Eastern Asia's revitalization of the state ideal through maritime territorial disputes

Ethan Yorgason

College of Social Science, Department of Geography, Kyungpook National University, 80 Daehak-ro, Buk-gu, Daegu 41566, Republic of Korea

A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

In the midst of globalization and other processes that redefine state-territory-sovereignty relationships, reassertion of traditional state ideals is common. This article highlights one venue through which this takes place. Building on Stuart Elden's distinction between territorial sovereignty and territorial preservation as two aspects of "territorial integrity," among other conceptual guides, the article posits that strong emphasis on territorial preservation through territorial disputes in effect works to counteract territorial sovereignty's slippage. Analysis of states' semi-official prosecution of five maritime territorial disputes in eastern Asia shows various rhetorical strategies that prop up traditional notions of unbreakable bonds between state, territory, and sovereignty. These include obscuring state historicity and naturalizing the nation-state relationship, using territory to represent historical victimhood and sanctifying state territory, and using the disputes to find a place for the state within the international state system. The analyzed territorial disputes include the southern Kurils/Northern Territories (Russia vs. Japan), Dokdo/Takeshima (Korea/Japan), Senkaku/Diaoyutai (Japan/China), Paracels (China/Vietnam), Spratlys (Vietnam/Philippines/China, especially).

An important element in most interstate territorial disputes, usually emanating from both sides, is the call to preserve *territorial integrity*. The term reminds us that territory is not a morally neutral category. Rather, states and citizens imbue territory with cultural meaning that carries far beyond its economic or strategic value. Territory's "integrity" emerges in part through frequent analogy to human bodies. It implies indivisibility and existential autarky for particular territorial configurations. Or, as Stuart Elden, one of geography's leading historians and theorists of territory, has observed (2005), the idea of territorial integrity consists of two main norms: territorial (boundary) preservation and territorial sovereignty (for a state within boundaries). This article builds on Elden's key point that these two aspects may follow differing trajectories. For example, he argues, the early twenty-first century U.S./U.K. military invasion of Iraq severely violated territorial sovereignty, partly in an apparent effort to uphold territorial preservation. While utilizing Elden's insight, the paper shifts the focus slightly. Analyzing examples from five eastern Asian maritime territorial disputes, I argue that territorial preservation may sometimes in effect 'come to the rescue' of territorial sovereignty.

In other words, in this age in which globalization often erodes states' territorial sovereignty, efforts at territorial preservation maintain and perhaps even strengthen the ideal of territorial integrity. The process perpetuates long-standing assumptions about nation-states. The article thus adds to reminders not to forget that traditional modern territorial nation-state ideals remain and even thrive amid globalization (Murphy, 2010, 2013; Agnew, 2010; Antonsich, 2009, 2010).[1] The first section specifies the theoretical issues. I next briefly introduce the disputes and explain the study's methodology. The analysis then highlights three ways in which prosecution of the territorial disputes—attempts at territorial preservation—reinvigorates traditional nation-state territorial ideals.

1. Contested state territory in a global era

Modern states' specificity derives from a Western scientific notion of calculable space along with an expectation of exclusive

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[1] "Traditional" and "modern" are not antonyms here. By traditional modern state ideals, I mean ideals of territorial discreteness and exclusive sovereignty that began to congeal with the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia and dominated world politics during the twentieth century.

E-mail address: yorgason@knu.ac.kr.

control over specific terrain. The political concept, and technology, of territory fuses these characteristics (Elden, 2010a; Hannah, 2009; Thongchai, 1994). Modern state territoriality tends toward careful and mutually exclusive delimitation and tenacious defense. With a recognition of finite resources, most of which come from the land, many justify this tendency as a prerequisite for an ordered and peaceful world (Chaturvedi & Painter, 2007; Reeves, 2011). Through such territorial control states gain greater capacity to wage war and otherwise compete with one another, as well as to produce, manage, distribute, and control wealth. But state territory also becomes valuable through cultural and emotional association with particular groups—as in the term *homeland*. It becomes a symbol of identity and corporate unity, often regardless of state success in using territory to help people flourish or provide 'objective' benefits.

Territorial integrity is vital to this symbolic function. The notion relies on the metaphor of a social body. Thus Thongchai's (1994) "geo-body" concept usefully explicates what is usually implicit. Advocacy of territorial integrity conveys worries about severing territory or the pain (or even humiliation: Callahan, 2004; 2010) caused by relinquishing even a small piece of territory. Dividing or sharing state territory almost never seems viable since the territorial body seems ontologically indivisible (Berg, 2009; Murphy, 2013; Newman, 2006). The body has long represented sovereignty, but with modernity the locus of sovereignty shifted from the body of the monarch to the body politic (Agnew, 2009), with its own geo-body. National self-determination is now typically seen as the justifying principle for state territorial integrity (El Ouali, 2006; Miller, 2012). Redrawing boundaries within the international political system comes to be seen *ipso facto* as a violent, illegitimate, and perhaps even unnatural act against not only the state but also the nation (Agnew, 2009; Elden, 2005).

