

China's Border Wars

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Introduction

The rise of communist China has been a phenomenon in itself, a force in being such that a new term has been coined in the lexicon of international relations in the 21st century: 'The Century of the Dragon'. This growth has been achieved in the backdrop of the post 9/11 world, a world which has seen new alliances being made, old ties forgotten and in some cases, turning sour. However, whatever the new era may bring with itself, the question of territorial integrity has and will always remain imperative to nation states, especially those who have gained independence from their Western masters in the 20th century. Boundary disputes have been a perennial feature of the Third World countries. The People's Republic of China (PRC), the third largest country in the world and the largest in Asia is blessed with fourteen neighbours at its peripheries and has featured in boundary disputes with almost all its neighbours.¹ As of today, China has resolved, peacefully or forcefully, twelve out of fourteen of its disputes. Some have been resolved on its own terms while some have been legalised due to the necessity of protecting the territorial as well as religious sanctity of Xinjiang, its Achilles heel, a region plagued by Uighur separatism and abject failure of Chinese law and order. The only border disputes remaining are with India and Bhutan, both having Indian stakes.

This article takes an analytical look at China's border conflicts with its neighbours; namely, North Korea, Russia (erstwhile Soviet Union), Mongolia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar (then Burma), Laos, Vietnam and finally the maritime borders of Taiwan (ROC) and then draws inferences that could be helpful in leveraging India's position in its border dispute with China.

Sino – North Korean Border Dispute

Please refer to **Figure 1**. China's relations with Democratic People's

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Republic of Korea (DPRK) have been relatively stable since 1949.² As the main benefactor of North Korea during the Korean War (1950-53), Beijing acquired quite a toehold over its 'ally' in term of its economy, defence and foreign affairs. A theme which will occur repeatedly in all of China's border disputes is the Sino-Soviet split during the 1960s. This period, which almost culminated in an all out nuclear war between the two countries in 1969, has been the source of majority of border episodes featuring PRC.³ China and North Korea share a 1416 km long border, which is aligned along the course of two rivers, the Yalu and the Tumen.⁴ The Yalu river, incidentally, was the boundary set by the Chinese for the UN forces under General Douglas MacArthur during the Korean war, crossing of which by the UN forces brought in Chinese intervention, forcing them back to the 38th Parallel. The areas of contention between the PRC and DPRK are enumerated in the succeeding paragraphs.

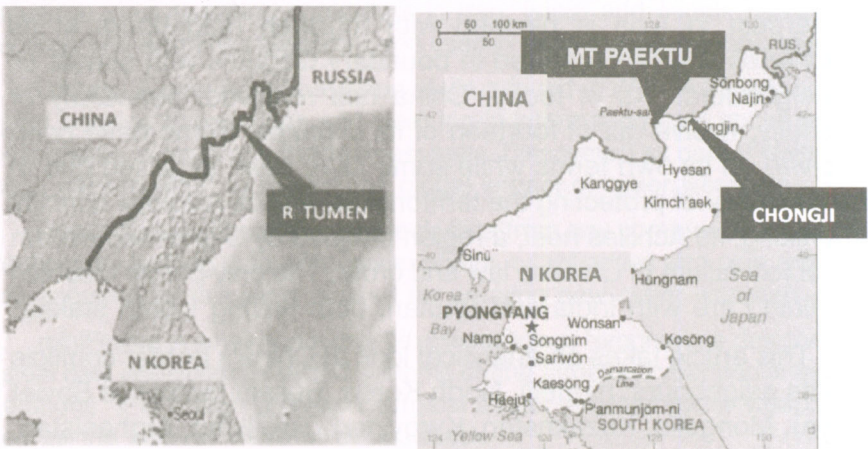


Figure 1 : Maps depicting the flow of River Tumen and the location of Mount Paektu

Mount Paektu⁵ (Baekdu – san, Changbai in Chinese). A 2774 metre high volcano, lying at the source of both the Yalu and the Tumen, which cradles Chongji lake (13 km long and 204 metre deep) that crosses a few prefectures of China before ending up in North Korea. Mount Paektu is considered sacred in Korean anthology and has been associated with the birth as well as the most famous and daring exploits of its legendary leader, Kim Il Sung.⁶ The Chinese, on the other hand, claim the mountain to be the source of origin of its Manchu people. Beijing has ruled out any

negotiation with Pyongyang on this issue and has even initiated plans to develop the volcano as a tourist attraction.⁷

Islands in the Yalu and Tumen River. China has recognised the sovereignty of North Korea over 80 per cent of the islands.⁸ The fate of the rest of the uninhabited islands has not been decided and an unofficial joint ownership is now being followed.

