



# International Relations Theory and China's Rise: Assessing China's Potential for Territorial Expansion

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Whether China's rise as a great power will be peaceful or violent is a question that animates scholars and policymakers alike. Power transition theory and offensive realism reach pessimistic conclusions about China's potential for armed conflict because of the benefits of aggression. Nevertheless, applications of these theories to China's rise fail to examine the size and scope of these benefits and to compare them systematically to the costs of conflict that other scholars have identified. To fill this gap, this article applies different international relations theories to identify potential benefits in one defined issue area, territorial conflict, and then weighs these benefits against the likely costs. The potential benefits of territorial expansion are limited, a finding that weakens confidence in the predictions of power transition theory and offensive realism but increases confidence in more optimistic arguments about China's rise based on economic interdependence.

Whether China's rise will be peaceful or violent is a question that animates scholars and statesmen alike. Within the study of international relations, however, competing theoretical perspectives offer different answers to this important question. Scholars who examine the consequences of China's rise through the lens of either power transition theory or offensive realism predict a future of conflict. According to variants of power transition theory, conflict is most likely when a rising power, dissatisfied with the status quo, approaches parity with the dominant state in a region or the system and is willing to use force to reshape the system's rules and institutions (Organski 1958; Organski and Kugler 1980; Gilpin 1981; Modelski 1987; Kugler and Lemke 1996; Thompson 2000; Lemke 2002). When power transition theory has been applied to contemporary China, many scholars predict that China will become more belligerent as it accumulates material capabilities (Tammen, Kugler, Lemke, Stam, Abdollahian, Alsharabati, Efrid, and Organski 2000; Efrid, Kugler, and Genna 2003; Rapkin and Thompson 2003, 2006; Kugler 2006; Tammen and Kugler 2006; Goldstein 2007).<sup>1</sup> Likewise, the theory of offensive realism asserts that states will pursue expansion as they grow stronger, when statesmen perceive a relative increase in power (Labs 1997; Zakaria 1998; Mearsheimer 2001; Elman 2004). As power is held to be the ultimate source of security in an anarchic world, states pursue expansion to achieve

<sup>1</sup>Chan (2008) and Levy (2008) also apply power transition theory to China, but reach less dire conclusions. This article complements Chan and Levy's skepticism, but focuses on the underspecification of benefits to be gained through aggression.

regional hegemony. Applications of offensive realism to China also predict that it will be prone to armed conflict (Mearsheimer 2001, 2006, 2010).

By contrast, other research in international relations reaches a more optimistic view of China's rise. These scholars recognize the importance of revisionist intentions in power transitions and note that some transitions have been peaceful, such as the one between the United States and the United Kingdom in the late nineteenth century. To date, China has pursued foreign policies consistent with status quo and not revisionist intentions (Johnston 2003; Kang 2007). In addition, drawing on theories of economic interdependence, scholars highlight the wide-ranging costs that China would pay for aggressive foreign policies, especially the damage to decades of economic reforms in terms of lost trade, foreign investment, and technology, and, more generally, its participation in an international order that has facilitated greatly its rise (Copeland 2000; Moore and Yang 2001; Scobell 2001; Kang 2007; Ikenberry 2008; Johnston 2008; Kirshner 2008; Zhu 2008). Aggressive behavior would not only increase these costs but also almost certainly trigger the formation of a coalition of states to contain China, undermining China's grand strategy of reassurance (Goldstein 2005).

Confidence in the predictions of these competing theoretical perspectives, however, suffers from two limitations. First, although unrealized benefits are the root cause of aggressive behavior for both power transition theory and offensive realism, neither the scope nor sources of these benefits are discussed in much detail in the existing literature. In power transition theory, the underlying benefit that the challenger desires is the ability to rewrite the rules of the international system. Although power transitions become violent when a rising state becomes dissatisfied with the existing distribution of benefits, the specific benefits that might lead to war are underspecified. These benefits might include control over territory, spheres of influence, access to resources, or status in the system, among others. For offensive realism, the benefit of aggression is security, broadly defined, through power maximization. Yet without knowing why specifically states would be dissatisfied with a prevailing international order or what most threatens security, it is difficult to have much confidence in the predictions that these theories offer when applied to specific cases such as China's rise.

Second, the costs and benefits of conflict that these competing theoretical perspectives highlight have yet to be evaluated systematically. Applications of power transition theory and offensive realism to China's rise rarely compare the benefits to be gained through conflict with the direct and opportunity costs that such aggression would incur. Likewise, scholars who stress the effects of economic interdependence do not weigh the costs of conflict that they identify against the potential benefits. In other words, the pessimistic predictions about China's rise imply that the benefits of conflict outweigh whatever the costs might be, while the optimistic predictions suggest that the costs exceed the possible benefits. In a simple and stylized model, however, a state will pursue aggressive policies only when the benefits to be gained outweigh the likely costs a state would pay.

To assess China's potential for armed conflict and its challenge to the international system, I examine one of several possible or likely causes of conflict, control over territory. I examine territorial expansion over other potential sources of conflict such as spheres of influence, status, or resource competition for three reasons. First, historically, states have fought over territory more than any other issue that divides them (Vasquez 1993).<sup>2</sup> For this very reason, many concerns about China's rise revolve around its potential to use force in its territorial disputes (Friedberg 2005).<sup>3</sup> Past rising great powers including the United States, Germany, Japan, and the Soviet Union have also all pursued

<sup>2</sup>On the dynamics of territorial disputes, see Hensel (2001), Huth (1996), and Huth and Allee (2002).

<sup>3</sup>For earlier statements of similar concerns, see Betts (1993), Friedberg (1993–94), and Roy (1994).

territorial expansion. Second, examination of territorial conflict offers a tangible benefit that is more amenable to empirical analysis than other benefits rising powers might pursue.

A third reason to focus on territorial conflict is that it plays an important role in the theories that predict a violent future for China. Research on power transitions highlights territorial disputes as a source of dissatisfaction and negative assessments about the status quo (Lemke 2002). As Robert Gilpin (1981:106) writes, for example, “as the power of the state increases, it seeks to extend its territorial control.” Likewise, applications of power transition theory to China stress territorial disputes as a potential source of dissatisfaction and war (Tammen et al. 2000; Efrid et al. 2003; Rapkin and Thompson 2003, 2006; Kugler 2006; Tammen and Kugler 2006; Goldstein 2007). A Chinese use of force over territory would also put pressure on the United States as the dominant state in the system to respond and enforce shared norms against conquest, especially if China attacked a US ally or a democratic state in the region. Similarly, the allure of regional hegemony in offensive realism suggests that conflicts over disputed territory would occur as China sought to achieve or demonstrate its dominance. According to the most prominent offensive realist, John Mearsheimer (2001:402), “A wealthy China would not be a status quo power but an aggressive state determined to achieve regional hegemony.”

Empirically, however, one might argue that analysis of China’s potential for conflict over territory is unnecessary. After all, China’s past behavior in its recent territorial disputes suggests that future territorial expansion may be unlikely. Although China has participated in more territorial disputes than any other state since the end of World War II (23), it has settled the majority of these conflicts through bilateral agreements, usually by compromising over the sovereignty of contested land. China has used force in some of these disputes, but it has generally not seized or conquered large amounts of land that it did not control before the outbreak of hostilities (Fravel 2008a). Other scholars argue that a stronger China will eschew expansion because imperial China sought cultural hegemony over states in the region, not physical control (Kang 2007).

Just as with mutual funds, however, past behavior in international relations is no guarantee of future performance. Indeed, policymakers and scholars of China continue to express concern about China’s willingness to use force over territory and its territorial ambitions (for example, Chang 2001; Ministry of National Defence 2009:19; Office of the Secretary of Defense 2010:23; Shirk 2007). A stronger China may behave differently in the same issue area than it has in the past. Precisely because China’s history of compromise in its territorial disputes suggests that China may be less likely to pursue territorial expansion, it is imperative to examine alternative outcomes, especially when they are predicted by important theories of international relations such as variants of power transition theory or offensive realism. In addition, international relations scholars who stress the costs of conflict should evaluate pessimistic arguments seriously. If power transition theory or offensive realism is correct, then it is important to understand the conditions under which conflict is most likely to occur and, in particular, what benefits might create strong incentives for expansion. If these theories have little empirical basis and the benefits of expansion are limited, then confidence that China’s rise will not result in conflict over territory would increase—and be grounded in more complete empirical analysis.

