

***Strong Borders Secure Nation: Cooperation and Conflict in China's Territorial Disputes.* By M. Taylor Fravel. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008. Softcover: 376pp.**

Academic writings on China's territorial disputes typically focus on the legal positions of the claims, the domestic politics of the contending states or in-depth studies of individual disputes. Fravel's book offers a fresh methodological approach by positing two central arguments: first, that China demonstrated willingness to concede disputed territories for external support in securing its frontier regions when faced with domestic threats and recalcitrant border minorities; and second, and conversely, China's decisions to use force in border disputes reflected a disadvantaged local military balance and an inferior claim posture where it occupied little or none of the lands contested. In the absence of rising threats or declining claim strengths, the default position taken by the Chinese leadership was the least costly one — to delay resolution of border disagreements indefinitely. For each dispute, the author meticulously traces the conditions before and after a change in strategy to identify those factors that vary with, and may have had a causal effect on, decisions to compromise or use force.

According to the first proposition, China made major compromises to settle its border disputes with Burma, Nepal, Mongolia, North Korea, Pakistan and Afghanistan in the 1960s, and tried to do so with India and the Soviet Union, to thwart potential foreign support for its restive ethnic minorities after a rebellion in Tibet, unrest in Xinjiang and nation-wide famine following the failure of the Great Leap Forward campaign. China likewise made boundary compromises in the 1990s with the Soviet Union/Russia, Laos, Vietnam (over their land border), Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, to forestall growing international ostracism following the 4 June 1989 Tiananmen Square Incident, and sought support from Russia and Central Asian states in denying assistance and sanctuary for Xinjiang's Uighur separatists. Domestic threats to regime legitimacy and control of frontier regions were demonstrably the primary concerns to China's leaders in cooperating with foreign states over boundary issues.

The second proposition states that internal instability combined with declining claim strength led China's leaders to conclude that its neighbours sought to profit from its domestic difficulties, and this had to be stopped (p. 219). The author traces the causes of the 1962 Sino-Indian War to unrest in Xinjiang and military weaknesses

caused by the post-Great Leap famine. Incidentally, these are the same reasons given for China's successful conclusion of boundary agreements at around the same time. Fears by China's leadership that the chaos engendered by the Cultural Revolution had made China vulnerable to external threats might explain its military posturing over the Sino-Indian frontier in 1967 and clashes with Soviet troops over the Zhenbao Islands in 1969. However, if the first proposition holds, China should have signalled compromise over the border issues; thus internal instability appears causally problematic as an explanatory variable for the initialization of conflict.

Moreover, the author does not state clearly what declining claim strength means. Although China's leadership saw the forward positioning of Indian and Soviet patrols on disputed frontier territories in the 1960s as indications of aggressive intent, it was also introducing troops to the vicinity that were numerically superior to the opposing forces. Beijing did not seize the Paracels in response to Saigon's occupation of the disputed islands, but that "the US withdrawal from South Vietnam removed an important obstacle that might have restrained China from taking military action" (p. 279). Also, "the United States maintained a strong presence in Northeast Asia that prevented China from taking action in the Senkakus ..." (p. 279). In other words, it was due to an increased claim strength that China managed to assert control over the Paracels in 1974, and a deteriorated or constantly weaker claim strength that has thus far prevented China from occupying the Senkakus. This weakens the author's conclusion that "a strong China might be less likely to use force in its remaining disputes ..." (p. 315). Perhaps an alternative proposition could have been tested, that China employed its military power only when and where its claims were physically challenged on the ground.

The author classifies claims by the People's Republic of China (PRC) over Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan together with disputes over the country's exact boundaries and contests for frontier territories. Yet these were essentially sovereignty claims to assert ownership over the entities entirely, by replacing the British and Portuguese colonial administrations in Hong Kong and Macau respectively, and the self-administrating authorities of Taiwan. Rather than China having adopted a strategy of delaying settlement over Hong Kong because of its local military superiority *vis-à-vis* the British, it could be that, as the author himself notes, "by not pressing the issue of Hong Kong's return ..., China ensured its access to foreign markets, technology and capital ... after the US and UN placed sanctions on

China in the early 1950s” by using Hong Kong to circumvent the embargo (p. 223). One suspects this was also the case with Macau. The PRC’s bombardment of Jinmen in 1954 and 1958 in response to the strengthening of military ties between Taiwan and the US, and missile exercises in the Taiwan Straits in 1995 and 1996 to protest against then Taiwanese President Lee Teng-hui’s visit to America and direct presidential elections in Taiwan, could have been made less to counter perceptions of weakened claim strengths on the part of the PRC leadership, but to express clear indignation at what were seen as direct and flagrant challenges to its sovereignty claim over Taiwan.

The book contains some glaring typographical slips allegedly about Indira Gandhi’s 1988 visit to China (p. 169), Congress passing a resolution in October 1994 opposing China’s bid to host the Olympics in 2000 (p. 259), and on China’s Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhu Bangguo (p. 263). It was Rajiv Gandhi as Prime Minister of India who visited China in 1988, the date of the resolution was October 1993, and the name of the spokesman was Zhu Bangzao. The statement “... Japan’s alliance with the United States ... includes the defense of areas under the administration of Japan, including the Senkakus” (p. 272) cannot be substantiated. The US has never stipulated to which country, Japan or China, it thinks the Senkakus (or Diaoyu islands to the Chinese) should belong.

Yet, the major strengths of the book are that practically all of the PRC’s frontier territorial disputes are examined, and the referencing is impeccable, particularly with respect to sources not yet publicly available. The author’s major arguments provide hypotheses for testing using examples from outside China, particularly the countries engaged in frontier disputes with China, to understand whether the causes for cooperation or escalation in these cases were similar to those posited here for China.

In all, this book is an unqualified welcome addition to the still comparatively sparse academic literature on China’s territorial disputes and security perceptions.