

Introduction

This book describes and explains the evolution of Beijing's relationship with the rest of the international system since the start of China's reform era in the late 1970s, by analyzing the prominent, yet poorly understood, role of sovereignty within this dynamic process. As discussed in more detail in the following chapter, sovereignty is a bundle of mutually recognized rights and obligations that states possess via their status as sovereign members of the contemporary international system. More specifically, it comprises four distinct components (territory, jurisdiction, authority, and economic rights) that form the lines between states. In this sense, sovereignty makes international politics possible by providing it with structural underpinnings. However, as the rights that constitute sovereignty are constantly being produced by the words and actions of states in ways that either reinforce or transgress the boundaries it creates, its specific meaning is never a given, but rather always in the process of being substantiated and refined.

Sovereignty is thus placed at the center of this book because of its contested and variable role in international politics, and because of the prominence of sovereignty-related concerns within each of the most contentious foreign policy issues facing Beijing as China has moved along the transformative path of economic opening set in motion in the late 1970s. Indeed, securing China's territorial borders, defining the status of Taiwan and Tibet—and to a lesser extent Hong Kong—as a part of China, and navigating the terms of China's involvement with the international human rights system and the global economy are all exercises in articulating sovereignty.¹ Each issue revolves around the type of sovereign boundaries being created between China and the rest of the world.

The book, then, is about how and why Chinese foreign policy and national security makers and analysts have attempted to draw the line between what is inside China and what is outside (the international system, community, or society) during a period of rapid change within both spheres. It seeks to cut through the controversies surrounding this issue by addressing the following questions: Has China's stance on sovereignty changed since the late 1970s, what factors have most directly influenced the Chinese position, and is the Chinese story then different from that being constructed by other states?

I addressed these questions via a five-step research process. First, I sought to advance our understanding of sovereignty through developing a new conceptual framework for analyzing its role in international politics. Second, I collected empirical data that add new specificity to the discussion of sovereignty's changing role in international politics. Third, I selected a series of cases directly related to the Chinese position on each of the main components of sovereignty. The general rationale for case selection was two-fold. To begin with, cases were chosen that constituted China-specific manifestations of issues that had already been identified in the new literature on sovereignty as key sites, or nodal points, in the construction of its role in international politics. Following initial research, I then chose issues that showed variation within Chinese sovereignty-related behavior (from boundary transgression, or soft policies, to boundary reinforcement, or a hard stance). The issue areas I selected, then, include China's stance on territorial boundaries; its relationship with Taiwan, Tibet, and Hong Kong; its involvement in the international human rights system; and its economic concerns, including globalization and participation in the major multilateral economic organizations (the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and especially the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade [GATT] / World Trade Organization [WTO]). Fourth, I collected and analyzed a comprehensive set of documents, primarily in Chinese, on all four issue areas. This involved (1) analysis of all sovereignty-related statements in official Chinese publications such as *Beijing Review* and *Zhongguo Waijiao Gailan* (Survey of China's Diplomacy); (2) examination of the universe of articles on sovereignty published in China's main academic journals of international relations and national security;² and (3) review of specific policy decisions made by Beijing. Finally, I carried out extensive interviews with ninety-nine members of China's elite foreign policy and national security circles in 1997 and 1998.³ The interviews focused on the informants' views of the role of sovereignty in international relations. Interviewees were asked questions intended to identify their receptiveness to the prospect of change in such a role.

This research reveals that the Chinese position on sovereignty is not what it used to be. Through the mid-1970s, China's stance was absolutist, unyielding,

and stood in sharp contrast to the changes beginning to take shape in the international arena at the time. Since then, both subtle and substantive changes in the Chinese position have occurred. Initially, during the 1980s, the Chinese approach continued to be relatively constant and boundary reinforcing, but placed a greater emphasis on cooperation and compromise than had been the case during the first thirty years of the People's Republic of China (PRC). In contrast, during the 1990s the Chinese position shifted, became more varied, and in the process also became the subject of intense debate within foreign policy and national security circles in China. More specifically, Chinese policies preserved a static interpretation of territorial sovereignty, promoted an unyielding and increasingly combative stance on jurisdictional sovereignty, and permitted a transgression of the lines created by the economic and authority components of sovereignty. In light of such developments, and lending specificity to the book's general framing questions, the central analytical task I confront in the following chapters is to explain the relatively uniform changes in Chinese policies affecting sovereignty in the 1980s, and the divergence of policies in the 1990s.