Elden (2005, 2010b) usefully differentiates two aspects of territorial integrity: territorial sovereignty and territorial preservation. The first emphasizes sovereignty within a territory; the second, resistance to border changes. In recent decades, he argues, territorial preservation has trumped territorial sovereignty (see also Berg, 2009; Gunter, 1979). World powers prioritize maintaining existing state borders over non-involvement in other states' 'internal affairs,' sometimes disregarding the latter to achieve the former (Elden, 2005; El Ouali, 2006, 2010). Elden, as well as many who have picked up on these aspects within territorial integrity, expose ironies in relations between hegemonic and less powerful states. And rightly so. But I think the point has broader application. Territorial integrity's two aspects may, somewhat differently, explicate struggles over territory elsewhere.

Globalization calls territorial sovereignty into question more strongly than it does territorial preservation. Agnew (2009) argues that sovereignty regimes involve the territorial state less exclusively as recent globalization proceeds. If this is the case, we should expect states, their agents, and their ideological supporters to attempt to protect state power and traditionally presumed prerogatives. Indeed, I suggest, eastern Asian's maritime territorial disputes—struggles over territorial integrity—shore up traditional modern state ideals. In attempting to preserve (specific instances of) state boundaries they also ideologically counteract and mask slippages in territorial sovereignty. This is not an argument about intentionality. State actors may directly perceive erosion of territorial sovereignty and strategically respond, of course, but the relationship is likely much more indirect. I suspect, rather, that actions supporting territorial preservation often feel appropriate to state proponents against a backdrop of dimly perceived or diffuse concerns about territorial sovereignty. While the balance between territorial sovereignty and territorial preservation may shift in the process, longstanding ideologies of territorial nation-statehood, including territorial integrity itself, remain.

In the modern state system, especially as interpreted through traditions of international law, people commonly imagine state territoriality as a zero-sum game. Territory becomes a key measure of state power and source of national pride. Disputed territory presents itself as an inherent problem requiring a final resolution in favor of one state or another. Disputed territory always means potential conflict and possible war because control of territory seems to be states' *raison d'être*. Disputes are thus easily framed—where political will exists—as direct threats to a state's state-ness.

Territorial disputes arise for many reasons. Among the most common are imprecisely worded or still-debated treaties, debatable histories of "discovery" or "control," presence of minority groups with cultural-historical connections to other states, shifting expectations among states prior to and after the advent of international law, discovery of resources, desire to reclaim territory previously claimed or controlled, and shifting control of marginal areas at wars' or empires' end. Similarly, states claim disputed territory on a variety of grounds (Sumner, 2004). Many appeal to international law's priority for treaties, effective control and *uti posseditis*, for example. With somewhat less likelihood for legal (but perhaps greater likelihood for popular) persuasion, states also frequently invoke "natural" geographic fit or history to claim rightful ownership (Burghardt, 1973; Murphy, 1990).

Whatever the basis, the territorial imaginations through which states and supporters make territorial claims help explain their stubbornness in these claims. Hans Vollaard uses the term "fictive fixity" (2009, p. 693). He means the sense that territorial borders always have been and will always be as they are imagined now to be. Such imaginations help explain the enduring power of the territorial preservation aspect of territorial integrity. Territories, like bodies, are supposed to have a long, morphologically unchanging existence. Territorial conflict also strongly impacts territorial sovereignty—Elden's second aspect of territorial integrity. As Agnew notes, "However much the world economy's violation of territorial spaces and rethinking the idea of territory may undermine [the sovereignty-territory nexus] …, there are continuing powerful social pressures 'from below' to keep it in place." Nationalist pressures, he explains, "[constantly invoke] border threats and dangers to the territorial integrity of the nation-hyphen-state" (2010, p. 782; see also Murphy, 2010).

Whether from 'below' or 'above,' this relationship between nationalism and state territorial integrity gives territorial conflict much of its ideological power. For one thing, nationalists often root their identity in territory and regard state territorial integrity as akin to the health of the nation (Agnew, 2009; Callahan, 2010). But more importantly here, the relationship also operates in the other direction. Prosecution of territorial conflicts almost necessarily enrolls states in projects of self-definition vis–à–vis nations and the modern state system.[2] These projects define state territory in spatial relation to other claimant states. But they also reinforce relationships traditionally understood to exist in the modern state system and between nations and states. In other words, one of territorial conflict's byproducts is ideological support for traditional nation-states.

The analysis of eastern Asian territorial disputes that follows

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[2] I say territorial conflict "almost necessarily" enrolls states in such projects because state actors make choices. It is possible to imagine competing states' technocrats solving territorial disputes with little recourse to nationalism, for example, or much ideological impact on the state system more generally. But this technical possibility often gets turned into political impossibility.