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## Comparing Hu Jintao's and Xi Jinping's Attitudes Towards Territorial Sovereignty: China's Land Border Disputes with India and its Maritime Border Disputes in the South China Sea

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**Comparing Hu Jintao's and Xi Jinping's Attitudes Towards  
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Border Disputes in the South China Sea**

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## **Index**

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>p. 3</b>
<b>Literature review</b>	<b>p. 4</b>
<b>Theory and Methodology:</b>	<b>p. 9</b>
<b>Case study 1: South China Sea:</b>	<b>p. 13</b>
<b>Case study 2: China-India border disputes</b>	<b>p. 22</b>
<b>Explaining the changes in China's attitude towards territorial sovereignty</b>	<b>p. 29</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>p. 31</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>p. 33</b>

## Introduction

The year 2020 has been a turbulent one for China's foreign policy. As the country got out of the worst of its COVID-19 woes, some have observed that the country suddenly seemed to be handling territorial disputes more aggressively than before (Campbell and Rapp-Hooper, 2020). An example of this was the deadly confrontation in the disputed region of Kashmir between Indian and Chinese soldiers that killed twenty Indian soldiers and at least four Chinese soldiers. It was the first time in 45 years that a clash between the two countries in this area resulted in casualties (Biswas, 2020). Thousands of miles away, China stepped up the pressure on the countries involved in the South China Sea dispute during the pandemic, for example by harassment of Malaysian exploration vessels within Malaysia's internationally recognized Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) (Manning and Cronin, 2020).

Some foreign policy experts argue that these developments are typical examples of President Xi's leadership style, which they consider to be a lot more assertive than that of his predecessors (Li, 2020). Others disagree, believing Xi's policies are actually not so radically different and are mostly a continuation of the policies of his predecessor, President Hu, and part of Beijing's grand strategy. The rise of China undoubtedly has a significant impact on the balance of power in the world, but this will be particularly true if President Xi's geo-political behaviour is indeed (a lot) more assertive than that of his predecessors.

These differing interpretations of change or continuity in China's leadership imply different kinds of policy advice for governments wishing to develop a coherent strategy to interact with Beijing and counter its rise. Tim Rühligh believes that China does not have an incentive to behave too aggressively because the country has become so highly integrated into the international economic system and therefore does not want to risk the international economic repercussions of such a stance. He therefore advises the European Union to simply use its leverage as the world's largest economic bloc to create a more predictable dialogue with the Chinese government (Rühligh, 2018). On the other side of the spectrum, Michael Schuman believes that President Xi is currently "the world's most dangerous man" who has broken with longstanding Chinese foreign policy principles. Schuman fears the EU is not sufficiently aware of the threat China poses to its security, its economic interests and its core values, and he urges the Europeans to quickly take a decisive stand against Xi (Schuman, 2020).

This thesis will add to this academic debate by analysing some prominent territorial disputes Beijing has been involved in: the conflict with various smaller countries - Malaysia, Vietnam, Indonesia and the Philippines - over control of the South China Sea, and the conflicts with India over the Aksai Chin region and the Arunachal Pradesh region. I will introduce a new angle to the debate, by analysing the foreign policies of President Xi and of former President Hu and by comparing their respective attitudes towards territorial sovereignty in the case of said conflicts. The research puzzle this thesis will try to solve is: to what extent has the Chinese government's attitude towards territorial sovereignty changed during Xi Jinping's presidency, compared to Hu Jintao's presidency? The developments in these conflicts that have occurred from 2005 to 2012 during Hu's presidency, and from 2013 to 2020 during Xi's presidency will be analysed. For me to be able to say something meaningful about a government's "attitude" towards territorial sovereignty, I will base the relevant aspects of my research on a framework created by Allen Carlson as a means to conceptualize territorial sovereignty (Carlson, 2003). This method shall be discussed in more depth below. This thesis will argue that the extent of the change to China's attitude towards territorial sovereignty under Xi varies between the case studies. In the South China Sea dispute, China's stance has not changed much, as it is clear that Xi's policies are simply a bolder continuation of Hu's already aggressive policies. However, in the Sino-Indian border dispute, a bigger change can be seen as China's stance changed from a relatively cooperative attitude characterized by conflict management under Hu, to a much more confrontational and uncompromising stance under Xi.

## **Literature review**

### **Historical background to China's territorial sovereignty and foreign policy**

In the past, China believed that its civilization was the centre of the world. This unavoidably changed from the mid-1800s with the onset of a period of civil war, military defeat, semi-colonization and internal turmoil, in China referred to as the "century of humiliation".

According to the CCP's narrative these troubling times came to an end through the War of Liberation (1946-49, the Chinese Communist Revolution) that resulted in the proclamation of the People's Republic of China on 1 October 1949. CCP Chairman Mao Zedong successfully entrenched the Party's position in the whole of the country (with the exception of Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macao) and even though he did later allow for some relaxation of the party's

grip on the country and its population, it was Deng Xiaoping who carefully opened up China, both to the world and internally. Prosperity grew significantly during his rule from 1978 to 1989 (Rühlig, 2018).

One of Deng's most influential policies was the "hide capabilities and bide time" guideline, in China known as Tao Guang Yang Hui (韬光养晦). Beijing had always regarded the United States as posing the greatest threat to the CCP's rule. Deng favoured a non-assertive foreign policy to reduce the risk of a military conflict with the United States, to diminish the odds of neighbouring countries 'ganging up' against China, and to create maximum space for China to develop. In 1996, China's approach became more proactive under the concept of a "peaceful rise", as it tried to convince other states that China would not be a threat to them even if it grew stronger and became more prosperous. Nowadays, some argue that President Xi Jinping has taken it upon himself to finalize China's journey towards "national rejuvenation" and regain the nation's status as a great power (Goldstein, 2020, 165). Opinions vary though on how drastic his impact has been on China's foreign policy. There are two schools in this respect.

### **"China's foreign policy has become more aggressive due to Xi"**

Some academics have argued that since Xi Jinping's rise to power Beijing's foreign policy has become significantly more aggressive and attribute this change to his leadership. In an article for Foreign Affairs, Campbell and Rapp-Hooper have for example argued that China's more assertive and, in some instances, even violent confrontations in 2020 were a direct result of President Xi's views on China's role in the world. They explain that a state's (diplomatic and military) foreign strategy is influenced by various factors such as a country's relative global power, regime type, culture, history and geography. When one or more factors (appear to) have changed, a government may adjust its foreign policy accordingly. They argue that since COVID-19 has started its spread across the globe, President Xi has seemed utilize the moment "to defy many of his country's long-held foreign policy principles all at once" (Campbell and Rapp-Hooper, 2020).

Examples of what Campbell and Rapp-Hooper call an "unprecedented diplomatic offensive on virtually every foreign policy front" are Beijing's increasing influence in and pressure on Hong Kong, the PLA's deadly confrontation with Indian soldiers in Kashmir, the continuous

tensions in the South China Sea and the more frequent and outspoken criticism levelled against Western liberal democracies (Campbell and Rapp-Hooper, 2020).

