

Nationalism Backfires: Explaining the Shift in PRC Behavior in Territorial Disputes

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Introduction

Nationalism in the People's Republic of China (PRC) has gained much attention and generated debate in the literature. Many contemporary commentators and scholars often express concern about rising nationalism in China and address the substantial role of popular nationalism within the society in aggressive foreign policy behaviors (e.g., Friedberg 1993-1994; Shambaugh 1996; Geris 2005; Shirk 2007; Christensen 2010; Huges 2011). With China's continuous economic development and growth and the subsequent rise of power, popular nationalism and nationalist anger in the wake of external disputes are considered to drive Beijing to pursue more aggressive claims and policies in disputes with other surrounding nations and become more assertive in confronting regional and global powers. By contrast, other scholars view that Chinese nationalism is a top-down phenomenon, suggesting that the Chinese government is capable of dictating dynamics in popular nationalism and nationalist activism (Zhang 2005; Weiss 2008; 2013). It is the government that determines to allow, control, or stifle nationalist protests based on available concessions from foreign states. Active anti-foreign protests are allowed when they are conducive to Beijing's negotiations with external targets, thereby showing that the protests are instrumental for the Chinese leadership.

However, in our view, these existing scholarships either overstate the impacts of popular nationalism on Beijing's foreign policy making or underappreciate independent effects of popular nationalism in the society on the China's foreign policy behavior. More importantly, little attention has been paid to the role of popular nationalism in deterring the implementation of hardline policies. We believe that popular nationalism can backfire on the government. Initially, nationalism was manipulated and instrumentalized to defend the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime especially after the global demise of communism and the

Tiananmen Incident. However, due to social changes undergoing over the past decades, nationalism has increasingly become a focal point of mass collective action and begun to be out of hand. Beijing has gradually feared that resonating with nationalist sentiments and permitting nationalist rallies can further incite nationalist movements and be transformed into collective actions for anti-government activities. We accordingly contend that in the outbreak of events that can awaken and arouse nationalist sentiments, it is Beijing's interest to refrain from tapping into nationalist sentiments and taking aggressive actions by hyping disputes with external states.

In this paper, we seek to show how popular nationalism in the society can make the CCP regime more cautious on escalating tension and be a deterrent force for Beijing's aggressive use of power toward other states by assessing two recent cases on China's territorial dispute over the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands. We also challenge the general notion in the literature of international relations that nationalism is a cause of international conflicts. This paper suggests that while nationalism's conflict-inducing effects exist in transitional and/or mature democracies, popular nationalism in authoritarian regimes can be a deterrent force for the risk of international conflicts.

The rest of the paper is as follows. We first discuss the debate on the role of nationalism in China's foreign policy behaviors. Secondly, we offer an alternative view on the role of popular nationalism. Thirdly, we examine China's behaviors in the two recent territorial disputes. Finally, we end with some concluding remarks.

Contrasting Views on the Role of Nationalism in China's Foreign Policy

Journalists, China specialists, and theorists often address their concern on China's increasing reliance on nationalism to safeguard the reign of the CCP in recent decades. The Tiananmen incident shocked the party leaders, which faced an existential threat after the worldwide fall of communist regimes. To maintain the power of the CCP, the Chinese leadership put a great emphasis on stability in the society. Deng Xiaoping, the paramount leader of the Chinese communist regime, said: "Of all China's problems, the one that trumps everything is the need for stability. We have to jump on anything that might bring instability." (Nathan and Link 2001; 423). The Party leadership's concern on domestic challenges and their legitimacy to rule the state led leaders to employ resources and authorities in two different ways: continuous economic growth and nationalism (Downs and Saunders 1998/9; Shirk 2007). For the leadership in Beijing, it became a political imperative to keep the economy growing, thus preventing social unrest. The fear of the failure of economic performance and its consequences on the survival of the regime motivated the party leadership to be eager to maintain high economic growth. In addition, quickly employing and imbuing an alternative ideology were indispensable to restore the legitimacy of the CCP. Beijing embraced nationalism which since then has become the only de facto unifying and ruling ideology.

