Popular Nationalism and China’s Japan Policy: the Diaoyu Islands protests, 2012–2013

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ABSTRACT
2012–2013 witnessed a renewed flare-up of anti-Japanese sentiment in Mainland China, followed by a toughening of the People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) Diaoyu Islands policy. Did popular nationalism influence the PRC’s military escalation? A lack of transparency in elite Chinese decision-making puts a definitive answer to this question beyond our reach. However, this article utilizes qualitative and quantitative analyses of anti-Japanese discourse and deeds in both cyberspace and on the streets of urban China to argue that the circumstantial evidence is compelling: nationalist opinion is a powerful driver of China’s Japan policy. The demands of nationalist legitimation appear to pressure the elite to respond to popular nationalism. Should one or more Chinese die at the hands of the Japanese navy or air force, therefore, the popular pressure for escalation and war will likely be more than China’s leaders can manage.

不杀日。难解心头之恨。
‘Without killing Japanese, I cannot relieve the hatred in my heart.’
(Sina Forum post from Chengdu, 16 August 2012)

这种人在日本叫做极右翼法西斯，在德国叫做纳粹，在中国叫做‘爱国者’。
‘In Japan these people are called extreme right-wing fascists. In Germany they are called Nazis. In China they are called “patriots”.’
(Wangyi post from Fuzhou, 21 September 2012)

The year 2012 witnessed a renewed flare-up of anti-Japanese sentiment in Mainland China. In April 2012, right-wing Tokyo Governor Shintaro Ishihara proposed that Tokyo Prefecture purchase three of the five Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands (钓鱼岛) from their private Japanese owner. Chinese nationalists were outraged. ‘I suggest everyone boycott Japanese goods,’ one netizen wrote on Sina.com. ‘Otherwise all the money we spend on Japanese goods will be used to buy bullets.’ In mid-August, activists from Hong Kong landed on one of the islands, and were promptly detained by the Japanese Coast Guard. Chinese
nationalists responded by protesting not just online, but outside the Japanese embassy in Beijing, in Shenzhen, and in other major Chinese cities.

In early September, the Japanese government purchased the three islands, apparently hoping to diffuse the situation by taking it out of Ishihara and the Japanese right-wing’s hands. Many Chinese interpreted the purchase, however, as an attempt to ‘nationalize’ Japan’s claim to the islands. ‘Start fighting!’ one netizen demanded online to the People’s Liberation Army (PLA). ‘There are 1.3 billion people backing you.’ On the weekend before 18 September, the eighty-first anniversary of the Mukden Incident that led to the Japanese occupation of Manchuria in 1931, there were street protests in scores of cities across China. Demonstrators carried portraits of Mao Zedong and chanted slogans like ‘Declare war!’ and ‘Kill all Japanese!’ Several Japanese factories were forced to close amidst widespread vandalism. On 18 September in Beijing, protesters hurled bottles at US Ambassador to China Gary Locke’s car and grabbed its American flag, blocking him from entering the US embassy.

The Chinese government then took the unprecedented step of sending armed naval warships to the disputed islands. In December, a PLA patrol plane flew over the area, and Japan scrambled jet fighters. In January 2013, Chinese and Japanese jets appear to have played chicken near the islands, and a Chinese frigate locked its weapons-targeting radar onto a Japanese helicopter and a destroyer.

The enigma of China’s Japan policy

Did nationalist opinion, expressed both in Chinese cyberspace and in urban street demonstrations, influence the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) elite’s decision to escalate militarily? Or are China’s foreign policy decision-makers wise mandarins with the smarts to fully manage popular nationalism, perhaps even strategically manipulating it to improve their bargaining position with the Japanese?

A lack of transparency in elite Chinese decision-making puts definitive answers to these questions beyond our reach. This article argues, however, that the circumstantial evidence is compelling: nationalist opinion is a powerful bottom-up driver of China’s Japan policy. While political elites may sometimes seek to strategically manipulate domestic politics for foreign policy bargaining purposes, the weight of the empirical evidence suggests that the opposite is more often true: party elites, concerned above all about maintaining CCP legitimacy and rule, are increasingly responsive to the demands of domestic nationalists.

