China’s unresolved land and maritime border disputes with its neighbors continue to be a negative factor in bilateral relations among them; undeniably they also complicate the regional situation. What are the root causes of China’s territorial positions? Why certain disputes remain unsettled? Can such situation lead to future conflicts? Has China begun to work towards implementing an economic interests based foreign policy and if so, how that may impact on the country’s so far adopted core-interest based foreign policy resulting in its territorial assertiveness? These are some of the questions the following study attempts to address.

China, like India, has five thousand years of civilization and history; in both the countries, the roots of the present can always be traced to the past; a prominent instance in the case of China is the influence of China’s founding Emperor Qin Shihuang, on the thinking of the country’s architect, Mao Zedong. [1] Similar is the linkage seen between China’s traditional “Tian Xia” (Under the Heaven) concept and its current stand on ‘territorial sovereignty’. The concept considers that all the people and areas where they lived belong to the Chinese Emperor, the Son of God, who is in possession of mandate of heaven; regarding areas which are not under the control of the Emperor, their rulers derived their power from the Emperor. [2] It holds that the biggest political unit for the Chinese is the framework of ‘world/society’, not the ‘country or nation state’. [3]

2. One can clearly see the connection of the Tian Xia concept with the current sense of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) on borders; China has been “grading all other states at various levels of tributaries based on their approximation to Chinese cultural and political forms and treating the borders between it and surrounding peoples as not so much political and territorial demarcations, but as cultural differentiations”. [4] Reflecting Chinese sense of territories, quite different from those of other civilizations, are authoritative maps published by the PRC in end eighties and in first decade of the current century which, while defining China’s modern borders as that
existed during the Qing Dynasty period (1644-1911), described the extent of the country’s “historically lost” territories; they encompassed vast areas belonging to neighboring countries, including parts of India’s Northeast and Andamans. At the same time, clarifications that the PRC has no claims to these territories in a contemporary sense, accompanied the maps (The Historical Atlas of China, 1982-1987 and History of China’s Modern Borders, vol. 1, 2007). Worth mentioning in the context of historical boundaries, is also Mao’s description of Tibet as China’s “palm” and of Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan, NEFA and Ladakh as China’s “five fingers”.

3. China’s penchant to compare its modern borders with those existed prior to the perceived ‘historical losses’ of territories is significant to understanding of the PRC’s current boundary issues. An authoritative article [5] (in Chinese language), noticed in 2005 is a case in point. It reiterated what the Historical Atlas of China mentioned above said about China’s modern borders as that existed during the Qing Dynasty period (1644-1911) and affirmed that borders of contemporary China must be seen as a continuity and succession from historic borders of the country. It further stated that the evolution of the country’s land and sea border areas was due to a multiplicity of factors like politics, military, geography, history, economy and culture. “Unless a composite view based on all factors, is taken, it may not be possible to correctly comprehend the nature of China’s borders”, it asserted. Notable also is the article’s contention that the central government had exercised absolute control over certain border territories though they had enjoyed political autonomy some times and that the border areas are of strategic importance to China, especially to counter military threat or armed aggression from abroad; this may go to justify China’s current stand on Tibet and Xinjiang, which were not formally a part of imperial China at times. With respect to sea boundaries, the article recognized the existence now of differing viewpoints internationally, but argued that it is necessary for the concerned nations to recognize China’s historical sea boundary in the background of its traditionally advanced coastal areas; this position may have a meaning with respect to China’s continuing claims over islands under dispute in South China Sea and East China Sea.

4. The PRC shares 22000 km land borders with 13 neighboring nations - the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK), Russia, Mongolia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, India, Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar, Laos and Vietnam (India’s contention is that China and Pakistan have no common border; China’s border is with a part of India’s Kashmir which is occupied by Pakistan). In this background, deserving focus are the following four key questions - why China is still unable to resolve land border issues with two of its neighbors- India and Bhutan (the PRC is not making the border with the DPRK an issue which needs to be understood in the context of special but complex ties existing between the two communist states), while it has been successful in settling disputes with others? Which of the contending neighbors gave border concessions to China during negotiations and why they did so? What are the cases when China had to yield to territorial demands from others during talks and what was its motivation in doing so? Lastly, why China has, in recent years, chosen a line of assertiveness towards its territorial claims and how that line is impacting on the regional security?

