

# THE GEOPOLITICAL WEAPONIZATION OF MAPS BY CHINA



**DISPUTED CLAIMS  
IN THE STANDARD  
MAP OF CHINA**



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# The Geopolitical Weaponization of Maps by China

## Introduction




Maps, traditionally considered reliable guides through the tapestry of global landscapes, serve as crucial instruments in shaping our understanding of geopolitical boundaries. While designed to illuminate the complexities between nations and territories, maps can, at times, be wielded as potent tools for political influence. In the contemporary geopolitical arena, China has encountered scrutiny for its release of maps that appear to deviate from established cartographic norms, potentially serving political and territorial agendas. This comprehensive investigative report by Investigative Journalism Reportika aims to scrutinize the contentious matter of distorted maps released by China, shedding light on the implications these cartographic representations may hold within the broader geopolitical landscape.

## The History of Chinese Maps

Tracing the chronological course of Chinese history, this report unveils the dynamic evolution of territorial landscapes across key dynasties and epochs. Commencing around 1600 BC with the Shang/Yin Dynasty, the exploration delves into the complex interplay of power, conquests, and shifting boundaries that characterize China's past. Successive dynasties, including the Zhou, Qin, and Han, contribute to the geopolitical mosaic, ruling over diverse kingdoms that governed distinct regions of ancient China. The Sui and Tang Dynasties mark transformative periods, wherein different kingdoms held sway over various parts of the Chinese realm.

Notably, the Yuan Dynasty excludes territories later claimed by modern China. While the Ming Dynasty predates the Qing, celebrated for its imperial zenith, it is crucial to note the incongruity between historical imperial claims and modern China's expansionist policies, evident in contested areas on contemporary maps.

This mismatch in historical Chinese maps and the new areas claimed by China has led to a situation of distrust and escalating tensions among its neighbors such as Taiwan, Japan, South Korea, Mongolia, Bhutan, and India, as well as nations surrounding the South China Sea. The report sheds light on the intricate and dynamic evolution of China's territorial assertions throughout its historical continuum, highlighting contemporary challenges stemming from conflicting territorial claims.

Dynasty and Time Period	Approximate territory of the Dynasty
<p>Shang / Yin Dynasty  Date: 1600 BC- 1045 BC</p>	 <p>Investigative Journalism Reportika</p>
<p>Zhou Dynasty  Date: 1046 BC – 256 BC</p>	 <p>Investigative Journalism Reportika</p> <p>1000 BC  ● Zhou Dynasty</p>
<p>Qin Dynasty  Date: 221 BC to 207 BC</p>	 <p>The State of Qin  c. 260 BCE</p> <p>Legend  □ State Capital Area  --- Fumined Border  ○ City/Town</p> <p>Investigative Journalism Reportika</p>

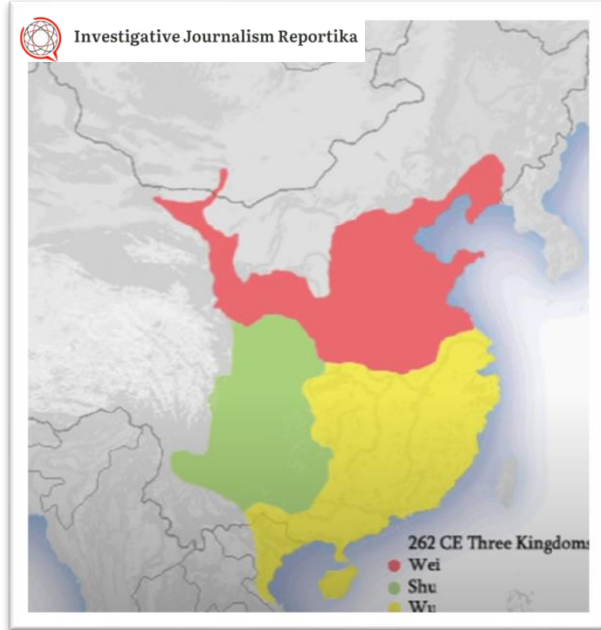
Warring states conquered by Qin Subsequently

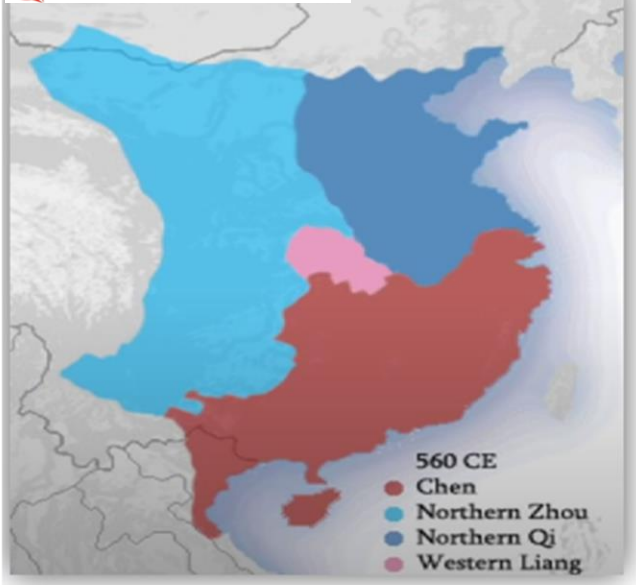


Han Dynasty  
Date : 202 BC – 9 AD; 25–220 AD



Different Kingdoms ruling different parts of then China



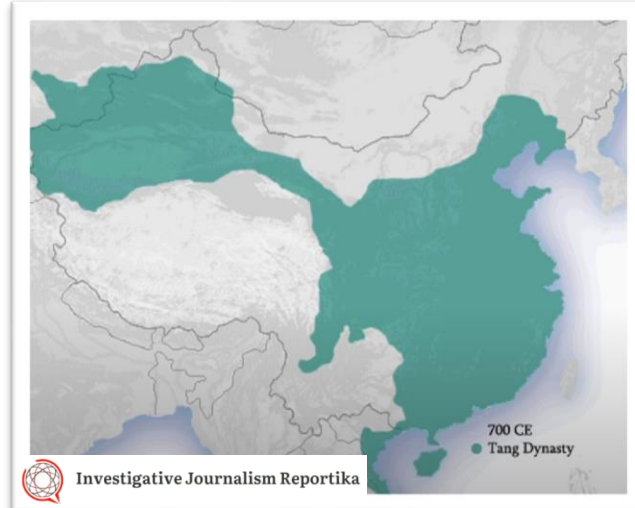


Sui Dynasty  
Date : 581–618 AD



**Tang Dynasty**

**Date :** 618–690, 705–907AD



**Yuan Dynasty**

**Date:** 1271–1368 AD



This was the first biggest kingdom in the Medieval Ages in China. Many parts claimed by Modern China are not included in this map.