They also argue that the most influential changes are occurring within the Chinese government's own policy making bodies. While in the past unexpected obstacles in the domain of foreign policy were overcome by Chinese government officials working together (a thought-process that was relatively easy to follow for outsiders), it is said that President Xi has increasingly come to make most of the important decisions himself without too much consultation with his advisers. This means that China's foreign policy may have become bolder because fewer people are in a position to try and change Xi's mind (Jakobson and Manuel, 2016). Campbell and Rapp-Hooper emphasize that this in itself is a big change from previous Chinese leadership, as Xi's predecessors believed in more collective leadership processes. (Campbell and Rapp-Hooper, 2020)

In this school of thought, therefore, Xi is directly responsible for China's foreign policy having become more aggressive. "The current lack of U.S. leadership matters, no doubt, but so do Xi's consolidation of power and his belief that China's geopolitical moment has arrived. These are the true forces pushing Beijing toward action. The United States' withdrawal from the world is merely giving China the space it needs to follow through." (Campbell and Rapp-Hooper, 2020).

Also Michael Schuman argues that Xi's new leadership has become a turning point for Chinese foreign policy. He argues that under Xi, "China veered dramatically from the core principles that governed the country's political, economic and foreign policies for decades, taking it in a startling new direction". Xi made these changes in order to turn his country into a superpower that can use its influence to manipulate the world stage to its liking. Schuman also notes that Xi has for a large part gotten rid of political competitors and has "crafted a one-man personality cult unseen since the days of Mao Zedong's 'Little Red Book'". He has ridded the Chinese constitution of term limits for his presidency and could therefore rule the country for the rest of his life (Schuman, 2020).

When it comes to foreign policy, Xi has been trying to boost authoritarianism around the world. Examples of this are China's clear efforts to pressure foreign companies, academics and journalists into censoring criticism of China, and its backing of undemocratic and illiberal

governments like those of Venezuela, Iran, Belarus and Hungary. Furthermore, Schuman argues that by imposing the new security law in Hong Kong, which violated Beijing's agreement with the British government, Xi has proven to be unafraid of international condemnation when it comes to fighting against Western democratic values (Schuman, 2020).

### **“China’s foreign policy under Xi is a continuation of Hu’s policies”**

Others argue that it is a misconception that Xi has personally had a decisive influence on China's foreign policy, and that this has resulted in a radically more aggressive stance. Rush Doshi acknowledges that President Xi has barely ever mentioned Deng's “hide capabilities and bide time” strategy and when he does, he rather advocates for China to “step out from Tao Guang Yang Hui”. Nevertheless, he argues this should still be regarded as a continuation of the past as it was actually former president Hu Jintao who first started to move away from this strategy. Doshi points out that Tao Guang Yang Hui was never considered to be a permanent policy by China's leaders: former leaders Deng, Jiang and Hu have all stated that the guideline was dependent on the “international balance of power”. If the balance would change, also the need for this non-assertive strategy could come to an end. This change eventually occurred in 2008, when the global financial crisis shifted the international balance of power and prompted China to change its grand strategy (Doshi, 2019).

The 2000s are considered a key moment of China's shifting policy in this school of thought, which laid the foundation of China's foreign policy under Xi. According to Dan Blumenthal, Hu was the one responsible for the big adjustments to the Communist Party's foreign policy - and internal workings - in the 2000s. While one big milestone was China's accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001, Hu also gave in to the severe pressure from domestic groups who ideologically opposed the policies of opening up and reforming China's economy. As a result, fundamental legal and economic reforms were rolled back, for example through a new policy that created and supported national champions instead of one that stimulated economic entrepreneurship. This foundation enabled Xi to start his rapid military modernization program and his aggressive international diplomacy (Blumenthal, 2020).

Even flagship projects and initiatives attributed to Xi can be traced to the 2000s, and leadership under Hu Jintao or Jiang Zemin. For instance, Xi's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), were founded on projects launched in the 2000s, when Hu encouraged state-owned businesses to “go out”. In fact, numerous flagship BRI projects were in fact built or started in the 2000s,



under the Great Western Development Strategy (Arduino 2017; Clarke 2017); one scholar reminds us that it was Hu who evoked the possibility of reviving the ancient Silk Road (Ferdinand 2016, 949).

Finally, China's enhanced military interest and presence in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean can also be traced back to the Hu era. With his "New Historic Missions", the PLA under Hu was used to defend China's commercial interests abroad, which also launched the pursuit of Beijing's maritime claims more aggressively. According to Blumenthal (2020), Hu involved the PLA in several international task forces to create a network of logistical hubs in the Middle East and Africa and to boost his country's power projection capabilities. China's BRI can be understood as an "updated version of the 'string of pearls' strategy", launched under Hu, which constituted an endeavour to establish naval facilities and port access all over the Indian Ocean as a means to defend China's energy supplies. Even an anti-secession law was passed in the Hu government which strengthened China's legal basis to go to war against Taiwan (Blumenthal, 2020).

Hu was also the one who strengthened the focus on the South China Sea, as he figured that controlling this region was the most effective strategy to counter US influence. As a result, non-Chinese oil companies were continually harassed by Chinese military vessels as Beijing started to treat the South China Sea as if it were its own national waters. According to Blumenthal, most of these developments were overlooked abroad as many countries were distracted by China's continued economic successes and its charm offensive. On all counts, Xi's current policies are very much in line with the goals Hu had been pursuing before him according to this school of thought (Blumenthal, 2020).

## Theory and Methodology

As demonstrated above, while there is a consensus that Xi's foreign policy has been rather assertive, there is a disagreement among academics over whether Xi's foreign policy really differs that much from his predecessor's. Therefore, this thesis will conduct research to try and answer the question: "To what extent has the Chinese government's attitude towards territorial sovereignty changed during Xi Jinping's presidency, compared to Hu Jintao's presidency?"

I will use the structured focused comparison method by George and Bennett that applies the same variables to two or more case studies so that they can be properly compared and assessed (George and Bennett, 2004). While China currently has various territorial disputes with several countries, this thesis will zoom in on and conduct a comparative case study of China's border disputes with India, and its dispute with several countries over the South China Sea. From the many countries involved in the South China Sea dispute, this research will focus on the Philippines. I chose these cases because I expected that research into both a maritime and a land border will result in the most comprehensive understanding of China's general approach to territorial sovereignty (Carlson, 2003). Furthermore, compared to Vietnam which has both a continental and a maritime border dispute with China, the two case studies that are the focus of this thesis do not overlap. While India definitely has economic stakes in the SCS, it is not a claimant of territory in the region. Finally, both border disputes have been ongoing for several decades, but there have also been significant new developments in recent years that are likely to increase the relevance of this comparative study.

Territorial sovereignty can be succinctly defined as "a state's right to maintain its territorial integrity" (Joseph, 1999, 49). In order to be able to properly determine what a president's "attitude towards territorial sovereignty" is, Allen Carlson created a framework for research on this topic which will be explained in more depth below. Carlson argues that this framework is important because "conceptualizing territorial sovereignty, and variation in the state practices that construct its boundaries, along these lines creates the analytical space to identify broad patterns of change and continuity within the border relations between states" (Carlson, 2003, 681). Therefore, this framework will be a most helpful research tool for this thesis.