5. To examine why China still has unresolved territorial issues- three land borders with respect to India, Bhutan and the DPRK and the fourth one concerning sovereignty claims relating to maritime borders in East China Sea and South China Sea, a comprehension of relevant data would be necessary. Taking the Sino-Indian boundary problem first, a comparison of the positions of India and the PRC would be in order. India’s official stand is as under: “In the Eastern Sector, China claims approximately 90,000 square kilometers of Indian Territory in the State of Arunachal Pradesh. Indian Territory under the occupation of China in Jammu & Kashmir is approximately 38,000 sq. kms. In addition, under the so-called China-Pakistan Boundary Agreement signed between China and Pakistan on 2 March 1963, Pakistan illegally ceded 5,180 sq. kms. of Indian territory in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir to China. India and China are engaged in discussions to arrive at a fair, reasonable and mutually acceptable solution to the boundary question at an early date”.[6]
India holds that “there is no commonly delineated Line of Actual Control (LAC) between India and China. There are areas along the border where India and China have differing perceptions of the LAC. Due to both sides undertaking patrolling as per their respective perceptions of the LAC, transgressions do occur. The Indian government regularly takes up any transgression with the Chinese side through established mechanisms.[7]

6. China’s official border position [8] is as follows: “The China-India border has never been demarcated and that the Chinese government does not recognize the illegal 1914 Simla Convention agreement over McMahon line, reached by the British, Indian and the local Tibetan representatives behind the back of the Chinese government. Following independence, India inherited the British colonial legacy and in 1950s, advanced its border line with China to the McMahon line. In 1959, India also put forward its territorial claim on the Aksai Chin region of China’s Xinjiang, in the Western part of China-India border. After the China-India border war in 1962, the two countries formed the current line of control in their respective borders. The total length of China-India border is about 2000 kms. The border falls into three sectors—Eastern, Middle and Western. The total area of the region disputed by the two sides is about 125,000 sq.kms; about 90,000 sq.kms in the Eastern sector, about 2000 sq.kms in the Middle sector and about 33,000 sq.kms in the Western sector. In February 1987, India established the so called Arunachal Pradesh state largely on the three areas south of the so called McMahon line of China’s Tibet- Monyul, Loyul and Lower Tsayul, which are currently under Indian illegal occupation. These three areas located between the illegal McMahon line and the traditional customary boundary between China and India, have always been Chinese territories. The Chinese side many times made solemn and just statements that it absolutely does not recognize the illegal McMahon line and the so-called Arunachal Pradesh state”. China also points [9] to the “consensus reached with India for a fair, reasonable and mutually acceptable solution of the border issue through negotiation as well as to the two sides making up the principle of resolving the problem eventually as a package rather than step by step”.

7. One can easily see in what has been said above the deep positional differences between India and China on the border issue. They are the main reason for the issue remaining alive with no immediate prospects for a solution. Admittedly, negotiations held so far between the two sides could lead to some progress; important bilateral agreements signed by them include those on “Maintenance of Peace and Tranquility along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border Areas (1993), “ Agreement on Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for Settling Border Question (2005), “ Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on India-China Border Affairs” (2012) and “Border Defence Cooperation Agreement” (2013). The two sides have agreed on a three-step strategy for border settlement—making the guiding principle, then setting up a framework agreement to implement the guiding principle and lastly, solving the border issue. Regarding the first, they have already reached the 2005 agreement mentioned above. There is still no consensus on the second. There have so far been eighteen meetings of Special Representatives of the two countries to discuss the disputed border - last one in New Delhi in March 2015.

8. In general, deserving recognition are the efforts being taken by India and China to diffuse the border tension; they need to be understood in the context of an apparent China-India understanding that the boundary problem is complicated, requiring a long time to solve and that in the meanwhile, bilateral ties should be promoted in other fields, particularly in the economic front. Tibet issue is indirectly related to India-China boundary issue. If China is able to effectively deal with the question of the Dalai Lama, who is in exile in India with a large Tibetan ethnic refugee population, the atmosphere can perhaps ultimately become conducive to a resolution of China-India border issue; that looks
difficult at this stage.

9. The unresolved China–Bhutan border issue, also requires attention. The two nations have no diplomatic ties, but bilateral negotiations to settle the nearly 470 km border shared by them are in progress since the 1980s, under the guidance of the agreed Guiding Principles of 1988 and the Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquility in the Bhutan-China border of 1998. The last 22nd round of negotiations was held in Beijing in July 2014. Between China and Bhutan, there are three territorial areas of dispute[10] - The Jakarlung and Pasamlung valleys in the north-central border, and the Doklam plateau in Eastern Bhutan. While the two territories to the north are of interest to China due to their proximity to Tibet, as well as what it perceives as its “historic claims” to the areas, the Doklam Plateau is important to it strategically.