**Ming Dynasty**

**Date:** 1368–1644 AD

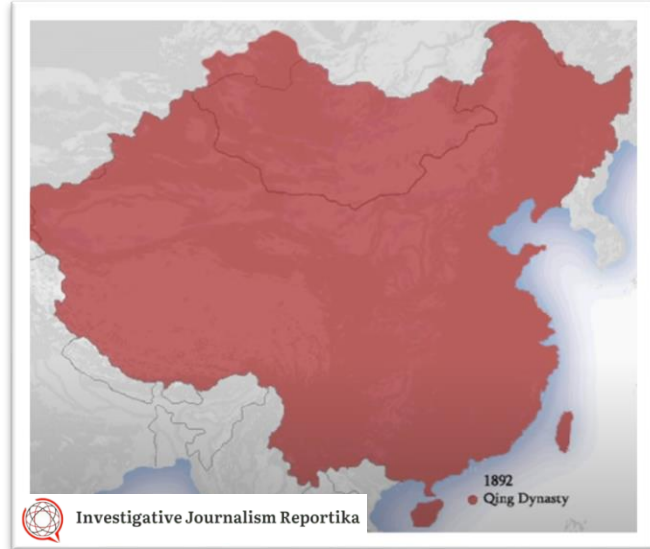


The historical map from the Ming Era excludes numerous regions later asserted by China, such as Tibet, Taiwan, disputed islands with Japan in the East China Sea, and areas in the South China Sea, along with portions of Bhutan, Nepal, and India.



## Qing Dynasty

Date: 1636–1912 AD



This map, often referenced by China as a historical source highlighting the largest Chinese empire, omits contested territories that China claims in Bhutan, Nepal, India, and the South China Sea (indicated by the "nine-dash line").

## The Context of Distorted Maps

**Map :** China (Disputed map released by China)

**Date :** 2023

Standard Map Released by China



In the context of China's geopolitical manoeuvring, a notable development unfolded on August 28, 2023, with the release of an updated map encompassing contested claims along its western border with India, the South China Sea, and Taiwan. Unveiled during the "National Mapping Awareness Publicity Week," the 2023 edition, hosted on the Ministry of Natural Resources' cartographic service website, signifies more than a routine cartographic update.

The updated map notably includes contentious areas such as the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh, a region China considers the southern part of Tibet, and Aksai Chin, a disputed region in Ladakh occupied by China since the 1962 Sino-Indian War. Additionally, a distinctive feature is the delineation of a "ten-dash line" around the South China Sea and Taiwan, intensifying maritime disputes with Southeast Asian nations. The Philippines, Malaysia, Taiwan, India and Vietnam have rejected the map as baseless. In response to widespread rejection by numerous nations, China asserted that its maps should be considered with a rational and objective lens as it sought to justify the demarcations

This cartographic move intertwines with the broader geopolitical competition between China and the United States, particularly evident in the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait. The region has witnessed frequent naval exercises, amplifying threat perceptions and insecurities on both sides. The economic interdependence of India and Southeast Asia with

China adds complexity to the situation, despite territorial disputes. Simultaneously, the economic ties between the United States and China, coupled with global technological rivalry, contribute to the intricate web of geopolitical dynamics.

Read Investigative Journalism Reportika Report on Chinese Dubious Maritime Activities and Distant Water Fishing (DWF) to assert its claims in South China Sea in the report: [An Investigation into the Dubious Chinese Distant-Water Fishing Fleet \(DWF\)](#)

## Country Specific Case Studies

### Bhutan

The longstanding border negotiations between China and Bhutan, spanning a 470-kilometer stretch, have been ongoing since 1984. However, it's essential to recognize that China's territorial claims date back much earlier, going as far back as the 1950s. China began publishing maps asserting territorial claims over Bhutanese territory during this period. These maps covered a substantial 764 square km, encompassing 269 square km in the northwestern areas and 495 square km in north-central Bhutan.

Specifically, China's claims extended to regions such as Doklam, Sinchulung, Dramana, and Shakhatoe in the northwestern part of Bhutan. In the central portion, the disputed areas included the Pasamlung and Jakarlung Valleys. These claims were a point of contention and dispute between China and Bhutan for decades. Interestingly, these earlier territorial claims did not reference any dispute in the eastern region of Bhutan, a stark contrast to China's current stance, which asserts a territorial dispute covering a vast 3,300 square km in the easternmost part of Bhutan.

**Map :** Bhutan

**Date :** 2020

Map of Bhutan with parts claimed by China



In July 2017, a blog post on sina.com, which has been subsequently hidden, presented two maps depicting the disputed borders between Bhutan and China. The map delineated the Bhutan-China boundary from the Chinese perspective, marked in red, while the Bhutanese interpretation was represented in blue. Interestingly, the map also featured a yellow line denoting the Sino-Indian boundary in the Tawang area, adding an additional layer of complexity to the ongoing border disputes.

Within these maps, there were seven items of interest. The initial six items addressed decades old Chinese claims, encompassing areas like Doklam, Dramana, Shakhatoe, Pasamlung, and Jakarlung. However, a noteworthy item appeared on the far right of the map, linked to the eastern region where the Sakteng wildlife reserve is situated.

China has asserted a territorial claim over the Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuary in Bhutan, contending that it falls within disputed areas between the two countries. This claim was brought to attention during a UNDP-led Global Environment Facility (GEF) conference in June, 2020, where China attempted to halt funding for the sanctuary. The surprising aspect of China's claim is its suddenness, as it had not previously objected to such funding, and the fact that the Trashigang area, where the sanctuary is located, does not share a border with China.

Moreover, in 24 rounds of boundary talks between China and Bhutan since 1984, the eastern boundary had not been raised until now. Bhutan rejected China's claim and secured GEF funding for the sanctuary, asserting that it is an integral and sovereign part of Bhutan. Despite initially standing firm, Bhutan has indicated a willingness to address the dispute in the next round of China-Bhutan talks, following repeated claims by China in recent months.

**Map :** Bhutan (With Parts claimed by China)

**Date :** 1980s

In a July 2017 blog post on the sina.com site, which has since been encrypted, the disputed borders between Bhutan and China have been depicted. There are seven items mentioned in the map that purports to show the Chinese version of the Bhutan-China boundary in red and the Bhutanese version in blue. The origin of the map is not clear, though it says it is from the 1980s.



**Map :** Bhutan’s Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuary and parts of India

**Date :** 2006

The area including Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuary made news in June 2020 when the Chinese government reaffirmed that it is a territory disputed between China and Bhutan. Bhutan rejected the assertion, and denied that China had ever laid claim to the area in the past.