While Carlson used his framework to analyse different decades in China's history, it is also relevant for this thesis which compares the presidents Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping. As President Hu has been in office for longer than President Xi so far has been, this thesis will focus on the final seven years of Hu's presidency and on president Xi's first seven years in office, in order to get a clearer picture of what both presidents have achieved within the same time span. This thesis will attempt to get a better understanding of continuity and change in China's attitude towards territorial sovereignty since President Xi took over.

According to Carlson, there are three representational and diplomatic tools or practices that can be used by Beijing foreign policy elites in order to maintain or construct China's sovereign boundaries. For this thesis I will organize my research by looking into each of those variables that were mentioned in Carlson's paper in the case studies (if applicable). These variables are specified below (Carlson, 2003, 680-681):

### **1. "Issuing of official boundary claims"**

Official statements are made in an effort to popularize a specific perception of the territorial borders of a certain state. In this section the research will also look at whether the Chinese government has announced how they believe the border issue should be handled and how the government responded in the event of a (perceived) infringement of China's territory (Carlson, 2003).

### **2. "Analysis of sovereign boundaries by foreign policy elites"**

While this indicator holds less power than official territorial claims, foreign policy elites are also able to speak more freely as they do not necessarily have to follow all the protocols involved in official discourse. Therefore, it exposes how much variety of interpretations is present with regard to sovereign boundaries within the official position of an individual state. The term "Foreign policy elites" in this case refers to senior members of the Chinese government (that are not the head of state) and prominent Chinese academics linked to the Chinese government (Carlson, 2003, 681). This thesis will focus on statements made by senior members of the Chinese government.

### **3. "Signing, enactment, and observation of international legal agreements"**

States formally establish territorial sovereignty by making these commitments. When one would compare a state's formal position in international legal agreements to the previously

mentioned territorial practices in variables 1 and 2, it is also possible establish to what extent the territorial ambitions of a state have been accomplished or denied (Carlson, 2003). This research will take into account elements such as whether the Chinese government has signed any new international agreements concerning the disputed territory, whether the Chinese government infringed upon existing international legal agreements concerning the disputed region and whether these treaties and/or agreements seem to be compatible with the boundary claims Chinese government officials have made previously.

These three territorial tools can of course be applied to specific contested territorial points or a border region that is shared with one or more sovereign neighbouring states. However, they can also be used in a more general fashion (Carlson, 2003). This thesis will specifically look into China's contested territorial claims on its shared border with India (the Aksai Chin and Arunachal Pradesh regions), and Beijing's territorial claims in the South China Sea with a specific focus on the Philippines.

The content of the various territorial efforts (tools and practices) will then be analysed through three different lenses:

1. Does the practice accept a reduction of the state's own territory, endorse the status quo or promote the expansion of its sovereign borders?
2. To what degree can the state's approach to border relations be considered cooperative or confrontational?
3. How does the practice interpret the definition of sovereign boundaries? An interpretation can either see boundaries as unyielding and absolute (a boundary reinforcing practice), or borders can be interpreted in a more ambiguous, flexible and open manner (boundary transgressing practices). Examples of the latter can be "less emphasis on the sanctity of territorial divisions" and the allowance of "relatively unrestricted economic and political flows in border regions" (Carlson, 2003, 681).

This thesis will first look into the case of China's maritime dispute in the South China Sea, with a specific focus on Beijing's relationship with the Philippines. After identifying all the relevant developments over the years, the actions of both presidents will be assessed according to the variables above, and the results accomplished by the two presidents will then be compared to one another in order to get an understanding of what the differences and similarities between them are. Subsequently, the same method will be used for the Sino-

Indian border dispute.

After analysing and drawing conclusions from the previously mentioned dependent variables, this thesis will look at factors that have influenced potential changes in the Chinese government's stance on territorial sovereignty in order to get a more complete understanding of other factors at play.

## Sources

This research will be conducted primarily by using qualitative data. Furthermore, primary sources such as official press statements, legal treaties, articles from international newspapers such as the *New York Times* and the *Guardian*, as well as articles from Chinese state-owned news channels such as *The China Daily*, and translated articles from *People's Daily* and *Xinhua News Agency* will be analysed in order to get a good impression of the attitudes of Presidents Hu and Xi respectively towards the two territorial disputes (Phillips, 2016), and to get a good overview of all the relevant developments over the years. Furthermore, secondary sources such as academic articles from international journals and think tanks will be used in order to get a deeper understanding of what might have influenced Beijing's (changes in) attitude towards territorial sovereignty.

## **Case study 1: South China Sea dispute**

### **Historical background**

Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century – if not longer – there has been competition among nations with regard to sovereignty over the South China Sea, with certain areas, such as the Spratly Islands and the Paracel Islands, being particular flashpoints. This maritime region is rich in fishing grounds and other natural resources, so it should not come as a surprise that China, Malaysia, Taiwan, the Philippines, Vietnam and Brunei have all been competing to get their share. China has claimed sovereignty over the vast majority of the sea area, including its estimated “11 billion barrels of untapped oil and 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas”, antagonizing the other competing countries in the region (Council on Foreign Relations, 2021). The decades-old dispute has flared up before, but has become more acute in recent years (Ibid.).

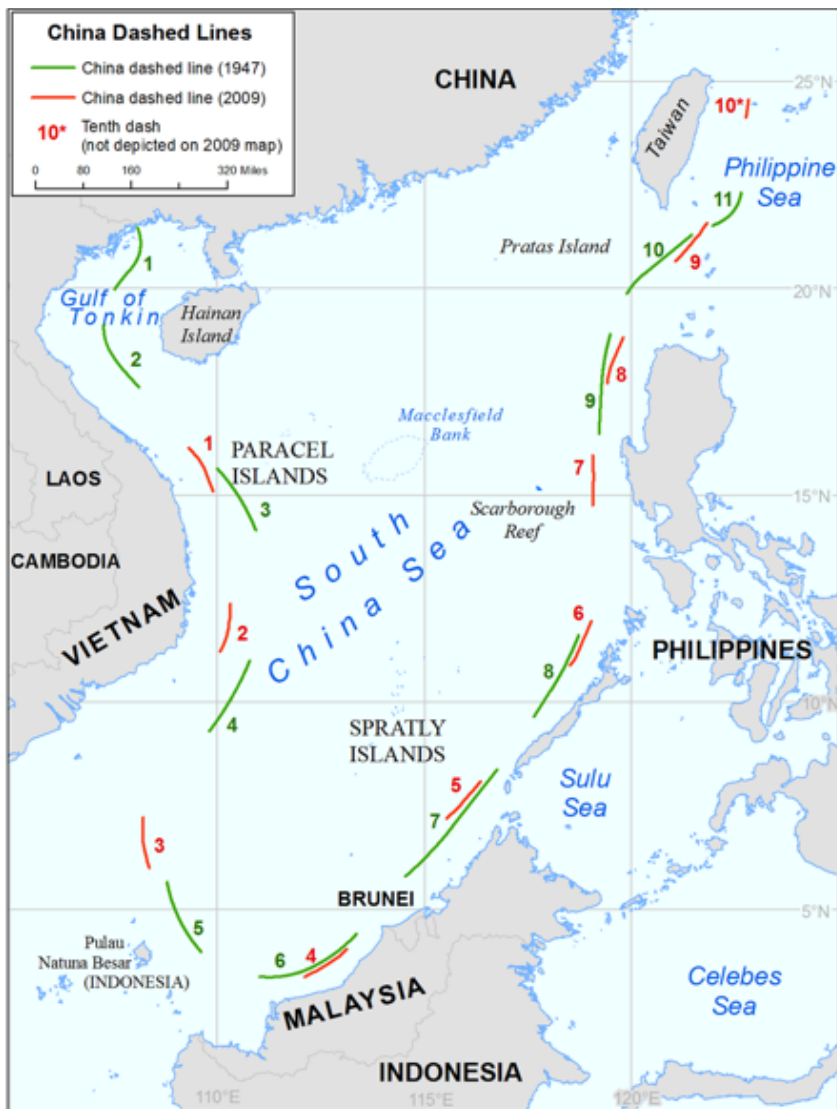
Other countries that are not claimants in the South China Sea dispute are also involved. Japan has sold military equipment and ships to Vietnam and the Philippines as a means to strengthen their maritime security capabilities to deter Chinese encroachment. Also the US is an actor in this conflict. In an attempt to protect its regional economic, security and political interests, the US government has provided aid in an attempt to strengthen its Southeast Asian allies. China is of the opinion that under international law most of the South China Sea is off-limits for foreign military forces as Beijing considers it part of its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). This is of concern to other naval powers, especially the United States, as they wish to defend what they see as their right to freedom of movement for naval forces as well as to gather intelligence; the Chinese position also constitutes a threat to trade and commercial freedom of navigation (Council on Foreign Relations, 2021).

