

Understanding China's 'New' Assertiveness from Resolved Territorial Questions

Written by Bhaso Ndzendze

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

Understanding China's 'New' Assertiveness from Resolved Territorial Questions

<https://www.e-ir.info/2022/06/29/understanding-chinas-new-assertiveness-from-resolved-territorial-questions/>

BHASO NDZENDZE, JUN 29 2022

This is a preprint excerpt from *Asian Territorial and Maritime Disputes: A Critical Introduction*. You can download the book free of charge from E-International Relations.

The assertiveness and aggression with which the People's Republic of China (PRC) has chosen to deal with the various territorial disputes in which it is currently engaged has ramped up in recent years, calling into question that regime's willingness to resolve these disputes with a diplomatic solution. In the past, however, this is precisely what leaders in Beijing have shown themselves capable of accomplishing. This chapter looks at the history of Chinese methods of dealing with disagreements over sovereignty by examining three distinct case studies: Mongolia, Shandong, and Macau. The Mongolian declaration of independence during the 1911 Xinhai Revolution, which brought down China's last imperial dynasty, remains the only successful case of secession by a former Chinese geographical entity. Moreover, the transfer of Shandong from Japan in 1922 and the transfer of Macau from Portuguese administration in 1999 through a process of bilateral negotiation, upon insistence of its removal from UN oversight and direct engagement with Lisbon instead, demonstrate that force need not be the only outlet for Beijing to settle its outstanding territorial disputes. This chapter highlights the need to look back at these resolved cases using a comparative perspective to understand China's current assertiveness and territorialism.

The chapter examines each case in its own domestic and international context and offers cross-case observations with regards to the more controversial questions of China's stance toward Taiwan, Hong Kong, Tibet, and Xinjiang in order to examine the differences in conditions for the successful secession and retention of international sovereignty by Mongolia compared to Tibet, Xinjiang, and even Taiwan; the relatively seamless takeover of Macau and Shandong compared to Hong Kong; and the relative lack of analysis that these cases engender in recent literature.

This chapter advances hypotheses to explain the differing approaches then and now, including the relative weakness of China in 1911, and of Portugal in the latter half of the 20th century, as well as lack of strategic value of the territories in question. It is asserted that the Mongolian case, coming at the height of the 'century of humiliation' and followed by perceived slights at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference that followed the First World War, has conditioned successive Chinese governments and nationalistic segments within the country's demographics to take advantage of key weaknesses in today's international system, and to be more proactive and unilateral in preventing secessionist movements and consolidating control over PRC territorial holdings, thereby problematising the newness of the assertiveness currently seen in Xi Jinping's China. This realisation slowly emerged after the Shandong transfer but was more effectively exercised in Tibet (1951) and over Macau. The current policy toward Hong Kong is thus merely a more recent incarnation of Chinese government proactiveness predicated on a Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership that is cognisant of these past lessons and the domestic audience costs, and the perceived permissiveness of the current international environment for such unilateral assertiveness.

The first section looks at the case of Mongolian independence and China's failure to reincorporate it into its territory. This is followed by a discussion of the difficulties around the return of Shandong following the First World War in the second section of the chapter. The third section examines the return of Macau. The fourth and final section consolidates the pattern seen across these cases and identifies the conditions behind China's modern-day

Understanding China's 'New' Assertiveness from Resolved Territorial Questions

Written by Bhaso Ndzendze

assertiveness.

Mongolia

Mongolia has a long and illustrious history. The country as we know it today originated under the leadership of Genghis Khan in the 13th century. Eventually Genghis's grandson, Kublai Khan, consolidated his conquest of China and became emperor of China in 1271. He called his dynasty Yuan ('origin') and ruled in accordance with Chinese institutions and customs, which he retained. While the Yuan dynasty would eventually be replaced by the Ming in 1368, and then the ethnic Manchu Qing dynasty in 1644, the Mongolian territory remained part of China, and from 1691, northern Mongolia was effectively colonized by the Qing.

In 1911, the Qing dynasty collapsed, and Mongolia declared its independence from China on 1 December 1911. The leaders of this newly independent Mongolia put in place a theocratic government led by the Bogd Khan, a monarchical position. Following a brief reincorporation in 1915, Russia, Mongolia, and the new Republic of China (ROC) signed an agreement that gave limited autonomy to Mongolia, though the ROC retained suzerainty over the nominally independent state. Nevertheless, in October 1919, the ROC revoked the autonomy of Outer Mongolia at the behest of local chieftains, whose power and influence had been greatly diminished by the imposition of a monarchical system of government. The ROC sent troops to garrison key areas of Mongolia, dethroning the Bogd Khan and occupying the country. This situation lasted until 1921 when the Chinese were driven out by a ragtag coalition of White Russians, Siberians, Japanese, and native Mongolians led the fanatically anti-communist Russian warlord, Baron Ungern-Sternberg. The baron, whose grand plan was to raise a cavalry of fighters to rout the communists out of Moscow, soon wore out his welcome, and a force of Mongolian soldiers, led by Damdin Sükhbaatar, sought the assistance of Russia's Red Army to oust Ungern (Palmer 2009).