## Nepal

**Map** : Nepal (Humla District)

**Date** : 2022

China encroaching along Nepal border- Report.

Courtesy : BBC



In the far west of Nepal's Humla district, an official report commissioned by the Nepalese government was leaked to the BBC, marking the first-ever claims of Chinese encroachment into Nepal along their shared border. The report followed allegations that China had trespassed in the Humla district of Nepal's far west.

The motives behind China's actions remained unclear, with potential reasons including security concerns, concerns about infiltration from outside forces, and a desire to disconnect relations across the border. Additionally, China could have been concerned about movement in the opposite direction, particularly from Tibet, where many had fled to escape perceived repression. The dispute had led to protests in Kathmandu and had stirred tensions in the region, but the Chinese embassy maintained that there was no dispute.

CGTN @CGTNOfficial · May 2

In pictures 📷: An extraordinary sun halo was spotted Friday in the skies over Mount #Qomolangma, also known as Mount Everest, the world's highest peak located in China's #Tibet Autonomous Region



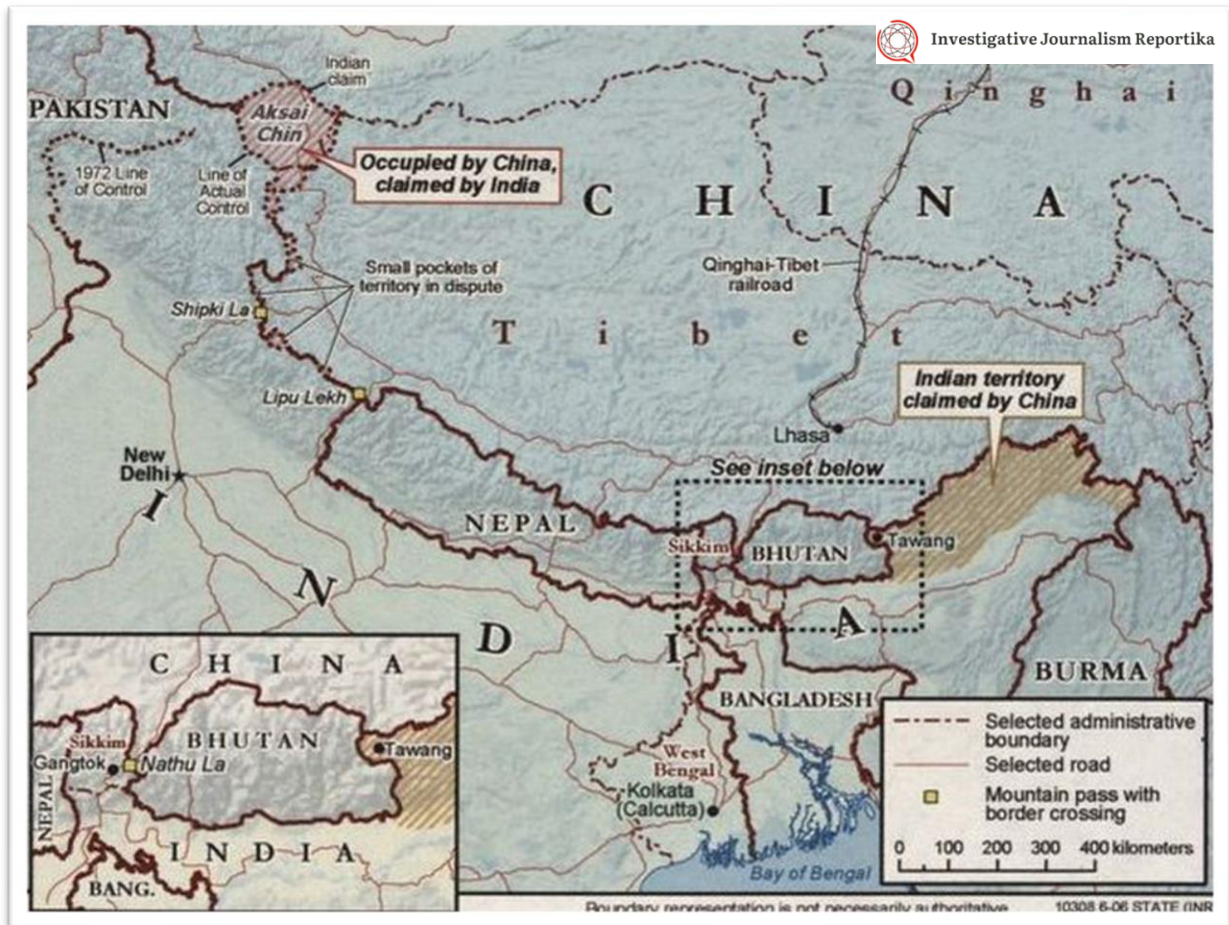
In a noteworthy incident reported by the state-owned Chinese media outlet China Global Television Network (CGTN) in 2020, a tweet posted on May 2 initially asserted that Mount Chomolungma, globally known as Mount Everest and recognized as the world's highest peak, is situated in China's Tibet Autonomous Region. However, CGTN later issued a revised tweet acknowledging the accurate geographical location, stating that the peak is positioned on the China-Nepal border. This revision came after sharp criticism and uproar from Nepali citizens, prompting a correction.

## India

**Map :** India (Shows southern part of China and northern part of India. Border disputes marked)

**Date :** 2006

Line of Actual Control between China and India (Map by the CIA).



The enduring border dispute between India and China stands as a multifaceted and deeply rooted issue, tracing its historical origins back to the 19th century. This ongoing challenge has evolved over time, shaped by a complex interplay of historical events, diplomatic agreements, and geopolitical shifts. To unravel the layers of this intricate matter, let's delve into a summary of its key points, providing insight into the complexities that continue to shape the dynamics between these two nations:

### Aksai Chin:

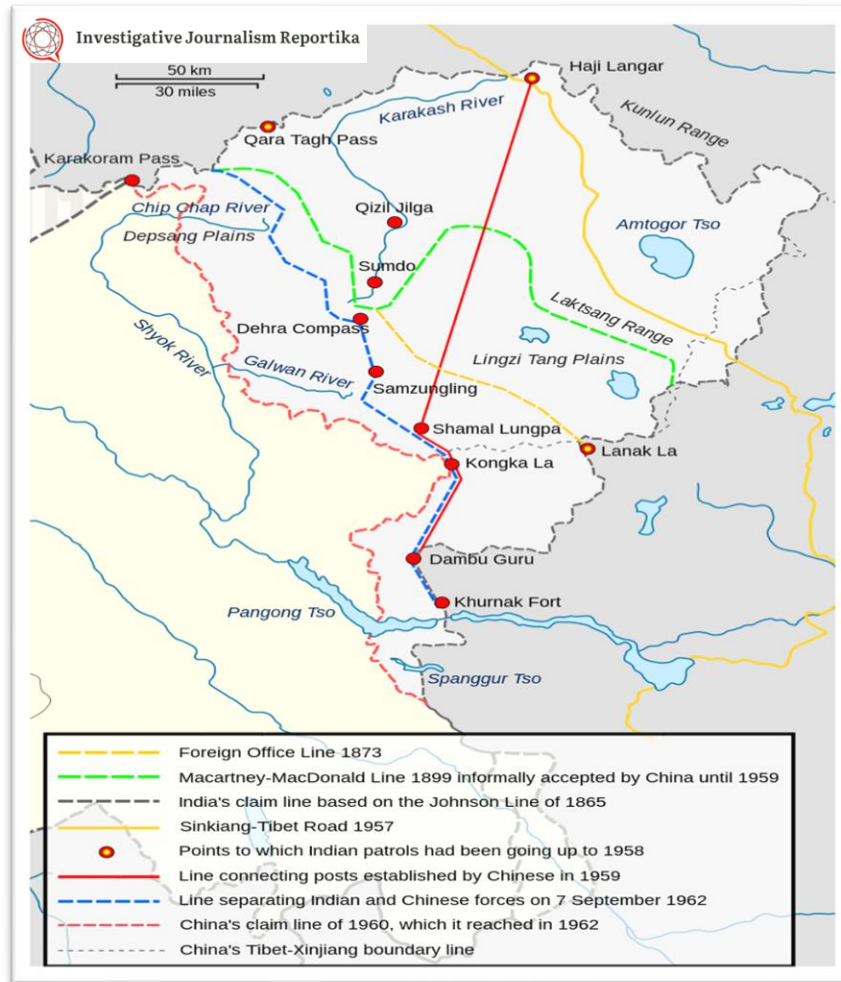
- Johnson Line, proposed by British, placed Aksai Chin in India, but not demarcated on maps.
- Macartney-MacDonald Line, proposed by British and supported by India, placed Aksai Chin in China, but not presented to China.



**Map :** North India (The Macartney–MacDonald line is dashed in green colour)

**Date :** 2020

The map shows the Indian and Chinese claims of the border in the Aksai Chin region, the Macartney–MacDonald line, the Foreign Office Line, as well as the progress of Chinese forces as they occupied areas during the Sino-Indian War.



- China built a road through Aksai Chin in the 1950s, sparking tensions.
- 1962 Sino-Indian War saw clashes in Aksai Chin and Arunachal Pradesh.
- China occupied Aksai Chin ignoring the historical Johnson Line and India still claims it.

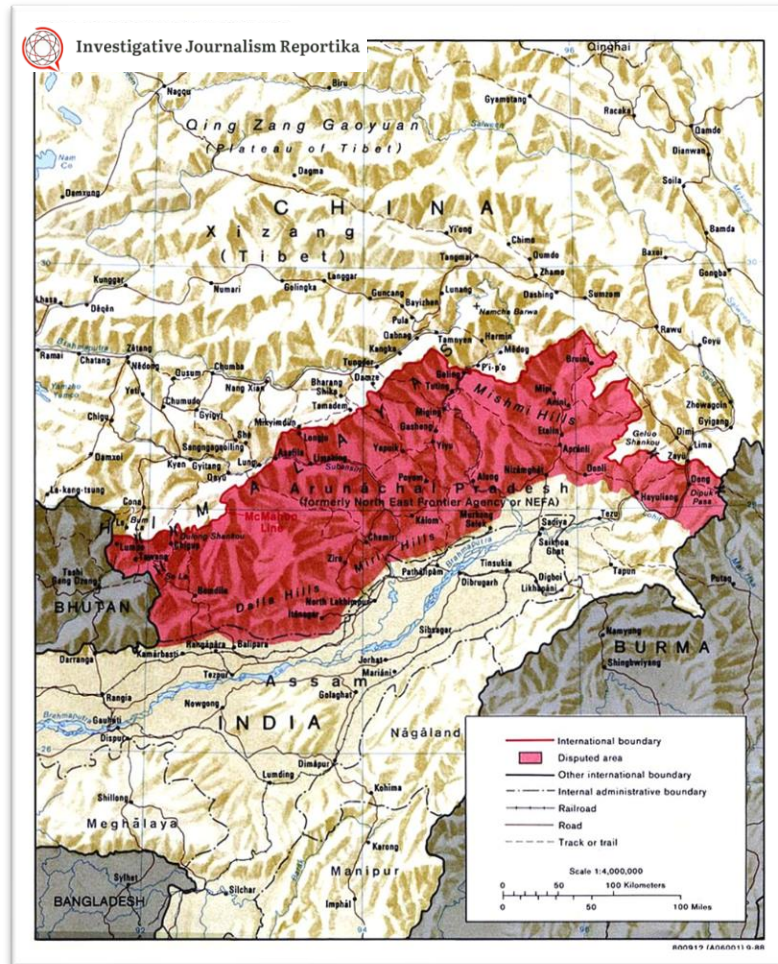
#### **Arunachal Pradesh:**

- Claimed by India but disputed by China.
- McMahon Line, drawn by British, placed Arunachal Pradesh in India, but not signed by China.

**Map :** China-India (Eastern Sector Border)

**Date :** 1988

China India eastern border depicting disputed areas in this sector including NEFA (Map by CIA).



- China claims entire Arunachal Pradesh misusing historical maps as depicted above in the report. China considers this province of India as part of Tibet.
- Occasional incursions and tensions reported along the border.

#### **Sikkim:**

- Formerly a protectorate of India, now part of India.
- Nathu La and Cho La clashes in 1967 between India and China.
- 2003 agreement saw China de facto recognize Sikkim as part of India.
- Dispute remains over "The Finger" in northern Sikkim.