CCP elites, furthermore, only appear ‘smart’ when the situations that they confront are relatively manageable. They have been lucky that events beyond their control—such as the accidents of history that led to the Belgrade bombing and spy plane collision incidents of 1999 and 2001 with the United States—have not yet occurred in the context of Sino–Japanese relations. Should one or more Chinese die at the hands of the Japanese navy or air force—accidentally or not—the pressure for escalation and war will likely be more than China’s leaders can manage.

This article does not argue that the Chinese party-state plays no role in anti-Japanese popular nationalism—only that the Chinese public increasingly plays an autonomous role in shaping China’s Japan policy. The CCP’s educational and propaganda systems are clearly a major distal cause of popular anti-Japanese nationalism. The ‘Patriotic Education’ (爱国主义教育) campaign that followed the Tiananmen Square Massacre inculcated a view of Japanese as the paradigmatic ‘devils’ (鬼子). More recently, the CCP propaganda apparatus has been involved in the production of countless movies and TV series about the brutality and bestiality of Japanese troops in China during the ‘Century of Humiliation’ (百年国耻). China’s youth are not just passively exposed to Japanese aggression; they are also given the opportunity to engage in active resistance. The CCP has even helped develop popular video games about World War II that enable vicarious vengeance.  


The CCP party-state was also a proximal cause of the popular anti-Japanese discourse and demonstrations of 2012–2013. For instance, some analysts believe that the September 2010 ramming of Japanese Coast Guard vessels by Chinese fishing trawlers was actually contrived by the CCP to assert China's right to patrol the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands.⁸ This 2010 incident likely prompted Ishihara's decision to try to purchase some of the islands, which ultimately sparked the 2012 protests in China. But we agree with scholars like Harvard's Iain Johnston that, in light of the sensitivity of the 18 September anniversary of the Manchurian Incident, the Chinese party-state did not directly initiate the September 2012 popular anti-Japanese protests.⁹ This article provides evidence that the PLA's military escalation at the end of 2012 followed popular nationalist protests against both Japan and the Chinese government, suggesting—but not proving—that an autonomous public was one proximal cause of the CCP elite's escalation of the dispute.

The article begins with a brief review of the recent literature on nationalism and Chinese foreign policy, followed by a concise historical overview of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands controversy. After a brief discussion of Internet sources, we turn to (1) qualitative and (2) quantitative examinations of the sequence of state–society interactions during the 2012–2013 Diaoyu Islands controversy. We find that flare-ups of anti-Japanese (and anti-government) sentiment, both online and on the streets of urban China, were followed by a clear toughening of the PRC's Japan policy. This does not prove that the former caused the latter: correlation does not equal causation. But it does satisfy the most basic and necessary condition for demonstrating causality: that a cause precedes an effect.

The article concludes with some thoughts on why nationalist opinion might influence Chinese policymakers when the CCP so easily disregards public opinion and crushes protests on so many other issues. We argue that because the CCP has staked its claim to legitimacy on its nationalist credentials for over 65 years now, repressing popular nationalists is much more costly to the party-state's legitimacy than crushing dissent on other issues. Regime legitimacy, in short, appears to be the key mediator accounting for the relationship between popular nationalism on the one hand, and China's Japan policy on the other.

**Popular nationalism and Chinese foreign policy**

Does public opinion shape foreign policymaking? In the study of American foreign policy, Aaron Wildavsky's ‘two presidencies’ thesis was dominant up until the Vietnam War. It held that the US Congress largely deferred to the president on foreign—but not domestic—policy.¹⁰ With Vietnam, however, partisanship over foreign policy became more apparent. In a longitudinal analysis of survey data, Benjamin Page and Robert Shapiro found that changes in public opinion on international events regularly preceded changes in American foreign policies.¹¹ A new thesis emerged to explain this finding: since the United States is a democracy, and the elected officials who make foreign policy generally desire re-election, they are attuned to what the public wants. In a comprehensive review of this ‘electoral connection’ argument, Duke's John Aldrich concluded that, ‘The potential impact of foreign policy views on electoral outcomes is the critical mechanism linking public attitudes to elite behavior.’¹²

But does public opinion shape foreign policymaking in non-democracies like China, where there is no ‘electoral connection’? James Reilly and Jessica Chen Weiss have recently taken up this question, re-examining anti-Japanese sentiment in 2003–2005 and anti-American sentiment surrounding the Belgrade embassy bombing of 1999 and the spy plane collision of 2001.