Shindo Island. This island has been in Korean hands since ages but coveted by the Chinese for its role in the transportation and communication in development of oil extraction facilities, off the Gulf of Beihai.⁹

Access to the Sea of Japan. The last seventeen kilometers of the Tumen river¹⁰ form the border between the DPRK and Russia,¹¹ thus depriving China of any access to the Sea of Japan. The Sea of Japan is a major strategic factor for China in its political and military posturing in North Asia.

Maritime Boundaries. North Korea, unilaterally established an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) off the Yellow Sea in 1977,¹² laying claim to 200 miles of an ecologically rich maritime region which has since been contested by Beijing as it delays the economic development of the Gulf of Beihai.

North Korea has never let any boundary or territorial dispute sour its relations with its giant neighbour to the North just for the simple reason that it cannot afford to do so. In 1965, in the midst of the Sino-Soviet crisis, a loose statement made by Kim Il Sung had led the Chinese to demand 160 square kilometers of area around Paektu – San, in lieu of the aid proffered by Beijing to North Korea during the Korean war.¹³ A decrepit economy, sanctions due to development of nuclear weapons, deteriorating political situation since the death of Kim Jong- Il, facing famine like conditions since 1995-96 and a burgeoning Chinese debt since the 1980s are hardly cards to place on the table when dealing with China.

Sino-Mongolian Border Dispute

Please refer to **Figure 2**. China and Mongolia have never had cordial relations. In fact the acrimonious border dispute regarding the Altai mountainous region,¹⁴ which Beijing regarded as part of its Xinjiang region, was resolved only in November 2005 along the 4677 kilometer long boundary.¹⁵ Mongolia, historically, has aligned

itself towards Russia. The Altai mountainous region was used by the Soviets for gold and tungsten mining and was the setting for a major confrontation between the Mongolians, supported by tanks and air, and the Kazakh and Chinese troops in June 1947.¹⁶ Ulaanbaatar allowed three divisions of Soviet infantry to be deployed within its territory opposite China in 1971, in addition to a coordinated air defence centre controlling upto 1000 aircraft.¹⁷ This was during the period when there were rumours of a Soviet surgical strike on China's nuclear facilities. A 'Secret' document by one of the most influential China watchers, Allen S Whiting, mentioned ten Soviet airfields operating in Outer Mongolia as well as Soviet long range aircraft undertaking reconnaissance and weather data collecting missions along the Sino Mongolian border.¹⁸

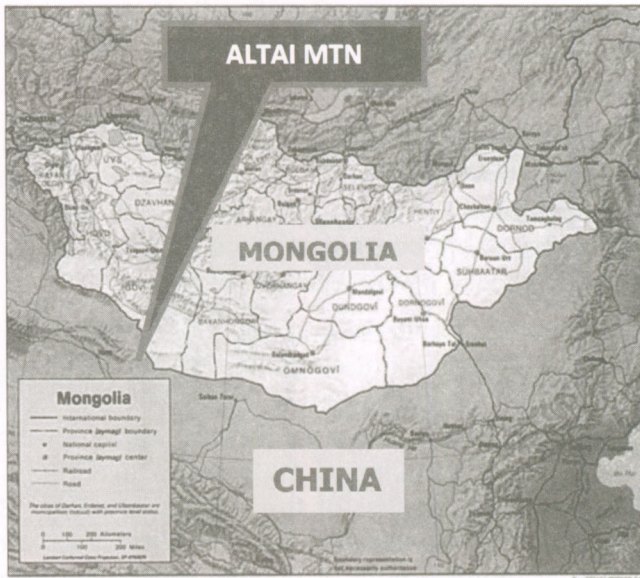


Figure 2 : Map showing the Altai mountainous region of Mongolia

Sino-Kazakhstan Border Dispute

Analysing the Sino-Kazakhstan border relations, a very interesting premise comes to light. The US CENTCOM conducted a multinational exercise in Kazakhstan in 1997 named CENTRAZBAT 97.¹⁹ This exercise featured the longest non-stop flight to a drop zone in history : From the Continental United States directly to Kazakhstan. In July 1998, China resolved its long standing border issue with Kazakhstan (total time period 36 years),²⁰ a 944 square