### **Developments during Hu Jintao’s presidency from 2005 to 2012**

In the early years of his presidency, Hu Jintao seemed to follow the “hide capabilities and bide time” strategy, as he started emphasizing that China was in favour of a “harmonious world”, a term found in official documents throughout his presidency. Consequently, Hu initially attempted to minimize the number of confrontations in the South China Sea. During these years he generally succeeded in this approach: while China still officially claimed the greatest part of the South China Sea, it did not much about it in order to nurture a more peaceful reputation in the region (Gonçalves de Oliveira, 2021).

However, from 2005 onwards more incidents occurred, especially involving Vietnamese fishing boats (Chubb, 2019): it has been reported that China stopped 63 fishing boats and arrested more than 725 Vietnamese fishermen between 2005 and 2010 (Ross, 2020). This more assertive attitude became even more pronounced after the financial crisis hit the world in 2008, arguably as China grew more confident as a result of its continued economic growth (Gonçalves de Oliveira, 2021).

In 2009, the Chinese government provided the UN Secretary General with two Notes Verbales with the request to send the notes to all Member States. They stated that “China has indisputable sovereignty over the islands in the South China Sea and the adjacent waters, and enjoys sovereign rights and jurisdiction over the relevant waters as well as the seabed and subsoil thereof (see attached map). The above position is consistently held by the Chinese government, and is widely known by the international community” (Baumert and Melchior, 2014, 4). The map referred to was a map of the South China Sea marked with a nine-dash line that covered most of the area. The Philippines, Vietnam and Indonesia all rejected the claims made in the Notes, arguing that the map had no legal basis under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) (Baumert and Melchior, 2014, 4).



Comparison of China's Dashed Line maps in 2009 and 1947. *Source: Kevin Baumert and Brian Melchior (2014), 6.*

In 2011, another Chinese Note Verbale was circulated among all Member States that mostly repeated what was said in the previous ones, but this time also underlined that “China’s sovereignty and related rights and jurisdiction in the South China Sea are supported by abundant historical and legal evidence” (Baumert and Melchior, 2014, 1). It should be noted that during Hu’s presidency China never specified the evidence in question (Ibid.). Generally the Chinese claims are known to be mostly based on historical maps that pre-date today’s People’s Republic of China. They include a 1947 “Map of the South China Sea” which featured 11 dashes, which was in turn based on a 1935 map. While the map distributed to the UN Member States had 9 dashes, most contemporary maps in the PRC have had ten dashes since the 1980s (Baumert and Melchior, 2014, 4). A comparison of the different maps can be seen in the figure above (Baumert and Melchior, 2014, 6).



Under Hu a new strategy was developed, paying more attention to the South China Sea, as he regarded this region as the “soft underbelly” of China that was being exploited by the US. Therefore, he instructed Beijing’s diplomats and military to defend Chinese interests in the region more aggressively. Chinese ships of various categories started harassing foreign oil companies on exploration missions in these seas and the companies were sent formal warnings by Beijing to stop their activities in the region even when they were operating in international waters. China expanded its administrative control over contested islands, reefs and waters, and Malaysia, Vietnam and the Philippines were put under diplomatic pressure to stop their oil exploration and fishing activities. In other words, China started to behave in the South China Sea as if it were officially part of its territorial waters, and to treat other countries’ exploits in them as a violation of Beijing’s territorial sovereignty (Blumenthal, 2020).

Hu also initiated the now common deployment of a navy task force that passes through the whole of the South China Sea and conducts military exercises, to showcase its freedom of movement and action in these waters. Some of these vessels – when not taking part in exercises – were stationed in the proximity of various disputed reefs, and oil exploration ships in the EEZs of Vietnam and the Philippines were harassed by Chinese civilian ships (Chubb, 2019).

Nevertheless, in July 2011 China and ASEAN member states unexpectedly passed the *Guidelines for the Implementation of the Declaration on Conduct of Parties*. These were guidelines for the 2002 Declaration on Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC), on the implementation of which until 2011 no progress had been made. It is plausible that China wanted to cooperate more closely with countries in the region in order to prevent a US intervention in the dispute (Panter, 2021). The DOC had the goal of building trust between the signatories and covers topics including safety of navigation and communication at sea, search and rescue operations, marine scientific research and fighting transnational crime. However, it provides no answers on how to solve disputes concerning the right to exploit the natural resources in the SCS (ASEAN, 2012).

In the following months, it remained relatively peaceful, but near the end of Hu’s term, Beijing’s relations with Manila started to deteriorate significantly in April 2012 when Chinese

ships started to exploit the waters surrounding the Scarborough Shoal, part of the Spratlys and near the Philippines. The Philippines regarded these actions as illegal and tried to expel the ships from the area, but Beijing retaliated by increasing military pressure, boycotting exports, introducing a fishing ban and harassing Filipino ships (Branigan and Watts, 2012). In the final months of Hu's presidency, Beijing was in control of the Scarborough Shoal, started militarizing small islands in the SCS, set up regular naval patrols in the region and bolstered the administrative district of Sansha in order to more effectively control the islands and waters Beijing had claimed (Blumenthal, 2020)

*The China Daily* reported about this incident and blamed the Philippines for it, while calling for further militarization of the area: "Although the bilateral agreement to resolve the issue diplomatically makes war unlikely, the Philippines continues to escalate tensions. For instance, the Philippines has declared that it will unilaterally bring the dispute to the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea, and it has confirmed its plans to open an elementary school on Zhongye Island, which belongs to China's Nansha Islands in the South China Sea (...) China should send construction teams and equipment to the island and speed up the building of shelters for fishermen, lighthouses and military outposts. Once these are established, military units can be stationed on the island to further safeguard the country's sovereignty and maritime interests in the area" (Li Jinming, 2012).

