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# Power Shifts and Escalation

M. Taylor Fravel

## Explaining China's Use of Force in Territorial Disputes

As China's military power increases, concerns grow about its potential for aggression over territory. Such concerns reflect the uncertainty and anxiety that accompany power transitions. Historically, rapid internal growth has propelled states to redefine and expand their foreign interests.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, economic development helps fund the acquisition of military capabilities to pursue these interests, especially long-standing territorial claims. Reflecting these concerns, for example, the congressional U.S.-China Security and Economic Review Commission concludes that China might "take advantage of a more advanced military to threaten use of force, or actually use force, to facilitate desirable resolutions of . . . territorial claims."<sup>2</sup>

Since 1949, however, China's use of force in its territorial disputes has varied widely. China has participated in twenty-three territorial conflicts with other states but has used force in only six.<sup>3</sup> Some of these disputes, especially those with India and Vietnam, were notably violent; others, such as China's dispute with the Soviet Union, risked nuclear war. Although China has been willing to use force in some of its conflicts, it has seized little land that it did not control before the outbreak of combat. Moreover, China has compromised more frequently than it has used force, offering concessions in seventeen of its territorial disputes.<sup>4</sup>

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1. See, for example, Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981); and A.F.K. Organski, *World Politics* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958).

2. *2006 Report to Congress of the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission*, 109th Cong., 2d sess., November 2006, p. 130, [http://www.uscc.gov/annual\\_report/2006/annual\\_report\\_full\\_06.pdf](http://www.uscc.gov/annual_report/2006/annual_report_full_06.pdf).

3. A territorial dispute is defined as a conflicting claim by two or more states over the ownership and control of a piece of land, including islands but excluding maritime demarcation disputes over exclusive economic zones. See Paul K. Huth and Todd L. Allee, *The Democratic Peace and Territorial Conflict in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 298.

4. M. Taylor Fravel, "Regime Insecurity and International Cooperation: Explaining China's Compromises in Territorial Disputes," *International Security*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (Fall 2005), pp. 46-83.

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China has been less belligerent than leading theories of international relations might have predicted for a state with its characteristics. For scholars of offensive realism, China has rarely exploited its military superiority either to bargain hard for the territory that it claims or to seize it through force. China has likewise not become increasingly aggressive in managing its territorial disputes as its relative military and economic power has grown since 1990. For scholars studying the effects of nationalism, China has been willing to offer territorial concessions despite historical legacies of external victimization and territorial dismemberment that suggest instead assertiveness in conflicts over sovereignty. For those focused on the role of domestic political institutions, China has escalated only a few of its territorial conflicts despite a highly centralized, authoritarian political system with limited internal constraints on the use of force.

Analysis of China's past uses of force in its territorial disputes offers a baseline for understanding the potential for violent conflict in East Asia. In an international system composed of sovereign states, a country's behavior in managing its territorial disputes is a key indicator of whether it is pursuing status quo or revisionist goals. Historically, territory has been the most common issue over which states go to war.<sup>5</sup> Today, China is involved in disputes over Taiwan and the Senkaku Islands that increase the likelihood of hostility between China and the United States, as the latter maintains close security ties with Taipei and Tokyo. Finally, although research on China's use of force demonstrates the centrality of territorial disputes, the conditions under which China has escalated these conflicts has yet to be examined systematically.<sup>6</sup>

Existing research on territorial disputes has identified those conflicts most likely to erupt in violence. States that are democracies or alliance partners, for example, are less likely to initiate military confrontations over territory with

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5. See, for example, Kalevi J. Holsti, *Peace and War: Armed Conflicts and International Order, 1648–1989* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); and John A. Vasquez, *The War Puzzle* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

6. On the role of territorial disputes in China's conflict behavior, see Alastair Iain Johnston, "China's Militarized Interstate Dispute Behaviour, 1949–1992: A First Cut at the Data," *China Quarterly*, No. 153 (March 1998), pp. 1–30. Studies of China's use of force include Thomas J. Christensen, "Windows and War: Trend Analysis and Beijing's Use of Force," in Alastair Iain Johnston and Robert S. Ross, eds., *New Directions in the Study of China's Foreign Policy* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2006), pp. 50–85; Melvin Gurtov and Byung-Moo Hwang, *China under Threat: The Politics of Strategy and Diplomacy* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980); Andrew Scobell, *China's Use of Military Force: Beyond the Great Wall and the Long March* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Gerald Segal, *Defending China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985); Allen S. Whiting, *The Chinese Calculus of Deterrence: India and Indochina* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1975); and Allen S. Whiting, "China's Use of Force, 1950–96, and Taiwan," *International Security*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (Fall 2001), pp. 103–131.

each other. By contrast, states are more prone to use force in disputes over land highly valued for its strategic importance, economic potential, or symbolic significance, or when they are stronger militarily than their adversary.<sup>7</sup> This research has deepened scholars' understanding about the nature of territorial disputes, but it lacks a complete theoretical account for decisions by states to use force for territorial ends. These studies illuminate mostly cross-sectional variation in the outcome of disputes, identifying conflicts that are more likely to witness violence. Although factors such as the value of contested land vary widely across different disputes, they are often constant in specific conflicts, which limits their ability to explain decisions to use force.

China's dispute over Taiwan illustrates the limits of existing approaches. As current research would predict, Taiwan is primed for conflict. It is China's most important territorial dispute, linked to modern Chinese nationalism and to the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP); it is also economically and strategically important. Since 1949, China has possessed military capabilities to strike the island or the territories it controls, while its authoritarian regime has placed few institutional checks and balances on the use of force. Yet China's use of force in its dispute with Taiwan has varied over time, with Beijing initiating major crises in September 1954, August 1958, and July 1995. The island's importance, China's coercive means, and its nondemocratic political institutions are clearly part of the story, but these factors fail to explain why China resorted to force at these three moments but not at other times.

To explain why and when states use force in their territorial disputes, I shift the analytical focus from dispute outcomes to individual state decisions. Incorporating insights from preventive war theory, I argue that a decline in the strength of a state's claim, defined as its bargaining power in a conflict, provides one explanation for the escalation of territorial disputes. This bargaining power consists of two components: the amount of contested land that a state holds and its ability to project military power against its adversary over the disputed area. When a state concludes that an adversary is strengthening its

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7. See, for example, Giacomo Chiozza and Ajin Choi, "Guess Who Did What: Political Leaders and the Management of Territorial Disputes, 1950–1990," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 47, No. 3 (June 2003), pp. 251–278; Gary Goertz and Paul F. Diehl, *Territorial Changes and International Conflict* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Paul R. Hensel, "Contentious Issues and World Politics: The Management of Territorial Claims in the Americas, 1816–1992," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (March 2001), pp. 81–109; Paul R. Hensel and Sara McLaughlin Mitchell, "Issue Indivisibility and Territorial Claims," *Geojournal*, Vol. 64, No. 6 (December 2005), pp. 275–285; Paul K. Huth, *Standing Your Ground: Territorial Disputes and International Conflict* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996); and Huth and Allee, *The Democratic Peace and Territorial Conflict in the Twentieth Century*.

relative position in a dispute, it is more likely to use force to halt or reverse its decline, seizing territory if necessary.

Negative shifts in bargaining power best explain China's willingness to use force in its territorial disputes. China has used force against adversaries that possess military forces capable of contesting its control of disputed land. China has also used force in conflicts where it has occupied little or none of the land that it claims. When China has faced an adversary seeking to increase the amount of disputed territory that it occupies or to improve its position in the local military balance, China has usually responded with force to signal resolve to maintain its claims or, at times, to seize part of that territory.

The pattern in China's use of force over territory has several implications for international relations theory. First, China's use of force provides further support for preventive war theory and demonstrates the utility of the theory in examining issues where specific conflicts of interest exist, such as territorial disputes. Second, China's behavior challenges existing arguments in the literature on power transitions, which assert that a rising state is more likely to use force than a declining one.<sup>8</sup> In its territorial disputes, China has usually used force as its relative power in a given dispute declined, not increased.

This article begins with a discussion of how negative shifts in bargaining power create incentives for states to use force in territorial disputes. It then examines the variation in China's use of force across its twenty-three disputes and finds that this variation is consistent with a decline in the strength of China's territorial claims. The next three sections trace the role of such decline over time in China's decisions to use force in disputes over Taiwan, the China-India border, and the Paracel Islands. After briefly examining China's other uses of force and alternative explanations for China's behavior, the article concludes by considering the implications of these findings for stability in East Asia.

### *Negative Power Shifts and Use of Force in Territorial Disputes*

The study of territorial disputes generally highlights military power as a key variable in explaining the escalation of these conflicts to high levels of violence. At one level, this finding is unsurprising: one purpose of a military is to seize and secure land from an opposing force. Only states with some military capabilities would be able to use force over territory in the first place. At the same time, this finding leaves unanswered many questions about the sources

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8. See, for example, Organski, *World Politics*.

of escalation in territorial disputes. Although stronger states may more easily employ force to achieve their territorial objectives, it is unclear why and when they do so—whether they are driven by greed or insecurity.

Applying insights from preventive war theory, I argue that a decline in the strength of a state's claim, defined as its bargaining power in a dispute, provides one explanation for the use of force in territorial disputes. A preventive war is defined as "a war fought *now* in order to avoid the risks of war under worsening circumstances *later*."<sup>9</sup> As a state's overall power declines, its leaders begin to worry about the long-term consequences of their state's weakening position in the international system, a decrease in future bargaining power, and a higher likelihood of war later under worse conditions. As Jack Levy describes, these concerns generate "preventive motivations" to use force, as war sooner rather than later becomes an increasingly attractive alternative for lessening the effects of decline or even maintaining a state's influence.<sup>10</sup> Importantly, war occurs even though no specific conflict of interest or *casus belli* exists, only uncertainty about the future. In empirical studies, negative power shifts that create incentives for war for one side are often called "windows of vulnerability."<sup>11</sup>

To explain the use of force in territorial disputes, I shift the focus from general uncertainty about a state's future position in the international system to concrete concerns about a state's bargaining power when conflicting interests exist. A state's bargaining power in a dispute reflects its ability to control the land that it claims. This bargaining power is formed by two components. The first is the amount of contested territory that a state occupies. The greater the proportion of disputed land that a state holds, the stronger its relative position given the costs for the opposing side to change the territorial status quo with force. The second component is the state's ability to project its military

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9. Jack S. Levy, "Declining Power and the Preventive Motivation for War," *World Politics*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (October 1987), p. 82 (emphasis in original). See also Dale C. Copeland, *Origins of Major War* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000); and Stephen Van Evera, *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999), pp. 73–104.

10. Levy, "Declining Power and the Preventive Motivation for War."

11. Van Evera, *Causes of War*, p. 74. For applications, see Copeland, *Origins of Major War*, pp. 56–117; and Stephen Van Evera, "The Cult of the Offensive and the Origins of the First World War," *International Security*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (Summer 1984), pp. 58–107. See also Victor D. Cha, "Hawk Engagement and Preventive Defense on the Korean Peninsula," *International Security*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (Summer 2002), pp. 40–78; and Jack S. Levy and Joseph R. Gochal, "Democracy and Preventive War: Israel and the 1956 Sinai Campaign," *Security Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (Winter 2001/02), pp. 1–49. On China, see Christensen, "Windows and War," pp. 50–85. Christensen's essay had an important impact on my thinking about China's territorial dispute behavior, although the sources of preventive logic that I describe as driving escalation in China's territorial disputes focus on bargaining power in the conflict, not on China's overall position in the international system.

Figure 1. Bargaining Power in Territorial Disputes

		Amount of Contested Territory Occupied	
		Small	Large
Power Projection	High	strong	dominant
	Low	inferior	weak

power against its opponent over all contested areas, including those that it claims but does not control. Even if a state holds only a small portion of the disputed land, it may still be able to project power over all contested areas and beyond. In this context, power projection refers to the local military balance, not a state’s overall position in the international system. As most states have multiple security goals, only a portion of their military assets can be devoted to a particular mission, such as defending territorial claims.