With an aim to strengthen the Party's rule, the CCP launched nationwide patriotic/nationalistic education and indoctrinated nationalism in the society (Gries 2005; Zhao 2005). A central theme of such nationalist propagandas was to stimulate nationalist emotions in the society with front-page stories of state-led new outlets hyping the memory of the century of humiliation, national security crises with Taiwan, and threats from foreign states including Japan and the United States (Gries 2005; Shirk 2007). Popular nationalism quickly emerged and became substantialized, as evidently seen in the best seller 'China Can Say No'. It can also be

found in massive protests against the U.S. and Japan in the wake of diverse crises, including the U.S. accidental bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade in 1999 and a series of territorial disputes.

In this context, Beijing's increasing reliance on nationalism and the consequential rise of nationalism in the growing society have led mass media and academia to express a 'China threat' and the potential for China's abandonment of 'a peaceful rise.' Accordingly, it is often predicted that a rising China would pursue aggressive and expansionist foreign policies (e.g., Friedberg 1993-1994; Shambaugh 1996; Gries 2005; Christensen 2010). China's pursuit of revisionist policies would be just a matter of time. Some even parallel China's contemporary nationalism with expansionist German and Japanese nationalism during the World Wars (Hughes 2011).

Moreover, it has been increasingly common to partially or fully link China's contemporary ongoing disputes with other nations to nationalism. A popular perception in this scholarship is that although patriotic nationalism was initially imbued and stimulated by the CCP leadership due to their anxieties about domestic challenges to the legitimacy of the regime, growing public attachment to nationalism in the society constrains China's policies on controversial foreign policy issues and pushes the party leaders to take tougher stance on these issues. Gries (2004) well develops the above point. His contention is that as popular nationalism gradually became out of the Party's control, emotion and historical animosity of nationalists would result in the rise of China's aggressive foreign policies toward Taiwan and countries like Japan and the United States. Similarly, Shirk (2007, 100-102) expresses that Beijing has difficulty tactically sacrificing its nationalist credentials and even choosing policies for their own strategic interests in the wake of disputes with rival or contending states. Shirk (2007) and He (2007; 11) even suggest that fearing that "public rage will quickly turn against the 'traitorous'

government,” the communist party would even get involved in unnecessary disputes or conflicts with the U.S and Japan in order to show their toughness.

The view on the role of nationalism in China’s foreign policies is not limited to the above perspective, however. There are also others contending the restricted, if not hollow, effect of nationalism on Chinese foreign policies. In this scholarship, nationalism in China is state-driven and thus the party leadership is capable of controlling the nature of nationalism and the life of nationalist activism at their discretion. Essentially, popular nationalism serves as a policy tool to gain advantage from foreign counterparts in negotiations. In other words, once allowing and stimulating or stifling domestic nationalist protests is beneficial for Beijing’s strategic interests, nationalist activism is exploited. In this vein, Zhao (2005), for instance, notes that the CCP is capable of reining in popular nationalism. Similarly, Weiss (2008; 2013) claims that the lifecycle of anti-foreign protests is a function of the CCP’s strategic consideration. Downs and Saunders (1998/9; 17) also point out the pragmatic nature of nationalism by writing: “When forced to choose, Chinese leaders pursued economic development at the expense of nationalist goals.” Public pressure and rage cannot trump the Party’s strategic interests in sustaining economic cooperation with trading partners including Japan. Accordingly, in contrast to the former scholarship, this camp shares the view that there is little room for the effect of nationalist pressure in Chinese foreign policy. Nationalism hardly exerts independent influence on Chinese foreign policy.

However, when closely delving into the role of nationalism in China’s foreign policy behaviors, for example, Beijing’s behavior toward its long-lasting regional rival – Japan – in the outbreak of territorial crises, both of the contrasting views appear to be of limited explanatory power and be often at odds with the reality. We believe while the instrumental view of popular

nationalism underestimates the independent role of nationalism, studies that emphasize nationalism's effect on more aggressive policies overstate the role of popular nationalism. Both of the views ignore deterring effects of popular nationalism on China's assertive foreign policy. In addition, as Zheng (1999) correctly points out, none of theories explicitly discusses the mechanism through which popular nationalism influences foreign policy. To contribute to the debate in the literature, we accordingly provide an alternative view on the role of popular nationalism in Chinese foreign policy behaviors and specify more systematic mechanisms in the following section.

