

China, Asia and Issues of Sovereignty and Intervention

by Chu Shulong

Compared with Europe and North America, East Asia is one of few areas in the world where most countries strongly defend traditional concepts of national sovereignty and firmly resist foreign intervention in the internal affairs of independent states. However, as many Asian countries become more interdependent with a globalizing world in the post-Cold War era, traditional concepts of sovereignty in Asia are in the process of changing. Accordingly, East Asia is no longer monolithic bloc, with many countries in the region increasingly divided in their positions on national sovereignty and international intervention.

East Asian Perspectives

General attitudes and perspectives within East Asia on national sovereignty and foreign intervention can be divided into three groups: a non-traditional group, a traditional group and a middle group.

Non-traditional group: Japan and South Korea, as two of the most developed countries in East Asia, accept relatively new concepts of national sovereignty and support and participate in international interventions. As such, they share positions on sovereignty and intervention with European and North American nations. While defending core concepts of national sovereignty, both two countries have supported numerous international interventions in Kosovo, Bosnia, East Timor, and Iraq with a variety of human, financial and material resources.

Traditional Group: China, North Korea, Burma, Vietnam and Malaysia are the East Asian countries which do not accept current concepts of limited sovereignty; which usually oppose international intervention, and which most strongly defend the principle of "non interference in the internal affairs" of nation-states. These countries reject external criticism of their human rights situation, religious policy and other domestic activities. They do not believe sovereignty is limited. Most of them have strongly opposed the international interventions in Bosnia and Kosovo as well as American-British military operations in Iraq.

Middle Group: Five members of ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asia Nations), notably Thailand, The Philippines, Singapore, Indonesia and Brunei, countries which used to strongly defend national sovereignty, are becoming more accepting of certain types of international intervention. Established in 1967, ASEAN traditionally set clear

guidelines between sub-regional cooperation and non-interference in the internal affairs of member states. In 1997, for example, the ASEAN members refused to criticize Burma's military government and its human rights record as these were considered "internal affairs" of Burma and neither ASEAN as a group or its individual members should interfere. The Burma issue was an especially controversial one between ASEAN and the European Union (EU) at the time, with the EU insisting during the Asia-EU meeting that Burma's military government and its human rights record should be condemned. More recently, however, support has been growing within ASEAN that the organization should pay attention to the internal affairs of its member states for the spill over effect these can have on other members.

Basic Chinese Principles on Sovereignty and Intervention

China is one of the few countries in the world which strongly defends traditional principles of national sovereignty and opposes most types of foreign intervention in the internal affairs of nation states.

China's traditional concept

Chinese concepts of national sovereignty are very traditional and are continually strongly defended by the Chinese government and its leaders. In his speech at the United Nations Millennium Summit on September 7, 2000, Chinese President Jiang Zemin strongly criticized the notion that "human rights rank higher than sovereignty." While acknowledging the obligation of governments to promote and protect the rights of their people, Jiang stressed that the principles of the sovereign equality of all countries, mutual respect for the sovereignty of every state, and non-interference in each other's internal affairs remain at the core of today's international relations. Stressing the equality of all nations, large and small, rich and poor, Jiang emphasized that protecting national sovereignty and security is the solemn right of the government and people of every country. "History and reality tell us that sovereignty is the only premise and guarantee of human rights within each nation," Jiang noted, adding that "national sovereignty and human rights do not conflict with each other, but rather complement each other."

In his speech, President Jiang pointed to the fundamental principles of the UN Charter and to the primacy of the UN in resolving international conflicts. Arguing that "disputes, if any, must be settled through dialogue, negotiation and consultation," Jiang supported a continued central role for the UN Security Council in handling international disputes: "We should come together to safeguard the authority of the Security Council rather than to impair it." The Security Council is the center of international collective security system and has a "primary" role in maintaining peace and security in the world, Jiang said, noting pointedly that "it is against the will of

many member states for any country to bypass the Security Council and do what it wishes on major issues concerning world peace and security."

The President went on to warn that willful use of force and interference in the internal affairs of other countries in the name of "humanitarianism" not only runs counter to the principles of the UN Charter but could also lead to severe consequences. "It has been proven that whether a peacekeeping operation is successful or not is decided by whether the purposes and principles of the UN Charter are honored," Jiang said. These principles, according to Jiang, include respecting countries' sovereignty, not interfering in internal affairs, gaining consent from relevant countries, maintaining neutrality and not using offensive force.

As requested by China, the declaration passed by the UN Security Council summit on September 7, 2000 also included clauses stating that sovereignty, political independence and territorial integrity should be respected, that in handling international relations, countries and organizations should not resort to force or intimidation, and that international disputes should be resolved peacefully.