The remainder of this article examines China’s expected utility for conflict over territory or territorial expansion. I define expansion as threatening or using force to seize part or all of the territory controlled by another state.<sup>4</sup> For China, territorial expansion would include issuing new territorial claims and using force

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<sup>4</sup>In this context, I use the terms “expansion” and “territorial conflict” interchangeably.

TABLE 1. China's Outstanding Territorial Disputes

<i>Disputed area</i>	<i>Size (km<sup>2</sup>)</i>	<i>Start date</i>	<i>Use of force</i>	<i>Description</i>
India border	~125,000	1953	1962 1967 1986	Offensive against Indian positions Clashes at Nathu La Crisis at Sumdurong Chu
Bhutan border	1,128	1953	–	–
Taiwan	32,260	1949	1952–55 1954 1958 1995–96	Seizure of coastal islands Shelling of Jinmen Shelling of Jinmen/Mazu Exercises in the Taiwan Strait
Paracel Islands	~10	1951	1974	Seizure of the Crescent Group
Spratly Islands	~5	1951	1988 1994	Seizure of several reefs; clash with Vietnam Seizure of Mischief Reef
Senkaku Islands	~7	1970	–	

Source: Fravel 2008a.

in pursuit of these new claims as well as in its existing territorial disputes. As noted in Table 1, China still participates in six territorial disputes as well as conflicts over maritime sovereignty in the Yellow Sea, East China Sea, and South China Sea. I employ an informal expected utility approach, identifying the benefits that China or its leaders might reap through territorial expansion and the probability that China can capture these benefits through military force.<sup>5</sup> My time frame for the analysis is the next two decades, a period when it is reasonable to assume that China will continue to be a rising power in the region relative to other major powers and a period when it will begin to approach parity in terms of gross domestic product (GDP) with the United States, the dominant power in the international system.<sup>6</sup> How China might behave if it were to become the dominant state or regional hegemon in East Asia lies beyond the scope of this article.

In an era of renewed globalization, a study of China's potential for expansion might be seen as passé, even irrelevant. Scholars have emphasized, for example, the shift from the "strategic state" to the "trading state" and the declining salience of territory as a component of national wealth and power (Rosecrance 1986), changes that reduce the potential benefits of territorial expansion for all states, including China. The globalization of supply chains creates production interdependence, while the rise of markets generates a capitalist peace in which human capital and technology, not land, are the key determinants of a nation's wealth (Brooks 2005; Gartzke 2007).<sup>7</sup> The internationalization of finance creates additional barriers for the financing of major war (Kirshner 2007). Nevertheless, other scholars have argued persuasively that conquest can pay in a narrow sense because states can profitably exploit industrialized societies (Lieberman 1996) and that some types of resources are cumulative (Van Evera 1999).<sup>8</sup> Moreover, as

<sup>5</sup>For a formal approach to expected utility, see Bueno de Mesquita (1989:143–169). Logically, one could show that expansion does not pay by demonstrating either that there were no benefits to be gained through expansion or, if there were benefits, that a state possessed no ability to capture them through military force. In this article, I examine both.

<sup>6</sup>Keidel (2008) concludes that China will not achieve economic parity with the United States for several decades.

<sup>7</sup>Brooks (1999) also argues that globalized supply limits the development of autonomous national defense industries.

<sup>8</sup>In particular, Lieberman argues that conquest "pays" in a limited sense, namely that the resources that can be extracted are greater than those required for occupation. Lieberman does not argue that conquest pays more generally when weighed against other costs, such as the costs of war to seize territory, the sanctions and other costs that states may impose in response to conquest, or the ability to use conquered military manpower. As Lieberman notes, "Conquest usually does not pay in the larger reckoning" (1996:x). I offer further support for this conclusion.

China's rise portends a return to a multipolar distribution of power and a type of competitive great power politics not witnessed for more than half a century, the potential benefits of territorial expansion merit thorough examination.

Before proceeding, several caveats must be noted. First, the analysis below examines only one of several potential sources of conflict involving a rising China, namely conflict over territory. The findings from the analysis cannot be generalized beyond territorial conflict. Future research should investigate other potential causes of conflict that might involve China, such as spheres of influence, status and prestige, resource competition, or fundamental disagreements over the rules of the system. Second, I investigate only how China's own territorial interests might change in the future as a rising power. As a result, I do not examine the interactive nature of territorial disputes or the possibility that China might, as it has in the past, use force over territory in response to the actions of opposing states in a given territorial dispute (Fravel 2007–08, 2008a). This article instead seeks to isolate the effect of China's changing interests on the benefits it might gain through conflict over territory, especially given the growing gap in military power between China and many of its immediate neighbors.

Third, I do not examine the conditions under which China might use force in its most important territorial dispute over Taiwan. Despite its significance, analysis of the Taiwan dispute is less helpful for understanding China's territorial ambitions elsewhere. The Taiwan conflict is unique because of its origins in the Chinese civil war and the mainland's pursuit of national unification since 1949. None of China's other current disputes, or potential ones that might arise involving neighboring states, are similar to the Taiwan conflict in this important respect. Indeed, it is China's only territorial dispute that has been incorporated into the constitution of the People's Republic of China (PRC), linking the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), in part, to the fate of the dispute.<sup>9</sup> In addition, the key factors shaping China's willingness to use force are its assessment of the long-term prospects for unification and cross-strait relations, not new interests that China might acquire as it accumulates material capabilities, which are the focus of this article. Scholars of China's international relations have examined in depth the dynamics of the dispute and prospects for the use of force, which certainly cannot be ruled out despite the warming of ties across the Strait after the election of Ma Ying-jeou as president in 2008 (for example, Ross 2000, 2002; Christensen 2002, 2006; Wachman 2007; Fravel 2008a; Kastner 2009). Nevertheless, although the exclusion of Taiwan from the analysis prevents an exhaustive examination of China's potential for conflict over territory, it permits a more detailed consideration of other possible sources of territorial conflict in the coming decades that have received less attention to date.

Over the next two decades, territorial conflict for China is unlikely to pay. To be sure, the costs of expansion would be high. Even more importantly, however, the potential benefits of territorial expansion beyond Taiwan are not as great as either the predictions of power transition theory or offensive realism suggest. China's ability to seize and control territory from other states also remains limited, constrained largely by the lack of robust strategic lift capabilities to deploy and sustain troops beyond its borders. Although this article reinforces optimism about a rising China's potential for involvement in armed conflict, it reaches this conclusion only through an exhaustive review of the benefits that China might gain through expansion and the weighting of these benefits against the likely and high costs that other scholars have identified. Despite the anxiety about China's rise, one of the traditional pathways to war is unlikely.

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<sup>9</sup>According to the preamble of the 1982 constitution, "Taiwan is part of the sacred territory of the PRC. It is the lofty duty of the entire Chinese people, including our compatriots in Taiwan, to accomplish the great task of reunifying the motherland."

My argument unfolds as follows. The following section describes briefly the certain costs that China would bear for pursuing territorial expansion. Next, the article investigates the potential benefits of expansion. This analysis begins with a detailed examination of the benefits of expansion identified by various theories. The article then considers the trajectory of China's military modernization and the odds that it can capture these benefits through the use of force. The article concludes with a discussion of the implications of the analysis for China's rise.

### **The Certain Costs of Expansion**

To be sure, territorial expansion would be a costly endeavor for China to pursue. Within the study of international relations, different theories identify several costs that China would almost certainly pay for expansion. Moreover, these costs are likely to be high and, as a result, create strong incentives for China to avoid territorial expansion and pursue its interests through other means. In the following analysis, I assume that China continues with its present grand strategy of reassurance, which is keyed to participation in the existing international order and preventing the formation of a counter-balancing coalition that could block or limit China's continued economic development (Goldstein 2005; Medeiros 2009).

