OXFORD, England — At the same time that China has stated its desire for peace in Asia, the country has been making assertive claims over waters in the East and South China Seas. The confrontational rhetoric suggests, to many observers (and to China’s uneasy neighbors in the Pacific region), a sense of pent-up entitlement, stemming from Beijing’s growing importance in the world.

But another, little-remembered factor is also at play: China’s lingering resentment that its contributions to the Allies’ victory against Japan in World War II were never fully recognized and have yet to translate into political capital in the region.

China’s resistance to Japan is one of the great untold stories of World War II. Though China was the first Allied power to fight the Axis, it has received far less credit for its role in the Pacific theater than the United States, Britain or even the Soviet Union, which only joined the war in Asia in August 1945. The Chinese contribution was pushed aside soon after the conflict, as an inconvenient story in the neat ideological narrative of the Cold War.

In the early 20th century China’s growing desire for national sovereignty rubbed up against Japan’s rising imperialism on the Asian mainland. War broke out in earnest in July 1937, and during the eight years that it lasted, both the Nationalist forces of Chiang Kai-shek and, to a lesser extent, the Communist fighters answering to Mao Zedong engaged in extraordinary feats of resistance.

Though far weaker and poorer than the mighty United States or the British Empire, China played a major role in the war. Some 40,000 Chinese soldiers fought in Burma alongside American and British troops in 1944, helping to secure the Stilwell Road linking Lashio to Assam in India. In China itself, they held down some 800,000 Japanese soldiers.

The costs were great. At least 14 million Chinese were killed and some 80 million became refugees over the course of the war. The atrocities were many: the Rape of Nanking, in 1937, is the most notorious, but there were other, equally searing but less well-known, massacres: the bloody capture in 1938 of Xuzhou in the east, which threatened Chiang’s ability to control central China; the 1939 carpet bombing of Chongqing, the temporary capital, which killed more than 4,000 people in two days of air raids that a survivor described as “a sea of fire”; and the “three alls” campaign (“Burn all, loot all, kill all”) of 1941, which devastated the Communist-held areas in the north.

These strains placed immense pressure on what by then was a weak and isolated country. But some of the Chiang government’s policies made matters worse. A decision to seize the peasants’ grain to feed the army exacerbated the 1942 famine in Henan Province. “You could exchange a child for a few steamed rolls,” one
government inspector recalled in his memoir. Such missteps made the Nationalist (Kuomintang) government seem corrupt and inefficient, and an embarrassing ally for the United States — even though the Nationalists did the vast majority of the fighting against Japan, far more than the Communists.

When the Allies won in 1945, China’s contribution to the victory was rewarded with a permanent seat on the Security Council of the new United Nations, but little more. After a civil war, the Chiang regime fell to the Communists in 1949, and Mao had little reason to recognize its contributions to the defeat of Japan. China’s wartime allies also did little to remind their own people of its role in their victory: The Nationalist regime — which fled to exile in Taiwan — was an embarrassing relic, and the new Communist regime was a frightening unknown. For the West, China had gone from wartime ally to threatening Communist giant in just a few years.

One major consequence that remains of great relevance today is that the old enemies of Asia never struck a multilateral settlement of the sort that took place in the North Atlantic after 1945, with the formation of NATO and what has become the European Union. The United States’ decision to put China on the sidelines of the postwar world order it dominated has meant that China and Japan never signed a proper peace treaty. And it has meant that for many years Western historians treated China’s role in World War II as a sideshow.

But recently a new political openness within China itself has allowed a different picture of the war years to emerge. Chiang and Mao are long dead, and the Chinese government has been trying to claim a greater international role by reminding the world of the benefits of its past cooperation with the West.

Eager to eventually reunify the mainland with Taiwan, Beijing has also adopted a more favorable attitude toward Chiang’s legacy. Chinese filmmakers and academics now have license to talk more freely about the Nationalists’ wartime contribution, whether in television dramas or scholarly articles. A lengthy and sympathetic biography of Chiang by Yang Tianshi, a historian at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, has been a big seller on the mainland. Chiang’s old wartime villa outside Chongqing has even been restored as a shrine of sorts, with pictures and captions describing him as a patriot who stood firm against the Japanese — a rehabilitation of Chiang’s reputation that would have been unimaginable under Mao.

This revision of history has significant consequences for East Asia and Southeast Asia today. If America’s leadership in defeating Japan in 1945 continues to justify a U.S. presence around the Pacific today, Chinese leaders feel, why shouldn’t China’s contribution to the same goal earn it some clout in the region? Beijing is trying to cash in today a geopolitical check Chiang Kai-shek wrote nearly seven decades ago.

**Rana Mitter**, *professor of the history and politics of modern China at Oxford University, is the author of “Forgotten Ally: China’s World War II.”*

INTERNATIONAL NEW YORK TIMES