<b>SN</b>	<b>Disputed Area / Sector (Alternate Names)</b>	<b>Chinese Province/Tibet</b>	<b>Indian State/UT</b>	<b>Operational Control</b>
1	Trans-Karakoram Tract (Shaksgam)	Xinjiang	Ladakh	China
2	Aksai Chin	Xinjiang and Tibet	Ladakh	China
3	Demchok / Dêmqog (Demchok sector)	Tibet	Ladakh	India / China
4	Chumar North	Tibet	Ladakh	India
5	Chumar South	Tibet	Ladakh	India
6	Kaurik (Sumdo)	Tibet	Himachal Pradesh	India
7	Tashigang-Shipki La (Khab and Namgia)	Tibet	Himachal Pradesh	India
8	Jadh Ganga Valley (also Mana Pass)	Tibet	Uttarakhand	India
9	Bara Hoti	Tibet	Uttarakhand	India
10	Part of Arunachal Pradesh (especially Tawang)	Tibet	Arunachal Pradesh	India
11	Upper Siang	Tibet	Arunachal Pradesh	India
12	West Siang	Tibet	Arunachal Pradesh	India

Amidst the complex geopolitical landscape of the India-China border, tensions have escalated beyond the demarcated Line of Actual Control (LAC). Recent years have borne witness to multiple military standoffs, with the Doklam incident in 2017 serving as a stark reminder of the delicate balance that exists. Despite numerous negotiation attempts, a definitive solution has remained elusive, perpetuating the simmering nature of the conflict.

**Map :** Political maps of India

**Date :** 1954

The Political maps of India published under the direction of Surveyor General of India in 1954. IT shows parts of Arunachal Pradesh and Aksai Chin as parts of India.



The India-China border dispute has its roots in historical complexities, with China's actions often reflecting a disregard for agreements made during the British India era. The blatant violation of these historical accords adds an additional layer of tension to an already complex issue. Only through such a holistic perspective can both nations hope to forge a path towards resolution, ensuring lasting peace and stability along this crucial Asian frontier.

## Tibet

China's annexation of Tibet involved a complex historical narrative. While Tibet had periods of independence, control by the Mongol Empire, and a subsequent era of independence, the situation changed in the 18th century when the Dzungar Khanate occupied Tibet. A Qing dynasty expeditionary force intervened, bringing Tibet under Qing rule in 1720. The region remained under Qing control until the dynasty's fall.

Fast forward to 1959, tensions between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Tibet led to the 14th Dalai Lama's exile to India. China's subsequent annexation of Tibet triggered waves of Tibetan refugees and the establishment of Tibetan diasporas globally.

In the contemporary context, China's claim to Tibet has taken an intriguing turn. China released an updated map in 2023, incorporating contested claims, including those over Tibet, the South China Sea, and Taiwan. This map, while aligning with China's historical narrative, ignores other maps and historical agreements, raising concerns about the accuracy of China's territorial claims. The use of distorted maps becomes a strategic tool, asserting territorial claims and shaping nationalistic narratives. As tensions persist, international debates on Tibet's historical status and the treatment of its people remain contentious, with China's reliance on old maps adding an additional layer of complexity to the ongoing discourse.

You can read about the struggle of His Highness Dalai Lama in our report : [The struggle for a free Tibet and His Highness Dalai Lama.](#)

Here is a series of Maps that shows how status of Tibet changed over the years.

**Map :** Asia (Tibet is a separate Entity here)

**Date :** c1798

Map of China, from: Johann Christian Hüttner: *Voyage dans l'intérieur de la Chine et en Tartarie fait dans les années 1792, 1793 et 1794 par lord Macartney.*, Paris, J. J. Fuchs, „an 7“ (1798–1799)



Map : Tibet within the Qing dynasty in 1820 as a Protectorate

Date : 1820

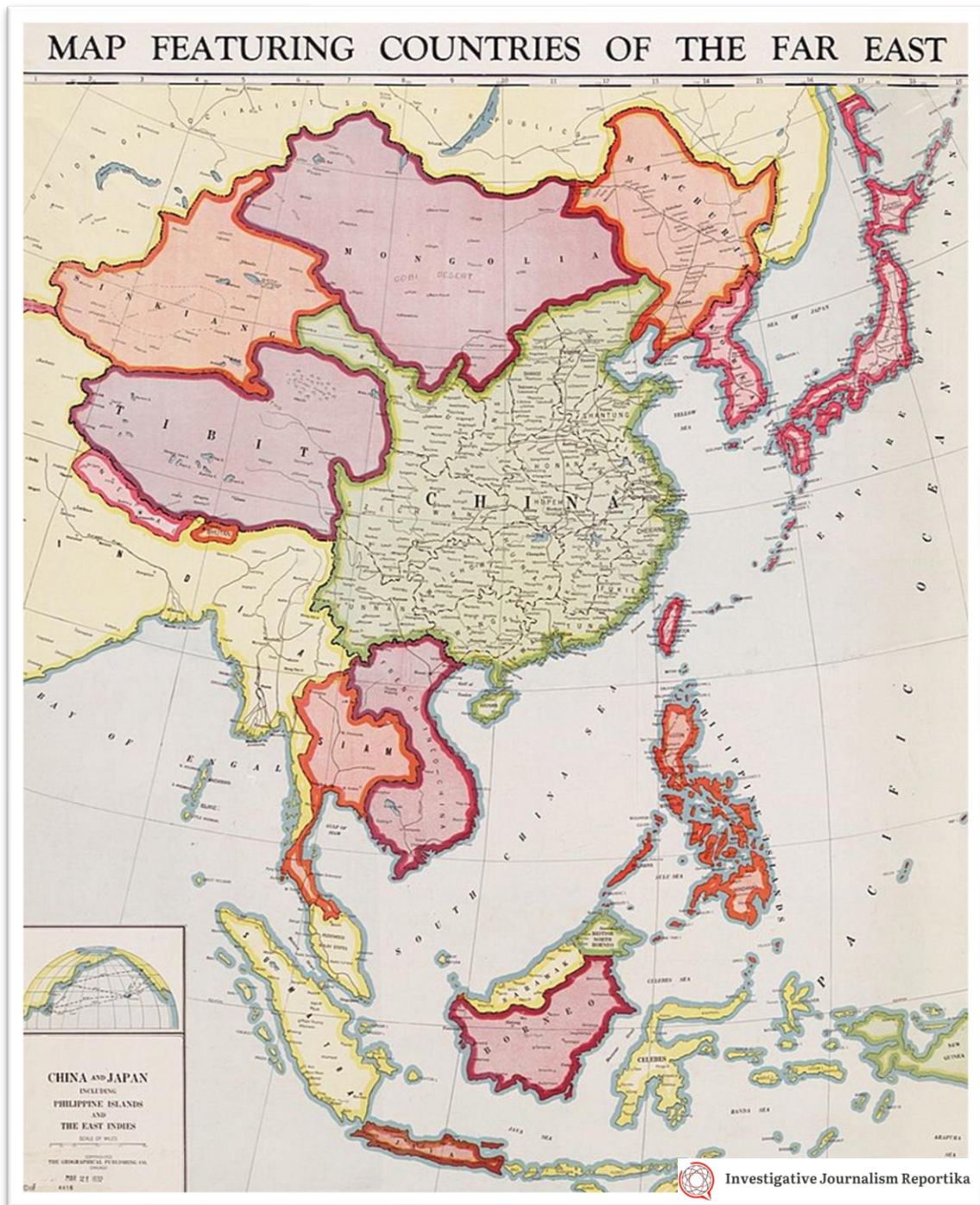
Attributes: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/User:Philg88>