#### *Political and Diplomatic Costs*

Within international relations, several theories highlight the political and diplomatic costs that states typically must bear for territorial expansion. Given the uncertainty about China's intentions, the first diplomatic cost of expansion would be signaling China's "type" as an aggressive rising power. This signal would be especially strong because it would mark a clear departure from China's past behavior of cooperating and compromising in its territorial disputes. In settling disputes on its land border, China agreed not only to concessions over disputed areas, but it also abandoned potential claims that it might have pursued to any of the "lost" territories ceded by the Qing dynasty in the nineteenth century. In the 1990s, for example, China compromised 11 times in territorial disputes with its neighbors, such as the 1994 boundary agreement with Kazakhstan (Fravel 2005, 2008a). China thus reassured its mostly smaller neighbors about its future territorial ambitions by committing to boundaries in bilateral treaties and agreements that excluded explicitly former Qing territories. The abrogation of these agreements would send an unambiguous signal of territorial ambition.

Such a signal of aggressive intentions through expansion would be costly in two ways. First, it would raise doubts in the region about China's intentions more generally and the potential costs of future engagement with China. If one objective of China's current grand strategy is to hedge against the United States through improved ties with regional actors, then violating even just one boundary agreement or territorial settlement, much less initiating new claims, would create an opportunity for the United States to improve ties with these states at China's expense. Second, territorial expansion against any one state would increase the likelihood that regional actors would coordinate to limit China's power and prevent further aggression. Thus, one of the main costs of expansion is that it would create the very type of reaction that China's current grand strategy seeks to avoid—a counter-balancing coalition. This cost greatly limits the use of force in existing disputes, much less the initiation of new territorial claims.

A second diplomatic cost of expansion stems from the emergence and consolidation of a "norm against conquest," which facilitates the creation of coalitions to punish states that violate this norm. According to Tanisha Fazal (2007), this

norm emerged in the 1920s and became consolidated during the Cold War. Mark Zacher (2001) has identified a similar norm, termed the “norm of territorial integrity.” All things being equal, the presence of such norms increases the already high likelihood that the international community will act to punish violations of these norms, especially by major powers (Hironaka 2005). Despite the incentives for buck-passing, these norms create a focal point for states to coordinate their responses to territorial aggression, as witnessed by the international community’s rapid reaction to Iraq’s occupation of Kuwait in 1990. As China’s current grand strategy seeks to prevent the formation of coalitions targeting China, the presence of these norms increases the costs of expansion, especially given the threat that creation of such a coalition would pose to China’s continued economic development.

#### *Economic Costs*

The literature on economic interdependence identifies another set of costs that China would pay for territorial expansion. Although this literature is too vast to summarize briefly, its core claim is that growing interdependence among states increases the opportunity costs of violent conflict and thus exerts a restraining and pacific effect on state behavior. Although scholars continue to investigate the causal mechanisms that link interdependence with peace, greater interdependence, all things being equal, raises the costs of armed conflict, especially expansion (McMillan 1997; Gartzke, Li, and Boehmer 2001; Russett and Oneal 2001; Gartzke and Li 2003; Mansfield and Pollins 2003).

China has benefitted tremendously from its participation in the existing international economic order. Indeed, China has risen precisely by deepening its engagement with existing institutions, not challenging them (Ikenberry 2008). To date, China’s economic development has occurred through the relative openness of its economy to trade and foreign investment. In return, China has become increasingly dependent on such openness for high rates of economic growth. The openness of the Chinese economy suggests that the monetary costs of expansion in terms of slower economic growth would be significant (Moore and Yang 2001; Chambers 2006; Moore 2008). Trade, for example, accounted for more than 65% of China’s GDP in 2008 and exceeded 70% before the financial crisis (World Bank 2010). In turn, by 2006, foreign-invested enterprises accounted for roughly half of all exports that China has produced. In some sectors, such as high-technology products, the figure jumps to 88%. At the same time, China has been more open to foreign direct investment than many other developing economies. In the past 10 years, the overall majority of such investment has been directed to wholly owned foreign enterprises, investment that might be reduced or revoked if China pursued expansion or other forms of aggression abroad (Naughton 2007:388–412). As China’s top leaders constitute a coalition of internationalist leaders, they would be sensitive to such costs (Papayouanou and Kastner 1999).

Importantly, Chinese primary sources acknowledge the potential costs of conflict that economic interdependence creates. In the early 2000s, Chinese political elites began to frame China’s foreign policy around the concept of “peaceful rise” (Zheng 2005a). Although the slogan was subsequently changed to “peaceful development,” the concept contained a clear recognition of the economic costs that China would pay for a more confrontational and aggressive foreign policy and their negative impact on China’s economic development as well as the political legitimacy of the ruling party (Glaser and Medeiros 2007). This concept acknowledged the degree to which China benefitted from its engagement with the existing international order. It was also strategic, designed to convey a benign and non-threatening image to other states, reassuring them about China’s growing capabilities.

Even Chinese military writings acknowledge the increased costs of conflict that growing economic interdependence creates. In 2001, the Academy of Military Science, an important research organization under the Central Military Commission of the CCP, published a book entitled *Zhanlue Xue* [*The Science of Military Strategy*] (Peng and Yao 2001). In this book, the military strategists note two important effects of economic interdependence. The first is the necessity of pursuing only limited aims in war, not broader aims that might be associated with territorial expansion. The second is the necessity of fighting short wars to limit the economic costs described in the previous paragraph. Such statements are only suggestive, but they do indicate an awareness of the costs of expansion within the Chinese armed forces. Moreover, as the audience for this particular book was internal, it is unlikely that these beliefs reflect simply strategic rhetoric design to assuage foreign concerns about growing Chinese military power.

A final economic cost would be the cost of occupation itself necessary to reap the benefits of expansion. Although Liberman (1996) argues that the conquest of industrialized societies can “pay” in the limited economic sense, it is unclear whether this argument can travel easily to the many semi-industrialized societies on China’s periphery, where more dispersed populations and poor infrastructure would increase the costs of surveillance and extraction. More generally, China’s continued difficulties in governing its own ethnic minority areas such as Xinjiang and Tibet hints at the costs that China would have to pay for expanding the size of the non-Han territory under its administration (Fravel 2008a).

### **The Uncertain Benefits of Expansion**

Of course, even if the costs of expansion are high, states might still engage in such behavior if the benefits to be gained are substantial. Why do states expand? Within the study of international relations, different theories and research programs offer different answers to this question by identifying various benefits that a state might gain through territorial expansion.<sup>10</sup> Some of these arguments stress the benefits that strengthen a state’s relative power position in the international system. Other arguments point to benefits that enhance a leader’s political power within a state or a regime’s control over the society it governs. Likewise, some of these theories are unique to the incentives that rising powers face, while others point to more general sources of conflict regardless of changes in a state’s position in the international system.<sup>11</sup> Overall, however, the examination of these various theories and arguments demonstrate that the benefits of expansion for China are limited, which suggests the likelihood of expansion is low.

#### *Systemic Sources of Expansion*

One set of arguments examines the sources of expansion generated by the condition of anarchy in the international system, which creates incentives for states to maximize their relative power. These arguments are consistent with structural theories such as neorealism (Waltz 1979) and offensive realism (Mearsheimer 2001). Systemic sources of expansion include lateral pressure, population pressure, and the dynamics of the security dilemma.

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<sup>10</sup>To be clear, I am not presenting a unified theory of territorial expansion. Instead, I examine the relevance and applicability of theories and arguments that other scholars have developed to explain territorial expansion to see which might shed light on China’s future behavior. Quite naturally, not all of these theories are compatible with each other, but the development of an integrated theory of expansion that reconciles these differences lies beyond the scope of this article.

<sup>11</sup>I do not consider means other than territorial expansion such as the market that might be used to capture these same benefits. Instead, my purpose is simply to see what benefits might exist for which expansion and conquest might be considered.



*Lateral Pressure*

The theory of lateral pressure developed by Nazli Choucri and Robert North (1975) offers one argument to explain why states seek to increase their influence abroad through a variety of means, including territorial expansion. States experiencing high rates of population growth and technological change require increasing stocks of resources to fuel further economic development. Over time, states find that they lack resources within their boundaries and thus face mounting “lateral pressure” to expand abroad. Although resources can be acquired through trade, states may also believe that they are cumulative and conclude that they need to be captured or controlled through conquest (Van Evera 1999). According to lateral pressure theory, the principal benefit of expansion is enhanced control over vital natural resources.

