

‘Regimes of territorial legitimation’ in a fast-changing world: why they matter and how they change

Alexander B. Murphy

University of Oregon, Department of Geography, Eugene

Abstract: The work of Anssi Paasi and others highlights the importance of viewing territories as institutionalized social constructs. The territorial claims made by states should be seen in this light, as these are fundamentally influenced by regimes of territorial legitimation. These regimes are a product of taken-for-granted ideas about the relationship between people and territory that emerged along with the modern state system, and related understandings of the political-cultural circumstances that gave rise to states as juridically independent entities. There is considerable inertia to the initial regimes of territorial legitimation that take root after a state becomes independent, but they can evolve over time in response to shifts in the internal challenges states face, changing geopolitical circumstances, and the ideological commitments of state leaders. Understanding the nature and changing character of regimes of territorial legitimation can shed light on the forces shaping interstate conflict in the contemporary world.

Keywords: territory, legitimacy, geopolitics, conflict, discourse

Introduction

Contrary to the assumptions of neoclassical economic theory, most human interactions are not driven by rational economic calculation. That is certainly true when it comes to territorial disputes, which rarely result from a simple assessment of cost-benefit tradeoffs by interested parties. Instead, the claims that undergird such disputes reflect the stories state elites tell—the discourses they nurture—to justify their right to exert effective control over discrete portions of Earth’s surface. These stories/discourses, and the practices and institutions that develop along with them, constitute what I have termed regimes of territorial legitimation (RTLs)—modes of legitimating claims to sovereignty over

geographical space that are rooted in the political geographic norms that developed along with the modern state system (Murphy 2002, 2005).

My thinking about RTLs has been greatly influenced by work that treats territorial arrangements not simply as material assemblages or a priori givens, but as social constructions. Anssi Paasi’s writings on the social construction of regions and territorial identities have served as a particular source of inspiration. I drew on his 1998 *Progress in Human Geography* article with David Newman, “Fences and Borders in a Postmodern World” (Newman and Paasi 1998), in the first piece I wrote on the RTL idea (Murphy 2002), and Paasi’s (1996) book-length study of the Russia-Finland boundary figured prominently in my

expanded discussion of the RTL concept (Murphy 2005).

Paasi's more recent work on the social construction and institutionalization of regions (Paasi 2010, 2013) and on the nature of borders (Paasi 2009) has prompted me to revisit the RTL concept with a view toward focusing more attention on the circumstances and processes that shape the evolution of RTLs over time. In the process, I have come to recognize the importance of bringing a more dynamic, relational perspective to bear on RTLs than I did more than a decade ago. As I argue below, paying more attention to the ways RTLs change over time in response to evolving events and circumstances not only has conceptual advantages; it offers a means of gaining greater insight into some of the troubling geopolitical challenges of our time.

Background Considerations

My early work on the RTL concept came out of an interest in the ways in which Westphalian political-territorial principles and the French-Revolution-inspired "nation-state" ideal have influenced territorial ideas and practices in the modern state system. Playing off of Prasenjit Duara's (1996) discussion of how China developed a discursive-cum-institutional regime that served to normalize a particular ethno-cultural notion of Chineseness—in the process melding a great diversity of peoples into a single dominant group and a few titular minorities—I argued that states develop analogous types of regimes that are designed to normalize particular

conceptions of what constitutes the state's proper political-geographic form (i.e., its territorial extent). These conceptions arise from three taken-for-granted assumptions about the political-territorial order that dominate the modern political geographic imagination: that the land surface of the planet should be partitioned into discrete territorial units (i.e., states), that those states should mirror the pattern of politically self-conscious ethno-cultural communities (i.e., nations), and that each unit should be juridically autonomous (see also Murphy 2013).

The foregoing assumptions gave rise to four types of founding myths depending on the circumstances surrounding the emergence of the state (Murphy 2005):

1. This is the state of a particular people (when a state was forged in the name of a historically self-conscious ethno-cultural group—e.g., France, Poland)
2. This is a primordial state (when the emergence of the modern state was seen as the reincarnation of an Ancient political-territorial unit—e.g., China, Egypt),
3. This is a natural unit (when a state occupies a territory that is widely thought to be a discrete physical-environmental unit—e.g., Australia, Hungary), and
4. This state is the successor to a colony, but there is an emergent political nation in the state that must be nurtured in order to preserve order (former colonies, many of which do not have a plausible basis for advancing any of the other three myths).