A state’s bargaining power in a territorial dispute captures its ability to achieve a favorable negotiated settlement. Although both components of a state’s bargaining power are continuous, extreme values can be used to identify four ideal types (see Figure 1). When a state’s relative position in a dispute is strong or dominant, its leaders can be optimistic about achieving a favorable resolution through diplomacy. By contrast, when a state’s position is inferior or weak, its leaders are likely to be pessimistic about the ability of diplomacy to achieve such a resolution.

Negative shifts in bargaining power create incentives for states to use force. Territorial conflicts are dynamic contests. States actively compete to strengthen their claim in a dispute, usually by improving their position in the local military balance. Often, states will be able to match each other’s moves and maintain their relative position. When one state strengthens its position relative to its opponent, however, the other side is more likely to conclude that it is “losing” the dispute and be more willing to use force to prevent or forestall its own decline. Although the rising state in the dispute will be more optimistic about the final outcome and less likely to use force, the declining state will be more pessimistic, which increases the value of using force if it possesses the means

to do so. Inaction is viewed as more costly in the long run than using force in the short run.

When a state's bargaining power declines relative to that of its adversary, it can use force in one of two ways. First, it can seize land and increase the amount of disputed territory under its control. Land seizure is common when states race to occupy disputed territory near the start of a conflict. Second, a state can use force to signal resolve to defend its claim and deter threats to its ability to control disputed territory. Signaling resolve is more common for a state whose claim is weak or inferior, especially when it lacks the capability to project power over the entire area being contested. By using force in response to their state's declining relative power in a dispute, leaders hope to convey information about their level of resolve.<sup>12</sup>

Changes in each component of a state's bargaining power in a dispute can create perceptions of decline. First, as the amount of territory that each side controls in a dispute is often fixed, each side's efforts to maximize its position in the local balance is the most likely source of negative shifts in bargaining power. An adversary's military actions should have the greatest effect on a state's assessment of the strength of its claim, including (1) increased troop deployments to the disputed area, (2) fortification of military positions in the area, (3) the force posture of the adversary's troops near the area, and (4) the development of new capabilities for fighting over the area. Political actions can also shape perceptions of an adversary's resolve to defend disputed land. These include (1) administrative declarations or acts to incorporate contested land into the state, (2) infrastructure projects in disputed areas, such as road building designed to increase the state's control, and (3) plebiscites and elections intended to increase the legitimacy of one side's claim.

Second, although the amount of territory that each side controls is often fixed, it can change under certain circumstances. Such changes will often be viewed as threatening. At times, some disputed territory may not be effectively controlled by any of the states involved. This may occur in new disputes, when the claimants have not yet deployed troops to the contested area, or when both states face operational obstacles to controlling or policing the disputed area. These conditions allow one side to seize unoccupied land through *fait accompli* tactics, strengthening its position in the conflict.

As territorial disputes are by definition conflicting claims to the same piece of land, even policies that one state believes to be defensive are frequently viewed by its adversary as offensive. This inherent volatility stems from the

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12. On information and war, see, for example, James D. Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War," *International Organization*, Vol. 49, No. 3 (Summer 1995), pp. 379–414.



security dilemma, which occurs when “many of the means by which a state tries to increase its security decrease the security of others.”<sup>13</sup> Although Robert Jervis examined general security competition under conditions of uncertainty, his insight also applies to concrete conflicts of interest such as territorial disputes, where strictly speaking no dilemma exists. As Thomas Christensen has demonstrated, when sovereignty is contested, the consolidation and defense of the territorial status quo can be viewed as aggressive, especially when it entrenches a disadvantage for one side. As a result, both sides may see their own actions as defensive, resulting in spirals of hostility as each seeks to bolster its control of contested territory.<sup>14</sup>

Importantly, the effects of relative decline are independent of a state’s initial strength in the dispute. States with both strong and weak claims will be sensitive to the implications of relative decline in their bargaining power. All things being equal, states with weaker claims will be more sensitive to the long-term implications of the same amount of decline and more likely to use force than states with stronger claims. When a state controls little or none of the contested land, even political actions by an opponent to consolidate the status quo can appear threatening to the state’s the long-term ability to gain disputed territory.

Existing research provides support for such preventive logic in explaining why and when leaders use force in territorial disputes. Although some studies demonstrate that states are more likely to escalate hostilities as their relative capabilities improve, the most volatile dyads measured by the frequency of escalation or high levels of hostility are usually evenly matched in terms of military strength. In many cases, somewhat weaker states initiated the use of force.<sup>15</sup> Under such conditions of rough parity, small military actions should have significant long-term implications for each side’s bargaining power. Likewise, efforts by one state to change the status quo in a dispute are linked with decisions by the other state to use force, a finding consistent with the argument advanced in this article.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, during periods of decline, imperial powers have resorted to the use of force to communicate resolve to defend the scope of their empires.<sup>17</sup>

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13. Robert Jervis, “Cooperation under the Security Dilemma,” *World Politics*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (January 1978), pp. 167–214, at p. 169.

14. Thomas J. Christensen, “The Contemporary Security Dilemma: Deterring a Taiwan Conflict,” *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (Autumn 2002), pp. 7–21.

15. Hensel, “Contentious Issues and World Politics,” p. 105; and Huth, *Standing Your Ground*, p. 116.

16. Huth, *Standing Your Ground*, pp. 122–124.

17. Charles A. Kupchan, *The Vulnerability of Empire* (Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 19.

Two additional variables condition the effect of negative shifts in bargaining power in a territorial dispute. The first is the salience of the disputed land. All things being equal, the greater the military, economic, or symbolic value of the land being contested, the greater the sensitivity of states to a loss of bargaining power. The greater the importance of the territory, the greater the potential gains for using force to acquire or defend it. But because the salience of territory changes infrequently and is usually constant in any particular dispute, it offers an incomplete explanation for why and when states use force. A territory's salience, however, can increase in two ways. The first is through the discovery of natural resources, especially petroleum or minerals, which increases the benefits of using force for the state with a weaker claim.<sup>18</sup> The second is through "lateral pressure" created by one or both states' economic growth, which in turn increases the value of controlling existing resources in disputed areas.<sup>19</sup>

The second variable that conditions the effect of negative shifts in a state's bargaining power in a territorial dispute is its broader security environment. When a state faces other threats to its power either at home or abroad, it is more likely to magnify its perception of decline in a territorial dispute. The state is likely to assume the worst about its opponent's intention—namely, that its adversary seeks to profit from its weakness—and believe that it must counter such action or it will continue. A state may also worry about its ability to counter pressure applied by its opponent. Finally, it may fear that failure to respond vigorously could produce internal unrest, adding yet another challenge to the state.

All things being equal, a negative shift in a state's bargaining power in a dispute creates an incentive to use force to prevent further decline. In addition, the salience of contested land shapes the overall stakes in a given conflict while a state's broader security environment can magnify perceptions of decline. A state is most likely to use force when these three variables take on high values—when it faces political or military pressure from an adversary in an important dispute while also confronting other security challenges. By contrast, a state is least likely to use force in disputes over relatively unimportant land where the state's bargaining power is stable relative to that of its opponent and it faces no other challenges at home or abroad.

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18. Nils Petter Gleditsch, "Armed Conflict and the Environment: A Critique of the Literature," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (May 1998), pp. 381–400.

19. Nazli Choucri and Robert C. North, *Nations in Conflict: National Growth and International Violence* (San Francisco, Calif.: W.H. Freeman, 1975).

In the remainder of this article, two methods are used to test this theory of escalation in territorial disputes. The following section describes the results of controlled comparisons of China's many disputes. Then, decisions to use force are traced in disputes over Taiwan, the China-India border, and the Paracel Islands, demonstrating how a decline in bargaining power is linked with decisions to use force and how stability corresponds with peace.

### *Why and When China Uses Force*

Since 1949, China has employed force in six of its twenty-three territorial disputes. The variation in China's use of force in its territorial disputes corresponds most closely with periods of decline in the strength of its claims.

As I have argued elsewhere, China's territorial disputes and their relative importance are linked to its ethnic geography, that is, the location and distribution of ethnic groups within the state. China's ethnic geography consists of a densely populated Han Chinese core along the coast and river valleys, a large but sparsely populated periphery of ethnic minorities, and unpopulated offshore islands.<sup>20</sup> Homeland disputes over parts of the Han core are China's most important, namely the areas of Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macao that were not under CCP control in 1949. In frontier disputes on its periphery, China's leaders seek to maintain control over vast borderlands populated by ethnic minorities that were never governed directly by any previous dynasty. These disputes are much less important for China because maintaining internal control trumps expanding the frontiers.<sup>21</sup> In offshore island disputes, China's leaders aim to secure a maritime presence on barren rocks and islands far from the mainland, a presence with potential economic and strategic benefits.

As Table 1 notes, China has initiated the use of force sixteen times in six different disputes. Following the Correlates of War project, I define the use of force to include the occupation of territory or a blockade, raid, clash, or war.<sup>22</sup> To limit the analysis to escalation decisions clearly authorized by China's top leaders, I examine only episodes when at least one battalion or its naval equivalent was employed. I do not examine small-scale clashes among border guards or maritime patrols, unless China seized disputed territory. I exclude

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20. Fravel, "Regime Insecurity and International Cooperation."

21. M. Taylor Fravel, "Securing Borders: China's Doctrine and Force Structure for Frontier Defense," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 30, Nos. 4-5 (August 2007), pp. 705-737.

22. Daniel M. Jones, Stuart A. Bremer, and J. David Singer, " Militarized Interstate Disputes, 1816-1992: Rationale, Coding Rules, and Empirical Patterns," *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (August 1996), p. 173.

Table 1. Summary of China's Territorial Disputes, 1949–2005

Disputed Area	Size (km <sup>2</sup> )	Agreements	Uses of Force
Burma border	1,909	1960: BA 1960: BT 1961: BP	—
Nepal border	2,476 Mt. Everest	1960: BA 1961: BT 1963: BP 1962: BT 1964: BP	—
North Korea border	1,165	1962: BT 1964: BP	—
Mongolia border	16,808	1962: BT 1964: BP	—
Pakistan border	8,806 K2	1963: BA 1965: BP	—
Afghanistan border	~7,381	1963: BT 1965: BP	—
Russia border (eastern)*	~1,000	1991: BA 1999: BP	1969: ambush on Zhenbao Island
Bhutan border	1,128	1998: MTA	—
India border	~125,000	1993: MTA 1996: CBM 2005: PriA	1959–61: expansion in Aksai Chin 1962: offensive along disputed border 1967: clashes at Nathu La 1986: occupation of Sumdorong Chu
Laos border	18	1991: BT 1993: BP	—
Vietnam border	227	1993: PriA 1999: BT	1980: assault on Luojiaopingda Mt. 1981: assault on Faka and Koulin Mts. 1984: assault on Lao and Zheyin Mts.
Russia border (western)*	NA	1994: BA 1999: BP	—

Table 1. *continued*

Disputed Area	Size (km <sup>2</sup> )	Agreements	Uses of Force
		Frontier Disputes	
Kazakhstan border*	2,420	1994: BA 1997: SA 1998: SA 2002: BP	—
Kyrgyzstan border*	3,656	1996: BA 1998: SA 2004: BP	—
Tajikistan border*	28,430	1999: BA 2002: SA 2004: SA	—
Abagaitu and Heixiazi Islands on Russian border	408		—
		Homeland Disputes	
Hong Kong	1,092	1984: JD	—
Macao	28	1987: JD	—
Taiwan	35,980	—	1950–54: clashes over coastal islands 1954: shelling of Jinmen 1955: seizure of Dachens 1958: shelling of Jinmen and Mazu 1995–96: missile tests
		Offshore Island Disputes	
White Dragon Tail Island	~5	No formal agreement	—
Paracel Islands	~10	—	1974: seizure of Crescent Group 1988: occupation of six features
Spratly Islands	~5	—	1994: occupation of Mischief Reef
Senkaku Islands	~7	—	—

NOTE: BA (boundary agreement), BP (boundary protocol), BT (boundary treaty), CBM (confidence-building measures), MTA (Maintenance of Tranquility Agreement), JD (joint declaration), PrIA (principles agreement), and SA (supplemental agreement).  
\*Territory also disputed with the Soviet Union before 1992.

two cases because China did not pursue territorial objectives in these uses of force. The first case is the 1965 mobilization and subsequent clashes along the Chinese-Indian border, which reflected China's efforts to support Pakistan in its war with India.<sup>23</sup> The second is China's 1979 invasion of Vietnam, which was motivated primarily by a desire to deter Soviet and Vietnamese expansion in Southeast Asia, not by the territorial disputes between China and Vietnam.<sup>24</sup> The 1995–96 Taiwan Strait crisis might be viewed as a borderline case. Although China conducted numerous live ammunition exercises, it did not engage in combat operations against Taiwan. Nevertheless, the March 1996 missile tests effectively blockaded the island's two key ports. I also exclude the occupation of territory before competing claims were defined, especially during the process of state formation. For example, China's occupation of parts of the western sector disputed with India when the People's Liberation Army (PLA) deployed to Xinjiang and Western Tibet in 1950 is not counted as a use of force.

