's leaders chose to respond with force.¹⁶

Zhao Enlai, in a "National Address" intended for domestic consumption on October 1 1968, said: "US imperialism and Soviet revisionism are capable of any evil. We must heighten our vigilance, intensify our preparations against

¹⁴ MacFarquhar, *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution*.

¹⁵ Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, 209.

¹⁶ Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, 211.

war and be ready at all times to smash any invasions launched by US imperialism, Soviet revisionism, and their lackeys, whether individually or collectively. Should any enemy dare to invade our great motherland, the 700 million Chinese people...will definitely wipe them out resolutely, thoroughly, totally and completely.¹⁷

The Chinese fear of American intervention in 1968 was not unfounded. Asia had been host to a number of US interventions in the name of the containment policy, one directed toward the Soviet Union but pursued at China's doorstep in Korea, Taiwan, Laos and Vietnam. And by 1968, China had reason to fear the Soviets as well.

History of the Bi-lateral Relationship China and the Soviet Union

The roots of this border conflict date back to the 1860 Treaty of Peking ratified between the declining Qing Dynasty and Tsarist Russia. The power dynamic at the time allowed Russia to exploit a weakened China beset on all sides by European colonialists and the Japanese. The Qing Dynasty would come to an end in 1911, and China would struggle through periods of civil war and invasion until the Communists, led by Mao Zedong, emerged victorious in 1949.

The relations between the PRC and the Soviet Union were initially peaceful. The Soviet Union backed the Chinese Communists during the civil war, and was one of the CCP's first and strongest allies following their victory in 1949. In February 1950, China and the Soviet Union signed a 30 year Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance which stated that each country would render all possible economic assistance and to effect the necessary cooperation in matters of mutual defense.¹⁸ This dissolution of this treaty, 29 years later, would factor into China's invasion of Vietnam, a Soviet ally.

The alliance was soon tested during the Korean War, where Mao ultimately felt exploited as a minor proxy for Soviet interests as his troops died

¹⁷ A.S. Whiting, "China's Use of Force, 1950-96, and Taiwan," *International Security* 26, no. 2 (2001): 238.

¹⁸ Michael S. Gerson, *The Sino-Soviet Border Conflict: Deterrence, Escalation, and the Threat of Nuclear War in 1969* (Alexandria, Va: CNA, Analysis & Solutions, 2010), 6.

fighting the Americans for Soviet advantage on Korean battlefields. Stalin's perceived stinginess with providing China with modern weapons and air cover set the two nations on divergent paths. The Chinese again suffered following the withdrawal of Soviet support in the Korean War after Stalin's death in 1953. The decision to renege on commitments to help China's atom bomb program in 1959 further strained the relationship.¹⁹

This fissure would ultimately result in the Sino-Soviet split that would serve as the backdrop for the 1969 border conflict. The Sino-Soviet split was based on a fundamental ideological divergence between the two states and their vision for a worldwide communist movement. Chairman Mao and Stalin had a strained but functioning relationship. Sino-Soviet relations took a turn for the worse when Khrushchev was appointed his successor in 1953. Mao believed that he was best qualified to lead in the international Communist movement, and had little respect for his Soviet counterpart.²⁰ Each country felt it represented the true communist ideal, and should occupy a position of leadership over the other. Tensions all along the border started to build in 1959 and progressed in intensity and frequency until the 1969 incident.²¹

In July 1960, the Soviet Union withdrew all of its personnel from China based on "Chinese failure to respect the experts that have provided assistance to the Chinese people for economic and cultural development and military buildup."²² This move was one of many in what became a gradual split between the former allies. The Soviet Union no longer saw the value in providing aid to a China that was becoming increasingly arrogant and assertive.

Escalating border tensions were symptomatic of the deteriorating political relationship between the two nations. The delineation of the border on the west bank of the river versus the traditional thalweg had been a point of contention for the Chinese, but routinely overlooked while the relationship was cordial. As the Soviets took an increasingly divergent ideological path and

¹⁹ Harry Gelman and Rand Corporation, *The Soviet Far East Buildup and Soviet Risk-taking Against China* (Rand, 1982), 8.

²⁰ Jian Chen, *Mao's China and the Cold War* (University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 69–71.

²¹ Robinson, "The Sino-Soviet Border Dispute," 1178.

²² Lorenz M. Luthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World* (Princeton University Press, 2010), 174.

assumed a confrontational diplomatic posture, the intrinsic strategic insignificance of Zhenbao Island was displaced with political relevance as the physical manifestation of broader disputes.²³

China offered to pursue a diplomatic resolution to the dispute in 1964, which was initially accepted at talks begun in February in Beijing. During the Soviet-Chinese consultations on border issues in 1964, a preliminary agreement was reached on almost the entire eastern part of the border at a working group level. The sides agreed to fix the border on navigable rivers along the main channel.²⁴

This proposal, initially accepted by the Soviet negotiators, clearly defined the border as the thalweg in the middle of the river, and returned islands such as Zhenbao, on the Chinese side of the main navigation channel, back to Chinese control. When the two sides met to formalize this agreement, China's initial position was for the Soviet Union to acknowledge that the 1860 Treaty of Peking, among others, was unequal and invalid and demanded the Soviets acknowledge this claim.²⁵ Invalidating any preexisting treaty as unfair based on Chinese inferiority to Tsarist Russia 100 years before was an untenable position for the Soviets and talks broke down in short order.²⁶ Although the return of Zhenbao to China was agreed to in principle, the additional Chinese demands poisoned the talks and an agreement was not to be had.

As a result of the failure of these talks, Soviet and Chinese troop deployments increased dramatically beginning in 1964. Mao upped the ante in July 1964 by making irredentist claims over broad tracks of Soviet Territory. He charged that Tsarist Russia had stripped China of territory in Siberia and the Far East, and that China "had not yet submitted a bill" for these territories.²⁷

The Soviets responded by deploying additional troops all along the border

²³ Neville Maxwell, "Report from China: The Chinese Account of the 1969 Fighting at Chenpao," *The China Quarterly* 56 (1973): 733–735, doi:10.1017/S0305741000019573.

²⁴ Maxwell, "A Note on the Amur/Ussuri Sector of the Sino-Soviet Boundaries," 120.

²⁵ Robinson, "The Sino-Soviet Border Dispute," 1179.

²⁶ Michael S. Gerson, *The Sino-Soviet Border Conflict: Deterrence, Escalation, and the Threat of Nuclear War in 1969*, 13.

²⁷ Michael S. Gerson, *The Sino-Soviet Border Conflict: Deterrence, Escalation, and the Threat of Nuclear War in 1969*, 13.

beginning in 1965.²⁸ By 1969 the Soviets had increased their strength along the Sino-Soviet border from 14 to 34 divisions, many of which were equipped with advanced weapons, heavy artillery, and greater mechanization when compared to Chinese forces in the same area.²⁹ This increase led China to conclude that its relative strength was in decline.³⁰

The Soviets also adopted a more aggressive posture with their troops. Beginning after the failure of the 1964 talks, Soviet patrols were told to “rebuff all attempts by the Chinese to land on the islands” but also to exercise restraint by not using small arms.³¹ Although each side wanted to demonstrate strength and resolve, they also wished to avoid escalation based on the interaction of these patrols. Between 1964 and March 1969, the Soviet Union proposed a number of escalation prevention measures for the deployed forces, including limits on patrolling by each side, which China reciprocated.³²

Viewed in the context of the 1968 Brezhnev Doctrine, the location, armament, and tactics of the Soviet troops on the Chinese border assumed a more ominous meaning.³³ The Brezhnev Doctrine espoused the Soviet imperative to intervene in states drifting away from the Soviet model of communism. In 1968 the Soviet Union invaded Czechoslovakia with 500,000 troops to put down what it perceived as a dangerous strain of socialism and liberal tendencies. Brezhnev’s use of force in 1968, combined with the troop buildup on the Chinese border, convinced Mao that the Soviets were intent on rectifying the Sino-Soviet split by invasion. In the years preceding the clash, China’s bargaining position on the border had declined considerably as the Soviets doubled their number of troops in the Far East in less than four years and adopted an assertive, forward-patrolling posture in disputed areas,

²⁸ Robinson, “The Sino-Soviet Border Dispute.”

²⁹ Gelman and Corporation, *The Soviet Far East Buildup and Soviet Risk-taking Against China*, 19.

³⁰ Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, 204.

³¹ Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, 206.

³² Directorate of Intelligence, “CIA Weekly Review 16 May 1969” (Central Intelligence Agency, May 16, 1969), 1,

<http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB49/sino.sov.3.pdf>.