Especially since the NATO operation in Kosovo, China has strongly criticized what it calls the "new interventionism" on the part of the West. During debate at the 54th Session of the UN General Assembly in the fall of 1999, the first such meeting following Kosovo, Chinese Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan criticized the "new interventionism" and the placing of "human rights over sovereignty" as hegemonistic in nature. Then, in December 1999, during Russian President Boris Yeltsin's visit to China, the two countries urged western nations to respect UN Security Council Resolution 1244 and to fully respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Yugoslavia and the lawful rights of all nationalities in the Kosovo region. China and Russia have frequently supported each other on sovereignty issues, with Moscow supporting Chinese reunification efforts as they relate to Taiwan and with Beijing in turn supporting Russia's moves to crack down on separatist forces in Chechnya.

China's historical legacy and the Tibet, Xingjiang and Taiwan issues

A major rationale for China's adamant position on national sovereignty and foreign intervention issues stems from modern Chinese historical experience and the multi-nationality structure of China today.

First, history plays a very significant role in Chinese thinking. To every Chinese, whether political leader or school child, Chinese history over the last 150 years is one of humiliation, of being invaded, and of losing national sovereignty and independence. Chinese history books are filled with references to the fact that, in the 100 years between the 1840 Sino-British Utopian War and the foundation of the

People's Republic of China in 1949, almost every "imperialist state" (Great Britain, France, Germany, Holland, the US, Russia, and Japan) had invaded China and bullied the Chinese people. Many if not most Chinese believe these countries would like to do the same thing if China did not strongly resist such attempts. This is the significance of Chinese leaders repeatedly stressing that national sovereignty and independence are more valuable to developing countries like China, who suffered in the past when they did not have full sovereignty. If a country like China can not protect its own sovereignty, then there will be no human rights for its people.

Second, the current reality of China as a large multi-national state also makes the country extremely sensitive about issues of sovereignty and foreign intervention. China today has 56 nationalities, with most of these minority groups living in border areas far from Beijing and in close proximity to other countries. It need not be stressed that some people within China are demanding independence for Tibet, Xingjiang and other such areas. The Chinese government believes that if China did not stand firmly in favor of protecting its sovereignty and national unity, then there would be far more serious troubles in these minority areas of China.

To many foreigners and foreign governments, Tibet is not a sovereignty issue because almost all countries in the world recognize that Tibet is a part of China; they do not support Tibetan independence. To most supporters of Tibet, the issue is rather one of human rights, religious freedom, and the protection of a unique culture heritage. However, the Chinese government and Chinese people do not see Tibet in this way. Most Chinese support the notion of improving human rights conditions in Tibet, as they do elsewhere in China. The Chinese government respects the religious freedom of the Tibetan people. Buddhist temples and religious activities are openly permitted, with the central and local governments spending significant sums to maintain and repair both temples and cultural sites. The Tibetan people still use the Tibetan language in their daily lives.

Nevertheless, there are some who would like to make Tibet an issue of sovereignty, despite the fact that Tibet has been part of China for 400 years. Despite central government control during this time over local affairs and local authorities, there are groups both inside and outside of Tibet seeking independence and the separation of Tibet from China. Therefore, Beijing does consider Tibet to be an issue of China's national sovereignty and national unity. While the Chinese government does crack down on separatism in Tibet, the problem for much of the outside world is that Tibetan religious people and separatists are often one and the same. When Chinese authorities act against such groups, the targets are the separatists, not those supporting religious freedom.

In addition to Tibet, Xingjiang in western China has become a major problem threatening China's national unity and security. Bordered by the former Soviet states of Kazakhstan, Kirgystan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, Xingjiang is home to most of the seven million Uighur people living in China. Xingjiang is also the home of other Turkic people, such as one million Kazakhs in the north, 140,000 Kirgiz people in the west, and 700,000 Tungan Muslims and smaller pockets of Mongols. These minority nationalities in China account for roughly 60 percent of the population in Xingjiang,

Xingjiang has been a part of China for thousands of years, since the days of the Han Danesty. In 1933, when the Koumingtang National Party (KMT) ruled China, some local Uighurs proclaimed the "Republic of Eastern Turkestan" which was quelled a year later. In 1944, a second "Republic of Eastern Turkestan" was declared, which lasted only a few days.

After the end of the Cold War and with the newly found independence of the former Soviet Central Asian republics, separatist movements in Central Asia and in Xingjiang became active again. Having as their goal to establish a "democratic and secular country" of "Eastern Turkestan," Uighur militant separatists in recent years have carried out a spate of bombings and killings in Xingjiang and other parts of China, including Beijing. West of Xingjiang, the former Soviet republics have become major centers of Uighur exile movements, fueling nationalist sentiments within Xingjiang. Beijing has asked these Central Asian countries and Turkey to curtail the activities of local Uighur exile organizations and offices, including the publishing of separatist newspapers and magazines, the holding of meetings, and appearances on television.