Alternative view on China's the Role of Nationalism in China's Foreign Policy

We begin by delving into the double-edged force of popular nationalism in China. From the standpoint of the CCP leadership, patriotic nationalism is "the key to managing social unrest and surviving politically" after the worldwide collapse of communism and the Tiananmen Incident (Shirk 2007; 67). Nationalism was accordingly indoctrinated and instrumentalized to restore the legitimacy of the CCP. However, the rise in patriotic nationalism in the society can also backfire on the government. Nationalists and regime critics can become loyal to the nation, not to the party. By sharing the fervor of nationalism and the loyalty to the Chinese people, their collective action against the Communist government can erupt. This is threatening and fearful for the party leadership. Indeed, the Chinese history shows that the two previous regimes prior to the ascendancy of the CCP to power – the Qing Dynasty in 1911 and the Republic of China in 1949 – were collapsed in the outburst of this type of mass revolutionary movements. The recent

major challenge to the communist regime after Mao was certainly the Tiananmen Incident, another mass movement.

Given the double-edged nature of nationalism, using nationalism to enhance the legitimacy of the regime becomes dangerous if there are growing social uprisings and demands for political reforms. In general, the likelihood of collective action against the government increases as the society develops and the control of the society becomes increasingly difficult (e.g., Lipset 1960; Lichbach 1998). Strides and movements toward more open and liberal societies can make the mobilization of dissidents easy and contribute to detaching the public from the communist regime. Under such developments and thus growing risk of social unrest, resonating with nationalist sentiments in the wake of disputes with external states to further solidify the legitimacy of the CCP can backfire on the government. Adapting hardline policies to appease nationalist rage would embolden protesters and further attract more participation in anti-foreign rallies. When nationalist protests become prolonged and expanded, it is far more difficult for the government to control movements. In turn, they can provide more opportunities for collective actions for those activists pursuing different goals. For example, two Tiananmen incidents in 1976 and 1989 started with a large gathering of people mourning beloved leaders. Nowadays, anti-foreign rallies following serious diplomatic crises can engender similar opportunities, as society harbors deep grievance toward the government coupled with the government's declining control of nationalism. Grievance underlies social mobilization, and the party's difficulty imbuing the society with nationalism permits civilian activists to pursue their own understandings of nationalism, thereby increasing collective actions for diverse needs and demands. Over the past decades, dissidents' ability to reinterpret state-sanctioned nationalism and mobilize their associates has been aided by the following profound and rapid changes.

First of all, rapid economy development has brought fundamental changes to the society. Inequality in the society has worsened much with the development of the economy. The GINI index in 2012 has reached a .61¹. This number put China into a group of most unequal societies in the world. Without surprise, this has exacerbated grievance in the society in combination with rampant corruption of the government officials. Moreover, the ability of the government to provide public goods has been far behind the pace of economic growth. Problems involving basic necessities for the society every year, for example, food security, transportation, have exhausted confidence in and the credibility of the government. These negative side effects of economic development have led civilian to question the political system, asking for more reform and freedom. The consequences of all these changes is reflected in the numbers of social unrests, which has increased by 5 times in the first decade of the 21st century. In 2011, the number is 500 mass incidents per day.

Secondly, the past decade has witnessed the transformation of China into an information society. The number of internet users in China has been over hundred times multiplied from 1997 to 2013. According to the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), in 1997, the number of internet users was merely 620,000.² In July 2010, the number has reached 420 million.³ In 2013, it totals 564 million.⁴ In urban area, about 48.6% as of 2010 and 57.3% of the

¹ Tom Orlik and Bob Davis, "Relief on China Growth Comes With Caveats", the Wall Street Journal, Jan 18, 2013. retrieved on Feb 10, 2012 from

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887323783704578249371234336736.html>

² CNNIC. "Report on the Development of Internet in China (1997/10)".

<http://www.cnnic.cn/hlwfzyj/hlwzxbg/hlwtjbg/201206/P020120612485123735661.pdf>

³ CNNIC. "The 26th Report on the Development of Internet in China"

http://www.cnnic.net.cn/hlwfzyj/hlwzxbg/hlwtjbg/201206/t20120612_26717.htm

⁴ CNNIC. "Report on the Development of Internet in China (2013/01)".