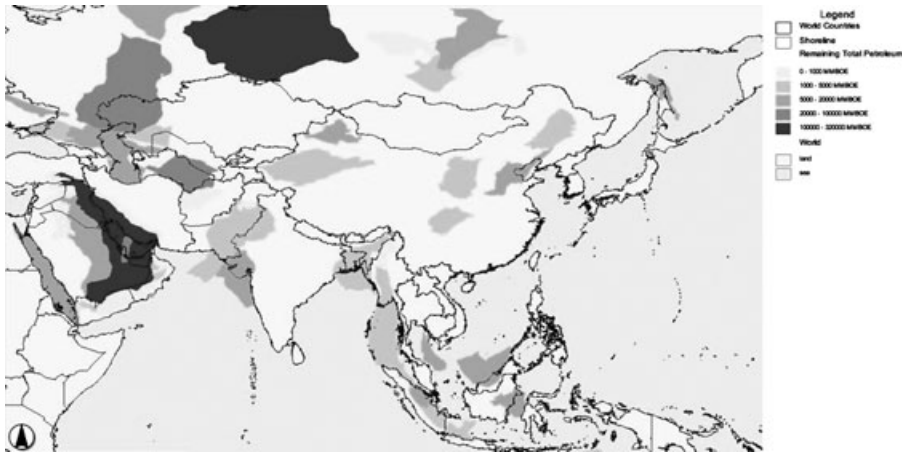
The states most likely to face high levels of lateral pressure and pursue expansion are “alpha” states with large populations experiencing rapid economic growth and industrialization. China today appears to fit the criteria of an “alpha” state prone to lateral pressure and scholars have begun to apply lateral pressure theory to China’s rise (Schweller 1999; Boehmer and Sobek 2005; Hatemi and Wedeman 2007). As China’s economy has developed rapidly over the past two decades, averaging more than 9% growth annually, its need for resources has grown dramatically. By 2005, China had become the world’s largest consumer of grain, meat, coal, and steel, and second largest consumer of oil (Brown 2005). China’s appetite for these products and commodities suggests that it might in the future consider expansion to secure its access to vital resources, such as petroleum or arable land.

*Petroleum*—One resource where China might face intense lateral pressure for expansion is petroleum. Indeed, China’s acquisition of equity stakes in oil and natural gas fields overseas has sparked much speculation about the state’s willingness to secure access to resources seen as vital to the country’s continued development. Since 1993, China has been a net importer of oil. As its reliance on oil imports has grown, debate has emerged within China over the security of its access to energy and efforts to ensure access through long-term contracts and overseas investments have increased.<sup>12</sup> As a result, as China’s economy continues to grow, it might consider using force to secure access to energy by seizing oil fields beyond its borders.

If states expand to enhance their energy security through physical control of petroleum assets, then the benefits of expansion for China are limited. To start, China is less dependent on oil imports than commonly believed. Although China has been a net importer of oil for more than a decade, these imports only account for about 10% of China’s overall energy consumption (Downs 2006; Energy Information Agency 2009). Moreover, on its continental periphery, few large deposits of petroleum exist that would quench China’s thirst for energy even if it were more dependent on foreign sources of supply. According to the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), only two petroleum fields that rank among the world’s top 100 remaining reserves are located in a neighboring country where China might plausibly use force to secure access to this resource (Map 1) (U.S. Geological Survey 2000). The first lies in western Kazakhstan, but this field is located more than 2,000 km from China’s western border, a distance that falls far beyond the limits of even China’s future power projection capabilities. The second major source of remaining reserves lies in Russian Siberia, approximately 1,500 km from western China (U.S. Geological Survey 2000). Yet Russia, as discussed in the following section, is the one neighbor on land where China would be unable to project military power.

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<sup>12</sup>See, for example, the articles in *China Security*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (Autumn 2006).



MAP 1. Remaining Petroleum Reserves around China. Source: U.S. Geological Survey (2000)

In maritime East Asia, remaining reserves are much smaller than contemporary press reports suggest. The southern portion of the South China Sea is listed in the USGS survey, but its proven reserves are estimated to be only 2% of those in Saudi Arabia (Energy Information Agency 2009). These reserves lie in waters near the coasts of Brunei, Malaysia, and Indonesia, not adjacent to the Spratly Islands that China claims in the center of the South China Sea. In addition, no sizeable reserves are identified in the East China Sea, where China's development of natural gas fields in the Xihu Trough has become a source of friction with Japan since 2003.

A related component of energy security is the security of the delivery of energy supplies from overseas. China might pursue expansion to ensure the security of delivery, especially if it relied heavily on one route. China, however, has pursued a policy of diversifying the channels of supply to reduce its dependence on any one channel. In addition to seaborne sources of energy, China is in the process of building pipelines with Russia, Kazakhstan, and Burma that would provide three additional overland routes for the delivery of oil and natural gas (Downs 2010). Chinese analysts (Dai 2010) refer to this diversification of delivery as "one ocean [channel], three Asian [channels]" (*yi yang san ya*). If Chinese ports are blockaded, for example, China could still receive the delivery of energy supplies from any of its overland pipelines. As a result, the value of controlling any one route, especially those on land, is reduced.

If China does expand in pursuit of petroleum, its efforts will most likely focus on the South China Sea. Even though the remaining reserves are not great when compared to other regions, it may be easier for China to assert control over these areas. Since 2007, China has demonstrated an increased interest in petroleum in these disputed waters. In April 2007, China objected to Vietnam's joint development of oil fields with foreign oil companies in areas that China held were disputed waters. In June 2008, these objections were reportedly voiced again (Beck 2008). In March 2009, China moved to assert its claims to an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in the South China Sea when it challenged the USNS *Impeccable*, a survey ship that was operating roughly 75 miles from Hainan Island. In 2009 and 2010, China has increased patrols by vessels from the Fisheries Administration in these disputed waters, in part to demonstrate China's sovereignty over this area (Xinhua News Agency 2010).

*Arable Land*—China might also face strong lateral pressure to secure access to arable land. As China's economy continues to develop, demand for food will increase, especially as the dietary composition shifts to agriculturally intensive products such as meat. Over time, China may become a net importer of certain foodstuffs, increasing the importance of agricultural production. At the same time, the land available for cultivation, or arable land, may decline, increasing the benefit of controlling arable land in neighboring countries.

China appears to face strong lateral pressure to increase the amount of arable land that it can cultivate. Today, arable land accounts for roughly 15% of China's landmass. On a per capita basis, however, China has roughly 0.11 hectares (ha) of arable land per person. Many of China's neighbors in the region possess similar levels of arable land, including India and Vietnam. Kazakhstan and Russia, however, contain much more arable land on a per capita basis, 1.47 and 0.85 ha per person, respectively (World Bank 2010). Thus, it is plausible that China might expand to seize arable land in these countries, especially areas adjacent to China's land borders. Moreover, in the Russian Far East next to China's Heilongjiang Province, the amount of arable land is 1.89 ha per person (Ilyina 2005), more than 10 times the average arable land in China. Nevertheless, as Russia is China's most powerful neighbor, China is unlikely to expand in this direction.

#### *Population Pressure*

China's imperial history provides another logic of expansion. Although similar to lateral pressure theory, this logic reverses the causal arrow. In China's imperial past, ethnic Han Chinese in search of economic opportunity migrated to non-Han areas to cultivate land for sedentary agriculture. Subsequently, the imperial state, in search of additional tax revenue, began to administer these areas. Over time, these patterns of migration increased the size of the state (Wiens 1954; Reardon-Anderson 2005). According to this argument, the principal benefit of expansion is additional living space. Although the predicted outcome is similar to lateral pressure theory, the mechanism is different: lateral pressure theory expects the state to lead expansion abroad to increase its living space, while arguments about population pressure assert that the state follows and does not lead expansion.