Reilly's 2012 *Strong Society, Smart State* examines the relationship between public opinion, mass mobilization, and the Chinese state in the context of China's Japan policy. Reilly argues that the CCP has become an ‘adaptive authoritarian’ regime, responding adeptly to public discontent, rationally

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⁸For example, Suisheng Zhao, ‘Shaping the regional context of China’s rise: how the Obama administration brought back hedge in its engagement with China’, *Journal of Contemporary China* 21(75), (2012), p. 374. On the role of fishing trawlers in Chinese sovereignty disputes, see Jens Kastner, ‘China’s fishermen charge enemy lines’, *Asia Times*, (16 May 2012).


managing popular nationalists and then quickly returning to pragmatic Japan policies. Over the longer term, the state uses propaganda campaigns to reshape public attitudes in a manner consistent with its goals. Earlier scholars like Susan Shirk, Peter Gries and Ed Friedman, Reilly claims, have been too pessimistic about the state’s ability to manage popular nationalism; the Chinese state is ‘smart’.13

Is the Chinese party-state really as skillful at blending responsiveness, repression and persuasion as Reilly suggests? Is it ‘smart’, or was it just lucky that the events of a decade ago that Reilly chose to re-examine were relatively manageable? The viciousness and violence of the 2012 Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands protests, and the PLA military escalations that followed them, appear to undermine Reilly’s claim that Sino–Japanese relations are ‘relatively stable’, and that ‘The likelihood of China going to war with Japan is no greater in 2011 than [sic!] it was in 2000’.14 The Diaoyu Islands protests of 2012–2013 strongly suggest otherwise.

In her 2013 ‘Authoritarian signaling, mass audiences, and nationalist protest in China,’ Jessica Chen Weiss makes a very different argument for *International Organization*. Weiss chides earlier China scholars as diverse as Iain Johnston, Danie Stockmann, Peter Gries, Mike Oksenberg, Dan Lynch, Wu Xinbo, Zhao Suisheng, Tom Christensen, Robert Ross and Wu Xu for suggesting that popular nationalism is an ‘unhelpful constraint’ on Chinese foreign policymakers. Specifically, she claims that these scholars err in treating popular nationalism as ‘a constraint exogenous to the government’s own actions’.15 Weiss flips the causal arrow, claiming that it is international strategy that drives elite decisions about domestic politics.

Weiss applies international relations (IR) bargaining theory to China, claiming that Chinese leaders strategically manipulate popular nationalists to signal either resolve (e.g. the Belgrade bombing, 1999) or a willingness to cooperate (e.g. the Hainan spy plane incident, 2001) in their diplomacy towards the US. When a major event occurs which mobilizes Chinese nationalists and creates the necessary conditions for mass protest, the CCP chooses to either ‘nip protests in the bud’ by giving a ‘red light’ to domestic nationalists, thus reducing domestic audience costs, or allow protests to develop, giving a ‘green light’ to domestic nationalists, tying their own hands and communicating resolve to their diplomatic foes.16

Since the publication of James Fearon’s ‘Domestic political audiences and the escalation of international disputes’ 20 years ago, a burgeoning rationalist IR literature on bargaining and ‘audience costs’ has been lucrative for its practitioners.17 Jessica Weeks has extended the bargaining logic beyond democracies to posit ‘authoritarian audience costs’.18 Weiss builds on this line of bargaining scholarship, arguing that nationalist politics within China are driven by leadership decisions about what messages to signal to the external world.

The application of rationalist bargaining theory to Sino–American relations today, however, suffers from many of the same empirical problems that it does in explaining international crises elsewhere. Jack Snyder has convincingly argued that bargaining theory is little more than ‘conjecture’, failing to survive a real world reality check. For instance, historical analysis reveals that leaders rarely issue ‘bridge burning ultimatums’ to increase audience costs and signal resolve. Instead, they usually seek the opposite: flexibility through ambiguity so that they are not forced into a corner from which they cannot retreat.19

In the case of Sino–American relations, Weiss claims that the CCP allows or forbids domestic protests primarily on the basis of its strategic interests. For instance, she asserts that the Chinese government permitted anti-American protests in 1999 to gain the ‘international benefits of signaling resolve’. Another

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16 *Ibid*.
possibility, of course, is that with the death of three Chinese and the visible anger of Chinese all around the world, the CCP elite may have realized that it would be too costly to its nationalist legitimacy to suppress the protests. They gave a ‘green light’ to domestic nationalists not because of its ‘international benefits’, but because CCP regime legitimacy was at stake.

