



The Future of Conquest

Fights Over Small Places Could Spark the Next Big War

BY DAN ALTMAN September 24, 2021

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The relationship between conquest and conflict may seem straightforward: start a war, prevail on the battlefield, take control of desired territory. Yet more and more, this is not how states take each other's land. Instead, they use a different strategy: seize a small piece of territory quickly and with minimal bloodshed, then try to avoid war. Today, conquest looks like what Russia did in Crimea and what China could do once again in the South China Sea.

For the last 20 years, scholars have agreed that conquest has steeply declined, perhaps nearing the point when it will cease altogether. A global norm of respecting countries' territorial integrity, which has been backed by U.S. power, is thought to have become so strong that conquest has largely subsided. This shared understanding that it is unacceptable to take territory by force is believed to have taken hold after World War II and come close to ending conquest by the late 1970s. In his influential 2011 book on the global decline of violence, Steven Pinker was one of many scholars who found reasons for optimism in this decline: "Zero is also the number of times that any country has conquered even parts of some other country since 1975."

That portrayal of conquest's demise is hopeful, but it is not accurate. Conquest remains a central issue in international politics—it has merely become smaller. Yes, attempts to conquer entire countries became rare after World War II: more than 30 years have passed since the last wholesale conquest of a country, when Iraq briefly conquered Kuwait. But there have been more than 70 attempts to conquer territory since 1945. As a rule of thumb, modern conquests ordinarily seize territories no larger than one province in size and typically much smaller. When the aggressor seizes only a small piece of territory rather than an entire country, the international community rarely intervenes to defend the victim. Indeed, attempts to conquer territory succeed about as often as they did a century ago: approximately half the time.

There is a clear strategy behind these small conquests. The idea is to take a small enough piece of land that the victim will relent to its loss rather than escalate the conflict to retake it. This strategy provokes war much less often than attempting to conquer countries outright. It succeeds much more frequently than diplomatic threats.

Small conquests are not new; they are an age-old practice. However, they are now more important than ever before because, like civil wars, they have persisted as larger conquests and great-power wars have declined.

Looking only at the U.S. experience, it is easy to miss the importance of small conquests. Over the past two decades, for example, the United States has intervened in other countries' civil wars, such as in Syria and Libya, and invaded countries to impose regime change, as in Afghanistan and Iraq. Some believe these wars are a glimpse into the future, while conquest is a relic of the past. The reason for this misconception is that U.S. interventions in wars of conquest are comparatively rare: while Washington has intervened to oppose the relatively infrequent attempts to conquer entire countries, as in the Korean and Gulf Wars, it has stayed on the sidelines during the much larger number of conquests of only parts of countries.

Unless the United States embraces a level of restraint not attempted since Pearl Harbor, sitting out future territorial conflicts may not come as easily as in the past. Too many of the world's most dangerous flash points pit China or Russia against U.S. allies threatened by conquest. Understanding how these flash points could erupt is essential to understanding the globe's future conflicts and the dilemmas that await the United States in the years ahead.

SMALL TERRITORIES, LARGE CONSEQUENCES

In May 2020, Chinese soldiers encroached into territory along their country's disputed border with India. They advanced in several areas of the mountainous Ladakh region, taking positions patrolled but not permanently occupied by Indian forces. Though initially bloodless, their advance precipitated a June 2020 clash that killed 20 Indian soldiers and four Chinese soldiers, marking the gravest crisis between the world's two most populous nations in over a half century. Eschewing guns to limit the risks of escalation, the two sides fought with makeshift weapons that included clubs studded with nails or wrapped in barbed wire.

Medieval weaponry aside, this is a textbook example of modern conquest. These small territory grabs are most common in Asia and also continue to emerge in the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, and eastern Europe. Such maneuvers usually avoid war but nonetheless always represent a gamble about how the other side will respond. Indeed, the miscalculated small conquest ranks among the most important causes of modern war. That is what happened in 1962, in much the same area that continues to raise tensions along the Chinese-Indian border. At the time, both countries sought to strengthen their claims over the disputed territory and advanced in small slices, built posts to expand their control, and attempted to block each other's encroachments. This strategic gamesmanship remained bloodless for months, but China eventually upended the playing board and attacked, beginning the Sino-Indian War. That war continues to cast a pall over relations between China and India and spurred India to develop nuclear weapons.