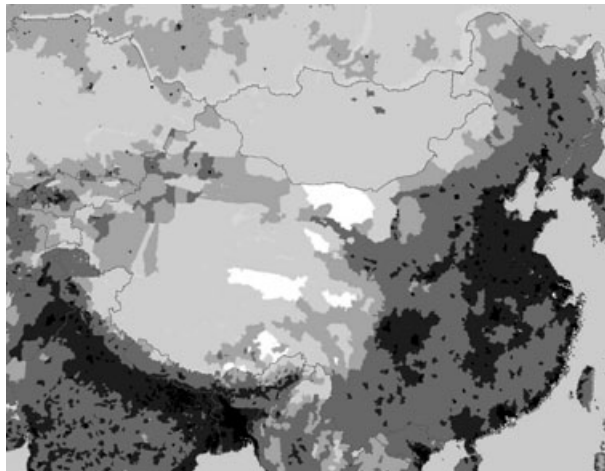
As the most populous country in the world, China may be ripe for expansion to relieve population pressure. According to the most recent census, China now has 1.3 billion citizens or 20% of the world's population. Although China's economy is witnessing some of the highest rates of sustained economic growth in modern history, income inequality is also growing and could create incentives for migration. In 2007, the Gini coefficient, a leading measure of income inequality, was 0.47, which would be seen as "moderately high" levels of inequality for a developing country (Xinhua News Agency 2008). In the face of growing income inequality, some Chinese citizens may increasingly consider moving to neighboring countries in search of better economic opportunities.

China's internal patterns of migration offer one indicator of China's potential for outward migration. In China's imperial past, outward migration led to the expansion of the state in China's present-day northeast and southwest, as Han Chinese moved from the fertile river valleys that formed the core of each empire into peripheral areas. Today, however, Chinese demographics paint a different picture. Although large population movements have occurred, the direction of migration has been mostly from the rural areas to the cities—away from the borders to the wealthy coastal regions (Zai and Ma 2004). Internal migration trumps emigration. Overall, between 1995 and 2000, approximately 20 million people have moved from inland provinces to coastal regions, while only three million have migrated from the coast to China's western regions (Fan 2005:304).

A second indicator of the potential for outward migration would be an imbalance between China's population density and the population density in neighboring countries, especially the relative population densities in areas adjacent to China's international boundaries. Along China's borders, however, few imbalances where the population density on the Chinese side is far greater than the density on the opposing side exist when measured at the county level (Socioeconomic Data and Applications Center, 2005). As demonstrated in Map 2, the greatest imbalances exist along China's border with the Russian Far East and Burma, but these differences are not large. Moreover, China in some cases faces demographic pressure from its neighbors, especially India.

At the macro level, however, potential for pressure for expansion remains. One area of potential concern lies in the Russian Far East adjacent to China. The population of China's three northeastern provinces (roughly 107 million) dwarfs the entire Russian Far Eastern Federal District (about 6.6 million), indicating that this is one area where population pressure might be easily released.<sup>13</sup> Although the Russian Far East is sparsely populated, with just one person per square kilometer, the Chinese northeast is densely populated, with more than 135 people per square kilometer. In addition, from 1989 to 2002, the number of ethnic Chinese living in Russia has increased by more than 500%, from 5,200 to 34,577 (Gelbras 2002:100).

China, however, has several options for releasing population pressure that might accumulate. Indeed, the variation in population density within China suggests that it can relieve internally any population pressure that might accumulate in the coming decades. As demonstrated in Map 2, ample areas exist where the state might be able to relieve population pressure that might swell in urban areas, although such actions would require creating incentives for individuals to relocate from vibrant coastal regions to the hinterland. For example, although Guangdong Province has 434 people per square kilometer, Qinghai Province only has 7.2 people per square kilometer (National Bureau of Statistics of China,



MAP 2. Population Density in East Asia. Source: Socioeconomic Data and Applications Center (2005)

<sup>13</sup>Both figures are based on census data from 2002, the most current data available. For Russian data, see <http://www.perepis2002.ru/index.html?id=87>. For Chinese data, see National Bureau of Statistics of China (2003:100).

2003:100). Although the difficulties that the state would face in creating incentives for Han Chinese to relocate to culturally different and economically less-attractive frontier regions cannot be underestimated, China has been able to encourage Han migration to Xinjiang and Tibet in the past thirty years.

### *The Security Dilemma*

According to the logic of the security dilemma (Jervis 1978), states in search of security may nevertheless pursue expansion to create secure frontiers or buffer zones with which to protect homeland territory from attack. Territorial expansion in pursuit of security results from fear and the perception of vulnerability to attack by the other great powers. As a state's economy grows and generates increasing levels of wealth, the importance of defensible frontiers or buffers increases because the state has more to protect and defend. States may also worry that their increased wealth might attract other states that seek to block or contain its rise. According to this argument, the principal benefit of expansion is security through the establishment of buffer zones.

Several factors suggest that China might consider expansion in pursuit of buffers. Since 9/11, the United States increased its military presence on China's western flank by establishing bases in Uzbekistan (now closed) and Kyrgyzstan as well as deploying forces to Afghanistan. Although the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have consumed the attention of US military planners, China's leaders have an acute sensitivity to potential encirclement that springs from China's historical conquest by nomads as well as China's rivalry with the Soviet Union from the 1960s to the 1980s. Moreover, when it comes to major powers, East Asia is a crowded neighborhood, which includes Russia, India, and Japan in addition to China and the United States. Alignments among these states might also increase China's need for buffers by increasing China's perception of encirclement by major powers on multiple strategic fronts.<sup>14</sup>

If states expand to enhance their security through the creation of buffer zones, then the benefits of expansion for China are mixed. On the Asian continent, China already possesses sizeable buffers—ironically, the vast frontiers within China's current borders, including Tibet, Xinjiang, and Inner Mongolia. These regions account for roughly 43% of China's landmass but only contain 3.5% of its population, ideal geography to trade time for space on the battlefield. China's present military strategy continues to leverage this favorable geography, though it seeks to limit as much as combat as possible to border areas (Chen, Xu, and Geng 2003). In addition, China's close relations with its smaller continental neighbors such as Laos, Burma, and Nepal as well as the Central Asian republics provide an additional layer of buffers beyond its borders. Although the advent of long-range precision strike munitions perhaps decreases the value of land buffers, they are so large in the case of China that they remain a formidable obstacle for any country seeking to attack China, especially on land, because they further increase the warning time available to China during a conflict (Goldstein 2008:70).

By contrast, China lacks strategic depth in maritime East Asia. China's wealthy coastal regions are vulnerable to attack from the sea, especially if a conflict erupted over Taiwan that involved the United States. More generally, China's economy is vulnerable to disruptions of seaborne trade through ports all along China's coast. To secure these coastal regions and maintain the flow of trade, China has strong incentives to create a maritime buffer. As a recent white paper on defense notes, China seeks to "gradually extend the strategic depth for offshore defense" (State Council Information Office 2006). The principal

<sup>14</sup>At the same time, the nascent multipolar structure in East Asia may also increase the opportunities for buck-passing and thus, potentially, opportunities for expansion that might otherwise not exist.

military means for achieving such security is through the creation of a full-spectrum area denial capability, one that would be grounded in the modernization of China's naval and air forces. Paradoxically, the control of disputed offshore islands such as the Spratly Islands will be less important given the difficulty of maintaining air superiority over large tracts of water that are far from the Chinese mainland. These islands, coral reefs, and shoals are too small to shelter and supply naval forces of any size. Nevertheless, China is likely to increase its presence in maritime East Asia to the extent that its naval and air modernization erodes US command of the seas, especially in waters 100 or 200 miles from the Chinese coast. Similarly, China has become increasingly willing to assert its interpretation of maritime rights within its EEZ under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, an interpretation that seeks to limit the activities of foreign naval forces (Ren and Cheng 2005).

On balance, then, the benefits of expansion for security through buffers are mixed. The creation of a maritime buffer depends on naval power, not the control of disputed islands. On land, China already possesses internal and external buffers. The benefits of expansion on land, however, might increase for a second reason: if states on China's periphery collapse or weaken substantially, such as North Korea or perhaps one of the republics in Central Asia. The weakening or collapse of a neighboring state, especially one that abuts China's ethnic minority frontiers, could threaten China's security in two ways. First, collapsed states could result in increased flows across China's borders of refugees and other actors, especially "separatists," which would increase instability among minorities in China, including ethnic Koreans in the Northeast and Uighurs in Xinjiang. As a result, China might conclude that limited expansion into a neighbor is necessary to secure China's borders and prevent unwanted flows into the country that could increase instability. Second, during a period of state collapse, other great powers may seek to intervene to provide relief, enhance stability, or increase their influence. Such intervention might increase substantially the number of troops deployed to a neighboring country. China might conclude that it needs to move forces into a neighboring state, either to block other great powers from intervening, or, if they do intervene, to balance their influence, especially in areas bordering China.