‘Second image reversed’ approaches have the potential to add nuance to extant second image work, introducing greater dynamism to our thinking about elite decision-making in the context of the two-level game that the CCP elite must play in the making of China’s Japan policy. To argue that elites are primarily driven by international bargaining considerations when making the ‘red light, green light’ decision vis-à-vis domestic nationalists, however, assumes a degree of elite unity and skill that, like Reilly’s argument, may be overly optimistic about CCP control of popular nationalism.

The Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands dispute: a brief history

The 2012–2013 Diaoyu Islands dispute provides a new and consequential case study to inductively explore the relationship between popular nationalism and Chinese foreign policy.

The Diaoyu or Senkaku Islands are eight desolate rocks lying in the East China Sea between Taiwan and Okinawa, and are claimed by China, Taiwan and Japan. The sovereignty dispute is long and complex. Chinese claims (Mainland and Taiwan) are based upon historical records dating back to the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), the 1943 Cairo Declaration stipulation that Japan return all Chinese territory it had annexed, and a ‘natural prolongation’ of the continental shelf argument in international maritime law. Japan’s claims are based on the 1895 Treaty of Shimonoseki, which formally ceded Taiwan ‘and its surrounding islands’ to Japan, the US return of ‘administrative rights’ over the islands to Japan along with Okinawa in 1972, and a ‘median line’ division of the continental shelf argument in international maritime law.

The first major Chinese protests over the islands occurred in 1971, after a September 1970 incident in which the Japanese navy evicted Taiwanese reporters raising the Republic of China’s (ROC) flag on one of the islands. Large and vocal anti-Japanese protests were organized in Hong Kong and Taiwan, and among Chinese in the US. Normalization of relations between China and Japan in 1972, however, included an agreement between Beijing and Tokyo to shelve the dispute for future resolution.

In 1996 David Chan from Hong Kong drowned while trying to land on one of the islands, prompting street demonstrations in Hong Kong and Taiwan, and the expression of anti-Japanese sentiment in Mainland Chinese books and magazines. The fall 1996 bestseller China Can Still Say No lamented that ‘China has been too warm and accommodating towards Japan’. 2003, the ‘year of Internet nationalism’, was the first time that Mainland Chinese nationalists undertook their own trip to the islands, organizing themselves online, and receiving a hero’s welcome upon their return to Xiamen.

Internet sources

The qualitative and quantitative analyses in this article utilize material gleamed from the Chinese Internet. Data from Chinese social media are obviously not representative of Chinese public opinion more broadly: Internet users tend to be younger, more urban and more educated than the Chinese population as a whole. However, our interest is not in Chinese public opinion as a whole. Instead, we are interested in the younger, more educated and more politically active urban public most likely to participate in nationalist protests in China—those of greatest concern to CCP elites. The authors therefore believe that social media offer a useful window into the state–society dynamics of nationalist legitimation in China today.


This analysis explores tweets made on Sina Weibo (新浪微博), a popular microblogging service in China that is comparable to Twitter, posts on Tianya Club (天涯社区), and comments on articles from three major online news outlets, Sina News (新浪新闻), Tencent News (腾讯新闻) and Wangyi News (网易新闻). We use multiple sources to increase variation and reduce sampling error. The comments on Sina News are relatively pro-CCP, while Sina Weibo is relatively liberal and enables us to examine comments on the incident outside the context of one specific news article. Wangyi is traditionally very liberal and independent of the party-state in terms of comments made on news stories. We assess public sentiments both quantitatively and qualitatively, coding Sina Weibo and comments made on Sina News articles, and translating from these sources.

Censorship could systematically distort the content of materials gathered from Chinese social media. We argue, however, that (1) the state is often not as thorough in deleting comments as some argue, (2) commenters are often very clever in how they phrase their comments to avoid deletion, and (3) the state's will to censor comments varies from issue to issue. The CCP faces significant costs to its legitimacy if it chooses to stifle public discourse on nationalist issues like Sino–Japanese relations.