³³ Richard Wich, *Sino-Soviet Crisis Politics: A Study of Political Change and Communication* (Harvard Univ Asia Center, 1980), 147.

especially near the Ussuri River.³⁴

Chinese Political Strategy

China's immediate objective was to deter future armed provocations along the Chinese-Soviet border, especially over islands on the Chinese side of the main channel of navigation.³⁵ China sought to counter increasing military pressure created by a sharp decline in the local military balance and assertive Soviet behavior during a period of domestic unrest. The goal of the initial plan was to teach the Soviets a "bitter lesson."³⁶ Internal documents support the interpretation of China's motives, demonstrating a clear link between the Soviet military posture and China's willingness to use force.³⁷

Until the clash of March 2 1969 the Chinese had prevented their patrols from using small arms. The Chinese troops would cross the often frozen river and perform their patrols armed with clubs. In the lead-up to the March 2 ambush, there were a number of smaller clashes, including one on January 23 in which 28 Chinese soldiers were injured.³⁸

In February 1969, the Soviet patrols fired warning shots, which was the first use of firearms along the disputed border. The Chinese leadership authorized the ensuing ambush following this incident.³⁹ Mao and his council concluded that further provocation could not be endured, and that a deterrent strike to demonstrate Chinese resolve was worth the associated risks.

When China launched its ambush it signaled not only its resolve to defend its territorial claims threatened by the Soviet Union, but also its commitment to resist Soviet coercion more broadly.⁴⁰ The Chinese identified a change in the cost-benefit analysis, where inaction following Soviet provocations would be more costly than the risks associated with ambushing the troops of a nuclear power on a remote river island. Andrew Scobell states China adheres

³⁴ Robinson, "The Sino-Soviet Border Dispute," 265–313.

³⁵ Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, 203.

³⁶ Dali Yang, "Patterns of China's Regional Development Strategy," *The China Quarterly* 122 (1990): 28, doi:10.1017/S0305741000008778.

³⁷ Melvin Gurtov and Byong-Moo Hwang, *China Under Threat: The Politics of Strategy and Diplomacy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 187–214.

³⁸ Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, 211.

³⁹ Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, 212.

⁴⁰ Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, 203.

to a “Cult of the Defense,” which “predisposes Chinese leaders to engage in offensive military operations, while rationalizing these actions as purely defensive and a last resort.”⁴¹ Kissinger describes these efforts as “offensive deterrence;” a concept that involves the use of a preemptive strategy not so much to defeat the adversary militarily as to deal him a psychological blow to cause him to desist.⁴² China does not see itself as the aggressor in these types of conflicts, but assumes the role of defender against future exploitation.

Chinese Military Strategy and Risk Mitigation Efforts

After the Soviets fired warning shots in February, the Chinese transferred roughly 600 elite troops to the area.⁴³ Beijing carefully planned the operation from an early stage, established a tight chain of command from top to bottom, and trained and equipped its forces in such a manner so as to assure reasonable success of the local operation.⁴⁴ Surprise and local superiority were essential elements in the Chinese plan.⁴⁵ The General Staff instructed the relevant military regions to “strive for suddenness of action, fight quickly, and avoid entanglement.”⁴⁶ As described previously, the Chinese military strategy was to secretly deploy a strengthened force onto the island and then attack with combined arms from the high ground on the Chinese side of the river when the two normal patrols confronted each other the next day.

The surprise strike to demonstrate resolve did not have the intended effect, and when the Soviets decided to reinforce their positions on the border after the March clash, the fear of an all-out Soviet invasion grew in Beijing. Instead of deterring Soviet aggression, the ambush elicited a robust Soviet response. China was at a disadvantage when fighting a more mechanized and mobile adversary in a set piece battle on Soviet terms. This was not the fight they had anticipated. It was, in fact, the exact type of confrontation they had

⁴¹ Andrew Scobell, *China's Use of Military Force: Beyond the Great Wall and the Long March*, Cambridge Modern China Series (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 15, http://books.google.com/books?id=9Z9js_6soFkC.

⁴² Kissinger, *On China*, 217.

⁴³ Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, 212.

⁴⁴ Robinson, “The Sino-Soviet Border Dispute,” 210.

⁴⁵ Robinson, “The Sino-Soviet Border Conflicts of 1969,” 210.

⁴⁶ Michael S. Gerson, *The Sino-Soviet Border Conflict: Deterrence, Escalation, and the Threat of Nuclear War in 1969*, 21.

attempted to deter. China may have underestimated the number of Soviet casualties that would result from the March 2 ambush and almost certainly miscalculated the magnitude of Russian reaction.⁴⁷

The Soviets received a very different message from the attack. Whereas Mao intended to deter Soviet aggression, Moscow interpreted China's actions as aggressive and emblematic of an increasingly revisionist and antagonistic regime in Beijing.⁴⁸ As the conflict on the border intensified, the Soviet Union began to threaten the use of nuclear weapons. China's nascent nuclear program and small arsenal of weapons was no match for the Soviet Union, and China knew it would be on the losing end of any confrontation of this type.

The Soviet Union was apparently seriously considering the use of nuclear weapons and approached the United States about a joint operation to strike China's nuclear infrastructure and eliminate its program.⁴⁹ The US had approached the Soviets about a joint strike against the Chinese nuclear program earlier in the decade, but the Soviets were not interested in cooperating with the US at the time.⁵⁰ This time it was the US that declined to get involved in a joint strike on the Chinese mainland. In fact, President Nixon had, in 1969, identified the USSR as the greatest communist threat, and, while adopting a framework of neutrality in any potential war between China and the Soviet Union, the US should "tilt to the greatest possible extent toward China."⁵¹ In the summer of 1969, Moscow approached communist parties in Australian, Finland, and Italy to inquire about their reaction to a Soviet nuclear attack on China.⁵²

China initially assumed the Soviet nuclear posturing was a bluff. China, at first, thought it could deter Soviet nuclear threats with the specter of a massive "peoples war," a concept Mao forwarded to describe the employment of

⁴⁷ Whiting, "China's Use of Force, 1950-96, and Taiwan," 239.

⁴⁸ Michael S. Gerson, *The Sino-Soviet Border Conflict: Deterrence, Escalation, and the Threat of Nuclear War in 1969*, iii.

⁴⁹ Kissinger, *On China*, 217.

⁵⁰ William Burr and Jeffrey T. Richelson, "Whether to 'Strangle the Baby in the Cradle': The United States and the Chinese Nuclear Program, 1960-64," *International Security* 25, no. 3 (December 1, 2000): 54, doi:10.2307/2626706.

⁵¹ Kissinger, *On China*, 218.

⁵² Michael S. Gerson, *The Sino-Soviet Border Conflict: Deterrence, Escalation, and the Threat of Nuclear War in 1969*, 43.

a conventional army backed by China's 700 million citizens. When China learned of Soviet queries to the United States about the prospect of a nuclear strike, China realized the seriousness of the situation and immediately returned to negotiations.⁵³

China's ambush of Soviet forces on Zhenbao Island escalated a conflict that the Soviet Union was better prepared to fight. From April to August 1969, the Soviets ambushed and decimated Chinese military units at different carefully chosen points along the entire Sino-Soviet border.⁵⁴ The Soviet Union coerced the Chinese with nuclear weapons, a threat the Chinese could not counter with their own nuclear arsenal, or with a credible threat of "people's war."

The Soviet Union taught China its own "bitter lesson," and faced with unstoppable conventional forces on its border and the threat of a nuclear strike, China reestablished diplomatic ties with the Soviet Union in September 1969. Both sides accepted the original proposals of 1964 without the USSR having to concede that all previous treaties signed during China's century of shame were invalid. These were the terms that China had initially proposed in 1964, and the Soviets had accepted, prior to China's additional demand that the old treaties be revoked.

Following this settlement, the improving domestic situation in China allowed it to refocus more of its military on the border conflict and by 1970, China was better able to match Soviet deployments on the borders and deter invasion.⁵⁵ China still retains control of Zhenbao Island today.⁵⁶

Analysis

Chinese behavior during the Sino-Soviet war of 1969 suggests the following:

1) China was struggling to deal with domestic unrest created by the Cultural Revolution and was predisposed to assume that Soviet deployments to the border were a harbinger of an invasion to seize territory, or possible

⁵³ Kissinger, *On China*, 219.

⁵⁴ Robinson, "The Sino-Soviet Border Conflicts of 1969," 214.

⁵⁵ Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, 217.

⁵⁶ Maxwell, "A Note on the Amur/Ussuri Sector of the Sino-Soviet Boundaries," 118.

overthrow of the CCP. This assumption was based in part on China's experience around the ratification of the 1860 Treaty of Peking, and also in the border dispute with India in 1962.