Across China's disputes, two characteristics of its use of force are consistent with the effects of declining bargaining power. First, on its continental border, China has employed force in frontier disputes where it has faced militarily powerful opponents (i.e., states that could possibly challenge its otherwise strong claims). Although the local military balance is difficult to measure with precision, China has on average been vastly stronger in the overall military balance than most of its land neighbors with which it has had territorial disputes, and only a few countries have possessed sufficient forces to shift the local balance in specific disputes (see Figure 2). Not coincidentally, these are the same countries against which China has used force: India in 1962, the Soviet Union in 1969, and Vietnam in the early 1980s. At the same time, China has refrained from employing force against its weaker continental neighbors.

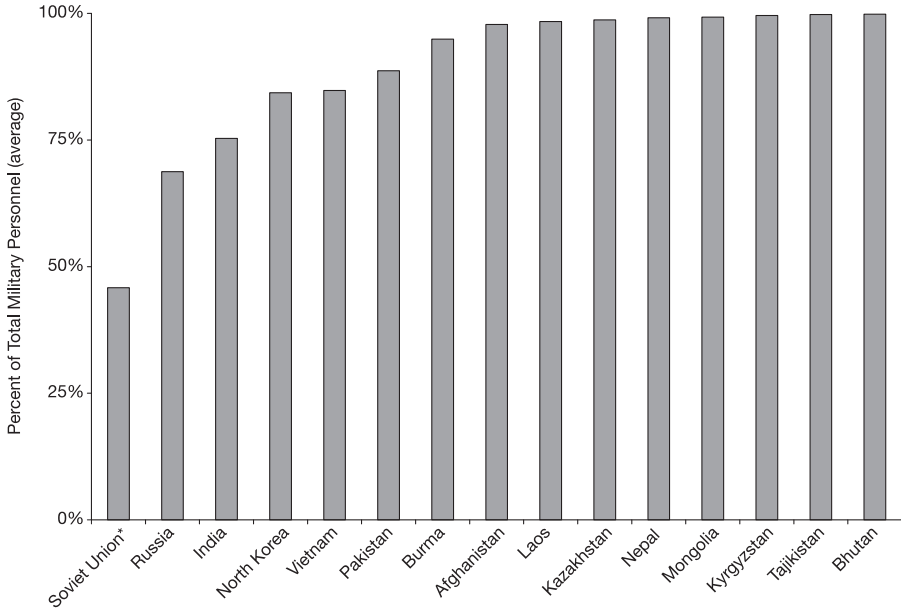
Second, China has used force in disputes where the strength of its claims have been weak, especially when it has occupied little or none of the contested territory. In these disputes, China has been sensitive to any further decline in its bargaining power. Over Taiwan, China initiated major crises in 1954, 1958, and 1995–96. In its offshore island disputes, Beijing clashed with Saigon over the Crescent Group of the Paracels in 1974 and with Hanoi over several features in the Spratlys in 1988; and it occupied Mischief Reef in 1994. Both com-

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23. John W. Garver, *Protracted Contest: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Twentieth Century* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001), pp. 200–204.

24. Robert S. Ross, *The Indochina Tangle: China's Vietnam Policy, 1975–1979* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); and Zhang Xiaoming, "China's 1979 War with Vietnam: A Reassessment," *China Quarterly*, No. 184 (December 2005), pp. 851–874.

Figure 2. China's Average Military Power in Frontier Disputes, 1949–2002



SOURCE: Correlates of War Project, military personnel variable, from EuGene program, ver. 3.040.

NOTE: Each bar represents China's share of combined military personnel. Figures greater than 50 percent indicate a Chinese advantage in the overall military balance with the opposing state.

\*Includes Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan before 1992.

ponents of bargaining power have contributed to China's weakness. In 1949, China controlled less than half of the four offshore islands it claimed and none of the Taiwan areas under Nationalist control. China also faced real challenges in projecting military power across the Taiwan Strait against Nationalist forces backed by the United States and over more distant offshore islands in the East and South China Seas.

The small amount of disputed territory that China has seized through force is also consistent with the effects of declining bargaining power. It is difficult to determine with much precision the amount of disputed territory that China has seized since 1949. China occupied several thousand square kilometers of land disputed with India in the late 1950s. After the 1962 border war, China may have acquired control over an additional 1,000 square kilometers of territory. It also gained small amounts of territory in a series of clashes with Viet-

nam on land and in the South China Sea. Overall, however, these acquisitions amount to less than 3 percent of the territory that China has contested since the founding of the People's Republic.

### *Use of Force in the Taiwan Strait*

Since 1949, China has frequently resorted to force in its dispute over Taiwan. China's relative position in this conflict, however, has been weak: China controls little of the disputed land, and it lacks the military means to conquer the island. Given the importance of national unification for the CCP, China has been especially sensitive to any further decline or deterioration in the strength of its claim. In 1954 and 1958, China used force when the United States increased its military and diplomatic support for the Nationalists on Taiwan. China used force again in the 1995–96, when democratization on the island increased popular support for formal independence and China viewed the United States as supporting this goal. By contrast, when China's bargaining power in the Taiwan dispute has been stable or increasing, it has refrained from using force.

#### 1954 ARTILLERY DIPLOMACY

When the People's Republic was established, its leader, Mao Zedong, made clear his intentions to "liberate" Taiwan and defeat the Nationalist (Guomintang) forces based there. China postponed its preparations to assault the island after the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950, when President Harry Truman deployed the U.S. Seventh Fleet to neutralize the Taiwan Strait, which runs between the mainland and Taiwan. Hostilities between China and the Nationalists resumed in 1952 in battles over control of the coastal islands adjacent to Zhejiang and Fujian Provinces, some of which the Nationalists used as bases for raids on the mainland. These clashes, which included large-scale assaults on each other's positions, were deadly.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, as a continuation of the civil war, their occurrence is not especially puzzling, reflecting each side's determination to control Taiwan's first line of defense.

The first major crisis over Taiwan erupted on September 3, 1954, when the PLA began a punishing shelling of Jinmen (Kinmen) Island, the largest Nationalist-held coastal island. The consensus among Cold War historians that China used force to signal its opposition to Taiwan's deepening relationship

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25. Xu Yan, *Jinmen zhi zhan* [Battle for Jinmen] (Beijing: Zhongguo guangbo dianshi chubanshe, 1992), pp. 147–196.



with the United States reflects three different sources of decline in the strength of Beijing's position in the dispute.<sup>26</sup> The first was increased U.S.-Nationalist security cooperation following the Korean War. In September 1953, for example, Washington and Taipei signed the Agreement on Mutual Military Understanding.<sup>27</sup> Deliveries of U.S. fighter aircraft to Taiwan began to increase substantially in 1953, challenging China's ability to achieve air superiority over the Taiwan Strait.<sup>28</sup> A second source of decline was the prospect of a formal U.S. alliance with Taiwan, which was first raised in March 1953. As the pace of the discussions quickened in early 1954, China's leaders came to believe that such a treaty would "legalize" the island's separation from the mainland, further weakening China's position in the dispute.<sup>29</sup> The emerging U.S. alliance system in East Asia presented a third threat to China's already weak position in the dispute. In the preceding two years, the United States concluded security or defense treaties with Australia, Japan, New Zealand, the Philippines, and South Korea. In the spring of 1954, it started talks to create a regional alliance, the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization. The potential incorporation of Taiwan into the U.S. alliance system, which itself sought to contain China, would further increase international support for the Nationalists at the mainland's expense, again threatening achievement of unification.<sup>30</sup>

By the summer of 1954, China's relative position in the Taiwan dispute had declined dramatically. In May and June, U.S. and Nationalist officials publicly discussed signing a defense treaty.<sup>31</sup> The division of Vietnam at the 1954 Geneva Conference affirmed a Cold War trend of partitioning hot spots such as the Korean Peninsula and Germany. Now, the United States appeared poised to use its power to divide China permanently by formalizing its commitment to defend Taiwan.<sup>32</sup> In early July, the Politburo reached two decisions

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26. Chen Jian, *Mao's China and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); He Di, "Evolution of the People's Republic of China's Policy toward the Offshore Islands," in Warren I. Cohen and Akira Iriye, eds., *The Great Powers in East Asia: 1953-1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), pp. 222-245; Thomas E. Stolper, *China, Taiwan, and the Offshore Islands: Together with Some Implications for Outer Mongolia and Sino-Soviet Relations* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1985); Zhang Shu Guang, *Deterrence and Strategic Culture: Chinese-American Confrontations, 1949-1958* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992).

27. Gong Li, "Tension across the Strait in the 1950s: Chinese Strategy and Tactics," in Robert S. Ross and Jiang Changbin, eds., *Re-examining the Cold War: U.S.-China Diplomacy, 1954-1973* (Cambridge, Mass.: Asia Center, Harvard University, 2001), p. 145.

28. Zhang, *Deterrence and Strategic Culture*, p. 193.

29. Wang Bingnan, *ZhongMei huitan jiu nian huigu* [Reflections on nine years of Chinese-American talks] (Beijing: Shijie zhishi chubanshe, 1985), p. 41.

30. Xu, *Jinmen zhi zhan*, p. 176; and Zhang, *Deterrence and Strategic Culture*, p. 191.

31. Stolper, *China, Taiwan, and the Offshore Islands*, pp. 21-26.

32. Gong, "Tension across the Straits in the 1950s," p. 145; and Xu, *Jinmen zhi zhan*, p. 175.

designed to reverse China's weakening position. The first was to launch a propaganda campaign called "We Must Liberate Taiwan."<sup>33</sup> The second was to use force to "attack the American-Chiang [Kai-shek] mutual defense plot."<sup>34</sup> The Politburo instructed the PLA to develop a plan to shell Jinmen and seize the remaining coastal islands, starting with the Dachens to the north.<sup>35</sup> Although the initial plan called for shelling Jinmen in early August, Chinese leaders decided to postpone the attack until September, as floods in Fujian hampered the deployment of artillery units.<sup>36</sup> Even though the shelling did not begin for almost another month, the original August date for the operation underscores the mainland's sense of urgency in the summer of 1954. The assault of the Dachens was postponed for operational and tactical reasons until January 1955.

Mao's reasoning reflects the relationship between a decline in China's bargaining power in the dispute and the use of force. At a July 7 meeting of the Politburo, he stated, "The Taiwan issue is a long-term problem, [but] we must think of some measures to destroy the possibility of the U.S. and Taiwan signing the [defense] treaty."<sup>37</sup> Describing further why China needed to act, Mao highlighted the dangers of inaction: "After the end of the Korean War, we did not promptly raise [the liberation of Taiwan] to all of the people in the country (we are now about six months behind). . . . If we now still do not put forward this task and still do not work toward it, then we will have made a serious political mistake."<sup>38</sup> Mao's artillery diplomacy, however, did not prevent the conclusion of a mutual defense treaty between Taiwan and the United States in December 1954.

#### 1958 ARTILLERY DIPLOMACY

On August 23, 1958, PLA forces initiated a second crisis across the Taiwan Strait with another sustained shelling of Jinmen, in addition to Mazu, another

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33. "Yiding yao jiefang Taiwan" [We must liberate Taiwan], *Renmin Ribao*, July 23, 1954.

34. Wang Yan, ed., *Peng Dehuai nianpu* [Chronicle of Peng Dehuai's life] (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1998), p. 571.