10. If China establishes control over Doklam plateau, it can challenge India as that region lies immediately east of Indian defences in Sikkim. This piece of dominating ground not only has a commanding view of the Chumbi Valley but also overlooks the Siliguri Corridor further to the east.” Reports suggest that China has proposed to Bhutan to cede to it the area close to Chumbi valley, a tri-junction abutting Bhutan, Tibet and the Indian state of Sikkim in lieu of which Beijing would give up its claim over Bhutan’s central areas. Chumbi valley is of geostrategic importance to China because of its shared borders with Tibet and Sikkim. The North-Western areas of Bhutan which China wants in exchange for the Central areas lie next to the Chumbi Valley tri-junction. If Bhutan cedes areas to China as mentioned above, there will be strategic implications for India’s defence of its Siliguri corridor—the chicken neck which connects India to North East India and Nepal.

11. The PRC visualizes occurrence of ‘local wars under informatisation conditions’. The belief is that such wars can be short and happen in China’s periphery, enabling China to realize limited political objectives. Can China use force to settle borders with India? The answer is affirmative considering that China’s ‘Active Defence’ strategy does not rule out the military resorting to ‘offensive operational postures’. Forceful recovery of ‘Southern Tibet’ (as China calls Arunachal) and fighting a ‘partial war’ with India were topics in the Chinese blogs not very long ago. China’s use of force to turn territorial conditions in its favour has precedence. Beijing launched ‘counter attacks in self-defence’ against Vietnam, India and former Soviet Union in 1979, 1962 and 1969 respectively. In the current period, China is indulging in a show of force in East and South China seas.

12. China’s third unresolved border is with the DPRK; for reasons quoted in Para 3 above, the two sides are not making it a bilateral issue. Their disputes concern the area surrounding Mount Paektu (referred to as Changbai Mountain in China), islands and rights of navigation in Yalu and Tumen rivers, and access to the East Sea or Sea of Japan[13]. This is so despite their agreement to split the land surrounding Paektu in 1962 and current sharing of administration over the mountain and the lake surrounding it. In recent years, China has been rapidly developing the area including building an airport and ski resort; some believe that these steps of China are aimed at bolstering its claims of sovereignty over the area. The PRC created further controversy in 2008 when it applied for the region to be considered a UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Site. There are other reports on the DPRK’s bid to host the 2018 Winter Olympics on the contested Paektu area
13. The unsolved maritime border issues are most serious for China as against competing claims of several littoral nations and the emerging regional order. Conditions in this regard put China against 8 littoral parties - Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei and Indonesia, as well as Taiwan. The PRC shares maritime borders with four countries, Japan and South Korea in the East China Sea and with the Philippines and Vietnam in the South China Sea.

14. In the East China Sea (1,249,000 sq-km), China is currently in disputes with Japan over Senkakus chain of islands (called Diao Yu by the Chinese) and with South Korea (Socotra rock, a submerged rock in the Yellow Sea). The disputes are over the extent of their respective exclusive economic zones, each resorting to different parts of the UN Conventions on the Law of the Sea. The eight uninhabited islands and rocks in the Senkakus chain have a total area of about 7 sq km and lie north-east of Taiwan, east of the Chinese mainland and south-west of Japan's southern-most prefecture, Okinawa. They, controlled by Japan, provide rich fishing grounds and lie near potential oil and gas reserves. The islands are also in a strategically significant position, amid rising competition between the US and China for military primacy in the Asia-Pacific region. China’s creation of a new air-defence identification zone (ADIZ) in November 2013, which would require any aircraft in the zone - which covers the Senkakus chain of islands - to comply with rules laid down by Beijing, assumes significance in this context. The move is being seen as one meant for China’s assertion of sovereignty over the Senkakus chain.