<http://www.cnnic.cn/hlwfzyj/hlwzxbg/hlwtjbg/201301/P020130117553206429540.pdf>

population in early 2013 are regular internet users and in big cities like Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou, etc., the percentage is even much higher. The outburst of people having access to the internet and social networks have weakened the government's control over information on the one hand, and helped social mobilization on the other hand.

In China, due to the lack of intermediate organization given the harsh restraints on the rights of association, the mobilization of collective action has been based on ecology facilitated increasingly by the internet (Zhao 2001).⁵ For example, the territorial dispute with Japan in 2012 gave rise to the largest protest across the country since 1989. The interviews of the participants of the protest confirm that the ecology-based mobilization⁶ was accommodated by the internet. They received information about a time and a place from friends or coworkers, and then they joined the crowd which finally turned into the largest anti-Japanese protests in recent history. Hence, nowadays the government has more reason to worry that social stability would be under threat if an international crisis breaks out.

Thirdly, China's integration with the world economy has challenged the government's control of information and society. The understanding and knowledge of the western world have increased much in the society not just for the intellectuals, but also for the general public. Activists and potential dissidents have become informed and information and knowledge have increasingly set them free from official doctrines.

⁵ Various levels of governments in China prefer building big squares to commemorate special figures or events or simply to show off power and prosperity. These places serve as the very base for a social movement. People who have access to the internet or other mobile devices can easily set up a time to meet somewhere. They don't need to ask for permission for a gathering as it is not formally a protest, but just wandering (散步) in the same place and at the same time. This strategy has been used for many events, especially in cities where the internet has reached most of citizens.

⁶ Zhenzi Qin, "Turning Point", *China Youth Daily*, Sep 19, 2012. Retrieved on Feb 22, 2013 from <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2012-09-19/063225204322.shtml>

Last but not least, the relationship between the government and the intellectuals has undergone changes in various ways. Since 1999 the government has carried out a policy to sharply expand higher education with a purpose to boost the economy.⁷ The number of college students in school has reached an unprecedented level--- from 3.4 million in 1999 to over 25 million of 2011.⁸ It occurred at the cost of the decline of education quality, and finding a job has been much more difficult for college graduates. It has accordingly produced a large group of young potential dissidents with deep grievance who challenge the party's doctrines and policies.

For many other intellectuals, the market has alienated their relationship with the government. The increasing marketization of the media and publication industry has provided an increasing number of free writers – they don't rely on the government salary for living. They tend to become or at least pretend to be a dissident in order to gain more readers and thus profits. As in a society full of grievance toward the regime, criticizing the government has become a profitable business. For example, many intellectuals gained a huge profit by writing extreme nationalism (Zhou 2005) and criticizing the softness of the government (Hughes 2011). As a result of the marketization of media, the competition between media outlets has led them to favor more radical opinions. All these changes contribute to the increase in grievance and preference in the society for more radical policies⁹.

⁷ Shaofeng Guo, "Increasing University Enrollment by 500 thousand: device the plan within 20 days". Xinjing Bao (新京报). Jan 5, 2009. Retrieved on Feb 21 2013 from <<http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2009-01-05/092316979223.shtml>>

⁸ <http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/ndsj/>

⁹ In this vein, Shirk (2007, 68) argues that increasingly market-driven media industry and the internet together "have changed the context for foreign policy making" in China.

As a result of these profound shifts in the society, it has become harder for the CCP to manipulate popular nationalism: the interpretation of nationalism and the outbreak of nationalist movements have increasingly escaped from the control of the party. Grievance in the society toward the government and the increasing convenience and easiness of collective action are exploitable for activists' interest in mobilization and thus post a threat to the CCP regime. Evidently, tens of thousands of angry protesters can be largely organized through online communications and instant messaging networks. As Shirk describes, coordination of the anti-Japanese demonstrations in 2005 occurred "mysteriously without any evident leadership or organization through obscure Internet sites, e-mail, and cell-phone text messages." (Shirk 2007; 103). Accordingly, despite the popular view of the media and some scholarship over Beijing's interest in stimulating and appealing to nationalist sentiments and thereby boosting its legitimacy, Beijing gradually becomes cautious on rallying the public around the flag in the situation of foreign policy crises.