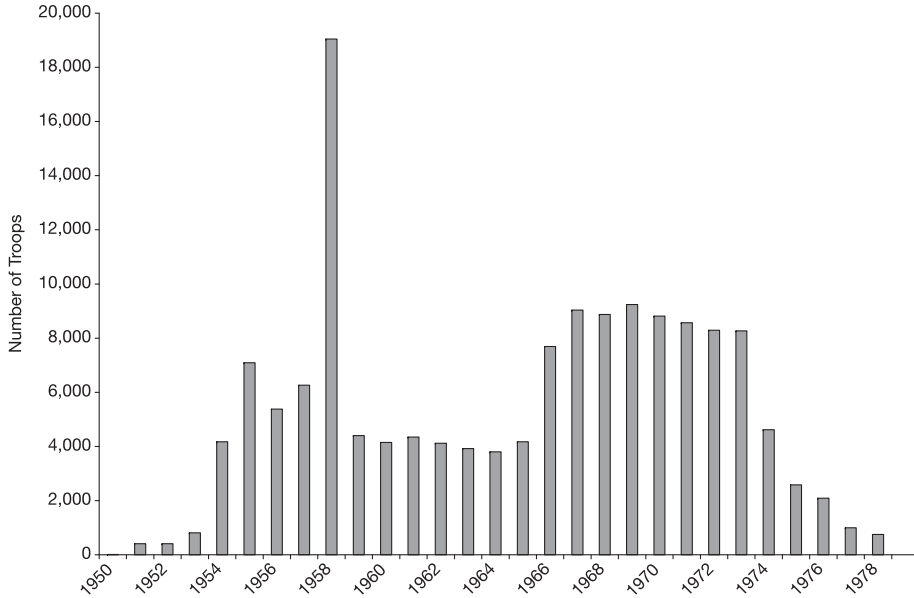
35. *Ibid.*, p. 573.

36. Zhang Zhen, *Zhang Zhen huiyilu* [Zhang Zhen's memoirs] (Beijing: Jiefangjun chubanshe, 2003), p. 574.

37. Quoted in Gong Li, "Liangci Taiwan haixia weiwei de chengyin yu ZhongMei zhijian de jiaoliang" [The causes of the two Taiwan Strait crises and Chinese-U.S. disputes], in Jiang Changbin and Robert S. Ross, eds., *Cong duizhi zouxiang huanhe: lengzhan shiqi ZhongMei guanxi zai tansuo* [From confrontation to rapprochement: Reexamining Chinese-U.S. relations during the Cold War] (Beijing: Shijie zhishi chubanshe, 2000), p. 42.

38. Quoted in Pei Jianzhang, ed., *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo waijiao shi, 1949-1956* [Diplomatic history of the PRC, 1949-1956] (Beijing: Shijie zhishi chubanshe, 1994), p. 337.

Figure 3. U.S. Troops Stationed in Taiwan, 1950–79



SOURCE: Global U.S. Troop Deployment Dataset (Washington, D.C.: Heritage Foundation, October 2004).

large coastal island. Although the need to mobilize domestic support for the ambitious economic goals of the Great Leap Forward explains the specific timing of the crisis, assessments of declining bargaining power prompted China's initial considerations to use force and again signal resolve in the dispute.<sup>39</sup>

After the 1954 shelling, China's position in the local military balance continued to decline as the United States increased its military support for Taiwan. U.S. troop deployments had risen substantially in 1954, and the number of deliveries of fighter aircraft had continued to grow (see Figure 3).<sup>40</sup> In March 1957, China learned that the United States planned to base nuclear-tipped Matador missiles on the island, compounding fears of nuclear war initially

39. Chen, *Mao's China and the Cold War*; and Thomas J. Christensen, *Useful Adversaries: Grand Strategy, Domestic Mobilization, and Sino-American Conflict, 1947–1958* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996).

40. John W. Garver, *The Sino-American Alliance: Nationalist China and American Cold War Strategy in Asia* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1997), p. 67.

raised during the 1954 crisis.<sup>41</sup> In November 1957, the United States and Taiwan conducted military exercises and maneuvers on the island and in the Taiwan Strait. In January 1958, reports surfaced that the United States was considering revising the alliance to clarify its commitment to defend Jinmen and other coastal islands.<sup>42</sup> In March 1958, the United States consolidated the seventeen military aid agencies that had been established to provide assistance to Taiwan into the U.S.-Taiwan Defense Command, demonstrating the U.S. commitment to the island's defense.<sup>43</sup>

China's relative position in the Taiwan dispute continued to decline for two reasons in early 1958. The first was the failure of Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai's "peaceful unification" diplomatic initiative in the spring and summer of 1955.<sup>44</sup> By late 1957, however, it had become clear to China's leaders that negotiations would not achieve their territorial goals.<sup>45</sup> The second was the inability to hold high-level negotiations with the United States over Taiwan in regular talks between U.S. and Chinese ambassadors stationed in Geneva, which had begun in 1955. In December 1957, China suspended these consultations when the United States replaced Ambassador U. Alexis Johnson with a lower-ranking official, a move that China viewed as downgrading the exchange.<sup>46</sup>

In response, China began military preparations for an attack on Jinmen and other coastal islands. Following Mao's instructions, the PLA Air Force submitted a plan to the Central Military Commission (CMC) in January 1958 to deploy aircraft to airfields in Fujian Province that were constructed after the 1954 crisis. On April 27, acting on CMC instructions, Fujian Military District Generals Ye Fei and Han Xianchu submitted operational plans for a large-scale artillery blockade of Jinmen and began preparations for a strike at the appropriate moment.<sup>47</sup>

Mao's desire to use a crisis with Taiwan to mobilize domestic support for the ambitious goals of the Great Leap Forward shaped the timing of the shelling in

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41. Zhang, *Deterrence and Strategic Culture*, p. 226.

42. Greg MacGregor, "Wider U.S. Guard Urged for Taiwan," *New York Times*, January 10, 1958.

43. Zhang, *Deterrence and Strategic Culture*, p. 227.

44. Yang Qinhu, "Zhongguo gongchandang he Zhongguo zhengfu jiequ Taiwan wenti zhengce de youlai ji fazhan" [Origins and development of the CCP and Chinese government's policy for resolving the Taiwan problem], *Zhonggong dangshi yanjiu*, No. 53 (1994), pp. 65–80.

45. Han Huaizhi and Tan Jingqiao, eds., *Dangdai Zhongguo jundui de junshi gongzuo (shang)* [Military work of contemporary China's armed forces, part 1] (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1989), p. 385; and Lei Yingfu, *Zai zuigao tongshuaibu dang canmou: Lei Yingfu huiyi lu* [Staff officer at the supreme command: General Lei Yingfu's recollections] (Nanchang: Baihuazhou wenyi chubanshe, 1997), pp. 174–175.

46. Steven M. Goldstein, "Dialogue of the Deaf? The Sino-American Ambassadorial-Level Talks, 1955–1970," in Ross and Jiang, *Re-examining the Cold War*, pp. 218–219.

47. Han and Tan, *Dangdai Zhongguo jundui de junshi gongzuo (shang)*, p. 386.

late August. At the same time, he sought to halt the continuing decline of China's position in the dispute, a decline that the 1954 shelling had failed to arrest. According to Gen. Lei Yingfu, a planner in the Operations Department within the General Staff Department (GSD), Mao believed that China's restraint in not attacking Nationalist-held coastal islands such as Jinmen after 1954 had led the United States and Taiwan to believe that China was "weak and easily bullied."<sup>48</sup> Likewise, Mao instructed Gen. Peng Dehuai that the shelling should "deal with Chiang directly and the Americans indirectly,"<sup>49</sup> targeting the Nationalists to pressure the United States to decrease its support. On August 25, for example, Mao stated that "the main goal of the shelling was . . . to reconnoiter and test the American resolve."<sup>50</sup>

#### STABILITY ACROSS THE TAIWAN STRAIT

After the 1958 crisis, China's bargaining power in the Taiwan dispute began to stabilize, mainly because of decreasing U.S. military and diplomatic support for the island. Mao ended the 1958 crisis when he concluded that the United States might pressure the Nationalists to abandon the coastal islands and renounce the use of force in retaking the mainland, thereby severing the physical link between the mainland and Taiwan. Toward the end of the 1958 crisis, Mao ordered the symbolic shelling of Jinmen on odd-numbered days, a practice that shifted to the use of artillery shells packed with propaganda leaflets from 1961 until 1979. Mao's decision underscored a belief shared by other leaders that unification could be achieved only through weakening U.S. support for the island. As Deng Xiaoping explained to Soviet Ambassador Pavel Iudin in 1959, China must "wait a bit" to achieve unification.<sup>51</sup>

An averted Chinese use of force highlights the U.S. role in China's assessments of its relative power in the Taiwan dispute. In early 1962, Chiang Kai-shek began mobilizing Nationalist forces to attack the mainland, seizing the opportunity created by the famine and economic crisis resulting from the Great Leap. By late May, China's leaders had concluded that the threat from Taiwan was real. In early June, the CMC instructed five coastal provinces to

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48. Lei, *Zai zuigao tongshuaibu dang canmou*, p. 188.

49. Liu Wusheng and Du Hongqi, eds., *Zhou Enlai junshi huodong jishi, 1918–1975 (xia)* [Chronicle of Zhou Enlai's military activities, vol. 2] (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 2000), p. 458.

50. Wu Lengxi, *Yi Mao zhuxi: Wo qinshen jingli de ruogan zhongda lishi shijian pianduan* [Remembering Chairman Mao: Fragments of certain major historical events that I personally experienced] (Beijing: Xinhua chubanshe, 1995), p. 76.

51. Quoted in P.F. Iudin, "Report of Conversation with the General Secretary of the CC CCP, Deng Xiaoping," May 27, 1959, reprinted in *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, No. 10 (March 1998), pp. 167–169.

prepare for an attack and deployed five divisions to the region.<sup>52</sup> Violence was avoided, however, when the United States assured China that it did not support Chiang's adventurism and dissuaded him from attacking the mainland.<sup>53</sup> On June 23, U.S. Ambassador John Cabot stated to his Chinese counterpart in Warsaw that the "U.S. government had no intention of supporting any attack [by Taiwan] on the Mainland."<sup>54</sup>

As the United States limited its support for Taiwan after the 1962 crisis, China's position in the dispute once again began to stabilize. The last major delivery of fighter aircraft from the United States to Taiwan until the mid-1990s occurred in 1963. Moreover, the number of U.S. troops based on the island declined slightly after 1958 until the escalation of the war in Vietnam in 1965, when Taiwan served as an important logistic hub for the United States in the region (see Figure 3). By the early 1970s, the prospect of normalization with the United States created an opportunity for Beijing to persuade Washington to further reduce its military and diplomatic support for the island. In the Shanghai Communiqué released during President Richard Nixon's 1972 trip to China, the United States acknowledged the Chinese position that "there is but one China" and agreed not to "challenge that position." Although emphasizing an interest in a peaceful settlement, the United States also pledged to withdraw "all U.S. forces and military installations from Taiwan."<sup>55</sup> Reduced support for Taiwan was a key Chinese demand, one designed to strengthen China's bargaining power in the dispute.<sup>56</sup>

Following the normalization of diplomatic ties with the United States in 1979, China's bargaining power in the Taiwan dispute further improved. Reflecting this improvement, China emphasized achieving unification of Taiwan with the mainland through negotiations under the slogan of "peaceful unification." Nevertheless, as the diplomatic crisis over the prospect of new U.S. arms sales to Taiwan (including the advanced FX aircraft to replace the aging F-5 fleet) demonstrated in the early 1980s, China remained vigilant in trying to maintain the gains achieved through normalization. In the August 1982 communiqué issued to resolve the crisis, China consolidated its position. The United States agreed in the document that future arms sales to Taiwan

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52. Yang Qiliang, *Wang Shangrong jiangjun* [General Wang Shangrong] (Beijing: Dangdai zhongguo chubanshe, 2000), pp. 484–492.

53. Wang, *ZhongMei huitan jiuinian huigu*, pp. 85–90.

54. Quoted in Goldstein, "Dialogue of the Deaf?" p. 228.

55. "Joint Communiqué of the United States of America and the People's Republic of China," February 28, 1972, [http://usinfo.state.gov/eap/Archive\\_Index/joint\\_communique\\_1972.html](http://usinfo.state.gov/eap/Archive_Index/joint_communique_1972.html).