15. In the South China Sea (3,500,000 sq-km), one of the world’s busiest waterways with huge potential oil and gas fields to be exploited, China claims most of the water ‘based on historical facts and international law’ and shows them in its maps within its ‘nine dotted’ imaginary line. All littoral nations - Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei and Indonesia have officially challenged the Chinese South China Sea claims including on the Paracel Islands, known as Xisha in Chinese and Hoàng Sa in Vietnamese, Spratly islands (Nansha in Chinese, Truongsa in Vietnamese) and the Macclesfield Bank (Zhongsha islands in Chinese). The ASEAN has attempted to resolve the disputes through multi-lateral talks but China prefers to deal with each country on a bilateral basis. China has expressed concern at the US Asia-Pivot policy and questions the latter’s intentions behind its call for freedom of navigation in the South China Sea. China has constructed an island with room for an airstrip at Fiery Cross Reef, West of Spratlys. There is a belief that the proposed air strip is symbolic of China’s plan to create an ADIZ in South China Sea also.

16. Conclusions that can be drawn from what has been said above on China’s land and sea boundary disputes, are given below:

   - The total number of countries/territory with which China has territorial disputes as of now is 11 (India, Bhutan and the DPRK through land; Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei and Indonesia, as well as Taiwan through sea).
   - China in recent years has not resorted to wars to settle disputes; its last wars were with India in 1962 and with Vietnam in 1979. Beijing’s ongoing assertive land actions (intrusions into Indian border) and sea skirmishes do not come under the category of wars.
   - Ethnic issues are indirectly involved in China’s border problems relating to Tibet and Xinjiang. But China’s handling of such issues has been different in each of these cases. On Tibet ethnic issue, China considers it as an internal matter, not related to Sino-Indian border question as India recognizes Tibet as part of the PRC. It has established full control over Tibet and does not find the exiled
Tibetan community in India as a threat to its sovereignty over Tibet. Its only demand to India is on not allowing any anti-Chinese activities of exiled Tibetans. Coming to the ethnic issue concerning Xinjiang Uighurs, it also does not have a direct role in the PRC’s settlement of borders with Central Asian nations. China however seems to consider the ethnic separatism factor in Xinjiang serious unlike the case in Tibet; this is because of its finding that Xinjiang independence activists are getting support from bases across the borders. This has motivated China in seeking support from the concerned governments for combating the perceived security threat to Xinjiang coming from the exiled Uighur separatist groups abroad; in return, China either made territorial concessions or provided economic benefits to its Central Asian neighbors.

- China had other motives for realizing settlement of border issues. They include the need for the PRC to gain access to Central Asia energy resources. For this purpose, China realized the importance of offering a quid pro quo to the concerned regional governments. For e.g., it dropped its claim over 80% of the disputed land with Kazakhstan, invested in the 3000 km long gas pipeline project across Kazakhstan and gave up claims over 70% and around 95% respectively of the disputed territories with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. On the reverse, Tajikistan ceded 386 sq kms of Pamir mountain range to China.
- With their own strategic interests in mind, nations like Russia offered border concessions to China. Russia reached an agreement with China in July 2008 after about 40 years of border talks. Earlier, it returned to China (2004) two territories stretching 174 sq kms, located at the confluence of the rivers, Ussuri in Russia and Heilong in China, under Russian occupation since 1929; the two were Tarabarov island, called Yinlong by the Chinese and half of Bolshoy Ussuriysky island, called Heixiazi by the Chinese. (Chinese scholars feel that the issue of ‘Southern Tibet’, called Arunachal by India, can be solved through a “Heixiazi”-type formula which settled the Sino-Russian border).

17. A new dimension to unresolved land and sea territorial disputes is being noticed ever since national security interests began to dominate China’s external line in 2008; the demands on China imposed by this ‘core interest’-based foreign policy course for making no compromises on all issues concerning the country’s territorial sovereignty, have resulted in the PRC’s territorial assertiveness which is giving rise to fears among the neighboring nations about the intentions of the former. In this regard, what the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leader Xi Jinping has said (Speech delivered at a party Politburo Study session convened on 28 January 2013) are important in this connection. He declared that “China will never pursue its development at the cost of sacrificing interests of other countries …. We will never give up our legitimate rights and will never sacrifice our national core interests. No country should presume that we will engage in trade involving our core interests or that we will swallow the 'bitter fruit' of harming our sovereignty, security or development interests”.