### **Developments during Xi Jinping's presidency from 2013 to 2020**

Under Xi, the number of territories in the South China Sea under Beijing's control did not change. Nevertheless, Xi quite literally built upon these claims from 2013 onwards by artificially turning reefs in the Spratlys and in the Paracels, some of which are only visible at low tide, into proper islands. In total, approximately 10 km<sup>2</sup> of land has been created on which China started to build harbours, airports and communications and surveillance facilities. It also deployed thousands of PLA troops to these new bases (Li, 2020). In 2020, Xi took the step of creating the new Xisha and Nansha districts to govern these new islands in the South China Sea as a way of entrenching administrative control over them. He also gave "standard names" to all the claimed rock formations in the region (including underwater ridges) to strengthen China's claims on them (Li, 2020).

In 2013, the Philippines turned to the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague as they

believed that China was acting contrary to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, with Manila specifically taking exception to China's aggressive attempts to expand its position of power in the South China Sea. In the days before the verdict was reached, China's foreign minister attempted to discourage the US from backing a potential ruling in favour of the Philippines by calling John Kerry, the US Secretary of State, and warning him not to engage in any activities that could violate China's sovereignty. Furthermore, in an apparent move to back its threats, China also deployed heavy military equipment in several military drills.<sup>1</sup>

On 12 July 2016, the international court in The Hague unequivocally ruled in favour of the Philippines, the verdict being that China did not have the right to claim the greater part of the South China Sea. China's historical basis for these claims, the nine-dash line, was ruled not to be legitimate. The tribunal also ruled that Beijing had no right to apply its EEZ of 200 sea miles around the small coral islands that it had artificially enlarged. Furthermore, the Court concluded that China had directly infringed upon the sovereign rights of the Philippines by building new artificial islands and by harassing petroleum exploration and fishing vessels in the EEZ of the Philippines. While this case was brought forward by the Philippines, it was closely followed in Malaysia, Vietnam, Taiwan, Japan and Brunei, where the clear verdict was hailed as a harsh blow to China's nine-dash-line theory: the court had confirmed that large parts of the South China Sea were in fact international waters.<sup>2</sup> Prior to the ruling, Beijing had already declared that it did not recognize the jurisdiction of the tribunal and would ignore its verdict. Still, the fact that the Permanent Arbitration Committee does not possess the means to enforce it, does not make the verdict less legally binding.<sup>3</sup>

After the verdict, newspapers controlled by the CCP warned that it made military escalation more likely, as they argued it was nothing more than a US-instigated manoeuvre to check China's rise (Phillips, 2016). In the People's Daily, the official mouthpiece of the CCP, Beijing stated "We do not claim an inch of land that does not belong to us, but we won't give up any patch that is ours... China, of course, will not accept such downright political provocations" (Phillips, 2016). Tabloid *The Global Times*, also affiliated with the Chinese government and known for its nationalist and inflammatory articles, stated that Chinese

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2016/jul/12/south-china-sea-dispute-what-you-need-to-know-about-the-hague-court-ruling>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2016/jul/12/south-china-sea-dispute-what-you-need-to-know-about-the-hague-court-ruling>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2016/07/12/hof-china-heeft-geen-historisch-recht-op-zuid-chinese-zee-a1510961>

citizens would “firmly support our government to launch a tit-for-tat counterpunch”.

After the verdict, newspapers controlled by the CCP warned that it made military escalation more likely, as they argued it was nothing more than a US-instigated manoeuvre to check China’s rise (Phillips, 2016). In the People’s Daily, the official mouthpiece of the CCP, Beijing stated “We do not claim an inch of land that does not belong to us, but we won’t give up any patch that is ours. (...) China, of course, will not accept such downright political provocations” (Phillips, 2016). Tabloid *The Global Times*, also affiliated with the Chinese government and known for its nationalist and inflammatory articles, stated that Chinese citizens would “firmly support our government to launch a tit-for-tat counterpunch”.

In 2016 the openly anti-American Rodrigo Duterte became president of the Philippines, providing an opportunity for China to improve relations with that country. Xi has been somewhat successful at intensifying bilateral relations, with the additional goal of pushing it away from the US, its historical ally. In the following years, China vowed to include the Philippines in its Belt and Road Initiative through investments (Grossmand, 2020) and in a meeting between the two heads of state in 2018 Xi had emphasized that he wanted the two countries to “continue to properly address the South China Sea issue and explore cooperation in joint exploitation and development at an appropriate time, making the South China Sea a sea of cooperation and friendship” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2018). However, the sovereignty issue remains a stumbling block, like when the two countries appeared unable to reach an agreement over which country’s legislation would govern these explorations, as they both claimed the Reed Bank. The future of the bilateral cooperation therefore is unclear (Robles, 2020).

## **Analysis South China Sea: Xi’s attitude towards territorial sovereignty is a bolder continuation of Hu’s assertive policies**

### **“The issuing of official boundary claims”**

Under Presidents Hu and Xi there was no difference in the boundary claims they made in the South China Sea. They both held the view that most of the SCS is part of China’s territory and based themselves on the same historical maps of the region. These territories include all of the Paracel Islands, the Spratlys, the Pratas and Macclesfield Bank. Both presidents have

also claimed all the natural resources like gas, oil and fish within the nine-dash line (Li, 2020).

While Hu put China's nine-dash-line map on the agenda of the UN, Xi continued to defend this claim, even after the Hague tribunal ruled that the claim had no valid legal basis. The exact coordinates of this dashed line area are even unclear and the 2009 map is not fully consistent with previous versions. The 1947 version has longer dashes which are further away from the coast lines of neighbouring countries. Even more recent maps have varying locations and sizes of the dashes (Baumert and Melchior, 2014, 5). Both presidents supported the – disproved – notion that China's EEZ applies to the sea area surrounding the small islands and reefs they claimed – sometimes even built – in the SCS, and their governments publicly called upon neighbouring countries to withdraw their ships from territories claimed by China and stop exploiting the area, for fish and for other resources. There have been numerous instances in which foreign boats were seized by the Chinese coast guard and foreign fishermen detained during Hu's and Xi's respective terms, both opting for a confrontational approach.

Both presidents have thus shown themselves publicly and assertively in favour of expanding China's sovereign borders. The extension of administrative control over the islands also took place during both presidencies. A notable difference in the approach taken by Hu and Xi respectively, is the physical expansion undertaken by Xi, who ordered the construction of artificial islands in the SCS and the establishment of military bases, ports and airports on them.

#### **“Analysis of sovereign boundaries by foreign policy elites”**

The views of foreign policy elites with regards to the maritime boundary did not change significantly during Xi's presidency either. Throughout the years, many analysts in China have expressed their belief that it is actually the US who is aggressive towards Beijing in the region, and that therefore China has the right to defend itself by militarizing the region. Also the nine-dash map claim has been generally supported by foreign policy elites over the years. Under Hu, the PLA leadership was also already in favour of building artificial islands in the SCS, however Hu never approved their plans (Li, 2020).

### **“Signing, enactment, and observation of international legal agreements”.**

Hu and Xi had a quite similar approach towards the international legal agreements. Both presidents have worked together with ASEAN to make preparations for implementing the DOC and Xi has also worked on the still unfinished Code of Conduct in the South China Sea (Panda, 2020). Publicly, they have been calling for peaceful interactions in the South China Sea, even though this rhetoric is not reflected in practice.