Given the rising possibility that during large-scale nationalist protests the public can turn against the government, it is in Beijing's interests to be restrained and not to escalate tension. In the next section, we conduct two case studies to assess our argument.

Cases: Japan's Detention of a Chinese Fisherman in 2010 and Japan's nationalization of the Senkaku Islands in 2012

To examine the role of nationalism in China's foreign policy behaviors, surveying China's behavior in disputes with Japan over the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands, we believe, is a reasonable touchstone for this task. While China has involved in territorial disputes with its

neighbors such as Japan, Philippines, and Vietnam in recent decades, China's territorial disputes with Japan are, *inter alia*, widely considered being tied to popular nationalism in the PRC.¹⁰ Indeed, in the Chinese society, there is still deep-rooted anti-Japanism and historical animosity toward Japan. Japan is long-characterized as China's top national rival and enemy (Shirk 2007).

Japan's Detention of a Chinese Fisherman in 2010

On September 7, 2010, a Chinese fishing trawler intruded into Japanese national waters around the Senkaku islands. When Japanese coastguard patrol vessels tried to stop the boat, the trawler rammed two of the patrol ships. It resulted in Japan's seizure of the Chinese ship and the detention of the trawler's captain for questioning by Japanese prosecutors, which triggered nationalist emotions in China. Immediately after the event, nationalist activist groups started to protest against Japan's provocative action. As the anniversary of the 1931 "Mukden Incident" that led to Japan's occupation of northeast China came closer, anti-Japanese sentiments were recalled and ran strongly in the society. The eruption of nationalist rage thus followed. Protests increasingly became larger and widespread across China. Protesters called for the release of the captain and pressured the CCP to take retaliatory actions. Heated participants of the rallies sometimes attacked Japanese restaurants and stores and destroyed Japanese-brand cars on the street. They also burned images of Japan's flags and denounced Japanese sovereignty claim over

¹⁰ For example, when covering China- Japan disputes over Diaoyu/Senkaku island in 2012, *Forbes* used the title "China and Japan Must Resist Nationalism Over Islands", retrieved on Feb 2, 2013 from <<http://www.forbes.com/sites/jonathanmiller/2012/09/18/china-and-japan-must-resist-nationalism-over-islands>>; *Deutsche Welle* said "East China Sea is hit by a wave of nationalism", retrieved on Feb 2, 2013 from <<http://www.dw.de/east-china-sea-is-hit-by-a-wave-of-nationalism/a-16232406>>.

the islands. These anti-Japanese rallies lasted even after Japan dismissed the captain on September 24, 2010.

Facing Japan's proactive action and rising public anger, the Chinese government immediately responded to the detention and demanded the release of the trawler's captain by summoning the Japanese ambassador to China. The Foreign Ministry also announced the suspension of high-level exchanges with Japan and its reservation of the right "to take further actions" against Japan.¹¹ Given Japan's continuous refusal of returning the captain to China, Premier Wen Jiabao threatened to punish Tokyo if it did not release him instantly. He warned Japan by stating: "If Japan clings to its mistake, China will take 'further action' and the Japanese side shall bear all the consequences that arise."¹² One day after his threat, Chinese customs officials halted shipments of the so-called rare earth elements to Japan that are used in such important Japanese products as semi-conductors and hybrid cars.¹³

While Beijing sought to resolve the incident with the implementation of diverse measures, it did not use the dispute to mobilize nationalism by tapping into anti-Japanese antagonism. Rather, Beijing focused more on preventing mobilization of popular nationalism. The Chinese government tried to forestall anti-Japanese protests. Authorities banned media coverage on the dispute, censored online postings from nationalist activists attempting to organize protests and blocked numerous websites of nationalist groups including the main

¹¹ Peter Foster, "Diplomatic tensions after Japanese arrest Chinese fisherman", *the Telegraph*, Sep 8, 2010. Retrieved on Mar 2 2013 from <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/japan/7989126/Diplomatic-tensions-after-Japanese-arrest-Chinese-fisherman.html>

¹² "China to Up Patrols near Senkaku isles", *the Daily Yomiuri*, September 28, 2010.