Map : East Asia (Tibet is a separate Entity here)

Date : 1932

Attributes: Chicago : Geographical Publishing Co., [1932]



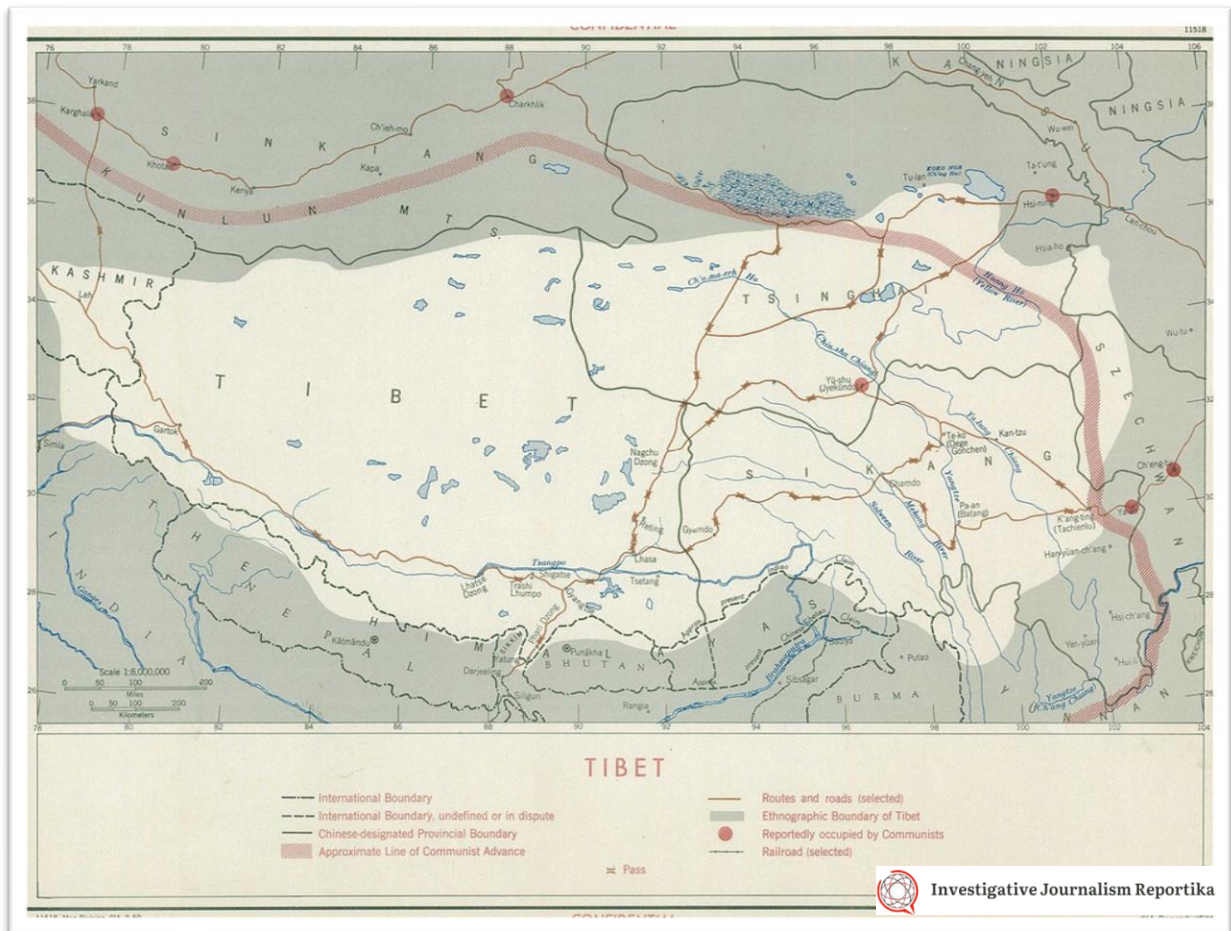


**Map :** Tibet

**Date :** 1950

CIA Map of Tibet with "Approximate Line of Communist Advance" and cities "Reportedly occupied by Communists" dated February 1950 and marked "CONFIDENTIAL".

Reference : <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/159083511>



Historical maps offer stark glimpses into how the geopolitical landscape can transform. In the case of Tibet, centuries-old cartography depicts it as a distinct entity, with its own borders and cultural identity. Yet, over time, shifts in power and reimagined boundaries changed the way Tibet was visually represented. Through cartographic revisionism, disputed territories were gradually integrated into China's map. This process, culminating in eventual annexation, demonstrates how seemingly simple drawings can hold immense sway over territorial perceptions and ultimately, the fate of entire nations.