Despite these tribulations and intrigues, Mongolian independence has stood since it was proclaimed in July 1921. While the Soviets, who exerted tremendous influence over the Mongolian state, were eager to rid the country of the Bogd Khan, he was demoted to a figurehead, and upon his death in 1924, the nation became the Mongolian People's Republic on the 26th of November that year. Brief diplomatic tussles would continue over the course of the 20th century, especially after the ROC was routed to Taiwan in 1949 and the CCP took power in Beijing and began to exhibit expansionary ambitions.

During the Sino-Soviet split, Mongolia predictably sided with the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), expelled some Chinese citizens, and cut trade with China. In 1961, Mongolia gained entry into the United Nations as a member. In response to the weakening of the USSR before its final dissolution in 1991, Ulaanbaatar enacted social reforms in the mid- to late-1980s, and in 1989 established full diplomatic relations with the PRC.

The major source of diplomatic upheaval has been the Tibetan question. Mongolia and Tibet share strong religious bonds based on Tibetan Buddhism, and both view the Dalai Lama as a major religious leader. The Dalai Lama first visited Mongolia in 1979, and has been there eight times since. China sees the Dalai Lama as a politician intent on splitting the strategic Tibetan region away from the rest of China. Beijing has been occupying Tibet since 1951, and administering it as a special autonomous region since 1965 (Shakya 1999, 45). The Dalai Lama escaped into exile in India in 1959, in the wake of intense disagreements with the Beijing government over the status of Tibet and the level of autonomy that was promised under the controversial 17-Point Agreement, which he has subsequently renounced (Shakya 1999, 89, 124, 200).

Following the Dalai Lama's visit in 2002, the PRC government closed the border between the two countries for two days. Upon a subsequent visit in August of 2006, the PRC's Foreign Ministry reiterated to Mongolia that it should not have given the Dalai Lama a platform to spread his 'separatist' views (VOA 2009). In December 2016, there was yet another visit, amid the controversy over the Dalai Lama's being scheduled to chant special sutras 'at a large sports facility built by Chinese companies with Chinese aid' (Associated Press 2016). This time, however, it was widely known, and had been made clear by the Mongolian Foreign Minister, that the visit would be the last for the octogenarian Dalai Lama, not because of his age but because future visits would be barred by the government of Mongolia. That government had found itself in need of funds from Beijing. As the *Associated Press* (2016) reported,

Understanding China's 'New' Assertiveness from Resolved Territorial Questions

Written by Bhaso Ndzendze

the country's leaders were under pressure as they were seeking a US\$4.2 billion loan from the Chinese in order to offset a deep recession they were going through. Mongolia's exports are also heavily dependent on China, which accounts for 90% of the land-locked country's market (Associated Press 2016; Namjilsangarav, 2016).