**The 2012–2013 Diaoyu protests: a qualitative analysis**

Prior to the fall of 2012, Beijing largely restricted its words and deeds on the Diaoyu Islands dispute to reassertions of its sovereignty and non-military actions. For instance, following a January 2012 Japanese government announcement that it would name a number of the uninhabited islands, the official Chinese People's Daily merely reasserted China's “firm and unwavering” determination to safeguard its sovereignty over the Diaoyu Islands:22

Prior to fall 2012, CCP actions had been restrained as well. The Chinese government sent fishery and patrol boats around the islands, but never armed PLA navy vessels.23 Even after a collision between Japanese Coast Guard and Chinese fishing boats resulted in the Chinese boat captain being detained in 2010, the Chinese government did not send military vessels to the area.24 Prior to the escalation of popular anti-Japanese nationalism in 2012, in short, it appears that China's leaders had no desire to escalate the dispute with Japan.

On 17 April 2012, Governor Ishihara announced that Tokyo would buy three of the islands. 'The purchase of these islands will be Japanese buying Japanese land in order to protect it,' he claimed. 'What would other countries have to complain about?'25

Beijing's response was notably mild. 'Any unilateral action taken by the Japanese side is illegal and invalid,' a People's Daily article stated. 'Given the complex and sensitive nature of the issue … Japanese politicians at both the central and local levels … should exercise caution in their remarks and should not take any provocative moves.'26

Chinese netizens (网民), by contrast, were upset at both Japan and their own government. As noted above, some urged a boycott of Japanese goods. Even at this early stage, however, netizens were already expressing frustration that their government had allowed this to happen in the first place. On 19 April, a netizen from Kaifeng lamented on Tencent that 'China is such a big country but pees itself in fear. China is really sad ('怕的尿尿，真可悲啊中国'). Three days later, a Beijing netizen added, sarcastically, that he might as well 'support Japan, as all China will do is [diplomatically] issue condemnation and protests' ('只会谴责和抗议').27

Protests erupted in mid-August following the Japanese arrest of activists from Hong Kong on one of the islands. Chinese netizens began calling for large scale demonstrations against Japan, some

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22‘China “unwavering” on Diaoyu Islands’, People’s Daily Online, (17 January 2012).
23See, for example, ‘China’s patrol fleet patrols Diaoyu Islands’, People’s Daily Online, (16 March 2012).
even going so far as to criticize the CCP’s ‘weakness’ over the situation. On 15 August, a netizen from Guangdong wrote on Sina that ‘we knew several days in advance that some Chinese would land on the Islands and declare sovereignty. So why didn’t the state send surveillance ships to assist them? They are always so passive, it is too funny. Shameful!’ (太搞笑了。可耻!), The next day, a sarcastic netizen from Jinan declared on Wangyi that, ‘China will launch the strongest counterattack: verrrrrrrrry severe major cities. Much Japanese manufacturing in China was suspended. Purchases of Japanese cars Japanese-made products were damaged in Chengdu, Shenzhen, Suzhou, Qingdao, Beijing and other major cities. Much Japanese manufacturing in China was suspended. Purchases of Japanese cars declined. Travel between the two countries decreased. The People’s Daily claimed that the Japanese economy slowed for months after the protests ended. An 18 September Tianya post explained the rationale (or rationalization?) for the violence of many Chinese netizens and protestors:

Smash hard! Don’t let the so-called rational Japanese dogs and Han traitors (日狗汉奸) dare to purchase Japanese goods. Drive those Japanese goods out of China … To drive a Japanese car is to dig your own grave (自掘坟墓) … By smashing a Japanese car we can prevent 100 people from buying one. This is how we should calculate the costs and benefits. It is not simply Chinese smashing their own cars. In the short run we destroy our own wealth, but in the long run we cut off the enemy’s road to wealth (敌人的财路) and begin our own path to development.

This is a clear proclamation of a willingness to suffer for the sake of vengeance.

Many anti-Japanese protests were actually directed at the PRC party-state. For instance, a QQ message spread around Nanchang in Jiangxi Province called for a protest on 16 September 2012 against ‘the Japanese invaders’. The 3,000–4,000 protestors chose to gather, however, in front of the provincial government building (江西省政府). Provincial Secretary Tan Xiaolin came out to speak to them, calling the demonstrators ‘patriots’ and reassuring them that the Chinese government would protect Chinese sovereignty over the Diaoyu Islands. He was clearly responding to the protestor’s dissatisfaction with their government’s Japan policy. The demonstrators had chanted ‘Never learn from Li Hongzhang again’ (不可再学李鸿章), a reference to the Manchu Qing Dynasty official who is reviled for selling out China to the Japanese in the 1895 Treaty of Shimonoseki.