China has traditionally been a multi-nationality state and half of the country's territory has consisted of non-Han minorities. Therefore, maintaining national unity, especially in minority areas, has always been a major task for Chinese governments. Yet, while strongly defending national sovereignty, the Chinese government does not deny individual rights, individual sovereignty and human security. However, the Chinese government logic is that without national sovereignty first, the Chinese people cannot enjoy individual rights and security. "How can you have family when you do not have the state?" is the official Chinese slogan. A fundamental Chinese interpretation of its own suffering history in modern times is that because the Chinese state was weak and lacked its own sovereignty, many ordinary Chinese suffered from foreign invasion, occupation and exploitation.

As is well known, China's position on sovereignty is especially strong regarding Taiwan. China insists that Taiwan is an internal issue of China and strongly rejects any move towards "two Chinas," "one China, one Taiwan," and Taiwanese independence. China opposes any foreign interference in Taiwan's affairs as well as

Taiwanese participation in any international organization that would require statehood.

The most recent example of this is China's objection to Taiwan's entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO). Apparently responding to remarks by US President Bill Clinton, China in September 2000 reiterated its stance that Taiwan should join the WTO only as a separate customs territory of China, not as a "Taiwan customs territory." President Clinton had pledged that the United States would not accept Beijing's bid to solidify its claim to Taiwan in documents covering China's entry into the WTO. The Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman countered that the Chinese government opposed Taiwan's attempts to create "two Chinas" or "one China, one Taiwan" in multilateral and bilateral forums by taking advantage of the WTO. China maintains that the Mainland should join the WTO before Taiwan and that all talks between the two sides should be based on the principle of one China.

China also refuses any foreign mediation on the Taiwan issue, regarding it as an internal matter. In May of 2000, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Zhang Qiyue declared that China does not need the United States or any other nation mediating the Taiwan question, as the "outside world has no right to interfere in China's internal affairs," Zhang said.

As first proposed by former Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping in the early 1980s, China adopted a "one country, two system" strategy for resolving the Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan issues. This policy states that, upon their reunification with China, the three entities would become "special administered areas" where they could maintain much of their political, economic, legal and social systems and enjoy great autonomy. For Taiwan, the "one country, two systems" policy even permits the island to keep its armed forces after reunification with China. According to Beijing, little would change in Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan upon reunification with China. Standards of living would not be affected by reunification, as the Chinese government does not (and will not) collect taxes or impose undue constraints on Hong Kong, Macao and a future Taiwan reunited with the mainland. The only condition demanded is that Taiwan cease referring to itself as a "nation" and give up the title of the "Republic of China".

The Chinese government has stated that the "one country, two systems" approach has worked well in Hong Kong and Macao, and should as well with Taiwan. Thus far, Taiwanese leaders have rejected this approach. While insisting that its goal with Taiwan is peaceful reunification, Beijing does not rule out a non-peaceful option should Taiwan declare independence or indefinitely block reunification. It thus appears as if future relations across the Taiwan Strait will depend very much on future changes in their respective societies. Hopefully, internal changes will lead to a future situation where both sides will find they have enough in common to find a solution

which is acceptable to both sides. This is the great challenge facing the Chinese people on both sides of the strait; to search for a new form of national sovereignty that can work out the current deadlock.

Changing Chinese Views on Sovereignty and Intervention

Although China's position on sovereignty and intervention is traditional and tough, its views on these issues are also in a period of transition because of changes in the world and in China itself.

China and globalization

Under Deng Xiaoping's reform and openness policy beginning in the early 1980s, China has gradually joined the international community. It has become a member of many international economic, financial, security, and cultural organizations. A longtime permanent member of the UN Security Council, China is now the world's seventh largest economy and its tenth largest trading power. As China becomes even further integrated into the international community, it is likely that traditional attitudes towards national sovereignty and foreign intervention will weaken.

Dilution of Chinese sovereignty

Due to the processes of globalization and the relationship between economic development and greater integration into the international community, China has had to give up some of its sovereign rights in order to benefit from joining international institutions and regimes. When China seeks greater access to the markets of other countries, it has to open its own market to foreign business. And when China joins various international institutions and benefits from being a member, it has to accept the rules and regulations of those international bodies, thus restraining its national sovereignty. A good example of this is China accepting inspections by US government officials of factories making CDs, and constraints on the final use of large computers imported from the US under bilateral American-Chinese agreements. In short, in order to benefit from American technology and products, China has had to surrender some sovereign rights on its own territory.

The World Trade Organization (WTO) is another good example. In order to enjoy WTO membership rights and benefits, China has to adhere to the organization's rules and rewrite its own domestic regulations which conflict with those of the WTO. These are sovereign rights that China must give up voluntarily if the country is to join the international community and benefit from integration and globalization.