¹³ Keith Bradsher, "Amid Tension, China Blocks Crucial Exports to Japan", *the New York Times*, Sep 23, 2010. Retrieved on Mar 2 2013 from <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/24/business/global/24rare.html>

activist group of pro-Diaoyu – the China Federation for Defending Diaoyu.¹⁴ They also ordered universities to prevent students from participating protests. Public security officers and polices interrupted and cracked down on anti-Japanese protests in major cities including Beijing, Nanjing, and Changsha.¹⁵ In addition, attempts to provoke Japan by dispatching the People’s Liberation Army around contested areas disappeared during the territorial crisis. In April 2010, a PLA’s navy helicopter threatened a Japanese military vessel by flying very low, but no such aggressive measure was implemented during the crisis.¹⁶ Also, before the eruption of the event, fisheries patrol ships, some of which were decommissioned navy vessels, had been in operation around the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands. Yet, these operations were resumed after the release of the captain.¹⁷ Moreover, Beijing’s arguably most threatening measure – the embargo of rare earth minerals – was denied by the Chinese government.¹⁸

Japan’s nationalization of the Senkaku Islands in 2012

This new round of series of diplomatic frictions between China and Japan started with the proposal of a former Tokyo Governor Shintaro Ishihara – Japan’s hardcore nationalist figure – to

¹⁴ “Anti-Japanese Protests Held in China”, retrieved on Mar 1, 2013 from <http://www.japanprobe.com/2010/09/19/anti-japanese-protests-held-in-china/>

¹⁵ “China suppresses anti-Japanese protests, bans media coverage.” BBC Monitoring Asia Pacific on September 13, 2010.

¹⁶ Peter Foster, “Diplomatic tensions after Japanese arrest Chinese fisherman”, *the Telegraph*, Sep 8, 2010. Retrieved on Mar 1 2013 from <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/japan/7989126/Diplomatic-tensions-after-Japanese-arrest-Chinese-fisherman.html>

¹⁷ “China to Up Patrols Near Senkaku isles”, *the Daily Yomiuri*, September 28, 2010

¹⁸ Areddy, etal., “China Denies Halting Rare-Earth Exports to Japan”, *the Wall Street Journal*, Sep 23, 2010. Retrieved on Mar 1, 2013 from <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704062804575509640345070222.html>

buy Diaoyu/Senkaku islands during a speech in Washington on April 15, 2012.¹⁹ The Chinese government immediately condemned the proposal illegal and claimed China's sovereignty over the islands. Later, Shintaro launched a campaign to raise the fund and gained significant support from the society. The Noda administration concerned that if the Tokyo government bought the islands, it could drag the government into more uncontrollable territorial dispute with China. In order to avoid such a situation, the Japanese central government in July 2012 considered nationalizing the islands.²⁰

In response, Chinese foreign ministry condemned and repeated the sovereignty claim over the islands.²¹ Nationalist activists' response in China were much radical than the government, however. In reaction to Japan's attempt to nationalize the islands coupled with Japanese right wing group's activities near the disputed areas in June, some activist groups in mainland China planned to land on the islands in June 16, 2012. But they were forced to cancel by the Chinese government. However, some activists from Hong Kong in August successfully landed on one of the disputed islands. They were immediately detained by the Japanese law enforcement forces. It caused fierce reactions from the society in China. Nationalist rallies against Japan broke out in dozens of Chinese cities, which called for more aggressive and retaliatory policy.²²

¹⁹ "Tokyo to buy disputed islands, says Governor Ishihara", BBC, April 17, 2012. Retrieved on March 7 2013 from <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-17747934>>

²⁰ Mari Yamaguchi, "Japan's government eyes buying disputed islands", Associated Press, July 7, 2012.

²¹ Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. "Response to the Japanese Government's Plan to Purchase Diaoyu Island". July 7 2012. Retrieved on March 1 2013 from <<http://haiwai.people.com.cn/n/2012/0708/c232573-17218279.html>>

²² "Anti-Japan Protests Held Across China", VOA news, retrieved on Mar 1 2013 from <<http://www.voanews.com/content/anti-japan-protests-held-across-china/1491277.html>>

On September 10, the Japanese government eventually bought the islands. Mass protests erupted in more than 100 cities.²³ It became the largest anti-Japan movement in the past three decades. Many turned violent. Some even attacked police forces and government facilities. During the rallies, protesters' demands were not limited to the sovereignty claim over the islands, but they spilt over prohibited territory including calls for liberty, human rights,²⁴ or worshipping Mao Zedong.²⁵