Some conflicts over small territorial grabs escalate into larger wars with lasting consequences. In 1978, for example, Uganda seized the small territory known as the Kagera Salient from Tanzania. Rather than accept the loss, Tanzanian forces attacked, retook it, and then continued on to Uganda's capital of Kampala, where they ousted the infamous dictator Idi Amin. The genocidal Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia met its demise under similar circumstances, when its aggressive encroachments along its border with Vietnam provoked the Vietnamese to invade.

The two most violent conflicts ever fought primarily between nuclear powers arose over small territories whose importance seems grossly out of proportion to the risk of nuclear war. In 1999, Pakistan infiltrated military forces disguised as Kashmiri militants to seize several strategic hills on India's side of the Line of Control. India suffered hundreds of casualties in the fighting to expel them. In 1969, fighting broke out between China and the Soviet Union over Zhenbao Island in the Ussuri River. Both conflicts raised fears of nuclear escalation from around the world.

Looking forward, possible Chinese and Russian conquests loom as many of the most consequential and plausible scenarios for conflicts among the world's great powers. But they are not the only potential conquests that should concern policymakers: enduring rivalry between India and Pakistan will continue to present opportunities for territorial encroachments in Kashmir. The Abyei dispute between Sudan and South Sudan is merely one of many potential flash points that may not make headlines until it is too late. Appreciating the importance of small conquests and understanding how they have played out historically can help policymakers to manage them more effectively—or prevent them altogether.

CHINA AND THE FUTURE OF CONQUEST

Whether and where China seizes territory will be defining facts about the twenty-first century. As the country grows more economically and militarily powerful, disputes with many of its neighbors threaten to lead to war.

Nowhere have China's territorial ambitions more often created tensions than the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea. China claims sovereignty over all the Spratly Islands but currently occupies only a minority of them. Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Taiwan control the remainder. These islands, which are so small that they qualify merely as rocks under international law, are precisely the type of territory that still falls victim to conquest.

Since 1918, there have been 28 instances of a country seizing one or more islands from another in peacetime. Only one—Argentina's ill-fated attempt to take the Falkland Islands in 1982—led to war. While the Falklands War invalidates any easy dismissal of concerns that seizing islands can spark serious conflicts, it represents the exception, not the rule. In a majority of island seizures—15 out of 28—the territory grab did not result in even a single fatality. This track record underscores why China might expect to get away with seizing islands.

The South China Sea is no stranger to such events. There is a history of countries accepting the loss of small islands to conquest, choosing peace over such minor pieces of territory. China clashed with South Vietnam over the Paracel Islands in 1974, ultimately seizing and holding them ever since. In 1988, China and Vietnam battled over Johnson South Reef in the Spratlys, with China again prevailing. Although the success rate of conquest attempts is around 50 percent overall, it rises to 75 percent when islands alone are seized.

There is too little appreciation in Washington for how historically exceptional—even aberrant—it would be for the United States to engage in hostilities with China over the Spratly Islands.

Despite frequent interventions overseas, Washington has never intervened militarily to defend another country's sovereignty when an aggressor seized an island or small border region. Indeed, the past century contains no instances where any country fired even one shot in response to the seizure of another country's outlying islands—and only a handful of cases for small territories along land borders. Interventions to oppose conquests of entire countries were more common, but they remain rare for smaller territories.

China could also find itself in conflict with Japan over the Senkaku Islands (known in China as the Diaoyu Islands), an assortment of barren rocks in the East China Sea. Although Japan is more powerful than the claimants at odds with China over the Spratlys, it faces a disadvantage in the Senkakus: the islands are currently empty. No Japanese troops are stationed there as a tripwire to bolster deterrence. No Japanese civilians live there. Both increase the chances of China successfully seizing the islands while avoiding war, presenting Japan with a *fait accompli*.