Shandong

After the emergence of the Qing dynasty in 1644, China was the most powerful nation in East Asia for nearly three centuries (Boissoneault 2017). However, as its economic fortunes diminished and those of European states and neighbouring Japan grew with the innovations of the Industrial Revolution, the Qing Empire found itself at the mercy of these players. Starting in earnest around 1840, the heightening rivalry among the great powers in the scramble for spheres of influence and territories in Asia placed China in the crosshairs of Great Britain, Germany, France, Japan, Portugal, Russia, and the United States. A series of events took place following the Opium Wars of 1839–1842 and 1856–1860, setting in motion 'the establishment of foreign spheres of influence in prosperous Chinese provinces, the surrendering of colonial bases (Hong Kong, Qingdao, Port Arthur) and extraterritorial foreign settlements and concessions (Shanghai, Hankou, Tianjin) were violently pushed through despite Chinese resistance' (Mühlhahn 2016, 2). In the First Sino-Japanese War of 1895, China lost, and was forced to hand over Taiwan (also called Formosa) 'in perpetuity,' according to Article II of the Treaty of Shimonoseki. After the successful suppression of the Boxer Rebellion (1899–1901), Qing-ruled China was not only forced to pay additional reparations to the colonisers, but also had to agree to the stationing of their militaries in Beijing. These humiliations at the hands of external powers also laid bare the decline of the Qing Empire to China's reform-minded intellectuals, who were increasingly republican in their disposition. Thus in 1911, the dynasty was overthrown, and revolutionary leader Dr Sun Yat-sen, serving as provisional president, proclaimed the Republic of China, but also acknowledged that this new political entity was unable to solve China's many pressing domestic and foreign policy problems (Mühlhahn 2016, 2). Among these was the continued presence of colonial outposts, including among them Germany. The country had made use of its military force to insert itself into China by capitalizing on the killing of two German missionaries, and attacking and invading the city of Qingdao in 1897. They then went about 'establishing what amounted to a German colony in Shandong province' (Boissoneault 2017, 1). The province was the historic centre of the Shang dynasty (1766–1122 BCE) and is the birthplace of China's greatest philosopher Confucius and military strategist Sun Tzu. In 1898, Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany declared Qingdao a German colony. The city was then remodelled using German institutions and architecture as a template; 'a complete German system of administration was established. Public institutions such as banks, consulates, and schools were also built. The new upper class from Germany naturally required that German-style villas ought to be constructed as well' (Mühlhahn 2016, 2). Moreover, the Germans also brought with them a prejudicial outlook, with racism defining the daily interactions between coloniser and colonised. For example, the colonial system 'differentiated between the Chinese and European populations in a fundamental, but also spatial, way' and in proto-apartheid fashion, the Chinese required permits to move about and were from the onset 'prohibited from living within the European part of Qingdao' (Mühlhahn 2016, 2).

The prospect of expelling Germany from Qingdao and taking over the colony greatly interested the Japanese and led to them to join the fight against Germany in 1914, thereby rendering the Great War a global one. Within China, the newly established republican government was a tenuous one, by this time led by General Yuan Shikai, who had come into power in 1912. The ROC government had constant clashes with local warlords and did not enjoy the 'monopoly of violence' of the Weberian state. Though 'the Chinese people suffered political chaos, economic weakness, and social misery,' according to University of Hong Kong Professor Xu Guoqi, 'this was also a period of excitement, hope, high expectations, optimism and new dream,' principally due to a belief among the Chinese that they could 'use the war as a way to reshape the geopolitical balance of power and attain equality with European nations' (Xu 2011).

In this way, then, China also 'declared war on Germany in hopes of gaining regional dominance.' For political reasons, however, China's entry into the war on the side of the Allied Powers was deferred, and the ROC did not send conventional troops into battle (Boissoneault 2017). Although China had declared itself neutral at the start of the war in August 1914, Yuan Shikai had secretly offered the British some 50,000 troops to retake Qingdao. The British refused the offer, but Japan soon used its own army to eject the Germans from the city, and would stay there for the remainder of the war, and after.

Understanding China's 'New' Assertiveness from Resolved Territorial Questions

Written by Bhaso Ndzendze

'On 15 August 1914, Japan issued an ultimatum to the German Reich that its colony in Kiautschou had to be unconditionally vacated by 15 September. Japan declared war on the German Reich on 23 August. A few days later, Japanese and English ships started a naval blockade against Kiautschou' (Mühlhahn 2016, 2).

With the European Allies completely preoccupied with the war in Europe, Japan took the opportunity to annex Manchuria and North China as a Japanese protectorate. In January of the following year, the Japanese imposed upon China the Twenty-One Demands. These were 'political demands and considerable economic privileges for Japan, especially in Manchuria and Mongolia, as well as the lower reaches of Yangtze River and in the province of Fujian' (Mühlhahn 2016, 2). With no alternative, Yuan Shikai agreed to the demands on 25 May. He received little in the way of concessions in his negotiations with the Japanese, and indeed sparked public protests against his failure to safeguard Chinese sovereignty. This further weakened the government, and May 9 came to be known as a day of national humiliation, to be observed annually (later supplanted by May Fourth, described in detail below) (Mühlhahn 2016, 2).

By February 1916, however, as the death toll in Europe skyrocketed, the British became more amenable to the Chinese offer. British officials agreed that China could 'join with the Entente provided that Japan and the other Allies accepted her as a partner' (Mühlhahn 2016, 2). Japan in turn refused to allow Chinese soldiers to fight, for an armed China may have meant concessions would be granted, possibly including Qingdao, were it to contribute significantly to an Allied victory (Boissoneault 2017). If China could not fight directly, then, Yuan and his advisors decided that the next-best option 'was a secret show of support toward the Allies: they would send voluntary non-combatant workers, largely from Shandong, to embattled Allied countries' (Boissoneault 2017). Thus, the Chinese participated in auxiliary roles:

'Chinese workers dug trenches. They repaired tanks in Normandy. They assembled shells for artillery. They transported munitions in Dannes. They unloaded supplies and war material in the port of Dunkirk. They ventured farther afield, too. Graves in Basra, in southern Iraq, contain remains of hundreds of Chinese workers who died carrying water for British troops in an offensive against the Ottoman Empire' (Boehler 2019, 1).