56. Robert S. Ross, *Negotiating Cooperation: The United States and China, 1969–1989* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1995), pp. 1–162.

would not exceed those in recent years and stated that it intended a gradual reduction of arms sales, while China noted that peaceful unification was its “guiding principle.”<sup>57</sup>

#### 1995–96 MISSILE DIPLOMACY

In the summer of 1995, China initiated a series of large-scale military exercises that culminated with provocative missile tests just before Taiwan’s March 1996 presidential election. As other scholars have noted, two factors spurred China’s actions to signal its resolve in the dispute: Taiwan’s move toward formal independence amid the island’s transition to democracy in the early 1990s and more visible U.S. support for the island, symbolized by the U.S. decision in 1995 to grant its president, Lee Teng-hui, a visa.<sup>58</sup>

The nature of the Taiwan dispute changed substantially in the early 1990s for two reasons, both of which challenged China’s bargaining power in the dispute. The first was Taiwan’s democratization, which increased internal support among Taiwanese for formal independence. Moreover, democratization shattered the view of “one China” held by Beijing and Taipei during the period of Nationalist rule. From 1989 to 1994, for example, support in Taiwan for independence increased from 8 to 27 percent.<sup>59</sup> At the same time, Taiwan’s leaders used “pragmatic diplomacy” to increase the island’s international legitimacy, including acceptance of dual diplomatic recognition along the Germany and Korean models.<sup>60</sup> In a May 1994 interview, President Lee began openly discussing Taiwan as an independent entity. He stated that Taiwan “must be [a country] for Taiwanese. This is the fundamental idea.”<sup>61</sup> According to a Xinhua commentary, Lee had “become more and more ineffective in concealing his true colors.”<sup>62</sup>

57. *Ibid.*, p. 197.

58. John W. Garver, *Face Off: China, the United States, and Taiwan’s Democratization* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997); Robert S. Ross, “The 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait Confrontation: Coercion, Credibility, and the Use of Force,” *International Security*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (Fall 2000), pp. 87–123; Scobell, *China’s Use of Military Force*, pp. 171–191; and Michael D. Swaine, “Chinese Decision-Making Regarding Taiwan, 1979–2000,” in David M. Lampton, ed., *The Making of Chinese Foreign and Security Policy in the Era of Reform* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2001), pp. 289–336.

59. Zhao Suisheng, “Changing Leadership Perceptions: The Adoption of a Coercive Strategy,” in Zhao Suisheng, ed., *Across the Taiwan Strait: Mainland China, Taiwan, and the 1995–1996 Crisis* (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 108.

60. Zhou Zhihuai, “Guanyu 1995–1996 nian Taihai weiji de sikao” [Reflections on the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait crisis], *Taiwan yanjiu jikan*, No. 2 (1998), p. 4.

61. “The Grief of Being Born a Taiwanese,” *Asahi Weekly*, May 6–13, 1994, reprinted in Congressional Record, Taiwan Policy, Senate, 103rd Cong., 2d sess., July 21, 1994, <http://www.fas.org/news/taiwan/1994/s940721-taiwan2.htm>. For an alternative interpretation on Lee’s motives, see Richard C. Bush, *Untying the Knot: Making Peace in the Taiwan Strait* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 2005).

62. “Two-Faced Tactics Cannot Conceal His True Intentions: Comment on Lee Teng-hui’s State-

The second reason for the substantial change in the Taiwan dispute was China's belief that U.S. policy was supporting or even encouraging Taiwan's move toward independence. The shift began during the 1992 presidential election when the incumbent, President George H.W. Bush, authorized the sale of 150 F-16 fighter aircraft to Taiwan, the largest arms package since the normalization of relations in 1979.<sup>63</sup> In 1993, President Bill Clinton authorized a review of the U.S. relationship with Taiwan, which led to a September 1994 upgrade in diplomatic protocol.<sup>64</sup> In December 1994, during an official visit to Taiwan, Secretary of Transportation Federico Peña attended an official meeting with President Lee in his office.<sup>65</sup>

From China's perspective, Clinton's May 1995 decision to permit President Lee to visit the United States added fuel to a smoldering fire. One month earlier, Secretary of State Warren Christopher had assured Chinese Foreign Minister Qian Qichen that the granting of a visa to Lee would "not conform with the unofficial relationship between the United States and Taiwan," which was based on the one-China policy.<sup>66</sup> In his speech at Cornell University, however, Lee frequently referred to "the Republic of China on Taiwan," further angering Beijing.<sup>67</sup> As a Xinhua commentary stressed, China "will definitely not sit around doing nothing about any act of separation which obstructs or damages the great cause of China's reunification."<sup>68</sup> China's missile tests and 1995–96 military exercises formed the core of its response to Taiwan's drift toward formal independence.

#### FRAGILE STABILITY AFTER 1996

China has not used force across the Taiwan Strait since March 1996. A brief examination of two averted crises illustrates the central role of U.S. policy in shaping China's assessments of its bargaining power in the dispute. In both episodes, crises were avoided when the United States indicated that it did not support Taiwan's efforts to move toward formal independence.

In 1999, President Lee threatened to spark a crisis with China. During a July interview on German television, Lee claimed Taiwan's independence, assert-

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ments at His News Conference," Xinhua News Agency, June 13, 1995, Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS), No. FTS19950613000282.

63. On the role of U.S. policy, see Zhou, "Guanyu 1995–1996 nian Taihai weiji de sikao," pp. 3–5.

64. "U.S. Shifts Policy Slightly on Taiwan," Reuters, September 7, 1994.

65. Zhao, "Changing Leadership Perceptions," p. 115.

66. Qian Qichen, *Waijiao shiji* [Ten stories of a diplomat] (Beijing: Shijie zhishi chubanshe, 2003), p. 305.

67. Lee Teng-hui, "Always in My Heart," *Taiwan Review*, August 1, 1995.

68. "Lee Teng-hui Is Guilty of Damaging Relations between the Two Sides of the Strait," Xinhua News Agency, July 26, 1995, FBIS, No. FTS19950726000130.



ing that because of the 1991 amendments to the Republic of China constitution limited the area (of the ROC) it covered to Taiwan, “cross-strait relations [were] a special state-to-state relationship. Consequently, there is no need to declare independence.”<sup>69</sup> Beijing responded with harsh statements, including a *Liberation Army Daily* commentary warning that China “will absolutely not sit by and watch even an inch of territory split off from the motherland.”<sup>70</sup>

The United States responded quickly. On July 13, State Department spokesman James Rubin reiterated the U.S. commitment to the one-China policy. He also repeated the “three no’s” that President Clinton stated publicly for the first time during his 1998 trip to China.<sup>71</sup> On July 18, Clinton placed a thirty-minute phone call to Chinese President Jiang Zemin in which he repeated the U.S. commitment to the one-China policy.<sup>72</sup> At the end of the month, Clinton dispatched two advisers to the region to affirm this message, with Assistant Secretary of State Stanley Roth visiting Beijing and American Institute in Taiwan Director Richard Bush traveling to Taipei.<sup>73</sup> Despite tough rhetoric, Beijing refrained from using force.

In 2002, Lee’s successor, President Chen Shui-bian, threatened to spark another crisis. On August 3, Chen stated, “Taiwan has always been a sovereign state.” He further described Taiwan’s international status as reflecting “one country on each side” of the strait.<sup>74</sup> China reacted with a series of harsh statements condemning Chen’s remarks. The United States again signaled that it did not support Chen’s apparent change in policy. On August 5, a State Department spokesperson repeated U.S. support of the one-China policy. On August 7, a National Security Council spokesperson repeated this message, adding that the United States “[does] not support Taiwan independence.”<sup>75</sup> At the end of the month, Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage, who was in

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69. “President Lee’s Deutsche Welle Interview,” July 9, 1999, <http://taiwansecurity.org/TS/SS-990709-Deutsche-Welle-Interview.htm>.

70. “Li Denghui buyao wanhuo” [Li Teng-hui, don’t play with fire], *Jiefangjun Bao*, July 15, 1999, p. 1.

71. Daily Press Briefing, U.S. Department of State, July 13, 1999, <http://secretary.state.gov/www/briefings/9907/990713db.html>.

72. Ann Scott Tyson, “U.S.’s Delicate Dance on China-Taiwan Issue,” *Christian Science Monitor*, July 23, 1999.

73. Mary Kwang and Ching Cheong, “U.S., China in Diplomatic Dance—In Beijing, Taipei,” *Straits Times*, July 25, 1999.

74. “President Chen’s Opening Address of the 29th Annual Meeting of the World Federation of Taiwanese Associations,” August 3, 2002, <http://www.gio.gov.tw/taiwan-website/4-0a/20020803/2002080301.html>.

75. Daily Press Briefing, U.S. Department of State, August 5, 2002, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2002/12477.html>; and Wendy S. Ross, “U.S. One-China Policy Remains Unchanged, Official Says,” Washington File, Office of Information Programs, U.S. Department of State, August 8, 2002.

Beijing on a previously scheduled trip, echoed this position.<sup>76</sup> China recognized the effect of U.S. statements in limiting support for Taiwan. A *People's Daily* article noted, for example, that the United States "reiterates the one-China policy."<sup>77</sup>

### *Escalation in the Himalayas*

The border dispute between China and India in the Himalayas began in 1953. Tensions did not begin to increase substantially until the late 1950s, however, first with tit-for-tat military deployments in disputed areas and then China's large-scale offensive along the contested frontier on October 20, 1962. China again used force in 1967 and 1986. Although China's claim has been strong, decline in both components of its bargaining power explains its uses of force as well as intervening periods of stability.<sup>78</sup>

#### 1962 BORDER WAR

The crux the 1962 war was competition to control disputed land that neither China nor India occupied when China was established in 1949. The locus of conflict was the western sector known as Aksai Chin. When the dispute began in 1953, the China-India border was basically unguarded and each side's position was weak. PLA troops were garrisoned in Tibet's major cities far from the border, while India had few forward-deployed forces near the boundaries that it claimed. Tensions increased in 1958, when India discovered that China had built a road through the disputed western sector. In 1959, China's suppression of a large revolt in Tibet led each side to deploy significant numbers of troops to the disputed border, resulting in small clashes in August and October 1959 in the eastern and western sectors, respectively.

Over the next two years, China consolidated its control of disputed territory that it held in the western sector at India's expense. By late 1961, India's Intelligence Bureau reported that China had established as many as twenty-one new posts in the western sector to control an additional 4,600 square kilo-

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76. U.S. Department of State, "Transcript: Armitage Says U.S. Does Not Support Taiwan Independence," Washington File, Office of Information Programs, U.S. Department of State, August 26, 2002.

77. Pan Xiaozhu, "Meiguo chongshen yige Zhongguo zhengce" [The United States reaffirms its one-China policy], *Renmin Ribao*, August 7, 2002.

78. This interpretation affirms Allen S. Whiting's now classic account of Chinese decisionmaking. See Whiting, *The Chinese Calculus of Deterrence*. See also John W. Garver, "China's Decision for War with India in 1962," in Johnston and Ross, *New Directions in the Study of China's Foreign Policy*, pp. 86-130.

meters of disputed land.<sup>79</sup> The Intelligence Bureau concluded that China would continue to occupy contested territory and that only an increased Indian military presence would prevent further incursions. Moreover, approximately 9,000 square kilometers in the west remained unoccupied by either side.<sup>80</sup>

Facing decline in India's control over disputed territory, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru in November 1961 ordered an increase in the number of posts in territory disputed with China, a move that became known as the "forward policy." In the spring and summer of 1962, India occupied 3,000 square kilometers of land in the western sector by establishing thirty-six new posts, many of them near and sometimes behind Chinese positions.<sup>81</sup> India built thirty-four new posts in the eastern sector, including several located north of the McMahon Line, which India claimed as its boundary in that sector and China had effectively agreed to recognize in diplomatic notes exchanged in 1958 and 1959.<sup>82</sup> Moreover, India made these gains despite Chinese tactical countermeasures and a policy adopted in July 1962 of establishing blocking positions.<sup>83</sup>

By late August 1962, China's leaders had concluded that only military force could stop India's growing military pressure on the border. Gen. Lei Yingfu, deputy director of the GSD's Operations Department, wrote in a report to the CMC that the situation had reached the point where "not fighting was not enough to prevent the Indian intrusions."<sup>84</sup> At the same time, two additional factors enhanced China's perception of decline in the dispute. First, India implemented the forward policy when China faced other threats to its territorial integrity, including ethnic unrest in Xinjiang in April and May 1962 along with Chiang Kai-shek's mobilization effort.<sup>85</sup> In addition, Indian pressure increased just as China completed pacification campaigns in Tibet following the 1959 re-

79. D.K. Palit, *War in High Himalaya: The Indian Army in Crisis, 1962* (New Delhi: Lancer, 1991), p. 97.

80. B.N. Mullik, *My Years with Nehru: The Chinese Betrayal* (New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1971), p. 309.