Chinese soldiers unexpectedly occupying the Senkakus is the most likely pathway to armed conflict between China and Japan. In this scenario, Beijing would take the islands without firing a shot, but Tokyo would not then have the option to recover them. This could leave the Japanese government with an unenviable choice: attack Chinese forces or tacitly acquiesce to their presence by responding with only diplomatic and economic measures. Japan may come to regret having refrained from deploying and maintaining troops in the Senkakus long ago, when China was weaker.

Unlike these outlying islands, Taiwan boasts a globally integrated economy, a capable military, a vibrant democracy, and a population of 24 million. Its violent subjugation would send geopolitical shock waves worldwide. Of course, Beijing would deny that invading Taiwan constitutes conquest; instead, China would regard the island as its rightful territory. The few countries that attempted to conquer another outright since World War II expounded variations of this argument: North Korea's and North Vietnam's respective claims on their southern counterparts were straightforward; Iraq advanced arguments that Kuwait was historically part of its territory when it invaded in 1990; and Indonesia did the same while conquering Timor-Leste in 1975. Yet those same precedents offer reason for optimism, because they are so few.

Although an outright invasion of Taiwan does not fit the mold of modern conquest, seizing small Taiwanese-held islands does. It would be a mistake to plan for a potential Chinese invasion, blockade, or aerial bombardment of Taiwan while neglecting the more likely scenario of China seizing outlying Taiwanese islands.

Taiwan controls Kinmen and Matsu, islands located within artillery range of the Chinese coast. Seizing these islands would allow Beijing to rally the Chinese people around the flag, send a clear message of intimidation to Taiwan, and risk a military confrontation on the most favorable ground possible. It would also confront Washington with a dismal set of options: either intervene close to the Chinese mainland to defend small islands or be accused of abandoning Taiwan to suffer defeat alone.

Taiwan also holds the largest of the Spratly Islands, Itu Aba, and the Pratas Islands in the South China Sea. Although tensions pitting China against the Philippines or Vietnam have received greater attention, the deep divisions between Beijing and Taipei suggest that China might prefer to advance its claim to the Spratlys by assailing Taiwan. It is hard to escape the conclusion that China is more likely to seize Itu Aba than any other defended area among its many territorial disputes.

Finally, the extensive, rugged border between China and India will always furnish undefended areas that provide fertile ground for territory grabs. Most crises like that which occurred in Ladakh will end without war. However, the risk of war is real, as is the prospect for years, even decades, of standoffs that sow the seeds of future conflicts. More optimistically, a minority of these episodes have ended in mutual pullback deals like those India and China negotiated in February 2021 for areas around Pangong Lake, in Ladakh.

However, New Delhi cannot put too much faith in the staying power of such agreements. Mutual pullbacks create neutral zones between Chinese and Indian forces that become tempting targets for future territory grabs.

RUSSIA AND THE FUTURE OF CONQUEST

No event brought more troubling changes to European security since the end of the Cold War than Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine. Seizing and annexing Crimea and its more than two million inhabitants shattered the false hope that conquest was a thing of the past in Europe. It underscores why the next Russian conquest is the most pressing foreign threat to European stability. The question is, where will it occur?

The worst-case scenario envisions Russia openly invading the Baltics—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. These NATO members were once part of the Soviet Union and contain Russian-speaking minorities. NATO planners fear a Russian advance through Belarus to close the Suwalki gap, the narrow land connection between Poland and the Baltics, and conquer all three countries.

Although any scenario this grave deserves serious assessment, the modern history of conquest provides reason to believe it is unlikely. A Russian attempt to conquer three countries outright—after only four total attempts to do so since 1945—would be the most aggressive action taken by any nation since World War II. And it would also represent a departure from Russian behavior, as Moscow has pursued conquest only when it could do so without undue risk of provoking a major war.

The more likely scenario is a sudden Russian seizure of a smaller area. The Estonian town of Narva, which juts into Russia and contains a mostly Russian-speaking population, offers one such target. Even there, it would be unusual for a country to seize territory to which it has no long-standing public claim. The fact that Moscow has not articulated such claims in the Baltics is encouraging, though Russia's willingness to engineer rationales to justify its conquest of Crimea should temper any optimism.