Furthermore, since China was officially neutral, commercial businesses were formed to provide the labour (Jeffery 2017). The First World War is perhaps remembered primarily for the brutality of its trench warfare, and as Professor Bruce Elleman (2002, 33-34) notes, 'a lot of those trenches weren't dug by the [Allied] soldiers, they were dug by Chinese laborers.' This was 'one way for China to prove it deserved a seat at the table whenever the war ended and terms were agreed upon.' Alas, 'even after a year of supplying labor, their contribution remained largely unrecognized diplomatically' (Boissoneault 2017).

America's entry into the war represented a shift in the internal dynamics among the Allied powers, with US officials backing China's aim as the end of the war was nearing. US President Woodrow Wilson expected 'the Post-War conference to be able to resolve these diplomatic issues [of Shandong]' between China, Germany and Japan since he sought to frame and lead the post-war negotiations (Elleman 2002, 34). Further changes were brought by Germany's announcement of its strategy of unrestricted submarine warfare (Mühlhahn 2016, 2). Soon thereafter, 'more than 500 Chinese laborers aboard the French ship Athos were killed in February 1917 when a U-boat struck the ship.' At this point, China would be able to declare war on Germany, and did so on August 14th of that year, though in practice not much changed in the substance of Chinese involvement, 'since they had already been sending laborers' (Mühlhahn 2016, 2). Thus, Chinese hopes for territorial restoration experienced a substantial boost that, in failing to materialise, reaped generational consequences.

For a time, the Chinese government entertained the prospect of cooperating with Japan, as an equal and as a partner – spurred by power shifts in Japan, as well as pressing financial needs at home:

'Because "the domestic situation [was] overshadowed by dangers threatening from abroad," China's political parties decided that "a policy of friendly cooperation with Japan within limits [was] desirable," partly because the Terauchi cabinet, which came to power in Tokyo in October 1916, seemed likely to respond. Japan, however, was also a promising source of the foreign loans China needed to restore her financial stability and to enable the government to

Understanding China's 'New' Assertiveness from Resolved Territorial Questions

Written by Bhaso Ndzendze

reassert its power. Of those in China who favoured closer ties with Japan, some favoured a permanent alliance, while others believed that China could be politically independent and financially dependent at the same time' (Craft 1994, 14).

Japan was therefore perceived by the Chinese authorities as a means to an end. According to one US official based in China, 'they appear to think that [Japan's domination] is more or less inevitable anyway, and that when Japan has nursed China back to strength the said country can be ejected' (Craft 1994, 14). Whilst there were different views on this, one man's decision ultimately mattered, and he was amenable to a rapprochement with Japan. 'Yuan and most of the cabinet opposed war because China was so weak militarily and could expect no support from the West' (Craft 1994, 10). In a similar vein, the Chinese foreign representative, Wellington Koo, suggested that, 'while China's army was being reorganized, the Waichiaopu should try to influence public opinion in Britain and the United States in order to drive a wedge between them and Japan. Once relations among the three became strained, China could try to persuade the West to protect her against Japan' (Craft 1994, 12).

Moreover, many Chinese public intellectuals gathered in Paris 'seeing it as a "once-in-a-thousand-years opportunity" for China to reclaim her rightful international standing and, more mundanely, to regain Tsingtao [Qingdao]' (Craft 1994, 22). The Chinese were optimistic that the Shantung Question would be answered favourably, leading to a feeling of betrayal when the former German colony was officially handed over to Japan. Notwithstanding vague promises that the Japanese would give Qingdao back to China sometime in the near future (a date of 1922 was suggested), the Chinese raised doubts over whether Japan would adhere to such commitments. Indeed, the Allies and Wilson had based this handover to Japan, *inter alia*, on the Twenty One Demands of 1915, in which China had 'gladly agreed' that Japan and Germany 'dispose of Shandong between them' (Craft 1994, 22). The period of the First World War and the attendant loss of Chinese territory and face was seen as yet an extension of the period of unequal treaties. Limited as their options were, however, Chinese authorities did not capitulate to the officiation of the transfer. It is no coincidence that this took place against the backdrop of a Chinese state in the form of a republic which was more susceptible to being influenced by the general populace. Wellington Koo, therefore, refused to sign the treaty, meaning that the Chinese delegation to the Peace Conference was the only one to not sign the Treaty of Versailles during the signing ceremony. In the words of Craft (1994, 22), 'although Peking wanted to sign the treaty notwithstanding, the May Fourth Movement sweeping the country at the time demanded reservations and, as the Allies and Wilson would not agree to them, the Chinese delegates chose not to sign.'