kilometer area whose possession now rests 56.9 per cent with Astana and 43.1 per cent with Beijing.²¹ PRC also solicited a promise from Kazakhstan not to shelter Uighur separatists²² threatening Chinese interests in Xinjiang. The US foray into the Central Asian Region, intensified after the September 11 bombings has gravely worried the Chinese who see the American thrust into their perceived backyard as one more step to containing China, in addition to anchoring Japan and Taiwan. China has now entered into a confrontational phase with Kazakhstan over the distribution of water of two of the trans - boundary rivers, the Ili and the Irtysh which originate in China but end up in Kazakhstan.²³ This emerging trend could be a future development in context with India as major rivers in India have their origins in Tibet, now part of PRC.

Sino-Kyrgyztan Border Dispute

Please refer to **Figure 3**. China and Kyrgyztan share a 1100 kilometer long border²⁴ and relations have been uneasy over the free trade zone of Naryn featuring the vast Karasu Bazaar in Kyrgyztan,²⁵ which is now being rapidly populated by the Chinese. President Akayev's government moved a secret resolution granting 125000 hectares of territory to China in the mountainous region of the country in 1999. This was not approved by the Kyrgyz parliament and border negotiations have stalled since 2001.²⁶ However, the borders have remained tranquil and since most of the trade deficit is against Bishkek, the boundary dispute has not been raised frequently. The Chinese, however, are concerned over the militant Uighurs who have found a safe haven in Kyrgyztan and their own Turkic Muslims²⁷ who view the independence of these Central Asian republics as an achievable dream.

Sino - Tajikistan Border Dispute

Please refer to **Figure 4**. The Tajikis have been a fortunate lot. Their territory shrank by just one per cent during 2011 when Tajikistan ceded 1142 square kilometers of its land to the Chinese as opposed to the 28500 square kilometers demanded by them. Dushanbe inherited the border dispute when Tajikistan was formed from the ashes of the Soviet empire in 1991. However, the dispute over approximately 41000 square kilometers of area in the Pamirs goes back to the days of Imperial Russia and China. The area ceded is in the Gorno Badakhshan Autonomous region which the Tajiki government considers mountainous and lacking in natural resources.²⁸



Figure 3 : Map showing the disputed free trade zone of Naryn



Figure 4 : Map showing the border between China and Tajikistan. The encircled portion is the disputed area

Sino - Vietnam Border Dispute

Please refer to **Figure 5**. China never should have had a border dispute with Vietnam, let alone a full scale border war. After all, the two were ideological allies and shared a common nemesis at the time ie the US. China and the Soviet Union were instrumental in providing much needed arms and materiel to the North Vietnamese Army (NVA), the dreaded NVA, which enabled this rural 'half – country' to defeat the military might of the United States in 1973. However, the much debated Sino - Soviet split, which scarred the relations between the two communist giants had an adverse effect on Sino – Vietnamese relations also. Faced with the option of choosing between the monolithic Soviet empire and its oft threatening neighbour whose bellicosity could any day escalate into an armed invasion, the Vietnamese chose the former and therefore drifted into the Russian camp. Chinese strategists had always desired of a fractured Indochina with Cambodia and Laos gaining some autonomy vis-à-vis Hanoi. However this was not to be the case as Vietnamese troops marched into Cambodia in December 1978 to uproot the Pol Pot directed brutality of Khmer Rouge. This was condemned by PRC who had supplied the Khmer Rouge with both materiel as well as diplomatic assistance.²⁹ The double whammy of Vietnam's defeat of the Cambodian dictator as well as its proximity to the Soviets led the Chinese to start a full scale border war which started on 17 February 1979 and lasted for 28 days. The Chinese entered North Vietnam and captured some of the border cities. On March 6, they declared they had punished Vietnam enough and retreated back across their border. The unofficial casualty figures for both sides are 26000 killed and 37000 wounded for the Chinese and 30000 killed and 32000 wounded on the Vietnamese side.³⁰ This act of punishing a neighbouring country in a limited border conflict has been a recurring feature of Chinese foreign policy, as seen in the Sino - Indian border conflict of 1962 and the Sino - Soviet conflict over the Zhenbao island in 1969.