81. Jiang Siyi and Li Hui, eds., *ZhongYin bianjing ziwei fanji zuozhan shi* [An operational history of the Chinese-Indian border counterattack in self-defense] (Beijing: Junshi kexue chubanshe, 1994), p. 154; and P.B. Sinha and A.A. Athale, *History of the Conflict with China* (New Delhi: History Division, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, [restricted], 1992), p. 70.

82. Mullik, *My Years with Nehru*, p. 136; and Sinha and Athale, *History of the Conflict with China*, p. 71.

83. Jiang and Li, *ZhongYin bianjing ziwei fanji zuozhan shi*, p. 143.

84. Quoted in Xu Yan, *ZhongYin bianjie zhizhan lishi zhenxiang* [The true history of the Chinese-Indian border war] (Hong Kong: Cosmos Books, 1993), pp. 91–92.

85. On Chinese decisionmaking during this period, see Yang, *Wang Shangrong jiangjun*, pp. 484–492.

volt.<sup>86</sup> Second, the forward policy and other threats to China's territorial integrity emerged in the wake of the domestic instability resulting from the famine and economic decline produced by the Great Leap Forward. In 1960, Mao withdrew from day-to-day domestic policymaking while more pragmatic leaders sought to address food shortages and stabilize urban areas.

For China's leaders, Indian military pressure and other challenges were not isolated. They viewed the forward policy, unrest in Xinjiang, and the threat from Taiwan as efforts by outsiders to profit from China's domestic problems. As Wang Enmao observed regarding unrest in Xinjiang, these events "were absolutely not accidental."<sup>87</sup> Zhou Enlai likewise noted in a speech in early June that "now the Americans and Chiang exploit our dire straits to carry out provocations, while the Soviet leadership group also exploits our difficulties to create difficulties."<sup>88</sup>

Tensions escalated in early September 1962 after a PLA company established a blocking position near Dhola, an Indian post located below the Thag La ridge in the eastern sector. For India, this action represented a violation of the effective boundary in the region, even though the post itself was located north of the McMahon Line. Following deliberately exaggerated reports of the number of Chinese troops, India began to reinforce surrounding areas and call publicly for their removal, resulting in frequent clashes by the end of the month.<sup>89</sup>

In early October, China's leaders decided to launch a large-scale military offensive. The key turning points were India's establishment of IV Corps for operations against China and its third refusal to hold negotiations without preconditions in the first few days of the month.<sup>90</sup> On October 8, the GSD issued an advanced order for executing the military campaign.<sup>91</sup> During an October 18 enlarged Politburo meeting to discuss the action, Mao summarized China's reasons for going to war, which underscored the potential long-term consequences if China did not take military action. According to the recollection of one participant, Mao said that "[India's] deliberately provoking armed conflicts, which are more progressive and more fierce. It is definitely going too

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86. Jiang and Li, *ZhongYin bianjing ziwei fanji zuozhan shi*, p. 463.

87. Wang Enmao wenji [Wang Enmao's collected works] (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 1997), p. 389.

88. Zhou Enlai junshi wenxuan [Zhou Enlai's selected military writings] (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1997), p. 435.

89. Sinha and Athale, *History of the Conflict with China*, pp. 77, 92.

90. Jiang and Li, *ZhongYin bianjing ziwei fanji zuozhan shi*, p. 179; and Xu, *ZhongYin bianjie zhizhan lishi zhenxiang*, pp. 106, 108.

91. Jianmie ruqin kejielang Yinjun yuxian haoling [Advanced order to destroy the Indian Army's invasion of Kejielang (Namka Chu)], in Jiang and Li, *ZhongYin bianjing ziwei fanji zuozhan shi*, p. 472.

far. . . . A colloquial saying goes ‘conflict creates communication.’ If we counterattack, then the border will become stable, and the boundary problem can be peacefully resolved.”<sup>92</sup> Reflecting the goal of deterrence, a Chinese diplomat recalls that Mao believed the attack would “create ten years of stability on the border.”<sup>93</sup> After India refused to enter into talks, China launched a second offensive in November and announced a unilateral withdrawal at the end of the month.

#### CONFLICT AND STABILITY AFTER 1962

Following China’s unilateral withdrawal in November 1962 from disputed areas that it occupied during the offensive against India, the disputed border remained tense. China used force two more times against Indian troops, first at Nathu La in 1967 and then when it occupied an Indian observation post near Thag La in 1986. Negative shifts in China’s bargaining power explain these uses of force and the intervening periods of stability.

On September 11, 1967, Chinese forces at Nathu La in the central sector unleashed a punishing attack on Indian troops. When the clash ended two days later, thirty-two Chinese and sixty-five Indian soldiers were dead.<sup>94</sup> As source materials on this clash are scarce, conclusions about China’s motivations remain tentative. These sources suggest, however, that China faced renewed Indian military pressure in the central sector. First, following its defeat in the 1962 war, the Indian Army almost doubled in size. As part of this expansion, ten mountain divisions were raised to guard India’s northern borders. Second, as the Indian Army grew, each side sought to consolidate control of Nathu La, a key mountain pass and one of the few areas along the disputed frontier where troops from both sides remained deployed in close proximity after the 1962 war. The proximate cause of the Chinese attack was Indian construction of fencing and other defense works around Nathu La in August and September.<sup>95</sup> Third, the Cultural Revolution had produced great instability within China, especially in 1967.<sup>96</sup> Given the tensions on the border and perceived

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92. Quoted in Lei, *Zai zuigao tongshuaibu dang canmou*, p. 210.

93. Zhang Tong, “DuiYin ziwei fanji zhan qianhou de huiyi” [Recollections of the counterattack in self-defense against India], in Pei Jianzhang, ed., *Xin Zhongguo waijiao fengyun* [New China’s diplomatic storms] (Beijing: Shijie zhishi chubanshe, 1990), p. 75.

94. Sinha and Athale, *History of the Conflict with China*, p. xxiv; and Wang Chenghan, *Wang Chenghan huiyilu* [Wang Chenghan’s memoirs] (Beijing: Jiefangjun chubanshe, 2004), p. 482.

95. G.S. Bajpai, *China’s Shadow over Sikkim: The Politics of Intimidation* (New Delhi: Lancer, 1999), pp. 156–195.

96. Roderick MacFarquhar and Michael Schoenhals, *Mao’s Last Revolution* (Cambridge: Belknap, 2006).

pressure from India to defend its claims, Chinese leaders likely concluded that a forceful response was required.

Following the clash at Nathu La, the China-India border remained stable with neither side initiating the use of force for almost two decades. Indian troops remained deployed far from the border. Chinese troops focused on countering a potential Soviet attack from the north. Areas that China had vacated after 1962 in the eastern and western sectors remained neutral zones unoccupied by either side. In 1981, the two sides began their first formal talks to resolve their territorial dispute.

In July 1986, reports from New Delhi that China had seized a seasonal Indian observation post vacated during the winter shattered this stability. Over the next twelve months, both sides deployed several infantry divisions each around Thag La in the eastern sector, sparking fears of a second China-India border war.<sup>97</sup>

Three factors account for the Chinese occupation of the Indian post, which was located in an area known as Sumdurong Chu. First, India had established this post in 1984 in a neutral zone near Thag La between the McMahon Line and the high ridge line, an area where neither side maintained a permanent physical presence after the 1962 war. From China's perspective, India's own action represented a clear challenge to the status quo.<sup>98</sup> Second, India's move toward the McMahon Line near Thag La occurred amid a much broader effort to strengthen its military position in the eastern sector. Code-named "Operation Falcon," army chief Khrisna Rao's plan envisioned the occupation of strategic heights on the Indian side of the line of actual control "as close to the McMahon [Line] as possible."<sup>99</sup> Third, the boundary talks that had started in 1981 were stalled. Although China had agreed to India's request for a sector-by-sector approach to resolving the dispute, each side adopted irreconcilable negotiating positions over the eastern sector at the sixth round of talks in November 1985 based on divergent interpretations of the location of the McMahon Line.<sup>100</sup>

Although the Chinese-Indian border appeared primed for conflict, the situation did not escalate further. Tensions subsided in June 1987 when the Indian

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97. Garver, *Protracted Contest*, p. 97; and Pravin Sawhney, *The Defence Makeover: 10 Myths That Shape India's Image* (New Delhi: Sage, 2002), p. 30.

98. Mira Sinha Bhattacharjea, "India-China: The Year of Two Possibilities," in Satish Kumar, ed., *Yearbook on India's Foreign Policy, 1985-86* (New Delhi: Sage, 1988), pp. 152, 156; T. Karki Hussain, "India's China Policy: Putting Politics in Command," in Satish Kumar, ed., *Yearbook on India's Foreign Policy, 1989* (New Delhi: Sage, 1990), p. 121; and Sawhney, *The Defence Makeover*, p. 29.

99. "Red Heat," *Force* (New Delhi), December 2004, FBIS, No. SAP20041209000096.

100. Bhattacharjea, "India-China," pp. 152-155.

foreign minister visited Beijing and the two sides agreed to resume border talks. In August, Indian and Chinese forces withdrew some troops from the area.<sup>101</sup> Unlike the war in 1962, China did not further escalate the dispute in 1987 for three reasons. First, India's effort to strengthen its claim was limited to a small area in the eastern sector. By contrast, New Delhi's forward policy in 1962 extended along the entire front of the western sector. Second, the scope of the troop mobilization was also limited to Sumdorong Chu. China was able to match India's deployments in the eastern sector, deterring any Indian military action. Third, China was more stable internally in 1987 than it had been in 1962, and the government faced no challenges to its control over Tibet.

After the Sumdorong Chu incident, China's position in the border dispute with India stabilized. Neither country erected new outposts in other neutral zones. In 1993 and 1996, agreements to observe the line of actual control and limit the number of troops near disputed areas greatly reduced the potential for shifts in the local military balance or for the occupation of vacant territory by either side that might create incentives to use force. Although a final settlement to this dispute remains elusive, peace has prevailed in the region since 1987.

### *Use of Force in the South China Sea—The Paracels*

In 1951, China formally claimed two island groups in the South China Sea, the Spratly Islands and the Paracel Islands. This section examines China's use of force over the Paracels, located about 100 kilometers southwest of Hainan Island. China faced two periods when its relative position declined in this dispute: first, when South Vietnam expanded its presence in the archipelago in the mid-1950s, and second, in the early 1970s amid growing worldwide interest in maritime resources. China was too weak to respond in the first instance, but it adopted a more assertive posture in 1974, which resulted in a clash with South Vietnamese forces and then consolidation of Chinese control of the Paracels.

The Paracels consist of two separate island groups, the Crescent (Yongle) Group in the southwest and the Amphrite (Xuande) Group in the northeast. In 1950, PLA troops occupied Woody Island in the Amphrite Group while France garrisoned Pattle (Shanhu) Island in the Crescent Group, which was trans-

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101. "India and China Agree to Avoid Border Conflicts," Associated Press, June 15, 1987; and "India, China Pull Back Troops along Tibetan Border," Reuters, August 14, 1987.

ferred to South Vietnam in 1956.<sup>102</sup> Control of the islands was fluid, as Chinese commercial ships operated around the Crescent Group in the mid-1950s. In 1959, however, South Vietnam moved to strengthen its control of disputed territory, arresting Chinese fishermen in February and March and evicting them from several small islands in the Crescent Group.<sup>103</sup> Saigon's actions weakened Beijing's relative position in the dispute, but China lacked the naval power to respond. Yet because South Vietnam was unable to threaten China's hold over the Amphrite Group, each side consolidated control over the areas it occupied, and the dispute stabilized.