Participation in international peacekeeping

It would be a mistake to say that China has opposed all forms of international intervention. In the past several decades, China has supported many international interventions in both regional and internal conflicts and has even participated directly in some of them.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, China, France, the US and the ASEAN countries worked together to conclude a peace agreement on Cambodia. China contributed military and civilian personnel to UN peacekeeping forces and assisted in the rebuilding of Cambodia under United Nations auspices. On the other hand, China has insisted that the problem of the Khmer Rouge is an internal Cambodian affair. In July 1999, for example, Chinese Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan stressed that the Cambodian Government and people should judge and resolve all of their own internal affairs, including the Khmer Rouge issue.

China has also participated in UN peacekeeping efforts in the Middle East and Africa, and supported the American-led action in the Gulf War against Iraq's invasion of Kuwait.

The most recent case of China's flexibility on sovereignty and intervention is East Timor. During UN Security Council debates on East Timor and in response to Secretary General Kofi Annan's appeal to Indonesia in September 1999 to accept a multilateral peace-keeping force for East Timor, Chinese Permanent Representative to the UN Qin Huasun demanded that all forms of violence in East Timor be stopped immediately and that the security of UN personnel there be protected. China favored UN oversight of the referendum on the future of East Timor, which resulted in a vote for independence. The Chinese envoy said that China supported full implementation of the vote in a peaceful, orderly environment. Gravely concerned about the continuing violence and resulting humanitarian crisis in East Timor, Mr. Qin noted that the East Timor issue must be solved through the United Nations and that the deployment of any peacekeeping force should be at the request of the Indonesian Government and endorsed by the Security Council. "China is willing to be actively involved in efforts by the UN in this connection," he said.

China decided to give 50 million yuan (US \$6 million) to East Timor to help rebuild the war-weary territory, as announced by Chinese Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan during a meeting with visiting East Timor independence leader Jose Alexandre Xanana Gusmao in January 2000. In addition to its monetary support, China continues working with the UN to augment peacekeeping forces. Also in January 2000, ten Chinese police officers, after receiving professional training, arrived in East Timor to join the UN transitional authority, and more will join them later.

China has also supported international interventions in some African countries. In January of 2000, China called on the international community to help bring about an end to the strife in Angola. Shen Guofang, China's deputy permanent representative to the UN, said during a Security Council debate on Angola that imposing sanctions on the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) was necessary for a final political settlement of the Angolan conflict. China hopes that the international community can work towards a co-ordinated action "as soon as possible by strengthening sanctions to force UNITA to lay down weapons and end hostilities," he said, because it is known to all that UNITA should bear the primary responsibility for the current situation in Angola, having long refused to honor its commitment to the Lusaka Protocol and to carry out relevant Security Council resolutions.

The logic for Chinese support of and participation in these international interventions, while rejecting outside interference in Chinese "domestic affairs", is the following. The interventions noted above were requested, or accepted, by the relevant states (Cambodia and East Timor) or agreed to by the United Nations. Where the Cambodian and Indonesian governments accepted international intervention, many interventions in Africa were United Nations operations based on overwhelming passage by the Security Council or the General Assembly.

China's concern with human security

The Chinese government condemned the mistreatment of Chinese-Indonesians in Indonesia in the late 1990s, calling for the protection of their basic rights and personal security. And when China decided to "teach the Vietnamese a lesson" in its military action in 1979, one of the reasons for its action was that the Vietnamese government had forced more than 200,000 Chinese-Vietnamese to leave Viet Nam, many of them becoming refugees and escaping to Chinese border areas with Viet Nam.

China and Asia on Sovereignty and Intervention: Future Trends

As the international community enters the 21st century, powerful forces of interdependence and globalization are changing all facets of life. Traditional concepts of national sovereignty, while still dominant in the minds of many Asian leaders and people, are undergoing a great process of transition. Asians will continue to defend some of their fundamental national sovereignty rights, but at the same time, they will become more flexible toward and accepting of relatively new concepts of sovereignty and foreign intervention as these are global trends that nobody can resist. Globalization requires a softening of sovereignty and a willingness to accept different levels of intervention to promote global regimes which benefit everybody. Also, Asians recognize that in the times of integration and globalization, nations and

peoples in Asia will gain more than they will lose from changing their traditional positions on national sovereignty and foreign intervention.

Those who have a strong rejectionist view of intervention feel marginalised and excluded. Therefore, processes of pro-active inclusion are important and necessary so that countries in Asia, including China, become more accepting of international intervention. Oftentimes, processes are as important as substance. Many of the differences dividing Asians, and especially the Chinese, from the rest of the world go beyond this or that case of intervention. The real difference lies in the conditions and processes of intentional interventions. Accordingly, in order to reach common positions on international intervention and to make these more effective, the United Nations and the international community may need to develop a set of criteria, conditions, and processes for international intervention which will be acceptable to all or most of the countries in the world.