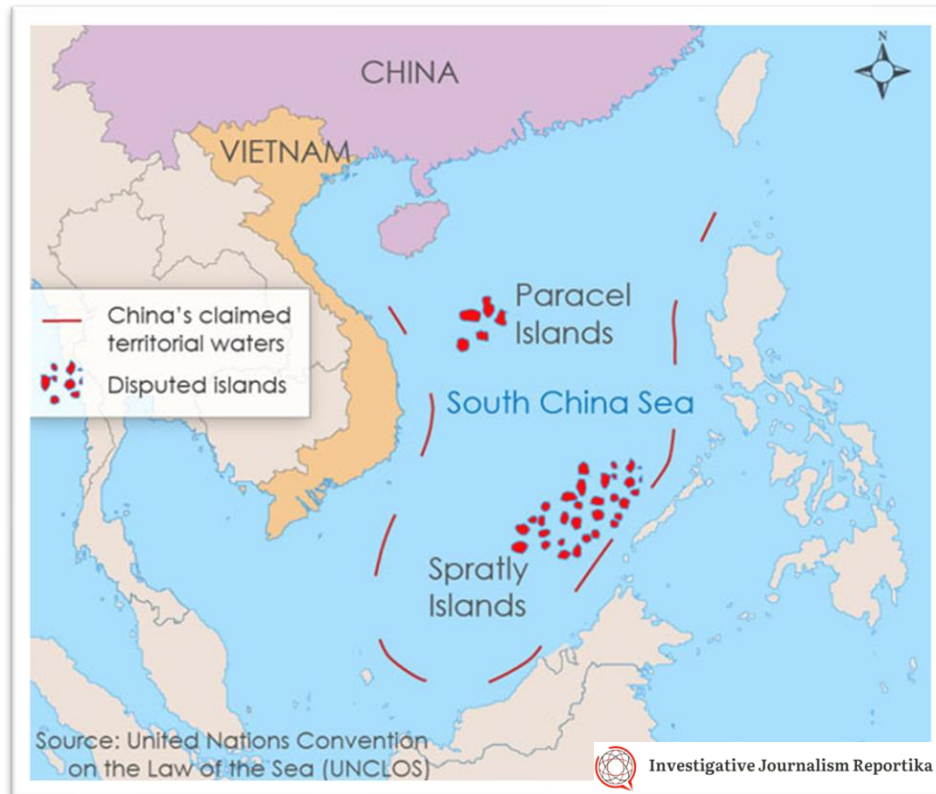
## The Nine Dash Line

**Map :** South China Sea

**Date :** 2011

9-Dash Line and islands claimed by China

Attributes: UNCLOS and RFA



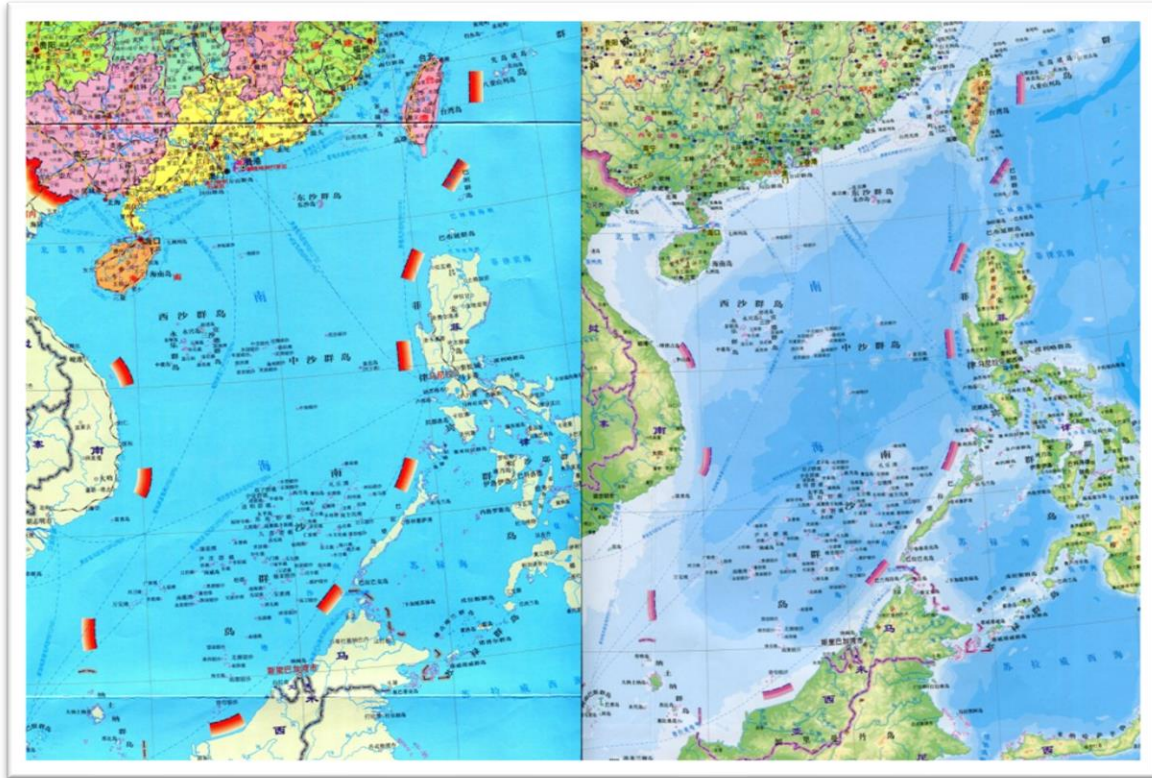
The 'nine-dash line,' the U-shaped line, and the dotted line, represents a contentious Chinese maritime claim in the South China Sea. Despite being a focal point of discussions in the law of the sea community, the complexity of this claim often eludes clarity in the national conversation due to sensational headlines and technical esotericism.

The nine-dash line is a visual representation found on some Chinese official maps and comparative maps of disputed claims in the South China Sea. Contrary to a common oversimplification suggesting it marks the limits of Chinese territory, Chinese scholars argue for a more nuanced interpretation. Beijing employs the dashed line to delineate the islands and rocks in the South China Sea over which China asserts territorial sovereignty, maritime zones governed by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), and waters where it claims some degree of non-exclusive "historic rights." While intentionally ambiguous, China views its territorial and maritime claims within the nine-dash line as distinct — the former expressing unbounded sovereignty and the latter asserting rights and jurisdiction based on UNCLOS and pre-UNCLOS custom.

**Map :** South China Sea

**Date :** 2023

10-Dash Line and islands claimed by China as updated in the standard map released by China in 2023



In a notable development in 2023, China released an updated standard map featuring a "10-Dash Line," which not only reaffirms China's claims in the South China Sea but also expands the dashes to encircle Taiwan. This move escalates the territorial ambitions, sparking international concern and discussions on diplomatic, legal, and strategic fronts. China's assertion of sovereignty and rights in the South China Sea, purportedly dating back to ancient times, took the form of a linear representation in the 1930s. This response was prompted by the unilateral annexation of the Spratly Islands by French Indochina. The official map of China's South China Sea claims, featuring a U-shaped line with eleven dashes, was published by the then-Republican government in 1947. In 1952, the People's Republic of China reduced the number of dashes to nine following negotiations with Vietnam over the Gulf of Tonkin. Since then, the nine-dash line has been a constant visual representation of China's diverse claims in the South China Sea.

While the line faces criticism from other South China Sea claimant states and international bodies like the Arbitral Tribunal, as seen in the 2016 Philippines v. China case, it remains emblematic of China's enduring interests and influence in the region. As discussions over South China Sea claims persist, understanding the nuanced nature of the nine-dash line becomes increasingly crucial in navigating the complexities surrounding this territorial dispute.

## Japan

China claims the islands in the East China Sea, known as the Diaoyu Islands in the People's Republic of China (PRC), as its inherent territory based on historical evidence and asserts that they have been an integral part of Chinese territory since ancient times. China argues that the Diaoyu Islands were first discovered, named, and used by the Chinese people, with records dating back to the Ming and Qing dynasties. According to China's historical perspective, the islands were included in maps, official documents, and maritime surveys conducted by Chinese authorities.