Official Chinese statements on the Diaoyu Islands, notably, were targeted more at the Chinese people at home than towards Japan or international/Western opinion. The day after the Nanchang...
demonstration, the Jiangxi Daily (江西日报) featured a front page editorial entitled ‘Rational patriotism is more powerful’ (理性爱国更有力量). It listed ad nauseam the measures that the Chinese government had already taken to safeguard Chinese sovereignty:

With regard to the Japanese purchase of Diaoyu Islands, the Chinese government has undertaken a series of steps to declare sovereignty and protect territorial integrity: from issuing solemn statements, to drawing baselines of the territorial sea around the Diaoyu and affiliated islands; from dispatching maritime surveillance ships for patrol and law-enforcement, to refuting Japan’s protest; from giving special declarations to foreign diplomats in China, to depositing the document of the base points and baselines of the territorial sea of the Diaoyu Islands with the Secretary-General of the United Nations. All of this manifests the clear position of the sacredness and inviolability of China’s sovereignty, and indicates our absolute determination to defend China’s territory.41

The Jiangxi Daily was not speaking to Japan; it was speaking directly to the Nanchang protestors of the day before, reassuring them that the government was responsive to their concerns, and seeking to persuade them that the government was handling the situation effectively.

The *Jiangxi Daily* was not alone; the central government in Beijing was doing the same thing. ‘Civility and reason display China’s strength’ (文明理性展现中国力量), an opinion piece on the front page of the 18 September 2012 *People’s Daily*, similarly enumerates the government’s extensive countermeasures:

Responding to Japan’s arbitrary move, the Chinese government, according to international laws and conventions, has undertaken countermeasures of different sorts in a just and confident way to declare its sovereignty and protect its territorial integrity: it has issued official statements, drawn the baselines of the territorial waters of the Diaoyu Islands and their affiliated islets, sent surveillance vessels to carry out patrols around the disputed islands, rejected Japan’s unreasonable protests, circulated special bulletins to embassies in China, submitted the baselines and related sea maps to the United Nations, and submitted the 200 sea miles outer limits of the continental shelf in the East China Sea to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf … All of these moves not only indicate the mature rationality of a great power, but also illustrate the [government’s] absolute and ruthless determination to defend its territory and sovereignty. The countermeasures greatly impair the Japanese goal of consolidating de facto occupation of the Diaoyu Islands, and have won the respect and recognition of international society.42

The *People’s Daily* is not speaking to ‘international society’; they are speaking to the Chinese people. Claiming that the Chinese government has won the respect and recognition of international society (赢得了国际社会的尊重与认同) is an attempt to reassure the Chinese people that their government is doing a good nationalist job of defending Chinese sovereignty and face before international audiences.

Following this mid-September outpouring of anti-Japanese and anti-government rage both online and off, the Chinese government sent PLAN warships to the Diaoyu/Senkaku area.43 The initial netizen response was largely positive. ‘Go fight!’ (打吧) declared a Nantong netizen on Tencent on 19 September. ‘At least 90 percent of the people around me are prepared to donate and offer support once war is declared. This is the people’s heart (民心) and will (民意).’ Also on Tencent that same day, a Shenyang netizen chipped in, ‘Good job navy! Your presence gives us strength … We support you’.44

There have been several military confrontations between fully armed Chinese and Japanese military personnel since then. As noted above, in December Chinese and Japanese fighters shadowed each other in the vicinity of the islands.45 In January 2013 a Chinese frigate locked its missile radar onto a

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43 See, for example, ‘Chinese defense ministry confirms naval patrols near Diaoyu Islands’, *Xinhuanet*, (27 September 2012).
45 See, for example, Kiyoshi Takenaka, ‘Japan protests after Chinese plane flies over disputed isles’, *Reuters*, (13 December 2012).
Japanese ship near the islands. And in November 2013, the PRC announced an East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) including the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, prompting firm protests from both Japan and South Korea, and the United States to fly two B-52 bombers over the contested area, which it considers to be international airspace.

The 2012–2013 Diaoyu protests: a quantitative analysis

In addition to qualitative analysis of popular and official discourse and behaviors, the authors also undertook a quantitative analysis, aggregating and coding the words and actions of both state and social actors over the 11-month period from April 2012 to February 2013.