The PRC and Vietnam are embroiled over the more than 750 reefs, islets, atolls, cays and islands in the South China Sea,³¹ collectively known as the Spratly islands as well as the Paracel islands off the Gulf of Tonkin. The only border dispute that has been resolved by the two former allies concerns the 1306 kilometers land border.³² The border markers were officially set up in 2009 marking an end (land only) to a centuries old conflict.³³

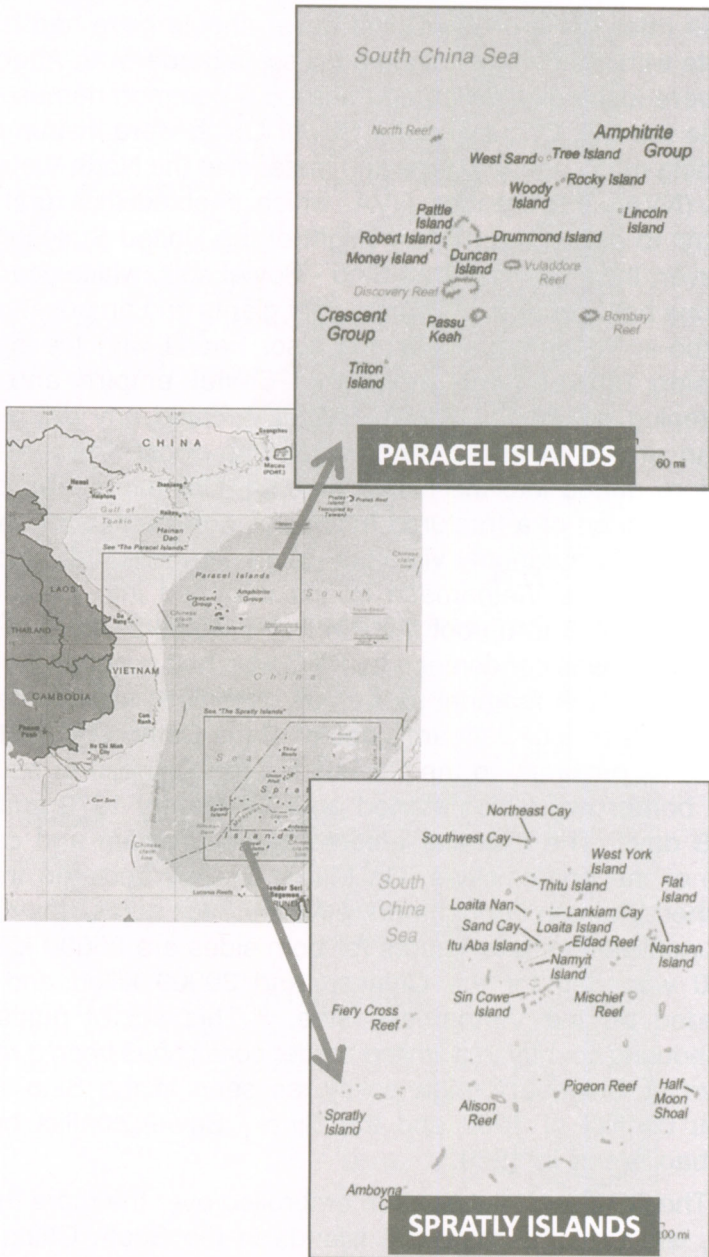


Figure 5 : Map showing the disputed area of the Spratly and Paracel islands in the South China Sea