The People's Republic of China rejects Japan's assertion of terra nullius, emphasizing that the islands were unlawfully seized by Japan during the First Sino-Japanese War in 1895. China contends that Japan's control over the islands during the period of 1945 to 1972 under U.S. administration is invalid, and the islands should be returned to Chinese sovereignty. China further highlights the strategic importance of the islands due to their proximity to key shipping lanes, rich fishing grounds, and potential oil reserves in the region. The territorial dispute has been a longstanding source of tension between China and Japan, with geopolitical and economic considerations at play.

**Map :** Uotsuri-shima / Diaoyu Dao (Blue, west end and nearly south end, 25°44'33"N 123°28'17"E at Mount Narahara), Kuba-shima / Huangwei Yu (Yellow, north end, 25°55'24"N 123°40'51"E at Mount Chitose), Taishō-tō / Chiwei Yu (Red, east end, 25°55'21"N 124°33'36"E at the peak)

**Date :** 2013

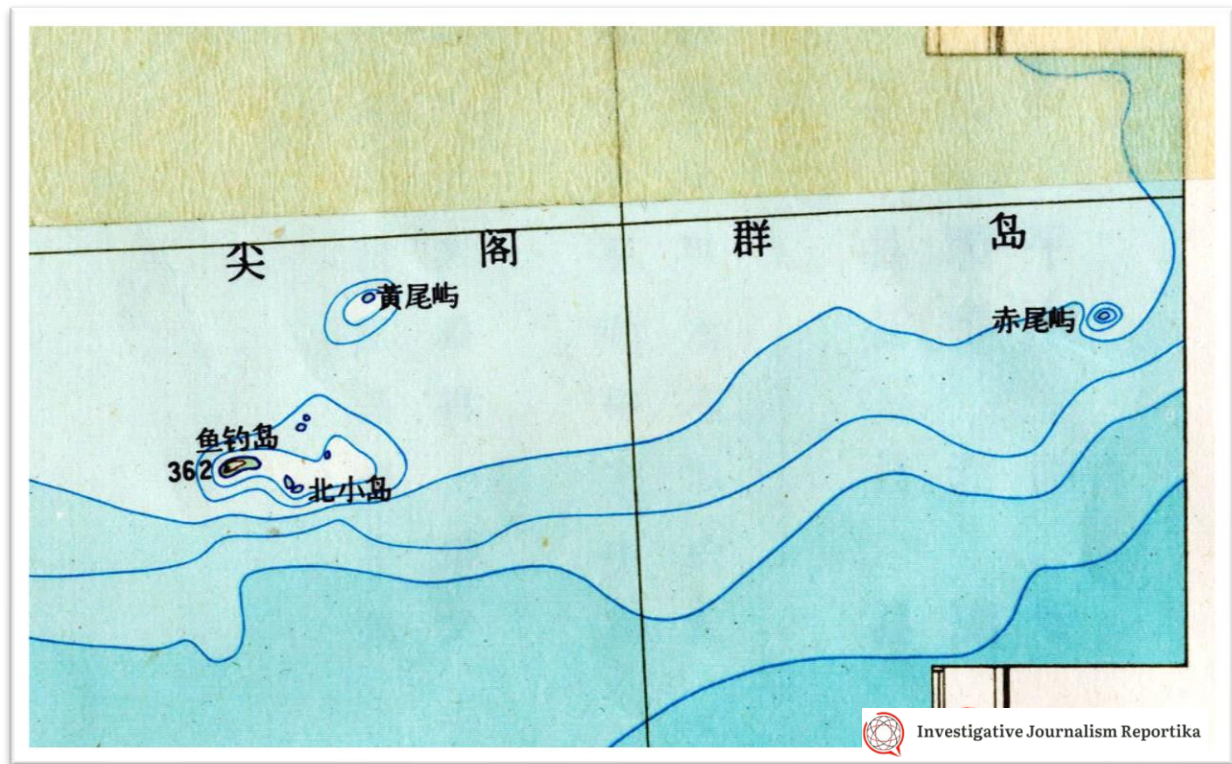
Referenced on Geospatial Information Authority of Japan and distances referenced on Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan.



**Map :** Senkaku islands

**Date :** 1969

The *Washington Times* states that this is a classified PRC government map and that it lists the Senkaku islands as Japanese name "Senkaku Guntō"



Taiwan, officially the Republic of China (ROC), also claims sovereignty over the disputed islands in the East China Sea, referring to them as the Tiaoyutai Islands. The ROC asserts its historical connection to the islands, citing evidence that predates the First Sino-Japanese War and emphasizing their inclusion in maps, official documents, and historical records. Taiwan argues that the islands were part of Chinese territory and rejects Japan's claim of terra nullius.

The territorial dispute involving Taiwan further complicates the situation, as both the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the ROC claim sovereignty over the Diaoyu/Tiaoyutai Islands. While the PRC and the ROC share a historical perspective on the islands, their political differences add an additional layer to the complex issue. The ROC's claim, similar to that of the PRC, contends that the islands were unlawfully seized by Japan and should be returned to Chinese sovereignty.

## Conclusion

In summary, China's territorial claims across Bhutan, Nepal, India, and Tibet, as depicted in a series of maps, unveil a complex geopolitical landscape marked by historical complexities and strategic maneuvers. The disputes in Bhutan involve historical claims dating back to the 1950s, with recent assertions over the Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuary adding new dimensions to the ongoing negotiations. In Nepal, allegations of Chinese encroachment in the Humla district have raised concerns about security and geopolitical motives.

The enduring border dispute between India and China spans regions like Aksai Chin, Arunachal Pradesh, and Sikkim, shaped by historical events and complex agreements. The 2023 standard map released by China intensifies territorial ambitions not only in the South China Sea but also in Taiwan. Tibet's annexation by China, marked by historical complexities, is reflected in the 2023 map, emphasizing territorial claims while ignoring historical agreements.

The 'nine-dash line' in the South China Sea has evolved into a 'ten-dash line' in the 2023 map, intensifying tensions and sparking international discourse. The distorted narratives and strategic maneuvers underscore the need for nuanced approaches in addressing these territorial disputes.

In conclusion, China's engagement in territorial disputes with nearly all its neighbors, as evident from historical maps that often diverge from its contemporary claims, highlights the intricate nature of geopolitical maneuvering in the modern era. The use of maps as strategic tools for asserting territorial dominance is a concerning trend that demands global attention. To navigate these disputes effectively, a nuanced approach is imperative, grounded in a deep understanding of historical intricacies and the significance of past agreements. Resolving these issues requires a commitment to diplomacy, acknowledging the historical context, and fostering cooperation among nations to promote lasting stability in the ever-evolving geopolitical landscape.

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