Xi and Hu have both infringed upon the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. The Permanent Court of Arbitration officially ruled that China had no legal basis for its nine-dash-line claim. Beijing also had no right to apply its EEZ of 200 sea miles around the small islands that it had artificially enlarged. They have prevented foreign ships from practicing their right of innocent passage through international and territorial waters and the presidents also argued that China was in its rights when regulating military activity in its claimed EEZ. Countries such as the US contest this, as they argue that this goes against the freedom of navigation. Xi specifically infringed upon the sovereign rights of the Philippines by building new artificial islands in its EEZ (Panter, 2021).

What can be concluded from the above is that Xi’s attitude towards territorial sovereignty may be bolder than Hu’s, but is in essence a continuation of Hu’s increasingly assertive foreign policy. They both claim the same area of the South China Sea and believe that the maritime boundary is absolute, wanting China to be able to control who enters its territorial waters and EEZ. Consequently, they do not seem to care much for adherence to the UNCLOS. While Hu’s South China Sea policies started out quite peacefully in the early years of his presidency, they became significantly more assertive over the years. Therefore, while Xi did make the bold move to create artificial islands in the South China Sea, his policy and territorial beliefs in the region are mostly a continuation of Hu’s increasingly assertive policies.

## Case Study 2: China-India border disputes

### Historical background

Another long-lasting dispute China has been involved in concerns the undetermined parts of its border with India. The conflict emerged in 1947 when India became independent. The exact demarcation of entirety of the long border between the two states had never been officially agreed upon by the Chinese and British authorities before India obtained its independence, and therefore differences exist in the respective understanding of the exact course of the border. Especially the now Chinese-controlled Aksai Chin region towards the Western end of the Indian border and the now Indian-controlled Arunachal Pradesh region on the Eastern end proved to be very controversial. (United States Institute of Peace, 2017). According to India, Arunachal Pradesh is part of its territory based on maps created during British colonial rule which showed the so-called McMahon Line as the border. However, the Chinese government argues that this area has always been part of the Tibet region that China has annexed and accuses India of perpetuating colonial views, as China never officially agreed to the British interpretation of the border (Paul, 2018).

In the mountainous and mostly uninhabited Aksai Chin Plateau the border dispute was even more ambiguous, as the British themselves had three different interpretations of where the border was supposed to be, and China and India both ended up claiming most of the region based on what they believed was historically and traditionally correct (Paul, 2018). Nevertheless, China slowly gained control over the region, which started by the controversial construction of an all-weather road through the Aksai Chin region (United States Institute of Peace, 2017).

This disagreement eventually led to a war in 1962, after India rejected a Chinese proposal whereby India would keep the Eastern territories, and China would keep the Western Aksai Chin territory. China interpreted the rejection as a confirmation that India wanted to maximize its territorial gains, and Mao then felt India had to be taught a lesson for not wanting to find a reasonable solution. India lost this war, and as a result, India started seeing China as an innate aggressive and expansionist country. Since then, the quite nationalistic public opinion in both countries has made it more difficult for either side to back away from their claims (Paul, 2018). It took two decades for diplomatic ties to slowly start to heal, and in the 1990s both sides signed agreements in which they stated their commitment to resolving the territorial

disputes peacefully. Furthermore, both sides started investing in so-called Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) with the goal of creating mechanisms which could prevent the disputes from escalating again and ideally of reaching a final agreement over the border. (Mukherjee, 2016).

As a first step, in 2000, the countries drew up a map on which the Line of Actual Control (LAC) was indicated for the first time. However, only a small part of the LAC in the middle of the border region was actually agreed upon: the border still has a significant number of undefined areas (Arpi, 2015).

### **Developments during Hu Jintao's presidency from 2005 to 2012**

During his presidency, Hu continued with the CBMs. Since 2003, both countries dispose of a Special Representative tasked to find an appropriate framework for a border settlement. In 2006, the Special Representatives even declared that they “shall complete at an early date the task of finalizing an appropriate framework for a final package settlement covering all sectors of the India-China boundary” (Paul, 2018, 40). Nevertheless, even though these talks have been held for many years now, no significant progress seems to have been made to date. Even the 2008 *Shared Vision for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century of the People's Republic of China and the Republic of India*, a declaration signed by both countries, seemed to imply that it would be best to temporarily leave the border dispute to rest in order to stop it from interfering with the development of Sino-Indian relations in other areas such as trade (Acharya, 2008).

In 2005, a pact was signed by both states in which several general principles were laid down that would help settle the dispute in Arunachal Pradesh. However, it quickly became clear that both countries interpreted some of the principles in different ways. For example, when it came to the principle of protecting the “settled populations” in the disputed regions, India interpreted this as not forcefully moving the local population to a different location. In 2007 China's Minister of Foreign Affairs emphasized that China disagreed, as it would complicate China's claims in Arunachal Pradesh where most of the people regard themselves as Indian (Dutta, 2008).

In 2006, Sun Yuxi, the Chinese Ambassador to New Delhi, stated in an interview with an Indian media outlet “In our position, the whole of what you call the state of Arunachal Pradesh is Chinese territory and Tawang (district) is only one place in it and we are claiming



all of that - that's our position" (China Daily, 2006). Sun held this interview just before President Hu's visit to India, which was the first time in ten years a Chinese President had visited the country. This seems to suggest that China valued a clear statement on the disputed territory higher than the ensuing deterioration of China's image among the Indian population. In 2007, China's Foreign Minister doubled down on this territorial claim during a G8+5 meeting (Dutta, 2008, 556).

There have also been controversies surrounding the refusal to issue visas to government officials from both sides. In 2007, a senior Indian state official from Arunachal Pradesh was denied a visa to China for a research trip organized by both the Chinese and the Indian governments to improve ties. Interestingly, China argued that the state official did not need a visa to visit his own country, considering he was from a region Beijing considered to be part of China. This led to a public backlash, and New Delhi decided to cancel the visit (Dutta, 2008, 556). Another visa row broke out in 2010, when the head of the Indian army's Northern Command, general B.S. Jaswal, was not allowed a visa for a trip to China because he worked in Kashmir. This falls in the pattern of China not issuing regular visas to people living in Jammu and Kashmir, an Indian state (Banyan, Economist, 2010). On the one hand this could have been a response to India's refusal to let a Chinese diplomat give a talk in the state of Manipur (DATE), on the other hand China has also seemed to back Pakistan more consistently in its conflict with India over Kashmir (United States Institute of Peace, 2017).

So, while there had been a great improvement in Sino-Indian relations through the signing of *the Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for the settlement of the India-China Boundary Question* in 2005, as well as through several high-level meetings in 2002, 2003, 2005, 2006 and 2008, the inflammatory statements and incidents mentioned put a new strain on the relationship and undid some of the progress made (Dutta, 2008).

In the years Hu was president, the CBMs seem to have been relatively successful, as there were not too many flare-ups concerning the border dispute, especially when taking into account how vast the disputed areas are and how public opinion in both countries could have pushed their leaders towards a more confrontational approach. Furthermore, when flare-ups did arise, they were de-escalated quite quickly (Paul, 2018).