2) China's relative military strength (and therefore bargaining position) on the disputed border declined sharply due to deployments by the Soviet Union. Since portions of the PLA were dedicated to internal stability following the unrest caused by the Cultural Revolution in 1966, China was unable to match the Soviet build-up along the border.

3) Concerned with this decline, China identified a narrow window for action and turned to the model of "teaching a bitter lesson" to deter this and future exploitations. With greater resources, the USSR would continue to build up their forces on the border, a move the Chinese could not match. A failure to respond with strength and resolve in the face of the Soviet Union's provocations would, China thought, embolden additional encroachments. Similar to the assessment prior to the Indo-Sino war seven years earlier, it would be better to "die standing" than to "die kneeling later."⁵⁷ Seen in the larger context, the PLA forward posture reflected a fundamental policy, which placed a premium on deterrent action against a threat to vital interests even when that threat comes from a markedly stronger military power.⁵⁸

4) China applied the strategic template used in their conflict with India in 1962 to the 1969 border crisis. The problem for China was that the Soviet Union was not the same as India. It was significantly stronger, and possessed a much larger military along with a credible nuclear arsenal. China coordinated political and military objectives and employed risk-mitigating military procedures right up until the ambush. Contrary to the lessons learned during the Indo-Sino war, the Soviet Union was not deterred by the show of strength on Zhenbao Island. The decision to ambush the Soviet patrol in 1969 points to the conclusion that Mao fundamentally underestimated his adversary.⁵⁹

5) China may have learned that equal or stronger adversaries are capable of playing the same game it does and that a planned quick strike can

⁵⁷ Sun Shao and Chen Zhibin, *Ximalaya Shan De Xue, Zhong Yin Zhazheng Shilu* (Snows of the Himalaya Mountains, the True Record of the China-India War), 100.

⁵⁸ Whiting, *The Chinese Calculus of Deterrence*, 240.

⁵⁹ Luthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split*, 345.

escalate into an undesired broader war with a stronger power. The Zhenbao exchanges of March 1969 were the bloodiest of the war, and China was effectively coerced into accepting the border treaty as offered by the Soviets in 1964, specifically without the treaty concessions demanded by Mao. Deterrent actions are designed to affect the mind of the adversary and influence their cost-benefit analysis. In the mind of the Soviet leadership, China was incapable of a credible threat of imposing unacceptable costs through Mao's use of a people's war. The Soviet Union, equipped with a better army and nuclear weapons, instead concluded that it could influence the cost-benefit assessments of the Chinese. The Soviets were correct in this assessment, and the threat of nuclear strikes, combined with a broad conventional offensive, coerced the Chinese to accept terms they had refused in 1964. China sought Soviet assistance with its nuclear program from the very beginning, and the Sino-Soviet split put an end to that aid in 1960.⁶⁰ This conflict accelerated China's desire for a "small retaliatory nuclear capability to strike against the population centers of a larger nuclear adversary."⁶¹

7) China was successful in demonstrating its willingness to fight a larger power and suffer losses, if necessary, in defense of its claims. This fact served to facilitate rapprochement with the United States, which some have speculated was an objective of the Chinese before the conflict.⁶² The decision to start a conflict with the Soviet Union, combined with a willingness to receive US envoys, made room for warming ties between China and the US at the expense of the USSR. In the US China had found a state with a common enemy and used this fact to foster a new international equilibrium.⁶³ Kissinger was the first to speak with the Chinese during secret meetings in 1971, followed by President Nixon's visit in 1972.⁶⁴ The next chapter will examine the Chinese use of force against a Soviet ally, Vietnam, in 1974, 1979, and 1988.

⁶⁰ Kissinger, *On China*, 158.

⁶¹ John Wilson Lewis, *China Builds the Bomb* (Stanford University Press, 1991), 216.

⁶² Kissinger, *On China*, 220.

⁶³ Kissinger, *On China*, 235.

⁶⁴ Y. Kuisong, "The Sino-Soviet Border Clash of 1969: From Zhenbao Island to Sino-American Rapprochement," *Cold War History* 1, no. 1 (2000): 21-52, doi:10.1080/713999906.

Chapter 4

China and Vietnam: 1974, 1979, and 1988

This chapter is formatted differently than the previous case studies due to the fact that the three conflicts span a period of fifteen years and take place on land and at sea. The 1974 and 1988 disputes occurred over tiny islands hundred of miles offshore in the Paracel and Spratly chains of the South China Sea (reference maps in Appendix A). The fighting there was comprised of naval gunfire exchanges between minor vessels lasting only minutes. The 1979 conflict was a three-week land war where China committed over 400,000 troops to a considerable cross-border invasion into Vietnamese territory. The 1979 cross-border invasion, its historical and political context, and China's lessons from it will be examined first. The unique characteristics surrounding the islands disputes will be discussed at the end of the chapter.

The Sino-Vietnamese War: 1979

China's use of force in Vietnam in 1979 is an aberration when compared to the other case studies in this thesis. The land border between Vietnam and China was not the primary cause of the dispute in 1979, and China resorted to the use of force, not to resolve territorial claims, but for grander strategic reasons in the context of the Sino-Soviet split and Vietnam's involvement in Cambodia, which was China's ally. This case is relevant because China's strategic decision making process followed the methodologies the PRC demonstrated in India in 1962 and the Soviet Union in 1969, and highlights the circumstances under which the PRC detects a shift in the cost-benefit balance and abandons diplomacy and deference in favor of a surprise attack across a border, albeit an uncontested one, as a deterrent signal to Vietnam and other regional players.

The Bi-Lateral Relationship between China and Vietnam

China and Vietnam had been allies in the Asian socialist movement following WWII, but as the Sino-Soviet split deepened throughout the 1960s, Vietnam became a battleground between the competing ideologies of the great powers. Both China and the Soviet Union vied for influence in Vietnam and aided North Vietnam's effort against the South and the United States during

the Vietnam War. Following the withdrawal of American forces in 1973, Vietnam allied with the Soviets at the expense of the Chinese, and this decision would color the interaction between the former allies in battles over contested territories and regional influence.¹ China aided Vietnam, along with the Soviets, to counter US regional influence to the tune of \$20 billion.² As the US war in Vietnam was winding down, China began to limit the aid it provided so as to not arm a potential future adversary. The Soviet Union, eager to maintain and strengthen ties with Vietnam as a check on Chinese power, filled the gap.³

China was concerned about the influence the newly unified Vietnam would wield in Southeast Asia. Specifically, China was troubled by Soviet attempts to use Vietnam to encircle China, and that Vietnam, backed by its powerful ally, would challenge Chinese ambitions in the region.⁴ In response to Sino-American rapprochement, the USSR strengthened its ties with countries bordering China, especially Vietnam.⁵ China also wanted to warn other Southeast Asian nations that a challenge to its fundamental interests would not be tolerated, and that alliances with superpowers at China's expense were unacceptable.⁶ China also felt that other nations in the region were taking it too lightly, and attacked Vietnam in order to demonstrate that China, not the US or USSR, was the primary country to consider when making foreign policy decisions.⁷ Chinese concerns of encirclement were confirmed with the signing of the Soviet-Vietnamese Treaty of Friendship on November 2 1978.⁸ These encircling alliances were an underlying worry of the Chinese, but Vietnam's invasion of China's ally Cambodia on December 25 1979 was the trigger for the conflict.

Vietnam invaded Cambodia at the request of the Cambodian people who were suffering from genocide at the hands of the Khmer Rouge and Pol Pot.

¹ Bruce A. Elleman, *Modern Chinese Warfare, 1795-1989* (Routledge, 2001), 284.

² Elleman, *Modern Chinese Warfare, 1795-1989*, 285.

³ Elleman, *Modern Chinese Warfare, 1795-1989*, 285.

⁴ Henry J. Kenny, "Vietnamese Perceptions of the 1979 War with China," in *Chinese Warfighting: The PLA Experience Since 1949*, by Mark A Ryan, David Michael Finkelstein, and Michael A McDevitt (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2003), 218.

⁵ Elleman, *Modern Chinese Warfare, 1795-1989*, 287.

⁶ Kenny, "Vietnamese Perceptions of the 1979 War with China," 218.

⁷ Kenny, "Vietnamese Perceptions of the 1979 War with China," 219.

⁸ Elleman, *Modern Chinese Warfare, 1795-1989*, 288.