I argue that China's shifting stance on sovereignty is a product of the changing relationship between relatively persistent and historically conditioned sovereignty-centric values, rational cost-benefit calculations, and external pressures (both material and normative) inadvertently brought to bear on China by reform and opening. During the 1980s, Deng Xiaoping's pragmatic call for strengthening China through a controlled integration with the international political and economic system provided the impetus for limited changes in the Chinese stance on each aspect of sovereignty (by overcoming the reticence to change caused by historical and ideological influences). Yet, over the course of the reform era, it was external factors that pushed newly emerging interpretations of sovereignty from the international arena into China.

More specifically, Chinese policies during the 1990s were shaped by the increasing salience of two different trends created by China's increasingly complex interdependence with the rest of the international system. First, material pressures for change (bilateral demands and enmeshment in multilateral institutions) became more pronounced than was the case during the 1980s. Second, new ideational influences for change were introduced in the process of norms diffusion and the advent of new image concerns in Beijing about portraying China as a responsible power. The combined weight of these forces caused substantial changes in two key facets of the Chinese approach to sovereignty (economic and sovereign authority), left one other largely untouched (territory), and triggered a prolonged battle to preserve the status quo vis-à-vis another component of the norm (jurisdictional sovereignty).⁴

These findings speak directly to a host of controversial issues in the “new sovereignty” debate in international studies and in recent analyses of Chinese foreign policy and national security making. To begin with, key aspects of Chinese behavior are puzzling when viewed solely within the distinct strands of the secondary literature on sovereignty that have forwarded relatively parsimonious arguments about the causes of sovereign change. Along these lines, my explanation of Chinese behavior is intended to contribute to the general constructivist turn in international relations theory (by bringing a consideration of historically framed, domestic ideational constraints into the discussion of international norms diffusion). However, it is also eclectic in integrating collective memory, pragmatic interest calculations, and external normative influences within its frame.⁵ In this sense, the book is part of a movement in international relations and security studies to bridge the apparent divide between rationalist and ideationalist accounts of international politics.

For students of Chinese foreign relations and Asian security, documenting the emerging heterogeneity of policy in the 1990s, in contrast to the homogeneous policies of the 1980s, is of inherent interest since the finding challenges current conventional wisdom. Chinese sovereignty is not as unyielding and monolithic as is commonly asserted. In addition, the patterns of sovereign change highlighted in the book have not been adequately documented or explained in the few sophisticated analyses previously published. Furthermore, by placing the issue of sovereignty at its core, the book sheds new light on how and why new interpretations have emerged (and are being contested) in China about the location of the boundaries between the PRC and the rest of the international system. The book reveals just how precarious the process of drawing such lines has become. Indeed, it shows a profound bifurcation within China between those who accept the erosion of Chinese sovereign rights and those who will make heroic efforts to resist such a trend. This being said, I am not advancing an alarmist thesis about the “coming collapse of China,” but rather exposing the extent to which “old” Chinese approaches to sovereignty are being increasingly buffeted by new and unexpected domestic and international challenges.

Although the specifics of this struggle are unique, the dilemma of participating in an increasingly interdependent and densely layered international system while maintaining independence and individuality in such a community is not. On the contrary, foreign policy and national security elites in most states are intimately familiar with the difficulties inherent in grappling with this dilemma. In this sense, to return to one of the questions raised at the outset, the development of the Chinese stance on sovereignty since the late 1970s is not all that unusual. It is embedded in the historical evolution of China’s relationship with

the rest of the international system, and parallels the struggles of other new states that won admission to the system over the course of the last century. Nonetheless, over the last two decades sovereignty has become an increasingly controversial issue in China's relationship with the rest of the world, one that during the 1990s posed unprecedented difficulties for China's leaders, and has the potential (*vis-à-vis* Taiwan) to place Beijing in direct conflict with other powerful members of the international system (especially the United States).

In short, changes in the Chinese approach to sovereignty during the reform era were impressively deep, but defined more by a divergence in positioning than by the consolidation of a single unified stance. Such behavior is reflective of China's evolving relationship with the rest of the international system during this period. While Beijing has allowed China to become ever more deeply incorporated into the world economy and polity since the late 1970s, it has also striven to maintain the lines that separate China from this system. In other words, China is both integrating with, and differentiating itself from, the international community in which it is now firmly embedded. This is the central characteristic of Chinese foreign relations and national security policy over the last two and a half decades, and, despite mounting challenges to such a position, will continue to be so in the future.