18. The 18th CCP Congress document echoed the same spirit. It proclaimed that China’s ‘banner is to forge a win-win international cooperation’; at the same time it laid emphasis on making ‘no compromises’ on issues concerning ‘national sovereignty and security of core interests’. Most significant has been the document’s clarification that “the two aspects are pillars of Chinese diplomacy and do not conflict with each other” (People’s Daily, 16 November 2013); the mention in the document that China “will never yield to outside pressure” and “will protect legitimate rights and interests overseas”, has been noticed for the first time in a CCP congress material. On his part, the Chinese Foreign Minister explained his country’s new foreign policy direction by saying (Beijing, 8.3.2014) that the PRC “will play the international role of a responsible, big country”. This signaled a firm shift in the direction so far existed of the PRC’s external course -
‘hiding one’s capacities and biding one’s time’ (veteran leader Deng Xiaoping’s famous 24-character maxim of tao guang yang hui).

19. The post-2008 assertive international behavior of China can be attributed to a variety of factors. The change seems to have come about mainly due to (i) China’s confidence gained through its ability to achieve a sustained growth leading to a build-up of the country’s ‘comprehensive national strength’, (ii) China’s feeling that an opportunity has arisen for itself to increase its influence globally as the world balance of power shifts from the West to East and a multi-polar world gradually emerges, (iii) the PRC’s growing need to protect land and sea trade routes in the interest of the much needed import of resources from abroad and (iv) deepening Chinese fears concerning sovereignty over Tibet and Xinjiang and (v) rising suspicions on the purpose of the US Asia-Pacific strategy.

20. China’s introduction of certain new foreign policy formulations at this juncture, looks significant diplomatically as they seem to symbolize some efforts on its part to correct the existing unfavorable image for the country internationally, which obviously resulted from an assertive external approach.

21. The first new formulation is now known as “New Type of Great Power Relations’. It was promoted by the PRC President Xi Jinping in his meetings with US counterpart Barack Obama in June 2013, July 2014 and November 2014, primarily addresses Sino-US ties. It had three points – major powers should have no conflict or confrontation, should emphasize dialogue and should treat each other’s strategic intentions objectively; they should have mutual respect, including for each other’s core interests and major concerns; and they should conduct mutually beneficial cooperation, abandon the zero-sum game mentality and advance areas of mutual interest.[16] The US is reluctant to endorse the proposal; because it feels that such endorsement would imply its recognition to China’s ‘core interests’, which case will not be in its strategic interests.

22. The second is the “Community of Shared Destiny” concept, which figured in the address of the CCP chief Xi Jinping at the aforesaid Foreign Affairs Work conference. The concept, providing for realizing Asia’s economic potential and durable security, stipulated that community of destiny will be based on deep economic integration, but going beyond trade. It will be a vision of a political and security community in which economically integrated countries in the region support and defend one another from outside threats and intruders, as well as manage internal threats together through collaborative and cooperative mechanisms. Echoing the vision in the concept are China’s two mega proposals for establishing regional connectivity - the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) that would be established along the Eurasian land corridor from the Pacific coast to the Baltic Sea, and the 21st century Maritime Silk Road (MSR) connecting Asia and Europe through sea route.

23. The outside world watched with lot of interest the elevation in status by China of its relations with neighbors during the Conference on Foreign Relations, mentioned above. Ties with periphery, was brought to No.1 position, followed by those with Great Powers and Developing countries ranking No.2 and No.3 respectively. The priority shift reflected Beijing’s assessment that relations with Asian nations and with rising powers are becoming more and more important to it, than ties with the developed countries. Confirming the new Chinese thinking is Xi Jinping’s declaration that “Asians have the capacity to manage security in Asia by themselves”[17]. Experts[18] assess that the first priority to periphery reflect the Chinese perceived long-term economic and geo-political trends. Beijing has come to recognize that the
periphery is becoming increasingly vital to China’s future. China’s Vice Foreign Minister stated in April 2014 that the country’s trade with East and Southeast Asia totaled “$1.4 trillion, more than China’s trade with the United States and European Union combined.” He noted “half of China’s top ten trade partners are in Asia.” Moreover, China realizes it must secure its geostrategic flanks to prepare the country’s ascent into the upper echelons of global power.

24. Xi Jinping’s new foreign policy formulations, new Silk Road initiative and priority to China’s ties with neighbors, taken together, could be indicators that China has begun to accord primacy to economic interests in its foreign policy; this may mean emerging intention on the part of China to make adjustments to its hitherto adopted assertive core-interest based foreign policy approach. One has however to wait further for a full picture in this regard.

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[4] As in 1 above ( page 16, preface)


[6] India’s External Affairs Minister Ms Sushma Swaraj, at Rajya Sabha, New Delhi, 18.12.2014