China's interwar period was, therefore, a significant period that coincides with China's complicated entry into multilateral frameworks, and yet it scarcely obtains much contemporary analysis. China's modern political history is inextricably linked to the foreign policy slights endured during this period and the domestic implications these brought about or at least catalysed, including the formation of the CCP. In other words, the century of humiliation, which is widely believed to be a principal narrative behind China's economic development-foreign policy nexus, is incomplete without a study of China's experiences in 1918 in Paris and the ramifications contained in the Versailles Treaty of 1919.

In retrospect, this refusal to sign the Treaty of Versailles marked sharply the single most identifiable point in Chinese political history in which, for the first time, domestic audience costs were a factor in its foreign policy. Unfair treaties had been a constant factor in China's recent memory, but this was the first such attempt to take place under the new republican government which was cognizant of the domestic political ramifications of showing weakness in foreign matters – an elemental feature which has only gained in importance, and indeed has become pronounced in China's post-1949 configuration. This is especially visible in the approach taken by the CCP regime toward issues such as the One China policy, the South China Sea, the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute, Tibet, and its insistence on non-interference in domestic affairs, buttressed by a civic nationalism toward foreign exploitation and territorial threats that is not only imposed from above but also generated from below, especially with the ability for online expressions of nationalistic sentiment to spread far and wide.

Macau

Diplomatic relations between contemporary China and Portugal were cemented in February of 1979. The lead up

Understanding China's 'New' Assertiveness from Resolved Territorial Questions

Written by Bhaso Ndzendze

was based on three factors: the overthrow of Portugal's fascist government, events over Taiwan, and the return of Macau. Following the expulsion of the *Estado Novo* regime in Portugal in 1974, the Portuguese government recalled its soldiers from Macau and withdrew its formal diplomatic relations with the ROC on Taiwan. Following this, several conferences took place between June of 1986 and March of 1987, the end product of which was the Sino-Portuguese Joint Declaration of April 1987. The process was set in motion for Macau to be handed over to the PRC in 1999, to be governed as a special administrative region (SAR), concomitant with comparatively higher autonomy and its own legal code. The return of Macau involved several crucial factors. There was an unwillingness on the part of Portugal to retain the territory at all costs, and a general lack of interest by global players to stand in the way of the handover. There was also the issue of China's own power vis-à-vis Portugal. This was not the case compared to Britain vis-à-vis the Hong Kong handover, for example, and this asymmetry persists to this day. For example, Jochen Faget (2019) highlights the importance of the 2008 financial crisis and puts the importance of China to Portugal in the following terms: 'when Portugal was facing difficult times, the EU imposed tough austerity measures, while China pumped billions into the country.' On the other hand, three main reasons underlie the Chinese interest in Portugal. Broadly, Portugal is the centre of a linguistic global population covering four continents consisting of some 260 million people, the majority of whom are in South America and Africa, and thus who are also of special interest to the CCP. Secondly, Portugal is also among the few countries in Western Europe to declare an interest in the Belt and Road Initiative, with its ambassador to China envisioning a value proposition for Portugal in its unparalleled proximity to Africa, North America, and Europe (Jose Augusto Duarte, 2018 Interview). This is also welcomed at the most senior levels of the Portuguese government, to the effect that 'over the past several years, Portugal's Prime Minister Antonio Costa has emerged as one of the staunchest supporters of Chinese investment in Europe,' even stating that Portugal's 'experience with Chinese investment is very positive,' and that the Chinese 'show total respect for our laws and market rules' (Faget 2019). On the other hand, according to a survey by Susi Dennison and Livia Franco for the European Council on Foreign Relations, 'Portuguese citizens are becoming concerned about the government's policy on China. They believe that to become a stronger global player, the EU should make the limitation of Chinese economic leverage over Europe its second-highest priority – after efforts to strengthen European unity' (Dennison and Franco 2019, 14).

Nothing New: Patterns and Sources of China's Territorial Assertiveness

Beijing has recently been exerting increasing assertiveness over Hong Kong (most evident in the July 2020 National Security Law), Taiwan (seen in Xi's statements averring that use of force will remain an option), Tibet, and Xinjiang (Hass 2020; Su and Yi 2021). Moreover, Beijing has asserted claims over disputed islands in the South China Sea, as well as with Japan in the East China Sea. In recent years, there have been clashes with India over bilateral disputes (Ladakh), as well as over Doklam, which is disputed by China and Indian ally Bhutan. It is useful to place this in context. In essence, it is nothing new.