Vietnam was also fed up with cross-border raids into its territory, which they perceived to be motivated by Chinese involvement.⁹ Not wanting to become bogged down, Vietnam surged forward and seized Phnom Penh on January 7th, a symbolic act that degraded the legitimacy of the Pol Pot regime by evicting it from the capital. The move also caused China to lose face.¹⁰

Chinese Political Strategy

China's immediate political objective was to induce Vietnam to end its operations against the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia.¹¹ China's broader aim was to demonstrate the limits of Soviet power by testing the alliance of Friendship and Cooperation between the USSR and Vietnam.¹² The war started three days after the 29th anniversary of the 30 year Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assurance signed in 1950. China wanted out of that treaty, but initially feared the Soviet response should they voice their desire not to renew it. On February 15 1979, the first day China could legally announce its intent not to renew the treaty, China deployed the bulk of its troops, upwards of 1.5 million men, to the Sino-Soviet border.¹³ China warned Moscow that a Soviet intercession on behalf of Vietnam, which China announced its intent to invade, would mean all-out war between China and the Soviet Union. A Chinese invasion not countered by a Soviet response would demonstrate the actual power relationships in the region and allow China to exit the Sino-Soviet treaty as desired.¹⁴

China also gained tacit approval from the US to conduct the invasion and secured assurances that neither the US nor or USSR would intervene on behalf of Vietnam. While visiting President Carter in Washington DC, Chinese Premier Deng Xiaoping said that he "wanted to teach Vietnam a lesson" so that the other nations of Asia could witness Vietnam's defeat by Chinese power. Carter was surprised at first, but then agreed. The US assured China that the USSR would not take action against China, because it had no vital interest at stake,

⁹ Kenny, "Vietnamese Perceptions of the 1979 War with China," 220.

¹⁰ Kenny, "Vietnamese Perceptions of the 1979 War with China," 221.

¹¹ Edward C O'Dowd, *Military strategy in the Third Indochina War: The Last Maoist War* (London; New York: Routledge, 2007), 3.

¹² Elleman, *Modern Chinese Warfare, 1795-1989*, 289.

¹³ Elleman, *Modern Chinese Warfare, 1795-1989*, 292.

¹⁴ Elleman, *Modern Chinese Warfare, 1795-1989*, 292.

and would not start a two-front war with China.¹⁵

The design of the campaign into Vietnam was similar to what the Chinese had planned in India and the Soviet Union: it would be a lightning fast attack to seize the territorial capitals of the bordering provinces and force Vietnam to either abandon Cambodia or fight a two-front war.¹⁶ Unfortunately for the PLA, the impending attack was not as much of a surprise as had been intended. Vietnam, seasoned by nearly continuous war since the 1950s, suspected a possible invasion along the Chinese border. With Phnom Penh about to fall to their advance in early January, the Vietnamese prepared for a conflict along their northern border.¹⁷

The Military Engagement

On February 17, 1979 more than 400,000 soldiers of the Chinese People's Liberation Army attacked across the Vietnamese border in 26 places.¹⁸ The invasion did not go as quickly as planned and casualties mounted. Instead of a lightning campaign, the capture of the objectives required a bitter three-week struggle. The Vietnamese fought from well-prepared defensive positions and the PLA stuck with its human-wave tactics, a holdover from Mao's era. After finally capturing the objective city of Lang Son on March 5, Beijing announced that it was declaring a unilateral cease-fire and would withdraw from Vietnam. This was an exact repeat of the plan used in India in 1962. China withdrew from Vietnam one month after invading, on March 16 1979, and retreated behind the original border leaving in its wake massive destruction.¹⁹ The Soviet Union did not assist Vietnam in its fight against China or Cambodia, and China concluded that the "bitter lesson" had been passed to Vietnam.

Vietnam, along with many Western observers, thought that the teaching of lessons went in the other direction. Vietnam did not abandon its Cambodian operation. The performance of the PLA had been very poor, and casualties were much higher on the Chinese side. The Vietnamese were able to slow the Chinese advance and inflict heavy losses. Additionally, the Chinese withdrawal

¹⁵ Kenny, "Vietnamese Perceptions of the 1979 War with China," 222.

¹⁶ O'Dowd, *Military Strategy in the Third Indochina War*, 3.

¹⁷ Kenny, "Vietnamese Perceptions of the 1979 War with China," 227.

¹⁸ Kenny, "Vietnamese Perceptions of the 1979 War with China," 217.

¹⁹ Kenny, "Vietnamese Perceptions of the 1979 War with China," 228.

did not mark the end of the conflict in Cambodia or along the Chinese border. The Chinese maintained a heavy concentration of troops on the border and continued to threaten Vietnam with a “second bitter lesson” until the last Vietnamese soldier left Cambodia in 1989.²⁰ There were follow-on battles along the border in 1981 and 1984, comprised mainly of artillery exchanges initiated by the Chinese and designed to draw Vietnamese forces to the border.²¹ The war ended, not because China imposed its will on Vietnam, but rather because Vietnam had achieved its objectives in Cambodia by eliminating the Khmer Rouge and had withdrawn following victory.²² An alternate explanation of the timing of the end of hostilities has to do with the Soviet Union. The Chinese threat of a second invasion served as a constant reminder of the Soviet failure to follow through on their alliance commitments to Vietnam and demonstrate the relative strength of the Chinese compared to the USSR. The threat of a Chinese second lesson, and the near daily artillery exchanges on the Sino-Vietnamese border, ended when the Soviet Union began to collapse in 1989.²³

Analysis

1) China attacked Vietnam for a number of reasons in 1979. The first was to help its ally Cambodia by distracting the Vietnamese army with an invasion from the north. The second reason was that Vietnam was increasingly leaning toward the USSR following the Sino-Soviet split, and the invasion was a deterrent signal intended to convince the Soviets that the China would not tolerate efforts to encircle it.

2) China performed reasoned risk assessments before deciding to invade Vietnam. China gained assurances from the United States that neither the US nor the USSR would intervene on Vietnam’s behalf. This reduced the risk of the operation for China, and encouraged it to proceed with plans for an attack. The difference between this expedition and Chinese success in 1962 in India was one of assessments. China was not capable of imposing the same costs on Vietnam as it was able to do versus India.

3) As in previous conflicts, China identified the need to deter future

²⁰ O’Dowd, *Military Strategy in the Third Indochina War*, 4.

²¹ O’Dowd, *Military Strategy in the Third Indochina War*, 4.

²² O’Dowd, *Military Strategy in the Third Indochina War*, 165.

²³ Elleman, *Modern Chinese Warfare, 1795-1989*, 297.

unfavorable behavior in its neighbors. In this case, the nibbling China wished to rectify was not one of territory, but one of prestige and influence. Once the Chinese decided the crisis merited a military response, it assessed its strengths and those of its adversary. It was the failure in this analysis, and the subsequent inaccurate cost-benefit assessments, that led to the tactical failures in Vietnam in 1979. The performance of the PLA in Vietnam was dismal, but it did capture its stated objectives after three weeks of fighting. It also set the stage for another unilateral cease-fire and withdrawal following the delivery of a psychological shock.

3) The strategy advocating quick, decisive battles like those attempted in India in 1962 and on Zhenbao Island in 1969 was again attempted in Vietnam in 1979. The difference this time was the PLA was a shell of its former self due to internal reforms and the influence of the CCP.²⁴ The PLA had become a political test bed for Mao and the CCP, and its war fighting capability had been neglected for over a decade. As a result the PLA persisted with human wave assaults as its main combat tactic.²⁵ The PLA was also going up against an experienced Vietnamese army, battle-hardened by wars against the French, the US, and the RVN in the previous two decades. Poor execution by the PLA and the resultant 40,000 Chinese casualties prevented China from achieving its objective of reliving pressure on Cambodia. The Sino-Indo war as a template for deterrent signaling failed again in 1979, ten years after it failed against the Soviet Union in 1969.

4) China may have taught an unintended lesson as well. Vietnam claimed “the expansionist and hegemonistic [sic] strategy pursued by the Chinese leaders over the past three decades” was the most dangerous threat in Asia. Instead of deterring regional counter-Chinese alliances, Beijing may have encouraged them by its behavior in Vietnam.²⁶ This war marked the second military failure of the template used in the Sino-Indo war of 1962. However, it did accomplish its fundamental objective: when the Soviet Union failed to respond, it demonstrated the limitations of Soviet strategic reach and

²⁴ O’Dowd, *Military Strategy in the Third Indochina War*, 153.

²⁵ O’Dowd, *Military Strategy in the Third Indochina War*, 153.

²⁶ Steven J. Hood, *Dragons Entangled: Indochina and the China-Vietnam War* (Armonk, NY: MESHARPE, 1992), 4.

delegitimized its regional alliances.²⁷ It represented again the Chinese version of deterrence; an invasion designed to forestall the next Vietnamese move.²⁸ In this, it reflected a serious long-term strategic analysis.²⁹ Singapore's Prime Minister said; "The Western press wrote off the Chinese punitive action [in Vietnam] as a failure. I believe it changed the history of East Asia."³⁰

The next cases cover the 1974 conflict over the Paracel Islands and the 1988 conflict in the Spratly Islands.