These founding myths are social constructions, of course—ideas that reflect ideologies/perceptions more than on-the-ground realities (even if they are rooted to some degree in actual circumstances). But that does not mean they are unimportant. To the contrary, they fundamentally shape the territorial arguments advanced by states: we have the right to control a territory corresponding to the distribution of the ethno-cultural group that gave rise to the state (type 1 above), we have the right to control a territory historically occupied by the Ancient political-territorial antecedent of the modern state (type 2), we have the right to control all of the territory within a particular natural unit (type 3), and we have the right to control the territory rightfully belonging to the colonial antecedent of the modern independent state (type 4).

The socially constructed RTLs rooted in these territorial arguments are, of course, based on other social constructions (concerning what constitutes an ethno-cultural group, what comprises a natural unit, and the like), but RTLs have to resonate to some degree with empirical understandings (Gabon cannot claim to be the state of the historically self-conscious Gabonese people since no such people existed; Canada cannot claim to the last incarnation of an Ancient political-territorial unit since there was no political unit straddling the northern reaches of the North American continent until the last two centuries). That does not mean that states are necessarily restricted to an RTL rooted in just one of these territorial arguments. Italy, for example, can claim to be the homeland of the Italian people, a natural territory defined by the peninsula

stretching southward from the Alps, and the modern incarnation of an Ancient political-territory—the core province in the Roman Empire. Relatively few states, however, are in a position to advance more than one, or at most two, of the territorial arguments set forth above.

The value of the RTL concept goes beyond the descriptive insights it provides. Perhaps most importantly, RTLs constrain the types of territorial claims states can and do pursue. Angolan state elites, coming from a state with a type 4-grounded RTL, have no basis for making a claim on territory in neighboring states (and have not made such claims), as opposed to Turkish and Greek elites, coming from states with type 2-grounded RTLs, which can and have made competing territorial claims based on the territory occupied historically by territorial antecedents to modern Turkey and Greece. Moreover, different RTLs have consequences for intrastate political-cultural circumstances. Ethno-cultural minorities are in a different position in states with type 1-grounded RTLs than they are in states with RTLs not premised on the idea of the state as the ethnic homeland of a given “nation” (in the original ethnic sense of the term).

Changing Circumstances

For all the explanatory utility of the RTL concept as originally conceived, when I first proposed the idea my focus was on the foundational RTLs of states, not their evolution over time. Foundational RTLs have great inertia because they are so deeply embedded in nationalist discourse and in the

territorial logic of the modern state system (on the latter point, see Agnew 1994). Nonetheless, states change over time, and even if they rarely (or ever) completely overthrow a foundational RTL, RTLs evolve and adapt in response to shifting norms, circumstances, and political culture. As Moisió and Paasi (2013) and others have argued, our theories about territories, regions, boundaries, and identities need to be sensitive to such changes and to the ways in which the objects of our studies are relationally constructed. It follows that taking a dynamic, relational approach to the study of RTLs represents the next logical step in the development of the concept.

The shifting nature of China's territorial discourse over the last few decades provides a good example of the dynamic character of RTLs. While still fundamentally rooted in the first two types of RTLs set forth above, the specific emphasis of China's territorial discourse has shifted from one focused primarily on the territorial integrity of China and the status of Taiwan to one encompassing China's historical rights to a number of islands in the East and South China Seas, with less emphasis on Taiwan (Murphy, A., forthcoming). That shift reflects significant changes in the way state leaders seek to underscore their legitimacy as rulers. As R. T. Murphy (2014: 351) has written:

"The CCP (Chinese Communist Party) has, in recent years, rewritten the defining sagas of modern Chinese history, sagas used to cement the image of the party and to mold patriotism. These sagas once featured class struggle, talk of the Long March, and civil war against Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang

culminating in the 1949 revolution. Now the sagas tend to begin with the humiliation of China in the Opium Wars and move quickly into a long tale of heroic fighting against the Japanese . . . The earlier accounts featured Chinese fighting Chinese; now all patriotic Chinese—Communist or Kuomintang—are seen fighting foreigners."