In the days before the formation of the PRC, republican Chinese diplomats targeted their activities in the League of Nations – the world's only truly multilateral institution at the time – toward two long-term Chinese national objectives. The first was obtaining formal legal equality with other states (and therefore putting an end to the disadvantageous treaty relations which had historically defined its relations with Western powers). The second was focused on gaining recognition for the country's 'self-assessed identity as a once and future great power' (Kaufman 2014, 605). On the first issue, these diplomats sought to goad the League to act indirectly on China's behalf, by supporting its diplomatic activities in other venues and upholding the effectiveness of international legal rules. On the second objective, the diplomats wanted the League's organisational structure to 'reflect China's self-perceived rightful status as an important nation' (Kaufman 2014, 605). However, these outcomes did not materialise, as the League failed to act against the Japanese annexation of Manchuria in 1931 the way it did against the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935. Moreover, while Shandong had been returned in 1922, this was only accomplished through the United States strong-arming Japan.

As a result of this history, the PRC government has promoted a narrative of 'national humiliation' (Callahan 2006, 178). This discourse reiterates the humiliation of the Chinese people, the dismemberment of territory, and loss of sovereignty to foreign hands and domestic weakness and corruption. The so-called Century of Humiliation is largely conceived as having begun with the first Opium War in 1839, in which the Royal Navy opened up China to Western

Understanding China's 'New' Assertiveness from Resolved Territorial Questions

Written by Bhaso Ndzendze

capitalism, and only ending in 1949, with the declaration of the PRC. According to Callahan, this may have worked too well:

'In the early twentieth century the political performances aimed to produce a proper Chinese nation out of the clashes between the Qing dynasty, northern warlords, and foreign empires. The goal was to construct a "China" worthy of being saved. When National Humiliation Day was revived in China at the turn of the twenty-first century, the political performances were more focused on containing the nation through a commemoration of the various crises of the early twentieth century' (Callahan 2006, 179).

While Callahan makes a strong case, he fails to take into consideration the earlier manifestation of this nationalism in the form of the May Fourth Movement against its own government, which was seen as weak and incapable of pursuing China's interests. Moreover, Chinese nationalism can equally be interpreted as a dispersed and bottom-up phenomenon, stemming not from government regulations and propaganda, but as a historically-derived civic practice rather than a set of artefacts to be consumed (Callahan 2006, 179).

The economist John Maynard Keynes, who was part of the British delegation to the Paris Peace Conference after the end of WWI, famously predicted in 1919 that the excessively punitive measures being taken against the defeated German state could lead to a resurgent Germany with a score to settle. In much the same way, contemporary analyses of China's foreign policy outlook ought to more accurately factor in the role of the slights suffered by China at the Paris Peace Conference, along with the territorial partitioning that accompanied them, as well as the impunity enjoyed by Japan even in the wake of the League of Nations, which the weaker nations of the world had looked to as an equaliser at the time. Far from being solely the product of CCP propaganda, Chinese nationalism is also a bottom-up phenomenon that developed, perhaps inevitably, from the colonial encounter. In the words of Shameer Modongal (2016, 1), 'even though the communist party has [a] major role in creating a civic nationalism through its restriction on media and education system, the Chinese people show highly nationalist feeling even abroad where they can access international media.' Modongal further highlights the autonomous modes of expression of this nationalism, including most recently in the cyber sphere. Interestingly, though the PRC government exerts extensive control over the expression of political opinion through various forms of censorship (Freedom House 2021), much hypernationalist online content is allowed to stand. As a result, the intersection of top-down with bottom-up forms of nationalism create a self-reinforcing feedback loop in which foreign policy decision-making – traditionally the purview of elite politics in China – is increasingly being influenced by netizens in a networked world (Yang 2016, 355).