The Paracel Islands: 1974

The Paracel Islands lie approximately 200 nautical miles south of Hainan Island, and 200 nautical miles east of Danang. The islands are divided into two principle groups, the Amphitrite Group in the east, controlled by the PRC since it was abandoned by the Chinese Nationalists in 1950, and the Crescent group in the west, which France transferred the to the Republic of Vietnam (RVN, South Vietnam) in 1956. The entire region was claimed by China, the RVN, and The Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV, North Vietnam), although the PRC and the DRV had signed a temporary agreement about the islands as allies during the Vietnam War.

There were a few minor skirmishes between the PRC and the RVN throughout the 1960s and 1970s, but these were limited in intensity and scope for a number of reasons. First, China did not possess the naval capability to project power that far out to sea. Secondly, even though the RVN navy was weak, the presence of the United States in the region indirectly supported Vietnamese claims in the Crescent Group. The Paracel Islands were the scene of regular patrols by US aircraft, and China lodged 497 protests over US violations of China's territorial waters and airspace during the Vietnam War.³¹ As the troubles for South Vietnam mounted throughout the war, the RVN withdrew troops from all of their claims in the Crescent group except Pattle Island, the focus of the 1974 conflict.

²⁷ Kissinger, *On China*, 340.

²⁸ Kissinger, *On China*, 368.

²⁹ Kissinger, *On China*, 370.

³⁰ Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First: The Singapore Story: 1965-2000* (HarperCollins, 2000), 603.

³¹ Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, 175.

The Bi-Lateral Relationship between China and Vietnam

The bilateral relationship between China and the Government of South Vietnam, the RVN, regarding the Paracel Islands had a long history. Each side made irredentist claims to the Paracel Islands. China and Vietnam had occupied the islands at different times throughout recorded history. Each of the islands has at least two names, and some have four or five, reflecting the differing periods of ownership.³² The fact that none of the islands supports an indigenous population has made the shifts in control possible and seemingly absolute. Before the formalization of maritime rights and claims associated with the United Nations the islands were of little strategic value. When the prospect of valuable maritime resources became known in the 1970s, the claims on the Paracel and other islands grew in significance, as did the willingness of claimants to use force to secure access to those resources.

Chinese Political Strategy

The interaction of three events in 1973-1974 led China to identify a finite window of opportunity to establish a legitimate claim on the Paracel Islands. The US was disengaging from Indochina following the peace agreement of 1973, Soviet influence was increasing in North Vietnam and in the region, and it appeared that South Vietnam would fall to the North as part of a unified country allied with the USSR. Moving to secure the portion of the Crescent group occupied by the Saigon government would pose little risk. Waiting until after the expected fall of the South would mean a possible confrontation with the Soviet Union, along with the risk of further Soviet encirclement along China's southern coast. As the importance of offshore islands increased, largely the result natural resources and geo-strategic significance, China concluded that tolerating a Vietnamese presence in "its" islands undermined the validity of the sovereign claim.³³

China adopted a two-pronged strategy for the Spratly Islands—diplomacy and armament. Diplomatically, it reiterated its claims to all of the Paracel Islands and the Spratly Islands (discussed below). The RVN responded to these

³² John W. Garver, "China's Push Through the South China Sea: The Interaction of Bureaucratic and National Interests," *The China Quarterly* 132 (1992): 1000, doi:10.1017/S0305741000045513.

³³ Steven J. Hood, *Dragons Entangled*, 125.

diplomatic efforts by deploying additional military force to the region and re-occupying islands in the Crescent group it had previously abandoned.

China responded with its own armament effort, and an escalatory arms race developed as each side strengthened its position by emplacing military personnel on the unoccupied reefs and patrolling the waters with naval vessels. By the evening of January 18 1974, there were four Vietnamese naval vessels in the Paracel Islands, including two cutters, one destroyer escort, and a minesweeper. The Chinese had six ships, which were smaller than the Vietnamese vessels but better manned and maintained.³⁴ The stage was set for a confrontation, and as in the previous examples, the on-scene commander would be acting on the direction of the highest levels of the Chinese government. Chairman Mao, Prime Minister Zhou Enlai, and future leader Deng Xiaoping were all directly involved in the operation.³⁵

The Military Engagement

On January 19, 1974, naval forces from China and Vietnam clashed over the Crescent Group in the western part of the Paracel Islands. Throughout the day the Vietnamese landed on three islands occupied by Chinese troops and firefights ensued. The naval vessels began to exchange fire, and by the end of fighting on the January 19, all four RVN vessels were damaged, some by friendly fire. On the Chinese side a minesweeper suffered heavy damage.

Following the action on the 19th, China deployed an additional 15 vessels from Hainan Island and over 500 more troops. The Vietnamese did not reinforce in kind. The Chinese assault on the remaining Vietnamese forces on Pattle Island began on the morning of January 20, and by noon the 48 remaining RVN soldiers and one American observer had surrendered.³⁶ Following this engagement, China was the sole occupant in the Paracel Islands and had secured control over the entire archipelago.³⁷ In the months after this exchange, China expanded the port facilities on a number of the islands, dredged deeper approach channels, and increased their troop presence.³⁸ The

³⁴ Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, 282.

³⁵ Garver, "China's Push Through the South China Sea," 1003.

³⁶ Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, 283.

³⁷ Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, 283.

³⁸ Garver, "China's Push Through the South China Sea," 1005.

entirety of the Paracel Islands has remained under Chinese control to this day.

Although the DRV did not have any claims to lose to China in the Paracel Islands in 1974, Chinese aggressiveness in this area concerned Hanoi.³⁹ This would set the tone for a deteriorating relationship following the unification of Vietnam in 1975, and become a factor in border and island disputes with China in 1979 and 1988.⁴⁰

Analysis

1) China had wanted to reclaim the Islands and evict the Vietnamese before 1974, but waited for the United States to leave South Vietnam and withdraw its influence from the region. China also acted before the South Vietnamese government fell to the DRV in 1975. Waiting until after unification would have complicated the contest and required direct conflict with another socialist government and former ally. China perceived a finite window of opportunity to realize a claim it desired and acted before the conditions shifted unfavorably.

2) China pursued a *fait accompli* tactic, and hoped that the RVN would abandon their claims after Chinese forces established a presence. This conflict represents the only case in this thesis where the Chinese used force to displace the military forces of another nation and permanently add to the territory under its control. Granted, it was fewer than 50 troops that had only been on the island for a short time, but in all other disputes China had retreated from the occupied territory it had seized.

3) China learned from this conflict that through the use of force it could assert its maritime claims. It also gained an appreciation for the value of an expeditionary naval capability in light of the growing value of offshore islands for both maritime claims and access to natural resources.⁴¹

There was not a buildup to this conflict like there had been in 1962 and 1969, and China did not use the phrase “Teaching Bitter Lessons” like it had before. China did demonstrate awareness of timing and opportunities, and limited the use of force to only one area, and only after Vietnam had deployed its forces to the islands. China was willing to maintain the status quo until the

³⁹ Kenny, “Vietnamese Perceptions of the 1979 War with China,” 225.

⁴⁰ Pao-min Chang, *The Sino-Vietnamese Territorial Dispute* (Praeger, 1986).

⁴¹ Steven J. Hood, *Dragons Entangled*, 134.

balances of forces in the region, and the threat of a declining position, shifted to favor the adversary. This case represents yet another Chinese move to check Soviet efforts towards encirclement, and a keen sense of timing to arrest unfavorable shifts in the regional balance of power. Even then, Sino-US rapprochement and US withdrawal from South Vietnam were required to ensure US non-involvement.⁴²

In 1988, China would again find itself in a fight with Vietnam over small islands, this time in the Spratly Island Chain 300 miles farther to the south.

The Spratly Islands: 1988

The Bi-Lateral Relationship between China and Vietnam

The Spratly Islands, approximately 500 nautical miles south of Hainan Island and 300 nautical miles east of Saigon, are currently claimed by six different nations: China, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, Philippines, and Taiwan. Much like the Parcel Islands, these remote reefs, some below water at high tide, are important in establishing maritime boundaries and economic zones, and sit above large reserves of natural resources, such as oil and natural gas.

The Spratly Islands also have additional significance because of their location near key sea-lanes, especially those that transit between the Strait of Malacca and East Asia. This is the main route for oil moving from the Persian Gulf to the industrial coasts of China, Korea, and Japan, and control over these waters brings with it strategic advantages in addition to the intrinsic value of the islands themselves.