In the early 1970s, worldwide interest in maritime resources increased the importance of sovereignty claims to offshore islands in the South China Sea. In 1970, the Philippines completed the first seismic survey of these waters and began drilling test wells in 1971.<sup>104</sup> South Vietnam initiated a program to exploit offshore petroleum resources, announcing in 1971 that it would offer oil concessions to foreign companies.<sup>105</sup> In July 1973, Saigon awarded eight offshore exploration contracts to Western oil companies, and initial drilling that fall revealed the presence of oil.<sup>106</sup> In January and August 1973, South Vietnamese vessels conducted seismic surveys around the Crescent Group.<sup>107</sup> In December 1973, North Vietnam announced its intention to prospect for oil in the Tonkin Gulf, north of the Paracel Islands.<sup>108</sup>

As the economic value of offshore islands increased, other states began to seize contested features south of the Paracels in the Spratly Islands, where China occupied none of the land that it claimed. To bolster its claims, the Philippine government occupied five islands and reefs in 1970 and 1971, its first seizure of territory in this dispute.<sup>109</sup> In August 1973, South Vietnam occupied six islands and reefs in the Spratlys, also its first seizure of land in this dispute.<sup>110</sup> On September 6, South Vietnam announced the incorporation of

102. Dieter Heinzig, *Disputed Islands in the South China Sea: Paracels, Spratlys, Pratas, Macclesfield Bank* (Wiesbaden, Germany: Otto Harrassowitz, 1976), p. 32; and Xu Ge, *Tiemaos gu haijiang: gongheguo haizhan shiji* [Steel anchors consolidating maritime frontiers: Record of the republic's naval battles] (Beijing: Haichao chubanshe, 1999), p. 287.

103. Xu, *Tiemaos gu haijiang*, p. 287.

104. Marwyn S. Samuels, *Contest for the South China Sea* (New York: Methuen, 1982), p. 90.

105. "Saigon Opens Coast for Oil Exploration," *New York Times*, June 10, 1971.

106. Samuels, *Contest for the South China Sea*, pp. 98–99.

107. Han Zhenhua, ed., *Woguo nanhai zhudao shiliao huibian* [Collection of historical materials on our country's South China Sea islands] (Beijing: Dongfang chubanshe, 1988), p. 676.

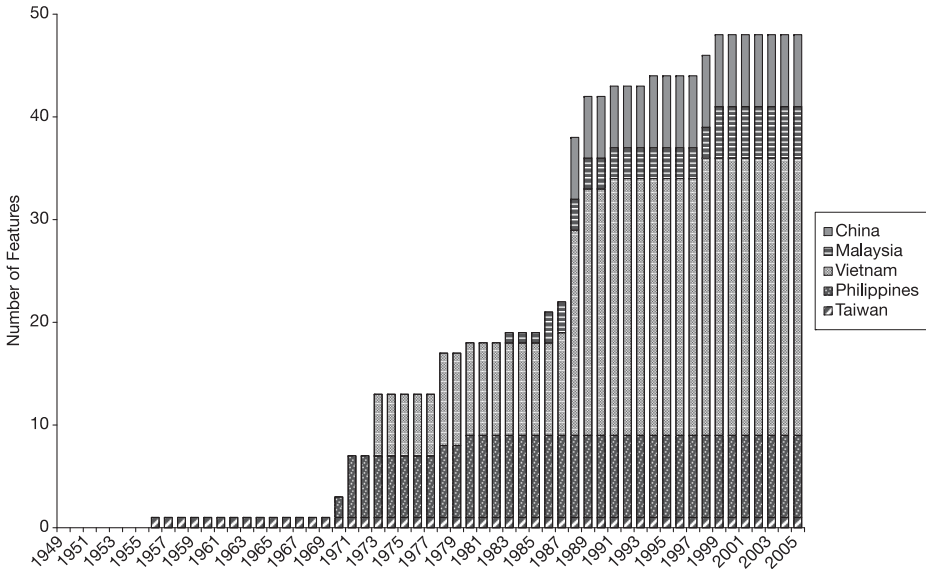
108. "Japanese to Continue Talks with Hanoi on Oil Search," *New York Times*, December 27, 1973, p. 81.

109. Lei Ming, ed., *Nansha zigu shu Zhonghua* [The Spratlys are China's since ancient times] (Guangzhou: Guangzhou junqu silingbu bangong shi, 1988), p. 206.

110. Heinzig, *Disputed Islands in the South China Sea*, p. 36.



Figure 4. Occupation of Contested Features in the Spratly Islands, 1949–2005



SOURCE: News reports from Lexis-Nexis, Factiva, and ProQuest; and Lei Ming, ed., *Nansha zigu shu Zhonghua* [The Spratlys are China's since ancient times] (Guangzhou: Guangzhou junqu silingbu bangongshi, 1988).

eleven Spratly islands into Phuoc Thuy Province, a move intended to bolster its claim and secure exploration rights for its foreign investors. The occupation of all of these islands in less than three years reflected a clear decline in China's bargaining power (see Figure 4).

In response, China decided to strengthen its position in the Paracels, the only offshore islands in the South China Sea where it could project limited naval power. It began with an increased presence of commercial fishermen in the fall of 1973, especially around Duncan Island in the Crescent Group.<sup>111</sup> On January 9, 1974, the fishermen moved to Robert Island close to South Vietnam's position on Pattle Island.<sup>112</sup> On January 11, China's foreign ministry

111. *Ibid.*, p. 34. China may have occupied these islands even earlier, as Chinese sources indicate that South Vietnamese troops had withdrawn from this territory. See Li Ke and Hao Shengzhang, *Wenhua dageming zhong de renmin jiefangjun* [The People's Liberation Army during the Cultural Revolution] (Beijing: Zhonggong dangshi ziliao chubanshe, 1989), p. 329; and Xu, *Tiemaoguo haijiang*, p. 287.

112. Xu, *Tiemaoguo haijiang*, pp. 289–290.

issued a statement challenging South Vietnam's September 1973 declaration. China not only reiterated its sovereignty over both the Paracels and the Spratlys, but also for the first time linked this claim to offshore islands with maritime rights.<sup>113</sup>

By mid-January 1974, the stage was set for a confrontation. Following Beijing's declaration, Saigon dispatched a naval patrol to the islands, which evicted the Chinese fishermen. Both sides dispatched reinforcements to the Crescent Group, resulting in clashes on January 19 and 20 that left China in control of the entire archipelago. As the Chinese vessels used in the operation had not been prepositioned in the Amphrite Group but instead had been deployed from Hainan Island as well as the Shantou naval base in Guangzhou more than 850 nautical miles away, it is unlikely that China's use of force was premeditated.<sup>114</sup> Nevertheless, Chinese perceptions of decline in all of its offshore island disputes and South Vietnamese actions around the Paracels ensured a swift response. Li Li, vice director of the Operations Department in the GSD, recalled that Saigon's goals were "to use its military presence in the Paracels area . . . to realize its illegal territorial demands and further plunder our South China Sea's abundant maritime resources and seabed petroleum and mineral resources."<sup>115</sup> Although Hanoi subsequently objected to Beijing's actions, China has retained control of the Paracels since 1974.

### *Escalation in China's Other Disputes*

This section examines briefly whether negative power shifts can account for China's use of force in its other territorial disputes.

A decline in China's bargaining power explains the PLA ambush of Soviet border guards on the disputed Zhenbao (Damanskii) Island in the Ussuri River on March 2, 1969. China's many disputes with the Soviet Union were initiated in the early 1950s, and the border between the two states remained largely unguarded until the mid-1960s. After talks over disputed territory stalled in 1964, both sides began to increase their patrols of contested areas. Over the next five years, however, Soviet actions weakened China's position in

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113. Han, *Woguo nanhai zhudao shiliao huibian*, pp. 451–452.

114. Wei Mingsen, "Xisha ziwei fanji zhan" [Paracels counterattack in self-defense], in *Haijun: huiyi shiliao* [Navy: Recollections and historical materials] (Beijing: Jiefangjun chubanshe, 1997), pp. 610–611.

115. Li Li, "Nanwang de shishi, shenke de qishi: wo suo jingli de Xisha ziwei fanji zuozhan" [Memorable facts, profound inspirations: My personal experience in the Paracels self-defensive counterattack operation], in *Zongcan moubu: huiyi shiliao* [General Staff Department: Recollections and historical materials] (Beijing: Jiefangjun chubanshe, 1997), p. 598.

the local military balance. A key factor was the doubling of Soviet infantry divisions deployed in the Russian Far East and Mongolia. Moreover, many of these troops were positioned close to the Chinese-Soviet border, where they adopted an assertive patrolling posture starting in early 1967.<sup>116</sup> After the August 1968 Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia, China became even more worried about Soviet intentions, which Beijing viewed in part as seeking to profit from the internal upheaval of the Cultural Revolution.<sup>117</sup> Although Soviet troop deployments continued to increase in the 1970s after the ambush, China's position in the dispute stabilized for two reasons: China was able to shift key reserve forces from the south to the north, and the Soviets adopted a much less assertive patrolling posture to limit the potential for escalation between the two sides.

A negative shift in bargaining power also illuminates China's occupation of Fiery Cross (Yongshu) Reef in January 1988, the first of six features it would seize in the Spratly Islands over the next three months. China's move into the Spratlys sparked a spiral of hostility with Vietnam, resulting in a clash in March when the two sides battled to control nearby Johnson (Chigua) Reef. The PLA Navy's lack of long-distance patrol and replenishment capabilities partly explains China's inability to seize and hold disputed territory in the Spratlys in the 1970s. At the same time, China's claim declined throughout the 1980s as maritime resources continued to grow in importance. Vietnam, Malaysia, and the Philippines occupied fifteen features from 1980 to 1988, further weakening China's position in a dispute where it held no contested land (see Figure 4). As Adm. Liu Huaqing recalled, "Since the 1970s . . . almost all above-water islands and reefs had been occupied by Vietnam, the Philippines, and Malaysia . . . their seizures [had] increased steadily."<sup>118</sup>

The reasons for China's late 1994 occupation of a seventh feature in the Spratlys, Mischief Reef, is indeterminate, as sources are limited. Circumstantial evidence suggests that China's decision to occupy the reef stemmed from bureaucratic politics and a decision by the PLA Navy to strengthen its position in the eastern Spratlys.<sup>119</sup> Nevertheless, the action is also consistent with the

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116. Directorate of Intelligence, "Military Forces along the Sino-Soviet Border," Intelligence Memorandum, SR-IM-70-5 (Washington, D.C.: Central Intelligence Agency, 1970).

117. Li and Hao, *Wenhua dageming zhong de renmin jiefangjun*; and Xu Yan, "1969 nian ZhongSu bianjie de wuzhuang chongtu" [The 1969 armed conflict on the Chinese-Soviet border], *Dangshi yanjiu ziliao*, No. 5 (1994), p. 5.

118. Liu Huaqing, *Liu Huaqing huiyilu* [Liu Huaqing's memoirs] (Beijing: Jiefangjun chubanshe, 2004), pp. 534–535.

119. Greg Austin, *China's Ocean Frontier: International Law, Military Force, and National Development* (Canberra, Australia: Allen and Unwin, 1998), pp. 162–176.

heightened competition over the Spratlys in the early 1990s, which included Vietnam's occupation of five additional features from 1989 to 1991 and unilateral efforts by all claimants to explore for petroleum.<sup>120</sup>

A decline in bargaining power fails to account for China's assaults against strategic hilltops along the China-Vietnam border in the early 1980s. Similar to the 1979 war, Beijing's goal was to maintain pressure on Hanoi and signal China's determination to resist Soviet efforts to increase its influence in Southeast Asia.<sup>121</sup>

### *Alternative Explanations for China's Use of Force over Territory*

There are at least four alternative explanations for the variation in China's use of force in its territorial disputes. None are convincing.