## **Developments during Xi Jinping's presidency from 2013 to 2020**

When Xi Jinping became China's new president in March 2013, tensions seem to have been rising with regards to the border disputes quite quickly. At the Daulat Beg Oldi incident in April 2013, a group of Chinese soldiers entered Ladakh, and remained stationed around 10km into Indian territory for around about two weeks. China's spokeswoman for its foreign ministry Hua Chunying argued that the Chinese troops were not on Indian territory, but she was in favour of resolving the matter peacefully. She said "I would also like to point out that China and India are neighbours and their borders haven't been demarcated. As such, it is difficult to avoid this or that kind of problem" (Harris and Wong, *New York Times*, 2013). The soldiers left shortly before Li Keqiang, China's prime minister, planned to visit India. After this incident, a border-defence cooperation agreement was signed by both countries as a crisis management tool to de-escalate future border tensions (Panda, 2012). After that, the incidents got increasingly hostile over the years, as a new incident already occurred a year later during Xi's first meeting with Modi in India, after it had been reported that Chinese troops had been spotted as they were trying to build a road that crossed the Line of Actual Control into the Indian Ladakh region (BBC, 2014).

In the summer of 2017, a dispute in the Doklam area almost escalated. While this dispute had its origins in a Chinese project to build a new road in Bhutan, so not directly related to the Sino-Indian border conflict, India did send troops to back Bhutan. This created a tense standoff between Chinese and Indian troops and for quite a while neither side wanted to back down, as they did not wish to be perceived as weak. Chinese media underlined that Beijing had no interest in violence, but also did not rule out a confrontation if necessary. An article in the *Global Times* titled "New Delhi didn't draw lesson from 1962 border war" stated that "It serves China's national interests to prolong the peaceful period of strategic opportunity. Although Indian border troops crossed into the Chinese area of Doklam, the Chinese government has exercised restraint... That said, a war is not completely impossible. There are a great deal of precedents of unnecessary battles fought at the completely wrong time and place" (Long, 2017). Nevertheless, also this stand-off was eventually resolved (Paul, 2018).

In June 2020, the tensions between the countries' reached a boiling point, as twenty Indian and at least four Chinese soldiers died in the deadliest confrontations in over 40 years.

Reportedly, an Indian patrol group suddenly encountered Chinese soldiers near a ridge that the patrol considered to be on India's side of the Line of Actual Control, but it is difficult to establish what exactly happened and both sides claim the other started the fight (Safi and Ellis-Petersen, 2020). Initially it was unclear what the losses on China's side were, but several months later China finally gave its own account of the clash, in which four fallen soldiers were honoured by awarding them the "Hero of Defending the Border" title. Beijing also claimed that one of the dead soldiers had written in his diary that the Chinese troops "are the boundary marker of the motherland, and every inch of our land under our feet is the motherland's territory." A spokesperson for the Chinese Ministry of National Defense, stated that this clarification was needed as India and other countries had tried to slander China, even though the Indian troops were the ones who started the "provocative attacks" (Myers, 2021).

As the Chinese and Indian soldiers usually do not carry firearms in this region in order to reduce the risk of escalation, not a single shot was fired during the confrontation and instead the troops reportedly attacked each other with rocks, clubs and pipes (Safi and Ellis-Petersen, 2020). In September 2020, a few months after the fight, the tensions were still not resolved, and both countries accused each other of being the first to fire warning shots, which was the first time in many years that firearms had been used near the LAC (Gettleman, 2020). Fortunately, both countries were ready to de-escalate and remove their troops from the area, while not publicly giving up any of the disputed territories. (Myers, 2021).

### **Analysis China-India border dispute: A cooperative approach to crisis-management under Hu, and a confrontational approach under Xi.**

#### **"The issuing of official boundary claims"**

Both Hu and Xi have stated they believe both the Aksai Chin region and Arunachal Pradesh belong to China, while both also agreed to adhere to the status quo of the Line of Actual Control for the time being. Even though some have argued that behind closed doors both Indian and Chinese leaders would most likely also agree that the best solution would be for China and India to receive the territories, they already control, i.e. China getting the Aksai Chin region and India Arunachal Pradesh publicly Hu and Xi have never given any indication of such thinking – and neither have Indian leaders (Paul, 2018). Consequently, both leaders are seen to be promoting the expansion of China's sovereign borders.

There is a difference in how both presidents have responded to perceived infringements of China's territory. Even though Hu had various diplomatic spats with India when it came to border issues during his presidency, refusing to issue visas to certain Indian officials or to people living in Arunachal Pradesh for example, these incidents remained minor and did not significantly escalate. The CBMs and other de-escalation mechanisms in place therefore seemed to work well enough for Hu to peacefully resolve issues with India, therefore his approach can be characterized as more cooperative.

Although these de-escalation mechanisms were also in place during Xi's presidency and were even augmented through a 2013 border-defence cooperation agreement, these did not prevent the increasingly serious 2013 Daulat Beg Oldi, 2014 Ladakh and 2017 Doklam incidents, nor did they prevent the deadly confrontation between Chinese and Indian troops in 2020. Furthermore, while both presidents publicly called for a peaceful resolution when disputes had arisen, Xi was had a much more confrontational approach.

#### **“Analysis of sovereign boundaries by foreign policy elites”**

Also, Chinese foreign policy elites, such as the Chinese Ambassador to New Delhi and the Chinese Foreign Minister during Hu's presidency have publicly stated that they believe both contested regions belong to China, as seen above. They also expressed an absolute interpretation of the border, exemplified by the Chinese Foreign Minister clarifying that he did not want to make any promises on preventing the forced resettlement of the local population of Arunachal Pradesh.

Nevertheless, T.V. Paul has also argued that “In essence, there has been some recognition in both countries—at least at the elite/governmental level—that each side in fact holds territory that was and is most important to them” (Paul, 2018, 43). Strategically, Arunachal Pradesh is of great importance to India, as the strip of land provides strategic depth to India's Eastern territories. In contrast, for China this region is less important, as there is no sizeable population, there are few exploitable resources, and it never belonged to the “ethnic Han homeland” (Fravel, 2008).

The Aksai Chin region was of great importance to China as it has the only all-season road that linked Tibet to the rest of China and it has become a convenient economic corridor to the West. India had felt quite indifferent towards the region initially, as the region was mostly

desolate and barren. However, domestic political factors and historical memory in both countries hinder government officials from both sides to change their stance on the areas claimed, even though the compromise of China getting the Aksai Sin region and India Arunachal Pradesh would seem a reasonable solution (Paul, 2018)

### **“Signing, enactment, and observation of international legal agreements”**

Both Presidents signed new border or cooperation agreements with India, such as the ones in 2005 and the 2013, but there have also been several violations of those agreements, especially under Xi. In the wake of the deadly 2020 confrontation, China deployed a lot of troops and military equipment to the LAC, in apparent violation of the 1993, 1996, 2005 and 2013 bilateral agreements with India (Peri, 2020).