#### *Domestic Sources of Expansion*

A second set of arguments highlights the sources of expansion generated within states through efforts by leaders or interest groups to maximize their domestic political power. Domestic sources of expansion include nationalism, diversion, log-rolling, and militarism. These arguments are generally consistent with some variants of defensive realism, which often highlights the role of domestic pathologies in the onset of international conflict (for example, Snyder 1991). None of these arguments are unique to the circumstances facing rising powers, but they have gained attention in scholarly studies of China as likely sources of conflict as China's military capabilities grow and as Chinese society continues its uncertain and often turbulent transition toward a market economy. In all cases, the principal benefit for leaders of conflict over territory abroad is enhanced or bolstered political security at home.

#### *Nationalism*

Nationalism and territory have always been intertwined and can create incentives for expansion for several reasons. First, national leaders might pursue expansion to recover or rescue coethnics who reside in neighboring countries. In particular, they may pursue expansion to achieve unification of a nation that has been divided or, when coethnics abroad face persecution, to defend kinsmen by

seizing the territory where they reside (Van Evera 1994; Moore and Davis 2001; Tir 2005). Second, national leaders might also pursue expansion to realize a given national identity, to right past injustices to the nation, or regain lost status (Van Evera 1994). Such incentives can be especially strong for countries with historical legacies of territorial loss, such as China.

Nationalism as a motivation for Chinese expansion is plausible for several reasons. First, although nationalism was a potent political force in China under Mao Zedong, the de facto collapse of socialism has increased its prominence relative to other ideologies that might sustain the legitimacy of the Chinese state.<sup>15</sup> In April 2005, demonstrations against Japan highlighted the potential of popular nationalism, especially if hitched to China's pursuit of territorial goals. Second, as China continues to pursue its economic reforms, growing social instability only increases the value of promoting a unifying ideology such as nationalism (Keidel 2006). Over the past decade, for example, the number and scope of demonstrations, protests, and riots classified as "mass incidents" in China has increased dramatically from 8,700 in 1993 to potentially as high as 170,000 in 2009 (Tanner 2004; Mi 2010).<sup>16</sup>

*Ethnic Recovery and Rescue*—Defining the content of any country's national identity is tricky. Scholars have described modern Chinese nationalism as aggrieved, isolationist, assertive, expansionist, confident, pragmatic, nativist, and anti-traditionalist, among others (for example, Oksenberg 1987; Whiting 1995; Zhao 2004). Although each characterization implies different preferences for expansion, the diversity of adjectives used to describe the content of Chinese nationalism creates analytical ambiguity. To assess whether nationalism might create a perceived benefit for expansion, I start with the assumption that nationalist aspirations would be shaped by the identity of China's dominant ethnic group, the Han, who constitute more than 90% of the population in the PRC.

If Chinese nationalism is ethnic and not civic in origin, then the goals of nationalist expansion would be the recovery or rescue of Han Chinese who reside outside of the PRC. In China's past territorial disputes, for example, China's status quo and revisionist preferences varied largely with the ethnicity of the disputed area. Since 1949, China pursued the unification of Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macao, but eschewed claims to non-Han areas in Central Asia republics once deemed to be part of the Qing (Fravel 2008a).

If ethnic rescue is one mechanism through which nationalism creates incentives for territorial expansion, then the benefits of expansion for China for this reason are limited. Although large ethnic Chinese populations are found in many countries in East Asia, few ethnic Chinese live in countries bordering China where China could most easily pursue expansion (Table 2). One exception is Vietnam, where ethnic Chinese account for about 1% of the population (Embassy of Vietnam 2007). In the late 1970s, the persecution and flight of many ethnic Chinese were a factor in China's decision to attack Vietnam in 1979 (Ross 1988; Zhang 2005). Today, however, the majority of ethnic Chinese in Vietnam live in the south, especially in Saigon and other coastal towns, not in northern areas where China could most easily project military power in pursuit of ethnic recovery or rescue. Although it is possible that renewed persecution might result in the use of force, it is unlikely to lead to territorial expansion and efforts to incorporate these communities into the mainland.

<sup>15</sup>At the same time, available studies lack sufficient data to show whether popular nationalism in China is, in fact, increasing (Johnston 2004).

<sup>16</sup>The figure for 2009 is calculated based on information in Mi (2010).

TABLE 2. Ethnic Chinese in Selected Asian Countries (2005)

Country	Ethnic Chinese	Percent of total population (%)	Land border with China?
Indonesia	7,566,200	3	No
Thailand	7,053,240	11	No
Malaysia	6,187,400	25	No
Singapore	2,684,900	75	No
Vietnam	1,263,570	1	Yes
Philippines	1,146,250	1	No
Burma	1,101,314	2	Yes
Japan	519,561	0.5	No
Cambodia	343,855	2.5	No
India	189,470	0.0	Yes
Laos	185,765	3.0	Yes

Source: Overseas Compatriot Affairs Commission (2010).



MAP 3. Qing and People's Republic of China Boundaries. Source: Produced by the Author with GIS

*Irredentism*—China's historical narrative of external victimization as the Qing declined and then collapsed, along with the loss of large amounts of territory during this period, suggest that as China grows stronger, irredentist pressure might emerge. Under this scenario, China would press new claims to those lands that had been ceded to other countries under the Qing as well as areas like Mongolia that drifted away from dynastic control. Although the boundary agreements reached by the PRC since 1949 dropped claims to the majority of Qing lands outside of China, they comprise roughly 3,400,000 square kilometers, or approximately one-third of China's current size (Fravel 2008a:43). As Map 3 suggests, the potential for expansion through pursuit of irredentism is clear.

Yet if the dominant Han identity provides any insight into contemporary Chinese nationalism, and if Chinese nationalism is characterized however crudely as ethnic in nature, then the benefits of expansion for irredentism remain limited. For many Chinese nationalists, past and present, the Qing was not considered to be a Han Chinese dynasty, as it was founded by the Manchus from the present-day northeast who had conquered the Han-led Ming dynasty.



Although China's current boundaries include territory conquered by the Qing, Qing areas currently beyond the PRC's borders are not Han regions, which limits the value of irredentist claims to territory part of past Chinese dynasties. With the important exception of Taiwan, all Han areas under Qing rule are all now located within the PRC's current boundaries.

Over time, it remains possible that the nature of China's nationalism might shift from an ethnic nationalism based on the Han identity to a civic nationalism based on the past achievements of Chinese civilization. This new identity would reinterpret China's history to emphasize the greatness of past dynasties, including those such as the Qing that were larger in size than the PRC today. An effort to regain such greatness might be cast in terms of pursuing irredentist claims to non-Han areas on China's periphery. More likely, however, irredentist claims to imperial lands would be pursued for the domestic benefit that might accrue to individual Chinese leaders, not to satisfy public opinion or regain the nation's standing in the international community. These benefits are discussed below.

#### *Diversion*

One way in which nationalism may interact with the parochial interests of domestic political actors would be to provide China's leaders with a rationale or justification for diversionary action. This source of expansion follows the conventional wisdom of "diversionary war," the theory that national leaders will initiate or escalate a dispute to distract or rally a restive and dissatisfied population (Levy 1989). In this case, the use of force in an outstanding territorial dispute or the initiation of new claims could provide China's leaders with an issue that can be tapped to mobilize society for diversionary goals.

The diversionary war argument is hard to assess because it seems so intuitive and is a phenomenon that might always occur. China appears prone to diversion, as the authoritarian state's legitimacy depends on economic development and broad but ill-defined appeals to nationalism. Amid the rise of popular nationalism and growing discontent with the social upheaval associated with reform, China has been described as "prone to muscle-flexing" in its foreign policy to deflect attention from social unrest (Shirk 2007:62).