Social actors

We start with the latter: what social actors said and did, as manifest online in social media and offline in demonstrations on the streets of urban China. The authors began by creating a spreadsheet with 317 rows: one for each day from 10 April 2012 to 20 February 2013.

To quantify online discourse, we examined Sina.com.cn, a popular website, and Sina Weibo, a popular Chinese microblogging site akin to Twitter that is used by well over 30% of all Chinese Internet users. From Sina.com.cn, we entered the number of news stories each day about the Diaoyu Islands in the second column (the first was the date), and the total number of comments to the stories in the third column. From Sina Weibo, the total daily ‘tweets’ that mentioned the Diaoyu Islands was entered in the fourth column.

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To quantify popular protests, in the fifth and final column the authors entered the total number of street demonstrations in cities across China every day. We did not quantify the size of protests; only whether a street protest in a particular city could be confirmed from multiple sources or not.

The resulting data for all 317 days are visually displayed in Figure 1. The dotted line represents Sina.com.cn news stories about the dispute, the dashed line public comments on the news stories per 10,000, the double line the number of tweets on Sina Weibo per 10,000, and the solid line the number of cities with confirmed street protests. The figure reveals a small peak of social media activity in August 2012, followed by a much larger peak in September, mostly just before the surge in street protests.

This pattern of a small peak of new media activity in August followed by a large peak in September is very closely replicated if one enters the Chinese characters ‘钓鱼岛’ (Diaoyu Islands) in either Baidu Index (百度指数) or Google Trends. Both websites graphically display the number of keyword searches over a selected period. This replication with keyword searches gives the authors confidence that our coding of Sina.com.cn and Sina Weibo successfully captured the quantity of social media activity on the Diaoyu Islands dispute over this 11-month period.

Figure 2 zooms in more narrowly on the September 2012 data, displaying social media activity and street demonstrations over the peak month of the dispute. There were over two million tweets per day for an eight day period from 11 to 18 September. This period of intense tweeting led up to two days of widespread protests, on 16 and 18 September, when there were street protests in 85 and 180 Chinese cities, respectively.

State actors

The authors also quantified the words and deeds of CCP party-state actors toward Japan over the Diaoyu Islands. Using Ministry of Foreign Affairs (外交部) and Ministry of National Defense (国防部) press releases, the PRC’s diplomatic and military words and deeds were coded separately. Coding was done on a 0–5 scale for each day, with 0 signifying no action and 5 meaning war. To deal with missing information, any misquotes in the press releases, or any other factors that might skew the data, we coded each day as an average of the information provided by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs with that provided by the Ministry of National Defense. Detailed coding criteria are listed in Appendix A.

Figure 3 displays the data averaged by month. It clearly reveals that PRC diplomatic and military rhetoric and behaviors towards Japan toughened over the 11-month period, with the most rapid escalation occurring in August and September of 2012. It also reveals that military escalation (September) slightly lagged behind diplomatic escalation (August), suggesting that CCP elites first sought to placate domestic nationalists with diplomatic measures before turning to military escalation.

State and social actors

Finally, Figure 4 combines data from the social and state datasets within a single chart covering a two and a half month period in the summer and fall of 2012. It clearly illustrates that China’s military toughening (the solid line) followed the rise in popular indignation expressed in both social media (dotted line) and demonstrations on the streets of urban China (dashed line).

Conclusion: the nationalist politics of state legitimation in China today

给我五百贪腐官，保证吃垮小日本。

‘Give us five hundred corrupt officials, and their gluttony will certainly topple “Little Japan”.

(Banner paraded in Hengyang, Hunan demonstration, 18 September 2012)
就算政府不养老，也要收复钓鱼岛。
‘Even if the government does not take care of the elderly, we should take back the Diaoyus.’
(Rhyme written on a chalkboard, likely in Chengdu, Sichuan, 18 September 2012)\(^5\)

This article deploys both qualitative and quantitative evidence to argue that popular nationalism expressed both online and in street demonstrations played a crucial role in escalating the Chinese party-state’s response to the 2012–2013 Diaoyu Islands dispute with Japan. The step up from unarmed surveillance ships and fishermen to fully armed naval warships, jetfighters and the declaration of an ADIZ represents a substantial escalation of the conflict that did not occur until after popular nationalist protests.