Sino - Soviet Border Dispute

Please refer to **Figure 6**. The Cold War had neatly divided the world into two camps: the Capitalists, led by the US and the Communists, led by Soviet Russia. However as the years progressed, the lines between the two were obscured with the Sino - Soviet split marking a watershed in the great ideological dispute. The Chinese accused the Soviet Union of subverting the Uighur population in its Xinjiang province when in May 1962, around 60000 Uighurs crossed the frontier into the USSR.³⁴ Prime amongst China's 'concerns' were the 'unequal' treaties imposed on it by Imperial Russia, through which it seized a total of 2.9 million square kilometers from China.³⁵ The region where all the vitriolic was concentrated was the Eastern border of China with the Soviet Union, especially the two islands of Qiliqin and Zhenbao³⁶ on the Wusuli (Ussuri) river. A number of seemingly disconnected minor incidents involving civilians, starting in 1964,³⁷ soon gave way to limited clashes between the Soviet and Chinese troops. The prospect of a nuclear war engulfing the whole subcontinent had never been more probable. The Chinese pattern regarding the Zhenbao and Qiliqin islands was the one used with India in pre-1962 and also later with Vietnam and in current times, Arunachal Pradesh and Aksai Chin. The Chinese infiltrated into small groups

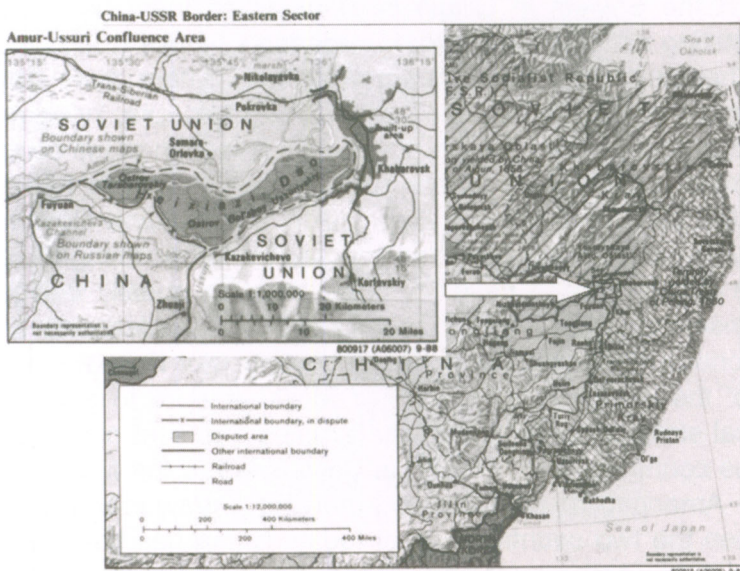


Figure 6 : Map showing the Eastern portion of the border between China and the USSR

on the islands and started their construction activity, which was then repulsed heavily by the Soviets. The most serious incident took place on 5 January 1968, when the Soviet patrol along with a couple of armoured vehicles attacked the Chinese, resulting in four civilian deaths. Seen from an analytical point of view, a significant number of China's border disputes were initiated or settled during the 1960s decade, prompting one to ponder that the Sino- Soviet split in conjunction with the Cultural Revolution were the driving force behind these negotiations.

On 2nd and 15th March 1969, the Soviets and the Chinese troops engaged in a full fledged firefight involving tanks, armoured vehicles, in addition to small arms. According to the analysis of an internal Chinese circular, the Chinese had been despatched in groups and had actually sprung a trap on the hapless Soviets who were not prepared for such an intense fight.³⁸ The Zhenbao Island battle was not simply a logical outcome of the long existing tensions on the Sino-Soviet border; it was a well calculated attempt at a defensive counterattack on the part of Mao. Repeated Chinese concessions in face of Soviet provocation had made the Chinese leaders feel that they had reached the limit of forbearance. By early 1969, they found it necessary to strike back in a well planned military attack. The Chinese had already practiced attack plans against the Soviets in Qiliqin in 1968 which they then used to devastating effect at Zhenbao. In ordering Chinese troops to fight the Zhenbao battle, Mao had no further military aims beyond teaching the Soviets a bitter lesson. The main aim, however, of Mao was to trigger a massive internal mobilisation of his country's resources, population and patriotic sentiments, which had been fractured completely in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, what with factional infighting and internal rioting becoming the order of the day. Mao had never contemplated an equally belligerent response from Moscow and the prospect of a nuclear war forced it to tone down its bellicose xenophobia. Soviet Russia began to 'probe' the response of the US, if Moscow were to carry out a surgical strike on China's nuclear facilities and sent out feelers to various countries. The fear of the Soviets led to the famous 1972 Sino - American *rapprochement* marking a thaw in the relations between the two countries. As of today, China has been granted control over Tarabarov Island, Zhenbao Island and approximately 50 per cent of Bolshoy Ussuriyski Island.³⁹