The presence of NATO troops serving as a tripwire deployment in the Baltics further reinforces deterrence against Russian invasion. History even suggests that deterring Russia would not require NATO to maintain enough military strength in eastern Europe to immediately repel an invasion. For every attempted conquest defeated short of its objectives, there have been several where the aggressor achieved its aims only to be driven out by political pressure or—more often—military force. Russia would have no sound historical basis for imagining that a conflict would fortuitously end after initial advances but before NATO mobilizes.

Although the history of modern conquest provides reasons for optimism in the Baltics, further Russian encroachments in Ukraine and Georgia remain all too plausible. Neither Ukraine nor Georgia is a treaty ally of the United States. No U.S. or NATO tripwire force is forthcoming.

In Ukraine's Donbas region and Georgia's South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Russia has partnered with (ostensibly) local rebels, embracing the art of seizing territory while obscuring its own role. Removing insignia from the uniforms of "green men" lent Russia's conquest of Crimea a threadbare fig leaf of deniability. Given its success with these tactics, Moscow may well try them again in Ukraine, in Georgia, and even against NATO allies such as Estonia.

There is nothing novel or inventive about these tactics. In 1919, ironically, Finland attempted to capitalize on the chaos of the Russian civil war by sending thousands of soldiers disguised as independent volunteers to occupy the border region of East Karelia. The Red Army defeated the invading force. In 1999, the Indian Army similarly defeated the Kashmiri militants who were in actuality Pakistani soldiers.

When possible, the best response to "green men" tactics is to defeat the incursion as if the opposition were truly rebels while not engaging Russia otherwise. Russia cannot maintain the ruse and intervene fully, such as with airpower operating from Russian bases. And by allowing Moscow to deny that it had been defeated, this approach offers the hope that Russia will accept a limited failure rather than escalate the conflict. In Karelia and Kashmir, that approach worked to help its partners strengthen themselves, equipping them to prevail in such fights. Ukrainian and Georgian military capabilities—and their presence in border areas—are what will matter most for deterring future Russian conquests.

THE UNITED STATES AND THE FUTURE OF CONQUEST

Even though small territorial grabs occur almost routinely across the globe, the United States has responded in the same way nearly every time: by staying out. Only Iraq's and North Korea's attempts to conquer neighbors outright provoked American military intervention. This sobering track record underscores why small conquests are poised to confound U.S. policy in the years ahead.

Today, small conquests directly threaten U.S. allies and partners in Asia and Europe. Such operations rest primarily on a calculation about what can be seized without sparking a war based on the national interests of those involved. They only secondarily revolve around a military calculation, and the balance of power is not a strong predictor of the outcomes of small conquests. Increasing U.S. defense spending or deploying more forces to Asia or Europe would contribute only at the margins. China and Russia will naturally doubt whether U.S. alliances, designed with larger aggressions in mind, extend to small territories. History even suggests that Washington cannot assume its allies would request U.S. military intervention to expel, for instance, Chinese forces from seized islands.

There is compelling evidence for only one approach to deterring small conquests: tripwire forces. For decades, NATO's tripwire barred off the Soviet Union and preserved the West Berlin enclave deep inside East Germany—notwithstanding the fact that West Berlin was hopelessly surrounded and indefensible. The United States maintained a tripwire in South Korea for all but one of the last 75 years; that one year was when North Korea invaded. A tripwire is poised to continue ensuring the security of the Baltic states in the years to come.

Conversely, U.S. deterrence in many of its potential flash points with China suffers because American tripwire forces are absent. There are no tripwires protecting the Senkakus, the Spratlys, and Taiwan and little political will to deploy them going forward. Against Russia, the same is true for Ukraine and Georgia. Where the United States is unwilling, partner state tripwires are the strongest tool available, but they are no guarantor of success.

A future of great-power competition with China and Russia conjures images of world wars, cyberwars, and trade wars. Those threats are real, but history tells us that—strange as it may seem—sudden seizures of small territories will continue to be the most common spark for wars and near wars between powerful nations. Despite the small size of the territories seized, these events are not of small importance. And the world has not seen the last of them.