In the current era, 'the increased diversity, velocity and free flow of foreign policy information, has raised public attention to foreign policy' such that foreign policymaking sees substantial input from the public, even if informally (Yang 2016, 355). This phenomenon, wherein the public exerts pressure on the process of PRC foreign policymaking, was dubbed 'popular sovereignty' when the phenomenon became apparent through the seemingly grassroots response (in both China and South Korea) to Japan's effort to be granted a seat on the United Nations Security Council (Liu 2010). It would, argues Liu (2010, 73), have been an apparent endorsement of Japan's WWII-era aggressions in Asia. More recent work by Zhong and Hwang highlights findings which indicate that Chinese who are pro-democratic are also more likely to be nationalistic. 'Random survey data on Chinese urban residents in 34 Chinese cities reveal that democracy-oriented Chinese urbanites tend to show stronger nationalistic feelings,' and perhaps unexpectedly, the same study showed that 'people with more nationalistic feelings tend to be those who show less support for the current system in China' (Zhong and Hwang 2020). This may suggest that at least some of the voices among the autonomous and bottom-up proponents of Chinese nationalism make a distinction between the Chinese nation and the Chinese government – a distinction that the CCP has been keen to obscure.

In most cases, however, the ire of the populace is not directed toward the PRC regime, but the external world, with the Chinese diaspora being particularly active, including students in Western nations who actively defend Beijing's actions in academia and cyberspace, using the advantages of their proficiency with the English language, as well as the access they enjoy to digital platforms censored or banned in China itself (Modongal 2016, 5). This same grassroots enthusiasm toward territorial questions has extended toward Hong Kong. While Westerners watched aghast as Chinese police brutally clamped down on democracy protests in the former British colony, counterprotests were organized by pro-CCP citizens of both China and Hong Kong to support the actions of the Beijing regime (Goh

Understanding China's 'New' Assertiveness from Resolved Territorial Questions

Written by Bhaso Ndzendze

2019; Shao 2019).

In 2012, as tensions rose over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, Chinese netizens organized boycotts of Japanese products as a form of protest, often through the Chinese microblogging website Weibo. In the words of one blogger: 'To those who say we shouldn't link buying Japanese goods to patriotism: if a seller bullied your ancestor, and plans to plunder your riches now, will you obediently pay him money to buy his goods?' Another common theme echoed by nationalistic bloggers is the Nanjing Massacre, as well as the continuing Japanese practice of honouring of its WWII martyrs at the Yasukuni Shrine (France 24 2012).

The vehemence of this anti-foreigner – especially anti-Japanese – sentiment online outstrips even the hardliners within the PRC government, serving to push policy further toward hawkishness, with netizens criticising their own country's policymakers for not being aggressive enough. If the perceived undermining of Chinese interests is expressed toward perceived foreign sources, it is carried out with the same vehemence toward China's own foreign policymakers, with the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) the subject of occasional ridicule. According to an MFA spokesperson, 'the ministry has been receiving calcium pills on a regular basis – a popular choice of insult from a public that sees the Chinese diplomats as spineless' (Jing 2017, 429). In the online world, the MFA has garnered the unofficial nickname 'the Ministry of Protests' due to its tendency to do little more than issue denouncements of unfavourable international developments (Jing 2017, 429).

Conclusion

Even prior to the founding of the PRC some 70 years ago, China has had a long history of territorial assertiveness. As examined above, this history introduces a critical stance into the debate today: namely, that such assertiveness has periodically appeared when conditions allow. Crucially, this assertiveness is neither fully top-down nor exclusively the result of CCP rule. Rather, it has its roots in popular sovereignty and is motivated by popular perceptions of international humiliation that took place long before the CCP came into being. Such a historical backdrop should give indication into the origins and contemporary social sources of China's foreign policy as far as territorial disputes are concerned.

References

- Associated Press*. 2016. "Dalai Lama to Visit Mongolia, Possibly Sparking China Anger." November 17, 2020. <https://apnews.com/article/78a150f6ceb44d679b9347e3e2d55f5b>
- Boehler, Patrick. 2019. "The Forgotten Army of the First World War: How Chinese Labourers Helped Shape Europe." *South China Morning Post*. <https://multimedia.scmp.com/ww1-china>
- Boissoneault, Lorraine. 2017. "The Surprisingly Important Role China Played in WWI." *Smithsonian Magazine*, August 17, 2017. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/surprisingly-important-role-china-played-world-war-i-180964532>
- Callahan, William A. 2006. "History, Identity, and Security: Producing and Consuming Nationalism in China." *Critical Asian Studies* 38, no. 2: 179–208.
- Craft, Stephen G. 1994. "Angling for an Invitation to Paris: China's Entry Into the First World War." *The International History Review* 16, no. 1: 1–24.
- Dennison, Susi, and Livia Franco. 2019. "The Instinctive Multilateralist: Portugal and the Politics of Cooperation." European Council on Foreign Relations, October 2, 2019. https://ecfr.eu/publication/instinctive_multilateralist_portugal_politics_cooperation
- Duarte, Jose Augusto. 2018. CGTN Interview: "Portuguese Ambassador: We are not afraid of China's rise." *CGTN*, 13 June. https://news.cgtn.com/news/3d456a4d3530575a306c5562684a335a764a4855/share_p.html.