The ability to affect vital economic flows that pass through maritime routes creates a strategic empowerment for any country that can disrupt or ensure this trade.⁴³ Given the desire of China and Vietnam to expand their economies, maintaining the free flow of commerce is within their strategic interest.⁴⁴ As one Vietnamese military officer put it, "Security insurance at sea in the sense of creating a stable environment for national . . . development [bears] a long-term and pressing significance, particularly in the context of

⁴² Garver, "China's Push Through the South China Sea," 1001.

⁴³ Todd Kelly, "Vietnamese Claims to the Truong Sa Archipelago," *Explorations in Southeast Asian Studies* 3 (1999), <http://www.hawaii.edu/cseas/pubs/explore/todd.html>.

⁴⁴ Kelly, "Vietnamese Claims to the Truong Sa Archipelago."

countries [preparing] to step into the 21st century."⁴⁵

China is also interested in disrupting the regional military influence of Vietnam, as well as in denying the Vietnamese any sphere of influence outside of their mainland territory. Vietnam is aware of the PRC's desire for an increased presence in Southeast Asia. Hanoi is also not keen on having what it sees as an enemy establishing a military base on islands that have been used as a staging area for military conquest in the past. Given the tiny size of the Spratly Islands, it is not surprising that the archipelago has never supported any indigenous or permanent human settlements apart from the military occupations that began this century. Fishermen have used the archipelago as a temporary encampment for centuries.⁴⁶ When French naval forces took possession of the Truong Sa Islands in 1933, Chinese fishermen were found on several of the islets in the chain.⁴⁷

While Vietnam's history forms the basis for its claims to the Spratly Islands, it was the current situation in the archipelago that strengthened Hanoi's case. Before Vietnam reunified in 1975, both the North and the South established a presence in the Spratly Islands to counter China.⁴⁸ By 1988 Vietnam occupied as many as 24 features, more than twice as many as any other claimant.⁴⁹ Control of the Spratly Islands by Vietnam would create a type of "Strait of Vietnam" through which these sea-lanes would then pass, and it was this situation the Chinese wished to avoid by establishing their own physical presence in 1988.⁵⁰

Chinese Political Strategy

As the perceived value of the islands in the South China Sea increased, other claimants established a physical presence on the islands large enough to support a military detachment. China decided, sometime in 1987, to establish

⁴⁵ Bradford L. Thomas and Australian National University Peace Research Centre, *The Spratly Islands Imbroglia: a Tangled Web of Conflict* (Australian National University, Research School of Pacific Studies, Peace Research Centre, 1990), 302–310.

⁴⁶ Kelly, "Vietnamese Claims to the Truong Sa Archipelago."

⁴⁷ Mark J. Valencia, Jon M. Van Dyke, and Noel A. Ludwig, *Sharing the Resources of the South China Sea* (University of Hawaii Press, 1999), 67.

⁴⁸ Chang, *The Sino-Vietnamese Territorial Dispute*.

⁴⁹ Valencia, Dyke, and Ludwig, *Sharing the Resources of the South China Sea*, 8.

⁵⁰ Raymond L. Garthoff, *The Great Transition: American-Soviet Relations and the End of the Cold War* (Brookings Institution Press, 1994), 536.

its own presence on the remaining unoccupied islands it claimed.⁵¹ China had claimed the islands since 1951, but did not maintain any outposts. All of the islands permanently above high tide had already been occupied by other claimants besides China, causing China's relative position to deteriorate.⁵² At least five of these features had Vietnamese troops stationed on them, totaling approximately "1,000 soldiers or sailors and some construction workers."⁵³

Another reason for China's expansion into the South China Sea may have had its roots in the bureaucratic calculations of the PLAN. The Navy saw this as a reason to strengthen its long-range capability, and transition away from being merely a coastal defense force.⁵⁴ This action was the first distant operation for the PLAN, which has continued to expand in capability until the present. A number of survey expeditions were made in 1987 to examine 20 unoccupied reefs, and Fiery Cross was selected as the location for the first outpost. In the first week of February 1988, a total of 11 PLAN ships arrived at the reef, whereupon construction soon began.

The Military Engagement

China's decision to build a permanent structure on Fiery Cross Reef elicited a concerned response from the Vietnamese. From a tactical perspective, Fiery Cross was isolated and vulnerable.⁵⁵ The reef on which the Chinese were building their outpost was surrounded by a number of additional, unoccupied reefs, which soon became relevant to both the Vietnamese and Chinese and would be the setting of the upcoming skirmishes. Vietnam's first move, following the arrival of the naval and construction vessels at Fiery Cross in January 1988, was to occupy at least five of the surrounding reefs in an attempt to create a perimeter around the Chinese.⁵⁶ Thus began a race between the Vietnamese and Chinese to establish a presence around Fiery Cross, much like Spratly Island dispute itself but on a smaller scale. Initially the Chinese frigates attempted to chase away the Vietnamese as they attempted

⁵¹ Garver, "China's Push Through the South China Sea," 1023.

⁵² Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, 288.

⁵³ Valencia, Dyke, and Ludwig, *Sharing the Resources of the South China Sea*, 31.

⁵⁴ Garver, "China's Push Through the South China Sea," 999-1028.

⁵⁵ Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, 294.

⁵⁶ Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, 294.

to land on the outlying reefs.⁵⁷ The first confrontation occurred when Chinese and Vietnamese landing parties arrived on Cuateron Reef and attempted to plant their respective flags. As the conflict progressed, it was marked by contests to claim the features surrounding Firey Cross.⁵⁸ China deployed additional vessels, including a guided missile destroyer of the Luda class.

The major clash began on March 14 1988, as each side landed forces on Johnson Reef in an attempt to claim it. There were fifty-eight Chinese and forty-three Vietnamese on the island on the morning of March 15, and a shoving match broke out and shots were fired.⁵⁹ The Vietnamese vessels provided fire support for their ground party, after which the Chinese responded by sending all of their ships to the area of the battle. All three Vietnamese ships were hit, two were sunk and the other badly damaged in a battle that lasted only 30 minutes.⁶⁰ Three Vietnamese soldiers were killed on land and seventy-four Vietnamese sailors were reported missing at sea.⁶¹ Vietnamese forces retreated from the area following this exchange.

Although China possessed an overwhelming naval superiority in the area following the clash, Beijing ordered its ships not to engage any other islands occupied by the Vietnamese.⁶² This order supports the Chinese claim that they did not intend to evict Vietnam from any of the islands they occupied, and that China only wished to construct the outpost of Firey Cross and establish a presence on a previously uninhabited reef.⁶³

Analysis

1) China saw its bargaining position weakening in the Spratly Islands as other nations reinforced their military presence and the perceived value of the islands increased. China did not have a military presence in the region until 1988, after all of the islands that remain above water during high tide were

⁵⁷ Alexander C. Huang, "The PLA Navy at War, 1949-1999," in *Chinese Warfighting: The PLA Experience Since 1949*, by Mark A Ryan, David Michael Finkelstein, and Michael A McDevitt (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2003), 263.

⁵⁸ Garver, "China's Push Through the South China Sea," 1022.

⁵⁹ Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, 295.

⁶⁰ Huang, "The PLA Navy at War, 1949-1999," 263.

⁶¹ Garver, "China's Push Through the South China Sea," 1023.

⁶² Ning Lu, *The Dynamics of Foreign-Policy Decision Making in China* (Westview Press, 2000), 126.

⁶³ Lu, *The Dynamics of Foreign-Policy Decision Making in China*, 126-127.

claimed and occupied by other countries. This is a continuation of the Chinese trend to act with force when the relative bargaining position is in decline, and it appears it will continue to decline with out intervention.

2) China relied again on the strategy of establishing a *fait accompli*, and has maintained possession of Fiery Cross reef since 1988. The use of naval vessels and the construction of an outpost legitimized the Chinese claim to the area, stopped the relative decline in influence, and extended the dispute indefinitely as China continued to strengthen its naval capacity.

3) China, when presented with the military opportunity to displace the Vietnamese from a number of features following a naval victory on March 15 1988, did not act to expand at the expense of other nations. It only occupied previously uninhabited reefs in order to strengthen its maritime claims. This restraint demonstrates an awareness of escalation risk, and the desire to avoid it. China did not want to create a greater crisis by territorial expansion, which follows in line with its behavior in earlier conflicts.

Vietnam Summary

The Vietnam case study spans a range of conflict types. The island disputes contain some elements of the Chinese method of crisis identification, but with military responses unique to the offshore environment. Unlike its land borders, where China has offered to settle every dispute diplomatically, China has never entered into talks directly regarding the sovereignty of these offshore islands, nor has it demonstrated any willingness to drop claims to any of the disputed islands as a concession.⁶⁴

The following synthesis chapter will compile the observations from this and the previous case studies, and attempt to deduce a Chinese strategy for dealing with these disputes.

⁶⁴ Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, 267.