This shift in discourse reflects profound changes in underlying circumstances. Memories of the civil war are fading in contemporary China, relations with Taiwan have improved to the point that there is little to gain (and much to lose) from a continued emphasis on Communist-Nationalist differences, threats to the country's territorial integrity have grown in Tibet and Xinjiang, Den Xiaoping's economic reforms have taken China far from its Marxist-Leninist roots, and geopolitical tensions with the United States have risen. These changes have not only produced the rewritten historical sagas described in the quoted passage above; they have led to subtle but important shifts in the tenor of China's RTL. Rather than being focused on the political-geographic rifts produced by the civil war, the emphasis now is on ensuring China's status as a power that will not leave itself vulnerable again to the type of external influences that produced its so-called century of humiliation, redirecting attention from twentieth-century internal differences to struggles against the Japanese, and making sure that no precedents are set that might encourage those with separatist leanings in China's western provinces. As a result, the foci of attention now are China's borders with its neighbors, islands in the South China Sea, and the Diaoyu

islands in the East China Sea, which are currently controlled by Japan (where they are called Senkaku). Given Japan's role in China's evolving territorial discourse, it is no surprise that the latter issue represents a particularly thorny problem that is unlikely to be resolved anytime soon (Murphy, forthcoming).

The China case is suggestive of the relational context that is relevant to the evolution of RTLs. As suggested above, foundational RTLs have great inertia, the power of which should not be ignored. But RTLs change in response to shifts in the internal challenges countries face, their relationship to external powers, and the ideological commitments of their leaders. These three variables help explain the changing character of Russia's RTL in recent years, which has come to focus more on the status of ethnic Russians in surrounding territories than was previously the case (see generally Dunlop 2014). Russia could cede Crimea to Ukraine in the 1950s because Ukraine was part of an umbrella state, there was no threat of secession of Crimea from that umbrella state, and the handover had the potential to bind Russia and Ukraine more closely together.

Moving forward in time to the present, the umbrella state has disappeared. At the same time, Russia's economic and geopolitical clout has greatly diminished, with obvious consequences for internal confidence in the country's leadership. Moreover, Russia increasingly feels encircled by an alliance with Cold War roots that is, in the minds of many Russians, hostile to the interests of their country. Furthermore, Russian politics in recent years has been dominated

by Vladimir Putin, a commanding political figure who is committed to establishing a Eurasian union of sorts, with Russia at its core, in an effort to restore Russian power and ensure the future security of the country (Trenin 2013). Against this backdrop, Russia's RTL has come to focus more on the importance of having buffer states on its periphery in the face of an expanding NATO, as well as a heightened concern with the status of ethnic Russians living outside of Russia. The latter issue arises out of one of Russia's founding ideas (Russia as the state of the Russian people), even as it provides a rationale for external intervention that resonates with a powerful myth that has long shaped thinking about the relationship between people and territory in the modern state system: the idea that peoples (i.e., ethno-cultural nations) and states should be geographically coincident (Mikesell 1983; Connor 1994).

Conclusion

Cutting across Anssi Paasi's extensive body of work on territory, regions, and boundaries is the idea that *how* people think about the political organization of space is of fundamental importance. Following Paasi, where those ideas come from, how they become institutionalized, and the impacts of that process is essential to understanding the nature and significance of political geographic arrangements. That same ontological predisposition is at the heart of the RTL concept. We cannot hope to grasp the complexities underlying the pursuit of geopolitical objectives unless we bring

squarely into the picture the circumstances that shape the territorial imagination; the discourses, practices and institutions that develop in keeping with that imagination; and the consequences of the emergence of particular regimes of territorial legitimation.

I have only begun to extend my thinking about RTLs along the lines outlined in this article, but further work on the subject—informed by more detailed analyses of a variety of cases—could provide an avenue for demonstrating the importance of foregrounding territorial ideologies and their institutionalization in studies of international relations. It could have applied policy significance as well. A serious effort to examine the forces shaping Russia's evolving RTL, for example, might have led to some reconsideration of the idea that expanding NATO, with its Cold War baggage, was an appropriate way to bring greater security to east-central Europe. In both conceptual and applied arenas, then, institutionalized geopolitical imaginations matter. We ignore them at our peril.

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