Nevertheless, quantitative research shows no systematic relationship between past episodes of domestic unrest in China and involvement in militarized interstate disputes, whether over territory or other issues (Johnston 1998). Moreover, in the 1990s, actions that might be seen as diversionary, such as the public demonstrations following the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999 or the 2005 protests against Japan, have been reactive in nature (Brittingham 2007). China's leaders mobilized society in response to external challenges that questioned their domestic credibility as leaders, not in response to domestic discontent from which attention needed to be deflected. Indeed, although the sources of discontent are widespread and constant, large anti-foreign demonstrations have been rare and infrequent. Instead, China's leaders reflect a nuanced understanding of the potential pitfalls of mobilizing nationalism and the dangers of unleashing a genie of public opinion that may be impossible to contain (Downs and Saunders 1998/99).

#### *Log-rolling*

Another logic of expansion that links nationalism with domestic politics is log-rolling. According to this argument, expansion occurs through the process of forming political coalitions, especially in cartelized political systems where political power is concentrated in only a few groups, such as industrialists and the armed forces (Snyder 1991). As these actors trade favors with each other, they often justify their policies in terms of expansionist goals to maintain coalition unity, a dynamic that results in the pursuit of aggression abroad.

Although political power in China is concentrated within one actor, the CCP, it is unclear if the conditions for log-rolling hold. Within the CCP, power is diffused through different actors within the party, including the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and various organizations such as the propaganda department. Nevertheless, the party's internal system of controls to enforce discipline and consensus-based decision making suggest that log-rolling politics among bureaucratic actors is unlikely (Lieberthal 2004). National security decision making in particular remains tightly controlled by the most senior leaders of the party, individuals in positions to prevent the formation of coalitions that might appeal to nationalism and pursue expansion (Lewis and Xue 2006:77–172). Politburo members are primarily the heads of key departments within the party and the state as well as party secretaries of the most important provinces, such as Guangdong (for trade) and Xinjiang (for ethnic stability). Importantly, the industrial, financial, and trade interests that might log-roll for expansion are not represented on this body, while the military presence since 1998 has been limited to just 2 of roughly 25 seats (Miller 2008). Finally, although the PLA's modernization has focused on defending national interests, the organization remains a party-army and is not an independent actor within Chinese politics, much less one that can easily defy the party (Zheng 2005b). The weakening or collapse of the party through degeneration or democratization might create conditions in which log-rolling would occur, but today the system cannot be characterized as cartelized and prone to log-rolling.

### *Militarism*

The preference among militaries for offensive doctrines offers another potential logic of expansion. Commonly known as the “cult of the offensive,” the glorification of the offensive within professional militaries and the belief among civilian leaders that the offense confers important advantages have been used to explain the causes of World War I. According to this argument, militaries prefer offensive doctrines for several reasons, but primarily because they advance organizational interests by increasing autonomy, resources, and social status (Snyder 1984; Van Evera 1984).

China might be prone to the development of such a preference for several reasons. One of the core doctrinal principles within the PLA is Mao Zedong's concept of “active defense” (*jiji fangyu*), which is also sometimes described as “offensive defense” (*gongshi fangyu*). Even when fighting for defensive goals, the offensive is often necessary to achieve victory on the battlefield (Godwin 2003). Likewise, even though China's economy has grown rapidly, the PLA's desire to create a modern military capable of waging high-technology war creates sustained demand for budgetary increases. Moreover, some military officers believe that increased spending is required to compensate for China's decline in defense spending during the 1980s, when Deng Xiaoping emphasized the importance of concentrating resources on economic reforms (Huang and Zhang 2008).

At the same time, Chinese sources on military strategy provide little evidence for a dominant preference for the offensive. To be sure, like many modern militaries, China's military strategy discusses the role of both defensive and offensive operations to achieve strategic goals such as securing China's long border or protecting sea lines of communication near China's ports as well as the importance of seizing the initiative should conflict erupt. Nevertheless, these sources do not contain an overriding emphasis on the offensive that would reflect a cult of the offensive in China or a denigration of defensive operations.<sup>17</sup> Importantly, the discussion of preemptive or preventive operations is not advocated as a general principle of warfare but one limited to discrete roles in certain types of

<sup>17</sup>By contrast, Scobell (2003) argues that China is best characterized by a “cult of the defensive.”

campaigns (Wang 1999; Wang and Zhang 2000; Peng and Yao 2001; Xue 2002; Zhang 2006).

In addition, there is little evidence for such a preference in the one area where China might most easily use military power by employing its large army, namely in potential conflicts along its land border. Instead, doctrinal writings from China's leading defense academies such as the National Defense University or Academy of Military Science, as well as training manuals on border defense from the People's Armed Police, all demonstrate a clear acceptance of China's current boundaries and a high degree of respect for the boundary agreements that the central government has concluded since 1949 to settle territorial disputes with neighboring states (Cai 1996; Mao 1996; Feng 1999; Li 2004). Indeed, these writings in the past decade reflect a conservative and non-expansionist preference among the PLA (Li 1999, 2004). When describing the Qing dynasty, some of these works refer to the history of "lost" territory that was ceded to other states, but they do not argue for the recovery of these areas through either force or diplomacy. Instead, they emphasize securing China's current boundaries, including those where China compromised over the allocation of disputed territory in the 1960s and the 1990s (Mao 1996; Li 2004; Fravel 2007).

### **The Limited Means of Expansion**

Even if the benefits of expansion were larger and more certain or if China's leaders believed the benefits to be greater, China nevertheless possesses only a limited ability to capture them through force. Determining how much military power China will possess in the next two decades is, of course, tricky. Current acquisitions illuminate the broad trajectory of China's future force structure and its ability to conduct offensive campaigns key to territorial expansion. Overall, the means of expansion are limited, as the PLA is not investing heavily in power projection platforms that are necessary for controlling territory beyond China's borders (excluding Taiwan).<sup>18</sup>

#### *Continental Power*

On the East Asian continent, China possesses the means to conduct limited offensive strikes against its neighbors. The PLA is one of the largest standing armies in the world and continues to modernize its ground forces through the development of advanced platforms that increase troop mobility and fighting power, such as the Type 98/99 tank. Likewise, the PLA has focused its recent reforms on transforming infantry divisions into smaller and more mobile brigades as well as training rapid reaction units and airborne troops, for whom one mission would be power projection abroad (Blasko 2006).

In the short to medium term, however, China is unlikely to possess a military capable of seizing and holding the territory of its neighbors for several reasons. Even though the PLA is actively modernizing, it has yet to develop platforms and systems to sustain large numbers of troops at great distances from its borders for long periods of time. Key capabilities that the PLA lacks are strategic lift, aerial refueling, and logistics systems capable of supporting at least two group armies or roughly 80,000–100,000 troops (Fravel 2007). The Department of Defense concluded in a recent report, for example, that China will not be able to "project and sustain large forces in high-intensity combat operations far from China" until 2025 or even later (Office of the Secretary of Defense 2010:29). In the largest military exercise to date beyond China's borders, Peace Mission 2007 with Russia, only 1,600 Chinese troops participated (Wei 2007).

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<sup>18</sup>This section draws on Fravel (2008b).

Trends in acquisition of strategic lift platforms illuminate the limits of China's offensive capabilities. Although China ordered 34 Il-76 transport aircraft from Russia in 2005, production has yet to begin. Even if these aircraft are delivered eventually, bringing China's total heavy transports to almost 50, the PLA Air Force will still possess just a fraction of the strategic airlift capacity of other major militaries such as Russia, much less the United States, and be able to deploy only one or two fully equipped battalions of mechanized infantry units up to 2,000 km from its borders.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, although China possesses more than a dozen large landing ships that would be used in an amphibious assault across the Taiwan Strait, China's strategic sealift capability is likewise limited. The PLA Navy (PLAN) has commissioned two landing platform dock ships that can transport one battalion of marines and their vehicles. Although additional ships may be built in the coming years, the total number of troops and equipment that China would be able to transport remains limited, especially in the absence of sufficient surface ships with area-wide air defense systems to escort these troops.

Likewise, China's evolving joint operational doctrine outlines a defensive approach to border security that is consistent with limited offensive power. In the "border area counterattack campaign" (*bianjing diqu fanji zhanyi*), PLA doctrine still relies on defense-in-depth, as the maneuver units used to repel an attack are based hundreds of kilometers away from the border (Chen et al. 2003; Wang and Zhang 2000; Xue 2002). In addition, internal security remains a key mission for China's ground forces. Key maneuver units are not only based in the interior, but they are also located in and around large population centers and generally far from China's borders (Map 4) (Mao 1996; Li 2004). In short, China's deployment of its ground forces is inconsistent with a force posture keyed to conquest and the offensive.