These agreements in question are quite similar to each other, but tended to become more specific over the years as to guidelines for crisis management and acceptable behaviour near the LAC (Governments of China and India, 1993; Ibid, 1995; Ibid, 2005; Ibid, 2013). In general, the agreements state that when “personnel of one side cross the line of actual control, upon being cautioned by the other side, they shall immediately pull back to their own side of the line of actual control. When necessary, the two sides shall jointly check and determine the segments of the line of actual control where they have different views as to its alignment” (Governments of China and India, 1996). The 1996 agreement also stipulates that both countries have to limit their military forces to minimum levels in the regions along the LAC, however, it does not specify what constitutes this minimum level, stating that it should be “compatible with the friendly and good neighbourly relations between the two countries and consistent with the principle of mutual and equal security” (Governments of China and India, 1996). Furthermore, neither side is allowed to fire a weapon within two kilometres of the LAC (Governments of China and India, 1996, Article VI (1)), an article that was infringed upon in the fall of 2020 when both sides fired warning shots.

## Explaining the changes in China's attitude towards territorial sovereignty

As seen in the case studies above, both changes and continuities can be found in the attitudes towards territorial sovereignty of Presidents Hu and Xi. This chapter will identify factors that are likely to have influenced their thinking in this field.

First of all, major geopolitical changes have taken place that have had a significant impact on China, including on its policies towards its border disputes, especially in the South China Sea. The time-honoured 'hide abilities and bide time' strategy (Tao Guang Yang Hui) became less relevant as a result of China's ascendancy. This affected foreign policy, but was the change attributable to Xi's personality and/or foreign policy beliefs? As Rush Doshi has pointed out, Tao Guang Yang Hui was never considered to be a permanent policy by China's leaders. If the international balance of power would change, so would the need for this strategy of non-assertiveness. This change was gradual, but if one has to pinpoint a particular event or moment, it was the global financial crisis which began in 2008: while most of the world fell into a deep recession, China escaped relatively unharmed and as a result considerably strengthened its relative position in global affairs. A more assertive stance in foreign policy and in world affairs in general was therefore justified (Doshi, 2019). More recently, as most of the world was distracted by combating Covid-19, China appeared to use that moment to create new districts for its artificial islands in April 2020 (Li, 2020), like he strengthened China's hold on Hong Kong.

US foreign policy is another factor with a significant impact on the Chinese government's behaviour, especially in the South China Sea. Some regard the building of the artificial islands as a consequence of President Obama's unsteady South China Sea policy. (Li, 2020). While China had already started to significantly increase its military spending a decade earlier, Zuo Xiying argues Trump's hostile policies towards China are considered another factor that influenced Xi's thinking. Trump hoped to coerce China into compromise on issues such as trade by trying to apply maximum pressure on Beijing. His administration strengthened US military bases in the South China Sea as a means to improve America deterrence and enhance the flexibility of its military capabilities. Zuo has argued that these harsh policies were counter-effective, as they reminded Chinese leaders of the hostile international environment during China's "Century of Humiliation". As a result Beijing started to feel even more

strongly about protecting the territories it claimed and began preparations for potential conflicts with major powers like the US (Zuo, 2021). In other words, ineffective American policy and less than credible projection of American power created the confidence China needed to develop an increasingly assertive foreign policy (Li, 2020).

This is not to say that no personal differences have been identified which may explain policy differences between Hu and Xi. Li sees Hu as a man who avoids conflict, is very cautious and is most comfortable with a “hands-off” approach, while Xi is less conflict-averse and is more of a “hands-on” leader. While the research about Hu’s policies in the South China Sea has shown it to be a misconception that Hu is utterly risk-averse and non-confrontational, the change of leadership likely did have an influence. For example, while the PLA already believed that it was strategically important to have a more stable military presence in the South China Sea during Hu Jintao’s presidency, he never fully supported the PLA’s plans to build artificial islands. However, President Xi did support this idea, and started the creation of the new islands in the early months of his presidency. Then again, this change did not necessarily (only) reflect Xi’s greater willingness to take risks and seek confrontation. It was also in his interest to quickly get the good-will and respect from the PLA as China’s new leader by building the islands the PLA already wanted for a long time (Li, 2020). Another external factor was the development of the necessary technology for the construction of the islands: the high-tech dredging machines used were only ready for use in 2010 (Chubb, 2019).

Another personal trait that has been identified as underlying the more assertive policy, is Xi’s belief in the importance of the “sanctity of sovereignty”. This is a topic he often talks about (Li, 2020). For example, in a speech marking the 90th anniversary of the PLA in 2017, Xi said “We will never seek aggression or expansion, but we have the confidence to defeat all invasions. We will never allow any people, organization or political party to alienate any part of Chinese territory at any time, in any form. No one should expect us to swallow the bitter fruit that is harmful to our sovereignty, security or development interests” (Wen and Blanchard, *Reuters*, 2017). This is a departure from Jiang Zemin’s policies, who had settled territorial disputes with neighbouring countries while making significant concessions. (Li, 2020).

In conclusion, it is likely that both external factors, like the 2008 financial crisis and US foreign policy, and personal differences between the presidents played a part in the ways Hu and Xi responded to the territorial disputes that are the subject of this thesis.

## Conclusion

What can be concluded is that China's attitude towards territorial sovereignty has become more assertive and even more aggressive during Xi Jinping's presidency. However, the extent to which this change has manifested itself varies between the case studies.

While both case studies show that both presidents had an absolute interpretation of (China's) borders, meaning they did not permit practices that could be construed as transgressions in border questions, in the border confrontations with India a significantly more confrontational approach is visible under Xi. This consisted of several instances where Chinese troops were accused of crossing the LAC, even leading to deaths, and several violations of agreements with India. Both sides blame the other, and of course it is difficult to determine whose troops first crossed the LAC or first started an attack. However, when Hu had his tense moments with India, he was willing and able to defuse those situations by cooperating through the CBMs. The same cannot be said of Xi. While both presidents laid claim to the same regions, China's attitude towards (perceived or alleged) infringements of the territorial sovereignty of the disputed regions of Aksai Chin and Arunachal Pradesh has definitely become more aggressive since Xi became president. Furthermore, as Chinese troops have been spotted across the LAC more often under Xi, he appears to more actively try and expand the territory controlled by Beijing. Therefore, Hu's approach of territorial sovereignty can be characterised as favouring cooperation and crisis management, while Xi's approach has more the characteristics of confrontation and maximization of territorial claims.

In the dispute over the South China Sea we have seen Hu become increasingly aggressive during the course of his presidency. Here Xi appears to simply have picked up where Hu left off. While the creation of the new artificial islands was a bolder move than anything Hu had undertaken during his presidency, this must not necessarily be taken as a principled change of policy as the aggressive moves towards foreign ships were quite similar. Both men publicly called for more peaceful interactions in the SCS, while consistently harassing other claimants



when they entered territory China regarded as its own. Therefore, Xi's South China Sea policy can be seen as a – bolder – continuation of Hu's increasingly assertive policies in the region.

Factors that have likely influenced these policy changes during the fourteen years studied, include differences in personal beliefs and the characters of the presidents, geopolitical changes such as a weak US foreign policy (under Obama) or an approach that was too hostile (under Trump), and technological advances (in the case of the artificial islands).

This thesis has only looked at English-language sources and did therefore not analyse primary sources in Chinese such as official statements and Chinese newspaper articles, nor secondary literature from Chinese academics. Therefore, it would be valuable for future research on this topic to take Chinese-language sources into account as well. It might also be interesting to widen the scope to other territorial disputes of China with its neighbours, to get a more complete picture of what has changed in all of China's disputes since Xi became president.

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