Chapter 5

Synthesis

A Look Over the Shoulder

The cases presented here suggest a number of observations common to the Chinese decision to use force: They are: 1) Fear of exploitation following domestic unrest, 2) Perceived decline in bargaining power over a disputed territory, 3) Conclusion that with time matters would continue to worsen, 4) The perceived need to deter future aggression and exploitation by changing the adversary's perception through a demonstration of Chinese strength, 5) Deliberate and reasonable risk assessment and risk mitigation efforts through close coordination of political and military objectives, and 6) The dual roles for the use of force; to deliver a psychological shock and to eliminate the threat to Chinese bargaining power along the contested border.

These six observations suggest a Chinese strategy for the use of force in territorial disputes that is captured by the Chinese phrase “Teaching Bitter Lessons.” The following will describe the six observations in detail. Following that, I will attempt to deduce the Chinese strategy for the use of force in these disputes.

Six Observations:

Fear of exploitation due to domestic unrest

The Sino-Indo War of 1962 occurred on the heels of the famine created by the Great Leap Forward, and the Sino-Soviet border conflict of 1969 occurred during the height of the unrest created by the Cultural Revolution. Some have suggested that the leadership of the PRC manufactured conflicts to inspire Chinese nationalism and unite the population behind their leadership in the fight against an external threat.¹ However, there is nothing in the evidence from these case studies to support this hypothesis. What, then, could explain the relationship between domestic unrest and territorial conflict?

¹ Thomas Christensen suggests that Mao's domestic mobilization concerns influenced his foreign policy decisions. Thomas J. Christensen, *Useful Adversaries: Grand Strategy, Domestic Mobilization, and Sino-American Conflict, 1947-1958* (Princeton University Press, 1996).

China was keenly aware of its history of victimization at the hands of foreign powers during its century of shame and humiliation. Because of internal problems in the Qing Dynasty China was unable to resist exploitation by external powers between 1840 and 1949. As a result of this history, China was inclined to perceive the actions of other states as probing of China's internal weakness. China's fear of encroachment and exploitation weighed heavily on their decision-making process and the decision to use force in these conflicts. Since the Sino-Indo War of 1962 and the Sino-Soviet border dispute of 1969 occurred immediately after periods of domestic unrest, China may have been predisposed to revert to a Hobbesian interpretation of world events and assume the worst of its neighbors. China looked for indications of probing following periods of domestic unrest, and often saw foreign actions in a sinister light regardless of the other state's intent. China tends to see events in the context of historical failures, specifically the colonial period beginning in 1840. China reverted to the use of force to, in part, dispel the notion that the Great Leap Forward or the Cultural Revolution had made it vulnerable to conquest. This occurred in concert with a decline in bargaining power over the disputed territories.

Perceived decline in bargaining power over a disputed territory

In each of these case studies, China reacted to changes in the political climate and perceived aggressiveness in its neighbors. China performed comparative analyses of the relative strength of the military force backing contested territorial claims and was aware when it tipped in favor of the adversary. In each case there was a perception on the part of the Chinese that their claims to territory were in decline relative to the position of other states. In India in 1962, the Forward Policy called for an extra division of Indian troops in an area where China had only small outposts. Between 1964 and 1969, the USSR deployed an additional 17 modern divisions to the Chinese border. In the island disputes the other nations had established permanent settlements where China had not. Each of these deployments outmatched the forces China had on the other side of the border.

There was also a perception on the part of the Chinese that the value of the contested claims was on the rise, or that the legitimacy of the claim by

others was increasing relative to the Chinese position. The discovery of natural resources in offshore islands made claims on the Paracel Islands and the Spratly Islands more valuable. The value of those islands was rising, and China's inconclusive claims on them were weakening relative to the other states in the dispute. The other claimants in the Spratly Islands deployed troops to garrison the larger islands, and, by 1988, China was the only country that did not have personnel stationed there. China's operation to construct an outpost on Firey Cross Reef became a conflict with Vietnam when the two countries jockeyed to secure additional land around that outpost. The declining position in these claims contributed to the Chinese perception that time was also becoming a critical variable affecting its relative bargaining position. Changes in the local balance of power inspired Chinese action.

Timeline pressures, and the perception of closing windows

China's decision to use force in these disputes was influenced by a sense of timing. In cases where the balance of bargaining power was stable China pursued a diplomatic resolution to the disputed territories in an effort to remove an area of uncertainty from its border. This was the case on the border with India before the 1962 war and along the border with the Soviet Union before the 1969 conflict.

When China's adversaries increased their military presence along the contested borders following the failure of these diplomatic efforts, China assessed that the relative decline in bargaining power along the border was likely to continue along an unfavorable trend. China is prone to action when it senses a relative decline, before the imbalance in strength along the contested border becomes more acute. The balance of forces shifted to favor the adversary just before the 1962 conflict with India and the 1969 conflict with the USSR.

China had not considered invading Vietnam before the Vietnamese invasion of China's ally in Cambodia. China rushed to action on the Vietnamese border to create a two-front war for the Vietnamese, before the Khmer Rouge was routed. The invasion was also timed on the 29th anniversary of the Sino-Soviet treaty the Chinese wanted to break, and soon after the Soviet-Vietnamese treaty was ratified. In the case of the Paracel Islands, also

discussed in Chapter 4, China acted to take advantage of a finite window of opportunity for low-risk seizure of the contested islands following US withdrawal from Vietnam and before the reunification of the country under socialist control. China moved into the Spratly Islands to solidify claims on uninhabited reefs as other nations strengthened their claims by garrisoning troops there. China acts to rectify the balance of power. The decision to act was meant as a signal to the other state in the conflict and to the rest of China's regional neighbors.

Deterring future aggression

China did not view these events as isolated incidents. China learned, beginning in 1840, that one injustice would be followed by countless more. China learned that there was no such thing as a single concession in a bilateral border dispute, but that potential adversaries would look at China's willingness to tolerate intimidation through military force and move to extract additional gains at China's expense. China had been exposed to the "give an inch, they'll take a mile" dynamic during the period of colonial expansion and exploitation, and their primary motivating influence was to prevent that from happening again. China wanted to demonstrate its strength, and signal that the China of 1960s, 70s, and 80s was not the weak China the region had exploited in the 19th century. China practices deterrence. The use of force to send this deterrent signal was not without risk, and China looked for ways to mitigate the risk of escalation and third party intervention in each of these conflicts.

Rational risk assessment and risk mitigation efforts

China preferred diplomacy to force. China attempted diplomacy when it needed to and used unilateral force when diplomatic efforts had been exhausted or deemed unproductive. The Chinese used a calendar to organize tactical and strategic decisions and periodic reassessments, especially in India in 1962. This demonstrated close control from the top of the government over the actions of the lower level diplomats and military units. In no case was the use of force initiated by a low-level commander and then allowed to escalate to war. Every one of these engagements demonstrates a high degree of control and coordination between the leaders in Beijing and the forces in the field.

China senses and responds to risk. China was aware of the risks of

escalation, and was concerned that these conflicts would escalate beyond what it desired. China feared third party intervention in India, the USSR, and during the war with Vietnam and acted to mitigate the risk in each case.

In each of these cases China balanced the perceived benefit of acting to deter future aggression against the potential cost of escalation of the conflict beyond a desired point. China did not always make the correct assessments, and even though it made mistakes, its decision to use force followed reasonable assessments and mitigation efforts. Another unique aspect of China's use of force was that it was never employed to seize territory and permanently expand its borders.

The Dual Roles for the Use of Force

China's use of force fulfilled two roles: the delivery of a psychological shock to the adversary and the elimination of a military threat to the Chinese claim. The first role for the use of force was the delivery of a psychological shock to the adversary. China did not intend to capture ground as a bargaining device.² China acted to deliver surprise and shock its adversaries. In every case the Chinese wanted to "teach a lesson" instead of expanding their borders. The Chinese action to displace 49 Vietnamese soldiers and one American observer from Pattle Reef in 1974 was the only time in these case studies China used force to permanently increase its sovereign land area. The other role for the use of force was to eliminate the threat to China's bargaining position. The physical reality of troops across the border was the root of the assessment of declining bargain power, and motivated China to use force to arrest that decline by removing the threat.

These observations represent the six main trends in the case studies examined for this thesis. These trends may inform assessments of China's future behavior when viewed together as part of China's strategy to "teach bitter lessons" to its adversaries in these conflicts.

Teaching Bitter Lessons: China's Two-Level Game

China's strategy for dealing with these territorial crises is captured by

² This is a departure of Clausewitz's definition of war with limited objectives, where territory is seized and then used as a bargaining chip later on. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 610.