The Chinese government quickly protested the purchase, summoned the ambassador, and issued a statement about the baselines of territorial sea around the islands.²⁶ China also started to dispatch ocean surveillance ships to the periphery of the disputed islands. However, although public nationalism sentiments were at its all-time height, their measures were not much more than symbolic. The Chinese government consequently faced a strong criticism from the society on its softness against the Japanese government. Moreover, the government tried different measures to suppress the scale of the protests, for example, cancelling large events to avoid big gatherings of people, blocking related words on the internet, letting the public transportation bypass stops near Japanese embassy in Beijing, calling for rationality and restraints, arresting radicals, etc.

²³ Louisa Lim, "Second Day Of Anti-Japan Protests Rock China", NPR news, Sep 16, 2013. Retrieved on Mar 1 2013 from < <http://www.npr.org/2012/09/16/161228298/chinese-flood-streets-in-anti-japan-demonstrations>>; CCTV 13, "Anti-Japan Protests in 180 cities: reflection on the violence", Sep 23, 2013. <<http://v.ifeng.com/news/world/201209/79d7223e-041a-40db-b6c4-1d2810df5d6b.shtml>>

²⁴ Oiwan Lam, "China: Protesters Arrested for Human Rights Banner at Anti-Japan Rally", Global Voice, Sep 17, 2012. Retrieved on Mar 1 2013 from <<http://globalvoicesonline.org/2012/09/17/china-protesters-arrested-for-carrying-wrong-banner-at-anti-japan-rally/>>.

²⁵ Didi Tang, "In protests, Mao holds subtle messages for Beijing", Associated Press, Sep 20, 2012.

²⁶ The Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China. "Statement of the Government of the People's Republic of China on the Baselines of the Territorial Sea of Diaoyu Dao and its Affiliated Islands". <http://www.gov.cn/jrzq/2012-09/10/content_2221140.htm>

Overall, the Chinese government reacted to the Japanese government in a cautious way in September. However, after October, the Chinese government started to escalate its aggressiveness. The ocean surveillance ships regularly entered the territorial waters of the disputed islands. In December 2012, airplanes belonging to the ocean administration of China flew over the islands and intercepted by the Japan's F-15 fighters.²⁷ In 2013, China even sent ten jet fighters to Japan's Air Defense Identification Zone near Diaoyu/Senkaku islands.²⁸ Yet, these measures took place much after nationalist anger retreated from the center of attention in the society (shown in the appendix). Moreover, China's most provocative action that one Chinese navy frigate locked its weapon radar on a Japanese battleship near the disputed islands took off in late January 2013, but China denied the charge.²⁹

In summary, in contrast to the contention that nationalist protests are state-sanctioned, in the outbreak of territorial disputes, the mobilization of anti-Japanese protests was rarely state-approved. Even there might be Beijing's tacit consent to these protests, which allows further mobilization, participants of anti-Japanese rallies in numerous cities across the country were gathered through individual contacts and online social networks. Protesters chanted anti-Japanese slogans and called for hardline policies. Yet, Beijing made limited response to public

²⁷ The Associated Press, "Japan says Chinese plane spotted over disputed islands, F-15 jets scrambled to area", Dec 13, 2012.

²⁸ Barbara Demick, "China-Japan tension over disputed islands takes to the sky", LA times, Jan 11, 2013. Retrieved on Mar 1 2013 from <<http://articles.latimes.com/2013/jan/11/world/la-fg-wn-japanese-chinese-islands-20130111>>

²⁹ Martin Fackler, "Japan Says China Aimed Military Radar at Ship", the New York Times, February 8, 2013. Retrieved on Mar 1 2013 from <<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/06/world/asia/japan-china-islands-dispute.html>>; Chris Buckley, "China Denies Directing Radar at Japanese Naval Vessel and Copter", the New York Times, February 8, 2013. Retrieved on Mar 1 2013 from <<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/09/world/asia/china-denies-directing-radar-at-japanese-military.html>>.

rage. It did not hype disputes with Japan and use nationalist sentiments to solidify patriotic nationalism in the society. Instead, the PRC sought to play nationalist sentiments down. In addition, the Chinese government was bent on preventing further outburst of protests. These general phenomena, which barely correspond to the existing views on China's foreign policy making, has appeared in the recent two major disputes over the islands.