Sino - Myanmar Border Dispute

Please refer to **Figure 7**. No dispute brings the duplicitous nature of Chinese hankering to fore than the settlement of the Sino-Myanmar border. While contending, on one hand that the McMahon Line is invalid in case for India, China has amicably settled for the same line as the International Border (IB), with regard to Myanmar. China made extensive claims for all of present-day Burma north of a line extending from Myitkyina almost due west to the Indian boundary in 1941.⁴⁰ However after much haggling by the newly independent Burmese government (Burma gained independence in 1948) the Chinese came to the negotiating table in 1954 and by 1960 had settled peacefully along a line, roughly matching the contours of McMahon Line. 132 square miles of Burmese territory was transferred to China (59 miles at Hpimaw and 73 miles at Panglao-Panghung) while Burma gained full title to the 85 square miles of Namwan leased territory.⁴¹

China, incidentally has no major existing border disputes with Nepal and Laos.⁴² However it is perturbed by the lawlessness prevailing in the Mekong Delta region of Myanmar and had dispatched around 300 armed police to control of the situation.⁴³



Figure 7 : Map showing the disturbed areas along Sino-Myanmar border

Sino-Bhutan Border Dispute

Please refer to **Figure 8**. Bhutan is the only country, except India, that has refused to bow under Chinese pressure. Border negotiations regarding the watershed of the Chumbi valley in the country's North West and the crest of the Himalayan ranges in the North remain stalled as of date.⁴⁴ However, cross border incursions by Chinese soldiers and Tibetan herders have plagued the country's security situation since 1966.⁴⁵