Understanding China's 'New' Assertiveness from Resolved Territorial Questions

Written by Bhaso Ndzendze

- Elleman, Bruce. 2002. *Wilson and China: A Revised History of the Shandong Question*. New York: Routledge.
- Faget, Jochen. 2019. "Portugal: A China-Friendly EU Nation Driven by Need." *DW*, March 12, 2019. <https://www.dw.com/en/portugal-a-china-friendly-eu-nation-driven-by-need/a-47872582>
- France 24. 2012. "Chinese Debate Boycotting Japanese Products Over Islands Dispute." <https://observers.france24.com/en/20120821-online-chinese-debate-boycotting-japanese-products-over-islands-dispute-protest-weibo-poll-censorship>
- Goh, Brenda. 2019. "'All the Forces': China's Global Social Media Push Over Hong Kong Protests." *Reuters*, August 22, 2019. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-hongkong-protests-china-socialmedia-idUSKCN1VC0NF>
- Hass, Ryan. 2020. "Why Now? Understanding Beijing's New Assertiveness in Hong Kong." Brookings Institution, July 17, 2020. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/07/17/why-now-understanding-beijings-new-assertiveness-in-hong-kong/>
- Jeffery, Keith. 2017. *1916: A Global History*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Jing, Sun. 2017. "Growing Diplomacy, Retreating Diplomats – How the Chinese Foreign Ministry has been Marginalized in Foreign Policymaking." *Journal of Contemporary China* 26, no. 105: 419–433.
- Kaufman, Alison Adcock. 2014. "In Pursuit of Equality and Respect: China's Diplomacy and the League of Nations." *Modern China* 40, no. 6: 605–638.
- Liu, Shih-Diing. 2010. "Networking Anti-Japanese Protests: Popular Sovereignty Reasserted Since 2005. In *Online Chinese Nationalism and China's Bilateral Relations*, edited by Simon Shen and Shaun Breslin, 73–90. Plymouth: Lexington Books.
- Modongal, Shameer. 2016. "Development of Nationalism in China." *Cogent Social Sciences* 2, no. 1: 1–7.
- Mühlhahn, Klaus. 2016. "China, 1914-1918." International Encyclopedia of the First World War. <https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/pdf/1914-1918-Online-china-2016-01-11.pdf>
- Namjilsangarav, Ganbat. 2016. "Mongolia Says Dalai Lama Will Not Be Allowed Future Visits." *Associated Press*, December 21, 2016. <https://apnews.com/article/8c026337a97640309f4bdb530bf6cd07>
- Palmer, James. 2009. *The Bloody White Baron: The Extraordinary Story of the Russian Nobleman Who Became the Last Khan of Mongolia*. New York: Basic Books.
- Shakya, Tsering. 1999. *The Dragon in the Land of Snows: A History of Modern Tibet Since 1947*. London: Pimlico.
- Shao, Grace. 2019. "Social Media Has Become a Battleground in Hong Kong's Protests." *CNBC*, August 15, 2019. <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/08/16/social-media-has-become-a-battleground-in-hong-kongs-protests.html>
- Su, Boyang, and Sophie Wushuang Yi. 2021. "Hong Kong: 'Patriotism Test' for Public Officials Shows China's Increasing Assertiveness." *The Conversation*, March 2, 2021. <https://theconversation.com/hong-kong-patriotism-test-for-public-officials-shows-chinas-increasing-assertiveness-156070>
- Xu, Guoqi. 2011. *Strangers on the Western Front*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Yang, Yifan. 2016. "The Internet and China's Foreign Policy Decision-Making." *Chinese Political Science Review*, no. 1: 353–372.

Understanding China's 'New' Assertiveness from Resolved Territorial Questions

Written by Bhaso Ndzendze

Zhong, Yang, and Wonjae Hwang. 2020. "Why Do Chinese Democrats Tend to Be More Nationalistic? Explaining Popular Nationalism in Urban China." *Journal of Contemporary China* 29, no. 121: 61–74.

About the author:

Bhaso Ndzendze, PhD, is Senior Lecturer and Head of Department: Politics and International Relations at the University of Johannesburg (UJ). His scholarship on China, Taiwan and Africa has been published in numerous journals and books, in addition to the popular press and policy briefs. His forthcoming volume (Palgrave) *The Political Economy of Sino-South African Trade in the Context of Asia-Pacific Regional Competition* examines the influence of disputes in the Asia- and Indo-Pacific on Asian states' trade with external regions.