

The Great Game in 21st Century Asia

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“There’s no Great Game to be won.”

- President Obama at the UN General Assembly

The term “Great Game” was coined in the early 1800’s to describe the strategy and tactics to protect India, the jewel in the crown of the British Empire, from a rising Russia. Beginning with Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points the United States has advocated substituting a universal international organization based on the rule of law for the great power competition and war.

In the 21st Century, the United Nations system provides the normative and institutional structure for international relations as well as the language of diplomacy. While Russia, China and the United States have never fought a declared war, the League of Nations and the United Nations have provided legal rationale and cover for the actions of their military forces and clandestine services.

This morning, I will survey the strategic landscape of Asia focused on a rising China’s territorial and maritime disputes and consider the implications for the United States. China and Russia view the world from the long-term perspective of participants in the Great Game. The Chinese play go and the Russians chess, while at UN this fall President Obama asserted United States was not engaged in a “zero-sum endeavor.”

For a next few minutes, I will try to get within Chinese strategic thinking by sketching the territorial disputes on China’s periphery as if they were to be played on a go board. I will consider the traditional mix of hard and soft power as it has been used over the centuries as the Chinese played the Great Game first in Central Asia and now across the world within the UN system.

China at the Center

The word for China means central kingdom. The state began as warring feudal lords finally dominated by the most powerful among them. Endless conflict eventually lead to the dominant kingdom unifying the country and establishing a highly centralized government based on a model of hierarchical family relations with the emperor at the top. He was considered the ruler of “all under heaven” which meant the world as civilized by Chinese culture. Those outside were considered barbarians and were managed by bones (rewards) and sticks (punishments). Written history in China generally is traced to the Shang Dynasty which tells of China’s First Emperor Ch’in Shih Huang (259 BC – 210 BC). **International relations evolved through** Zhou, Qin, Han, Sui, Tang, Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties with a highly ritualized system of diplomacy and trade described as tribute to the Emperor.

The Game of go as Strategic Model

The source of power in ancient China was agricultural land so go is played on a plane grid of 19 horizontal and 19 vertical lines called a board. The players are given as many black or white stones as necessary. Unlike chess or checkers the opposing stones are not killed or counted. Instead stones are captured by completely surrounding the opposing player's stones. It generally takes five or six moves to surround even empty territory, and many more to capture an opposing player's stone. All moves take place in plain sight so strategy and deception are keys to victory.

Asia as a Go Board

In order to consider China's territorial disputes as a strategic game it is merely necessary to imagine a map of China with a grid of horizontal and vertical lines. Chinese military forces and those of the bordering countries will be for the sake of the game deployed as they are actually positioned today. For the sake of my discussion, the rapprochement between Russia and China in the early 1990's settled the various territorial claims. It was followed by withdrawal of significant military forces by both sides. To begin with the go board will be focused on the Asian continent and the surrounding waters:

1. The China – India Border Disputes – Seize the high ground
2. Tibet – Send Han, recruit the monks
3. The Mekong River- Grab them by the throat
4. The South China Sea – Divide and Conquer
5. Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands – Just a Point
6. Kinmen (Quemoy) - Atari
7. Taiwan – East Wind

From the strategic perspective of space and population as reflected in go, the bottom line is that none of the peripheral territorial disputes are critical to China's economy or territorial integrity. The territory on the Himalayan ridgeline between India and China is the only territory of strategic significance. It is important as a back door to China and need not be occupied by China, only denied to another great power. i.e. India. Tibet is another question. The Chinese have gone beyond treating its autonomous zone as a border and are gradually filling in the space with Han Chinese.

The game of go is between two players. China's traditional imperial diplomacy with China at the center would treat each of the separate peripheral spaces bilaterally so that the opponent would have to deal one-one where China has a huge relative advantage. In the 21st Century China is one of 190 or so sovereign states presumed to have legal equality. Yet each has a unique territorial space on the globe with a unique configuration of relations with every other state.

Global Go

China's participation in the current system of international relations may also be viewed as projection of the Great Game strategy on to a go board to the UN system. Over Churchill's objections, President Roosevelt insisted the Chinese be included in the wartime alliance and as permanent members of the UN Security Council. The PRC took the UN seat from Taiwan in 1971 and now pursues China's traditional Great Game objectives within the legal and institutional framework of the UN system.

- Permanent Membership on the UN Security Council granted automatic great power status and veto over any UN binding resolution or anti-Chinese coercive action
- Shanghai Cooperative Organization (SCO) was created with the Russians and some former Soviet satellites in 2001- it is a regional organization within the UN system to counterbalance the EU and NATO
- UN General Assembly and other deliberative and distributive UN organs - China has joined Russian and the non-aligned caucus to form their own Like-Minded Group to press their programs and protect their interests
- Participation in the UN Law of the Sea Treaty gives China political advantage in UN forums

Each of the UN organizations has different functions and political cultures so it is necessary to consider China's territorial disputes within each organization:

- (1) China – India Border Disputes – China's veto offers protection but UK and US generally support India
- (2) Tibet – Taiwan and the PRC had virtually identical positions on Tibet so PRC inherited positions protected in both the Security Council and the General Assembly but today faces competitive votes on human rights
- (3) The Mekong River Commission makes decisions by consensus but China is building upstream dams on territory it controls
- (4) The South China Sea – China has recently refused to participate in arbitration required by the Law of the Sea Treaty as requested by the Philippines
- (5) Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands – A trilateral dispute with Japan opposed to both the PRC and Taiwan
- (6) Kinmen (Quemoy) – Peaceful at the moment
- (7) Taiwan – the UN battle was lost when the PRC took the China seat

For twenty years the PRC kept a low profile posture in the UN. It used its veto sparingly only when direct interests were threatened such as over Taiwan. Recently, China has developed a comprehensive global presence in the UN system and has developed a web of alliances to block adverse political actions of any kind. With respect to territorial issues it has the veto power and political backing to ignore the UN and deal with countries on a bilateral basis.