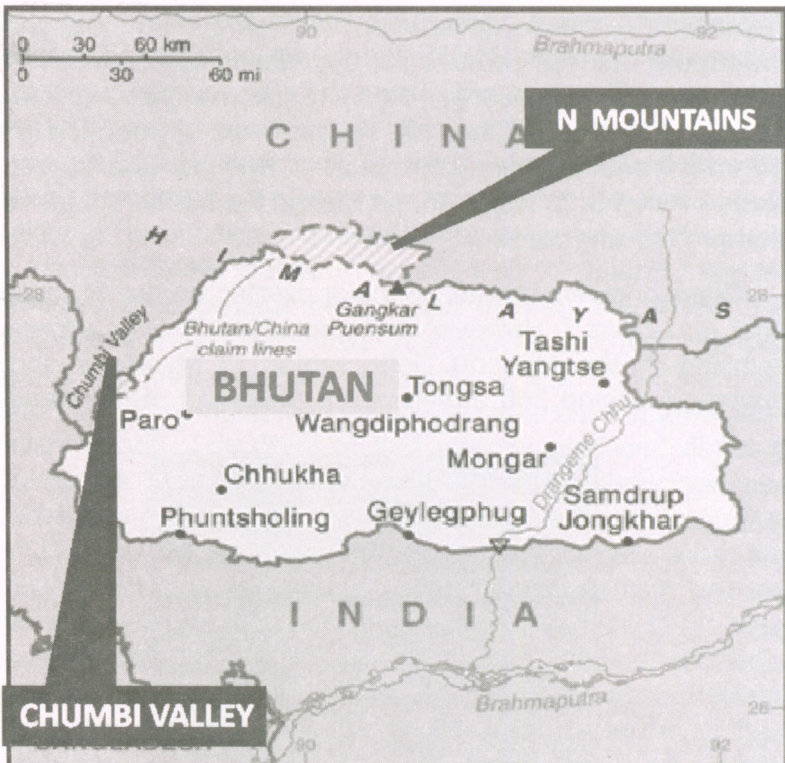


Figure 8 : Map showing the disputed areas of Bhutan

Sino - Indian Border Dispute

The most enduring amongst all the disputes has been the one with India. It is a complex issue and has defied a solution in spite of sixteen rounds of talks held at the level of Special Representatives of the Government of India and China. It is a subject of ongoing negotiations; hence is not being covered in this paper. In any case, it can easily form a subject for a separate research paper.

Inferences

Scrutinising all the above border disputes of China, a few useful inferences can be drawn which are mentioned in the succeeding paras.

Xinjiang is a vulnerability that has time and again surfaced in almost all of China's disputes. The nuclear testing facility of Lop Nor⁴⁶ as well as most of China's strategic missiles forces, the Second Artillery are based in this region. Xinjiang has acquired such an importance that China has embroiled itself again in a dispute with Kazakhstan, this time over the distribution of the waters of two of its rivers in the region. This region has been the reason for China negotiating its border disputes with the Central Asian nations of Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyztan. In fact, China settled its dispute with Kazakhstan within six months of a major US exercise so as to maintain its control over the Steppes. Tibet, on the other hand, considered earlier not to have any major economic significance and only as the platform for any future attack into India is being seen differently. Tibetan assimilation in mainland China is still a distant dream for Beijing despite infrastructural and economic development of the region and settling down of Hans. This imperative (for China) has a great potential of future conflict with India as, with the passage of time, Chinese behaviour is likely to become more assertive and overbearing, symptoms of which are being seen today in a number of disputed areas.

China settled for just 1142 square kilometres out of the 28500 demanded by it of Tajikistan as it was keen to gain the confidence of Dushanbe in its persecution of the Uighur separatists, who owe their origins to these nations. Kazakhstan benefitted from the USCENTCOM exercise in 1997, which hastened the process of demarcation of its borders with China, with minimum loss to Dushanbe. This brings to fore the three basic concerns of China which are:-

- (a) Physical security along its frontier borders with Central Asia.
- (b) Ensuring that no power hostile to China has any influence over the Central Asian steppes. Considering the polemics of Sino - US relations in the context of post September 2001,

this has become a major factor as China saw the US influence increase manifold with unfettered access to air bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyztan.⁴⁷

(c) Gain access to the natural resources of the region. The case of Kazakhstan and its inability to stop China's unwarranted activities on its two rivers comes to mind.

China has evolved a very subtle way of intruding and then claiming any land which it considers to be part of its territory. Consider the case of India and Russia, in both the cases the Chinese surreptitiously crept towards unclaimed boundaries and started their construction activities. When challenged by the other side they retaliated with fire, and claimed publicly that they were just protecting their territory. These tactics were observed by the Russians during the Zhenbao incident and is now being reported regularly by the Indian armed forces in Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh.

Another attitude that has been observed is the Chinese practice of punishing its neighbours with punitive action in order to take the pressure off its internal instability. This behaviour has been observed during the border conflicts with Russia, India and Vietnam. Only Russian aggressive reaction forced China to look towards a boundary settlement that it could not resolve at its own terms.

All the border disputes with China have taken decades to get resolved and that too at China's terms and conditions. This is the legacy that the treaties of Argun (1858)⁴⁸ and Peking (1860)⁴⁹ have bestowed upon China: *never bargain from a position of weakness*. This is the reason why China has taken such a long time to resolve its border disputes with its neighbours. The only anomalies have been found in cases where China's own security interests or economic interests have been the prime concern. In fact, it compromises with its neighbours when its internal stability is threatened.

Conclusion

This article takes a broad look at all the major border disputes of PRC with its neighbours and draws inferences which go beyond the usual military interpretation; instead delving into the behaviour and nuances of Chinese attitudes and policies that have shaped

its response to the world since its bloody inception in 1949. These historical experiences could help the Indian policy makers in negotiating with China to resolve the boundary dispute which has defied solution so far.

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