Mao's phrase: "Teaching Bitter Lessons." The act of "teaching lessons" implies the "teacher" needs to change the behavior of the student. This phrase assumes the teacher knows or understands something the student does not, and through the delivery of a "lesson" the perspective, and thereby the behavior, of the targeted student will be modified. In these cases China felt the need to realign the perceptions of its adversaries to the reality of the situation as China saw it. China was relatively content with the physical location of the land borders, but found the political situation and prospect of disadvantageous change based on what it saw as an adversary's misperception-based aggression unendurable.

China did not view the bilateral border disputes in isolation. China's experience, beginning in 1840, was that one forced concession in a territorial dispute would be followed by additional encroachments. China's own lesson learned was that there was no such thing as a single concession to one other state, but that every other interested party would look at China's behavior as an opportunity. China's demonstrated willingness to tolerate intimidation through military force opened the door to additional injustices in the 19th century. The first level of China's game was focused on its lesser neighbors.

The lesson China desired to teach was: *"Don't poke the dragon, we're stronger than you think, and that goes for all of you."* China failed to teach this lesson at the beginning of its century of shame, and desired to avoid a repeat of history now that it was capable of defending itself. The lesson that China attempted to teach in each of these case studies was one of deterrence. China attempted to influence its adversary's cost-benefit analysis by demonstrating that the costs of further exploitation of China would be higher than the adversary apparently perceived them to be. China was also communicating with the rest of its neighbors and wished to deter a replay of the multidirectional exploitation from the prior century. Understanding China's strategy in deterrent terms accounts for China's description of these events as "self-defensive counterattacks" even though China initiated the hostilities each time. China used the word "defensive" in relation to future exploitation, not aggression that had already taken place.

China pursued diplomatic solutions and offered reasonable concessions

in all of its land border disputes. When a state, such as India, refused these and militarized the border China saw those actions as potentially the first of a series. The nibbling they feared was not from India alone, but from all of China's neighbors inspired by India's potential success. The audience for their bitter lesson was as much China's other neighbors as it was directed at India.

China's decision to use force in these cases was also spurred by a fear of great power encirclement, the second level of the game. The ripple effects of the Sino-Soviet split were manifest in warming ties between China's land neighbors and Moscow. China looked to check the Soviet influence in India and Vietnam by testing its alliances with those countries. China, in these cases, used force to expose the USSR's lack of commitment to their new friends and cement China's hegemonic claims in East Asia. China demonstrated its willingness to stand up to a stronger nuclear power during the 1969 border dispute and directly challenged the Soviet-Vietnamese mutual defense treaty of 1978 by invading Vietnam.³ Tactical military setbacks aside, China succeeded in tarnishing Soviet prestige by exposing the USSR as an uncommitted regional interloper. China's reemergence as the dominant power in the region versus a meddling USSR was both the cause and effect of their use of force.

These cases suggest that the decision to use force was, in each example, reasoned and deliberate from a Chinese perspective. China used experience from its history in apparently analogous events to guide its assessments and strategy. China dealt with these strategic decisions through "analysis, careful preparation, attention to psychological and political factors, a quest for surprise, and rapid conclusion."⁴ The decision to use overwhelming force in a surprise attack against a single adversary seems aggressive in isolation, but less so when viewed in the context of neighbors and great powers, and on a timeline that spans centuries.

These observations of Chinese behavior in territorial conflicts, understood through the "lesson-teaching" lens, suggest that China is prone to identify a dispute as a crisis requiring the use force before its adversaries or an objective outside observer may see it as acute. China's predilection for crisis

³ Elleman, *Modern Chinese Warfare, 1795-1989*, 285.

⁴ Kissinger, *On China*, 188.

assessments, and corresponding crisis response, plays into China's ability to administer a psychological shock to an adversary still invested in a diplomatic solution. Since China was the first to identify a dispute as a crisis in the context of exploitative nibbling, its use of force was perceived as aggressive and unwarranted. That perceived aggression, combined with the negative military consequences resulting from inaccurate net assessments, contributes to the perception of an unrefined use of force by a resurgent great power.

Summary

The metaphor of teaching lessons puts the six observations described at the beginning of this chapter into context. If China develops (or has already developed) an inflated sense of self, and perceives in other states a failure to acknowledge China's position, China may feel the need to align those disparate views. Hubris and self-delusion, combined with aspirations of hegemony and its associated prestige, can be dangerous when reconciled with reality. Great power encirclement combined with a superficial foreign commitment to regional alliances will elicit a Chinese response designed to expose weaknesses. Such were the lesson of 1962, 1969 and 1979.

These cases do suggest that if China resorts to the use of force based on these assessments, accurate or not, it will not act impulsively. Consistent with the trends observed in this thesis, China may look to resolve the issues diplomatically, to mitigate risk globally, and to deliver a psychological shock versus conquest and territorial acquisition. This pattern may provide the astute strategist opportunities to avoid, or at least anticipate and with action deter, a "bitter lesson."

Appendix A



Figure 1: Eastern and Western Sectors in the Sino-Indo War.

Source:

http://www.google.com/imgres?imgurl=http://newsimg.bbc.co.uk/media/images/41020000/gif/_41020631_india_china_border2_map416.gif&imgrefurl=http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/4431299.stm&h=300&w=416&sz=11&tbnid=GmSFihWjeOHZBM:&tbnh=90&tbnw=125&zoom=1&usg=__6kYUmr-oQSLy1MleB3aq65YfCUs=&docid=alj9IRwwtac_WM&hl=en&sa=X&ei=xOW1UaP fBvPy0QG7ooH4DA&ved=0CDsQ9QEwBA&dur=0

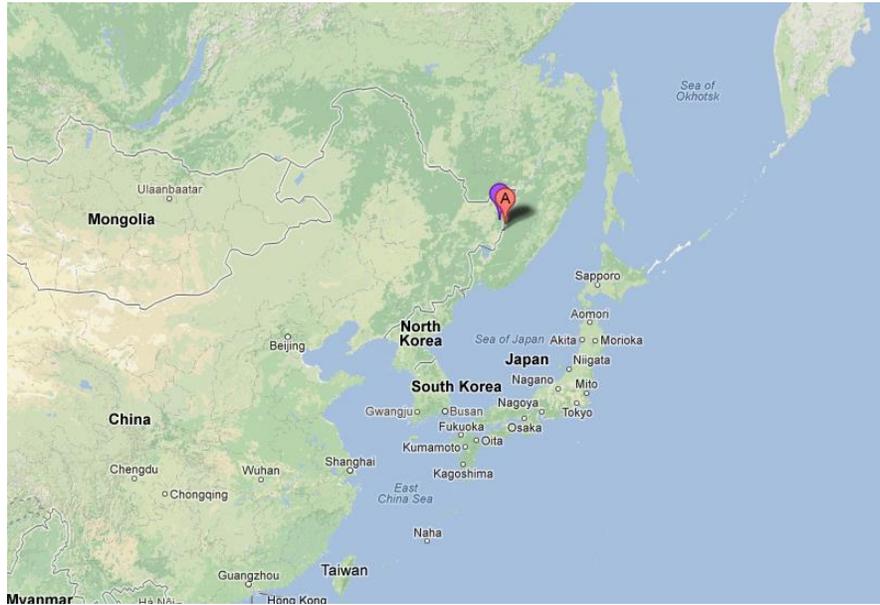


Figure 2: Location of Zhenbao Island on the Ussuri River

Source: <https://maps.google.com/maps?hl=en&tab=wl>



Figure 3: Image of Zhenbao Island

Source:

http://www.google.com/imgres?um=1&safe=active&sa=N&hl=en&biw=1143&bih=557&tbm=isch&tbnid=CTl0s3ClbidiCM:&imgrefurl=http://www.worldwidepanorama.org/wwp_rss/go/p294&docid=S4NZZC4kwpT_VM&imgurl=http://www.worldwidepanorama.org/worldwidepanorama/wwp1206/thumbs/YangDehua-2822.jpg&w=200&h=100&ei=Hua1UdTAKqnm0gGckYGoCQ&zoom=1



Figure 4: Parcel and Spratly Islands in the South China Sea

Source:

http://www.google.com/imgres?safe=active&sa=X&rls=com.microsoft:en-us:IE-Address&biw=1143&bih=557&tbm=isch&tbnid=m0a8rKXem5MYpM:&imgrefurl=http://www.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/7941425.stm&docid=XTE2CeHiJiqT8M&imgurl=http://newsimg.bbc.co.uk/media/images/45552000/gif/_45552694_south_china-sea_466.gif&w=466&h=350&ei=Uua1UbzqI7Ot0AGJ5oCIBw&zoom=1&iact=rc&dur=234&page=1&tbnh=137&tbnw=183&start=0&ndsp=19&ved=1t:429,r:12,s:0,i:119&tx=53&ty=49

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