One alternative explanation would focus on "windows of opportunity," or periods when one state enjoys a sudden and favorable increase in the local military balance in a dispute. This logic applies to states with weaker claims that would benefit from an opponent's decline for reasons unrelated to the dispute, such as involvement in another conflict. These conditions, however, only apply to China's disputes where it faced clearly stronger adversaries: the Soviet Union and Taiwan, the latter through its alliance with the United States. In the 1969 clash over Zhenbao Island, however, China used force not because a decline in Soviet military power created a window of opportunity on the border. Instead, China launched the ambush in response to increased Soviet deployments and the aggressive posture that its troops had adopted in disputed areas. Likewise, China has not sought to profit from U.S. involvement in other military conflicts, such as during the 2003 Iraq War and its aftermath, to adopt an increasingly belligerent posture in the Taiwan conflict.

A second alternative explanation draws different conclusions about the incentives for states with a strong or dominant position in the local military balance. According to offensive realism, states with a major relative power advantage should be more likely to use force because they can seize disputed land at an acceptable cost (or impose a settlement on favorable terms).<sup>122</sup> This explanation is broader than the windows of opportunity logic outlined above,

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120. Daniel J. Dzurek, "The Spratly Islands Dispute: Who's on First?" *IBRU Maritime Briefing*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (1996).

121. On these clashes, see Sun Cuibing, ed., *Yunnan shengzhi: junshi zhi* [Yunnan provincial gazetteer: Military affairs] (Kunming: Yunnan renmin chubanshe, 1997), pp. 424–435.

122. See, for example, John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001); and Fareed Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power: The Unusual Origins of America's World Role* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998).

as it predicts how all states with a military advantage will behave, not just those whose otherwise poor claims improve suddenly or temporarily. China's enhanced naval capabilities did enable its occupation of territory in the Paracels and the Spratlys. Yet as discussed above, China used these capabilities only when it viewed its relative position in these disputes as weakening, not strengthening. In the Spratlys, China has not used force since occupying Mischief Reef in 1994 despite the PLA Navy's great strides in modernizing its fleet, especially in the past ten years. Likewise, China has not used force in other disputes where it enjoyed significant military advantages, such as with Burma or Kazakhstan, offering substantial concessions to such states instead.<sup>123</sup>

A third alternative explanation stresses the role of reputation and the requirements of deterrence. One variant of this logic posits that states will use force in one dispute to create a reputation for toughness over territory and deter its opponents in all other disputes.<sup>124</sup> Involved in more conflicts than any other state since World War II, China presents an easy case for this argument. Although China began to use force in its territorial disputes soon after the end of the Korean War with the 1954 Taiwan Strait crisis, it is unsurprising that China might resort to violent means in its most important conflict. Moreover, China's willingness to compromise in many disputes in the early 1960s is inconsistent with what a reputational argument would predict.

Another variant of the reputational logic highlights the competitive dynamics of enduring or strategic rivalries. A state might use force in a territorial dispute with a rival not to strengthen its position in the dispute but to signal general resolve or coerce the rival over another issue.<sup>125</sup> The territorial dispute, then, is a proxy for the broader rivalry. Nevertheless, the applicability of this logic depends on the centrality of contested land in a rivalry. If the dispute defines a hostile relationship between two countries, then separating it from the rivalry would be difficult. In rivalries where states compete over a range of issues, this logic might be more relevant.

Rivalry dynamics account for China's decisions both to attack and to seize Vietnamese-held hilltops on the China-Vietnam border in the 1980s. Broader concerns about the Chinese-Soviet rivalry were an additional factor in the

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123. Fravel, "Regime Insecurity and International Cooperation," pp. 55–62.

124. Barbara F. Walter, "Explaining the Intractability of Territorial Conflict," *International Studies Review*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (December 2003), pp. 137–153.

125. On rivalries, see Paul F. Diehl and Gary Goertz, *War and Peace in International Rivalry* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000). On territory and rivalry, see Karen A. Rasler and William R. Thompson, "Contested Territory, Strategic Rivalries, and Conflict Escalation," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 50, No. 1 (March 2006), pp. 145–168.

1969 ambush on Zhenbao. By contrast, although China-India relations may be viewed as a rivalry, especially in the 1960s and 1970s, the rivalry stemmed from their large territorial dispute, not other conflicts of interest. This logic also implies that China should have used force more frequently over Taiwan or against other U.S. allies in East Asia, such as Japan, as a means to signal its determination to counter U.S. containment before rapprochement in the 1970s, which it did not.

A fourth alternative explanation points to domestic political incentives for using force in territorial disputes, including arguments about domestic mobilization and diversionary war. As territorial disputes are among the most salient foreign policy issues for any state, they provide an issue over which leaders may rally society to pursue other goals. Domestic mobilization to generate support for the ambitious goals of the Great Leap helps to explain why Mao sought to initiate a crisis over Taiwan in August 1958, but it has not been a factor in other disputes.<sup>126</sup> Likewise, China has frequently compromised during periods of internal threats to the state, a pattern of behavior that poses a strong challenge to diversionary war arguments.<sup>127</sup> As shown above, when China has used force during periods of domestic unrest, it has exacerbated perceptions of declining bargaining power, not provided an independent incentive for escalation.

### *Conclusion*

Shifts in China's bargaining power explain why and when Beijing has used force in its territorial disputes. China has demonstrated a strong sensitivity to declines in its relative position in such disputes, especially when facing strong adversaries or in conflicts where it controlled little or none of the contested land.

While further research is necessary, other examples of negative power shifts in the escalation of territorial disputes suggest a more general application of the argument beyond China. On July 20, 1974, for example, Turkish troops invaded the island of Cyprus. Only six days before, the Greek junta in Athens had ordered a coup overthrowing President Archbishop Makarios III and installing a president who was a strong supporter of Cyprus's unification with Greece. To safeguard the interests of Turkish-Cypriots and prevent the station-

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126. Christensen, *Useful Adversaries*.

127. Fravel, "Regime Insecurity and International Cooperation." See also Johnston, "China's Militarized Interstate Dispute Behaviour, 1949-1992," pp. 18-20. On diversionary war, see Jack S. Levy, "The Diversionary Theory of War: A Critique," in Manus I. Midlarsky, ed., *Handbook of War Studies* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), pp. 259-288.

ing of Greek forces on Turkey's southern flank, Ankara used force to maintain its bargaining power in the dispute.<sup>128</sup> Likewise, declining bargaining power was a key factor in Pakistan's decision to attack India over Kashmir in 1965. Following the 1962 war with China, the Indian Army engaged in a substantial modernization drive, which threatened a long-term shift in the local balance of forces in Kashmir at Pakistan's expense. Pakistan initiated the 1965 war to strengthen its claim before it became too late to take military action.<sup>129</sup>

The prospects for China's use of force in its six unresolved disputes are mixed. On a positive note, China's disputes with India and Bhutan as well as its conflicts over the Paracel and Spratly Islands have been effectively neutralized. China reached agreements on confidence-building measures in its remaining frontier disputes with India and Bhutan in the 1990s, and negotiations for a final settlement are ongoing and have been conducted without using military threats. In April 2005, India and China signed an agreement on the guiding principles for settling their long-standing dispute.<sup>130</sup>

Offshore, the potential for conflict over two of China's outstanding island disputes has been reduced significantly. China has occupied all of the disputed Paracels features since the 1974 clash with South Vietnam. Although it is unlikely to relinquish control over the archipelago, Vietnam lacks the means to challenge China militarily. Likewise, the hallmark of China's foreign policy in Southeast Asia, its engagement of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), has neutralized the Spratlys dispute.<sup>131</sup> By agreeing to a code of conduct declaration in 2002 and signing the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in 2003, China has committed itself to refrain from occupying additional contested features and from using force against other signatories to the agreement, which includes all other claimants to the Spratlys. Likewise, having occupied disputed reefs in 1988 and 1994, China has strengthened its relative position. Bolstered by its growing naval power relative to the other claimants, China can be confident about the strength of its claim and the outcome of any negotiations.

Only two disputes involving China might threaten major conflict and instability in the region. Its dispute with Japan over the Senkaku Islands will

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128. William Hale, *Turkish Foreign Policy, 1774–2000* (London: Frank Cass, 2000), pp. 150–156.

129. Sumit Ganguly, *Conflict Unending: India-Pakistan Tensions since 1947* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), pp. 37–38.

130. "Agreement between the Government of the Republic of India and the Government of the People's Republic of China on the Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for the Settlement of the India-China Boundary Question," April 11, 2005, <http://meaindia.nic.in/treatiesagreement/2005/11ta1104200501.htm>.

131. Michael A. Glosny, "Heading toward a Win-Win Future? Recent Developments in China's Policy toward Southeast Asia," *Asian Security*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (2006), pp. 24–57.

remain volatile for several reasons. China's claim is weak, as Japan has controlled the islands since 1972, and international law supports its claims. Japan fields one of the most powerful navies in the world, arguably the strongest in East Asia, and it is backed by an alliance with the United States. As a question of sovereignty, the islands could spark a crisis between China and Japan, one that, as the April 2005 anti-Japanese demonstrations in China indicate, would be difficult for both sides to manage. Although Japan maintains no permanent presence on these rocks, its establishment of any significant military facilities would be viewed in China as a clear challenge to its already weak position.

Taiwan, however, remains China's most conflict-prone territorial dispute. At one level, this is unsurprising, given the importance of unification for China's leaders and likewise independence for many of the people on Taiwan.<sup>132</sup> So long as the CCP remains in power, and perhaps even if the mainland democratizes, these conflicting goals are likely to persist. At the same time, despite China's progress in modernizing its armed forces, its relative position in the Taiwan dispute remains weak, even though any future conflict would be more destructive than past ones. China does not control any of the land that it contests and still cannot project power over the island, especially if U.S. forces intervene. Given the significant role of national identity in Taiwan's domestic politics, China's leaders remain uncertain about the prospects for unification even though long-term economic integration across the strait strengthens the Chinese position.<sup>133</sup>

As long as China's position in the Taiwan dispute remains weak, its leaders will continue to be sensitive to military or political actions that appear to reduce the likelihood of achieving unification. As the impact of Taiwan's domestic politics on cross-strait ties is central but unpredictable, the U.S. role is key to China's assessments of its bargaining power. Crises were averted in 1999 and 2002 in part because the United States signaled that it did not support efforts by Taiwan's presidents to alter the island's standing in the international community. More clearly, further crises have arguably been avoided since

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132. For recent analyses, see Thomas J. Christensen, "Posing Problems without Catching Up: China's Rise and Challenges for U.S. Security Policy," *International Security*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (Spring 2001), pp. 5-40; Christensen, "The Contemporary Security Dilemma," pp. 7-21; Robert S. Ross, "Navigating the Taiwan Strait: Deterrence, Escalation Dominance, and U.S.-China Relations," *International Security*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (Fall 2002), pp. 48-85; and Whiting, "China's Use of Force, 1950-96."

133. Recent studies suggest that support on the island for independence may be declining. If true, then the odds of China using force should also decrease. See, for example, Shelly Rigger, *Taiwan's Rising Rationalism: Generations, Politics, and "Taiwan's Nationalism,"* Policy Studies, No. 26 (Washington, D.C.: East-West Center, 2006); and Robert S. Ross, "Taiwan's Fading Independence Movement," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 85, No. 2 (March/April 2006), pp. 141-148.



President George W. Bush stated in December 2003 that the United States opposes “any unilateral decision by either China or Taiwan to change the status quo.”<sup>134</sup>

The consequences of potential conflict over Taiwan cannot be understated. It would almost certainly involve the United States. And, given the stakes, it would likely escalate to high levels of force, with long-term consequences for U.S.-China relations and East Asia. Nevertheless, with regard to China’s behavior in territorial disputes, this conflict provides a poor indicator of China’s territorial ambitions in the region and Beijing’s willingness to resort to force in other conflicts. China has settled the majority of its disputes and neutralized many others. China’s rise will create many challenges for East Asia and the world, but the use of force over territory may not be the leading cause of regional instability.

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134. White House, “President Bush and Premier Wen Jiabao Remarks to the Press,” December 9, 2003, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/12/20031209-2.html>.