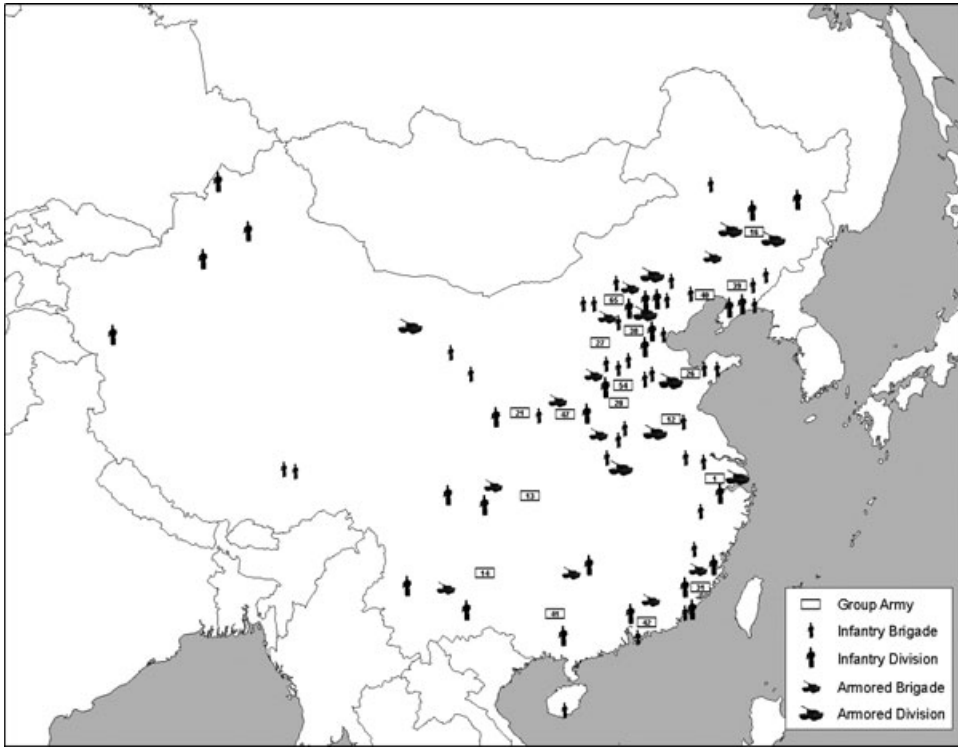
Finally, in the Russian Far East, one area where multiple benefits of expansion overlap, China is least able to project military power. Put simply, Russia possesses the most potent armed force of any country sharing a land border with China. In addition to its nuclear deterrent, Russian maintains roughly 90,000 troops in the Far East alone along with 270 advanced fighter aircraft (Ministry of Defense 2009:68–69). Even though the Russian Far East might tempt Chinese expansion, Beijing lacks the military means to capture the benefits that might exist.

#### *Maritime Power*

In maritime East Asia, China's ability to expand is much more complicated. To assert claims to disputed islands such as the Spratlys or to EEZs, the PLAN would need a sea control capability that would allow it to conduct naval operations without risk by minimizing the presence of other forces. Such control would need to extend roughly 1,000 km from the mainland into areas such as the South China Sea. Sea control is exceptionally difficult for any advanced navy, much less China's, which has only begun to modernize in the past decade. Although China is actively modernizing its navy, the emerging force structure is consistent with the pursuit of an area denial capability or the ability to disrupt and complicate the operations of other navies in waters near China (O'Rourke 2010).

Chinese military doctrine acknowledges these constraints on the projection of naval power. The 2006 edition of *Zhanyi Xue (The Science of Campaigns)*, a PLA textbook on military operations, contains a new type of naval campaign, described as "attacks against coral islands and reefs" (*dui shanhu daojiao jingong*

<sup>19</sup>China will possess only 14% and 6% of the heavy strategic airlift capacity that Russia and the United States possess, respectively. Calculations based on transport data in International Institute for Strategic Studies (2008).



MAP 4. The People's Liberation Army Ground Forces Order of Battle (c. 2005).

Source: Produced by the Author with GIS

*zhanyi*), a scenario that appears to be tailored for the South China Sea disputes where China might consider attacking islands and reefs held by other claimants (Zhang 2006:535–538). The discussion of the campaign, however, highlights the obstacles and challenges that China's navy would face, including the distance from the mainland and difficulties in command, air defense, and logistics support along with the harsh natural environment characterized by typhoons and subsurface obstacles. The prominence of the difficulties in the discussion of this maritime campaign is noteworthy.

China's ability to sustain significant annual increases in its defense expenditure presents an additional constraint on the development of capabilities to expand into neighboring countries. Although China has experienced three decades of rapid economic growth, it certainly cannot be taken for granted that such rates of growth will continue in the future. To date, these increases have been sustained by proportionally large increases in central government spending. Moreover, like many other industrialized nations, China's population is aging, which will have important consequences for China's ability to sustain high rates of growth and invest substantially in its armed forces at the expense of welfare spending and other domestic priorities (Haas 2007).

### Conclusion

International relations scholars disagree about a rising China's potential for involvement in armed conflict. Scholars who examine China's rise through the lens of either power transition theory or offensive realism often predict a violent future for China because of the benefits that it could seize through

force. By contrast, scholars who stress the effects of economic interdependence in the international system reach more optimistic conclusions by noting the high costs that China would pay for aggression in a globalized and interdependent world.

Looking beyond the Taiwan conflict, territorial conflict for China over the next two decades will not pay. This conclusion is reached through a detailed analysis of the potential benefits of territorial expansion and China's ability to capture these benefits through the use of force. Put simply, the benefits of expansion are limited, and China's ability to capture them is weak. When weighed against the high and certain costs of conflict that other scholars have identified, the likelihood of expansion is low.

Although China's rise is unlikely to witness increased conflict over territory other than Taiwan, several limits of the analysis should be noted. First, China may also use force for reasons unrelated to territorial control. As noted in the introduction, although territorial conflict has been the leading issue over which states have gone to war in the past, it is only one of several potential sources of conflict for rising powers. Other potential pathways of conflict deserve further research, such as the establishment of spheres of influence, considerations of status and prestige in the system, or competitive arms races. Nevertheless, future conflict for one important reason, control over territory, is unlikely.

Second, the assumption of rationality used in the informal expected utility approach might not completely or accurately capture how China's leaders view the potential benefits of expansion or assess China's military capabilities. Psychological or perceptual factors may lead Chinese elites to see greater benefits in expansion than contained in this article. Nevertheless, the expected utility approach provides a useful baseline for examining when these other factors may become more prominent in Chinese decision making in the future. The examination of Chinese perspectives on future territorial conflict offers another fruitful avenue for future research.

Two areas where multiple benefits of expansion overlap will nevertheless be important to watch in the future. The first is the Russian Far East, a sparsely populated area once part of the Qing where China could mobilize domestic support to release lateral or population pressure. If the need for arable land or living space increases, and Russian military power declines, then the benefits of expansion would grow. The second area where multiple benefits overlap is in maritime East Asia. In the South China Sea and East China Sea, territorial disputes over contested islands and maritime delimitation claims partially overlap with a perception of large deposits of oil and natural gas. Moreover, these waters are seen in China as "historic" and traditionally Chinese. Here, however, China is likely to enhance its maritime area denial capabilities, not seize disputed islands held by other states. China's naval presence in these waters will no doubt increase, but China will be unable to control the access of other navies.

The limited utility of expansion also carries important implications for the study of international relations. China's rise today provides a critical case for theories such as power transition theory and offensive realism that predict the onset and severity of great power conflict. This article demonstrates, however, that the value of a key variable creating incentives for conflict in these theories, the benefits to be gained through aggression, is much lower in the case of conflict over territory than their application to China suggests. This finding increases confidence in the predictions of those scholars who stress the effects of economic interdependence on state behavior. At the same time, this conclusion is reached not by examining just the costs of aggression, but also by probing the likely benefits. China may eschew territorial expansion over the coming decades, but one important reason is that it will not pay for China to do so in the first place.

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