Some Concluding Remarks

In this paper, we seek to show that the existing views on the role of popular nationalism in China's policy making are problematic. Unlike a growing perception or suspicion in the media and academia that Beijing's exploitation of popular nationalism in the society, our paper makes the point that popular nationalism in China can deter the rise of assertive foreign policies. The current popular views on the danger of China's nationalism need to be further assessed. Also, this study questions the existing studies on the deterrence role of China's economic interests in cooperating with Japan in the rise of aggressive behaviors (e.g., Downs and Saunders 1998/9). We believe that rising grievance in the society can trump economic interests.

Additionally, our work suggests that the effect of nationalism in the society on interstate conflicts can be conditional on regime types. In the existing literature, nationalism is often linked to conflict via elite's manipulation in democratizing countries (Mansfield and Snyder 1995). By contrast, in a more mature democracy, facing domestic challenges, such as high unemployment rate, scandal and so on, the democratic leaders might stimulate popular nationalism and scapegoat an external threat to divert the domestic tension. Leaders in trouble strive to salvage themselves by creating a national enemy (Levy 1988). Here too, nationalism is

conflict-inducing. Yet, what is missing in the literature is attention to the role of popular nationalism in the risk of international conflicts in authoritarian regimes. As our case of China illustrates, when popular nationalism is at its height and can easily erupt into widespread protests, it would actually deter the government from escalating conflict. Hence, in authoritarian regimes, popular nationalism can have mitigating effects on conflicts under certain conditions.

At last, some clarification on our case might be in need. In this paper, we are not arguing that China is not interested in or be willing to cede the territorial sovereignty of the islands. We indeed admit that the islands are strategically and economically important for the CCP regime so that China has provoked Japan to dispute the Japanese sovereignty over the islands. Instead, we contend that popular nationalism in China has increasingly been a threatening forces so that Beijing is (will be) reluctant to rally the public around the legitimacy of the CCP by escalating tension over the disputed islands and fanning nationalist sentiments.

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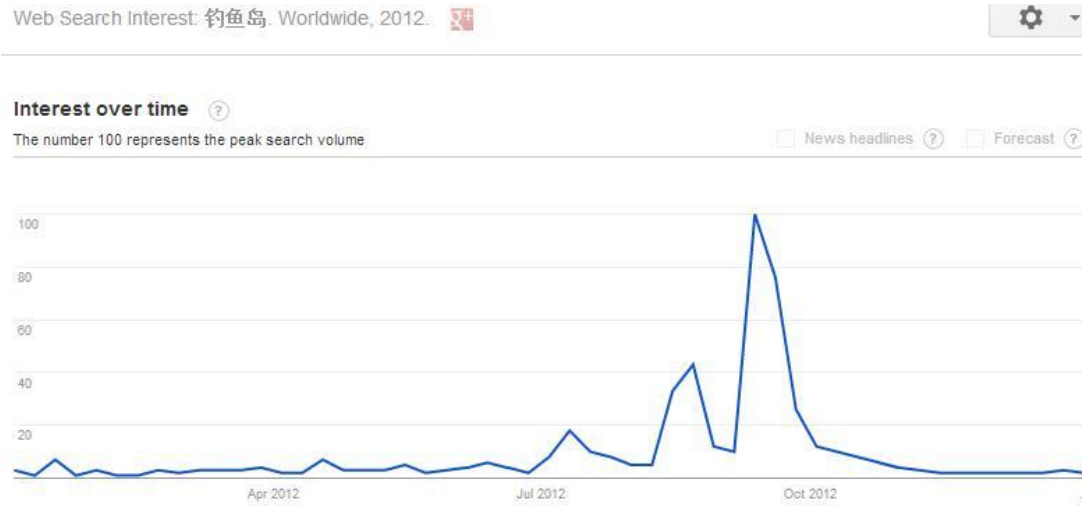
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Appendix:



This graph was generated by Google Trends using the Chinese character “钓鱼岛”. It shows the frequency of “钓鱼岛” searched online. It can be regarded as an indicator of public sentiment on the dispute.