That a cause precedes an effect is a necessary but insufficient condition for demonstrating causality. What is the causal mechanism linking popular nationalism and Chinese foreign policy? In other words, why might CCP elites respond to domestic public opinion?

In the qualitative analysis we saw that protestors directed their ire not just at Japan, but also at the Chinese government. The party-state was mostly accused of being weak on Japan, but also of being corrupt and failing to live up to its paternalistic promise to take care of the Chinese people, as the epigraphs from Hengyang and Suzhou above reveal. And we saw that both local and central party leaders and official print media directly responded to popular nationalist complaints, trying to reassure the public that the CCP was living up to its nationalist promises.

In this concluding section the authors suggest—but cannot prove definitively—that regime legitimacy is the key mediator accounting for the association and sequencing between popular nationalism on the one hand, and China’s Japan policy on the other. Lacking the procedural legitimacy accorded to democratically elected governments and facing the collapse of communist ideology, the Chinese Communist Party is increasingly dependent upon its nationalist credentials to rule. It therefore repeatedly claims to the Chinese people that it will make China rich and strong again and restore China’s respect within the international community.\(^5\)

The party’s nationalist claims, however, are increasingly falling on deaf ears. Moreover, many popular nationalists are beginning to articulate their own nationalist counterclaims—often employing the regime’s own nationalist grammar—to argue that they have the right to participate in nationalist politics.\(^5\)

The global financial crisis appears to have exacerbated the situation. The CCP elite may have become a victim of its own propaganda: it has convinced many Chinese that China emerged from the crisis in a superior economic position vis-à-vis the West and Japan. Chinese popular nationalists, therefore, appear more inclined to demand deference from China’s neighbors and the West—and more willing to call for their government to get tough with the world.

The prominence of Mao posters in the 2012 street demonstrations is noteworthy. Mao is clearly a symbol of nationalist pride: Mao is widely seen to have successfully led both the ‘War of Resistance against Japan’ (抗日战争) and the ‘War to Resist America and Aid Korea’ (抗美援朝战争). The Mao posters were clearly a manifestation of expressive politics, allowing protestors to identify themselves with a Chinese nationalist icon.

Mao posters also served a second and more instrumental function: they reminded the party-state of the righteousness of the popular nationalist demonstrations. Mao thus served as a ‘patron saint’ of sorts for the demonstrators, increasing the odds that they would not be brutally repressed the way


that Falun Gong and many other Chinese protestors are. The CCP had the capacity to suppress all cyber nationalism and street demonstrations in 2012—yet it did not. The costs to its nationalist legitimacy would have been too high.

The CCP is thus increasingly stuck between the rock of domestic nationalists and the hard place of international politics. The tough foreign policies that nationalist opinion increasingly demands can arouse fears among its neighbors about China’s rise, undermining the leadership’s foreign policy goal of reassuring the world about China’s ‘peaceful development’ (和平发展). Domestic nationalist opinion thus appears to constrain the ability of China’s elite to coolly pursue China’s national interest.

The Chinese party-state today does not appear to have the impressive control over popular nationalists that both recent second image reversed (bargaining theory) and optimistic rationalist accounts have suggested. Chinese nationalism can no longer be described as a purely ‘state’ or ‘official’ top-down affair. Bottom-up popular pressures are increasingly threatening the party’s nationalist legitimacy. As the party loses its hegemony over Chinese nationalist discourse, the hyphen that holds the Chinese party-nation together weakens, and Chinese foreign policy becomes increasingly hostage to the accidents of history that can arouse the ire of domestic nationalists. Let us hope that our luck holds, and that no Chinese dies soon at the hands of a Japanese—whether over the Diaoyu issue or otherwise. The peace and prosperity of twenty-first century East Asia depend upon it.

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Appendix A: Criteria for coding diplomatic discourse and military actions

**Diplomatic discourse**

0 = Missing data or no comment made
1 = Statement of China’s unquestionable sovereignty over the islands
2 = Reference to Japan as the guilty party in the dispute
3 = Warning of economic or military consequences including how Japan’s actions threaten bilateral or regional stability
4 = Threats of dire consequences if Japan does not acquiesce to China’s sovereignty and/or comments regarding China’s responsibility to use military force to protect its territory
5 = Declaration of war or use of military force in a hot conflict

**Military action**

0 = No known military presence around the islands or missing data
1 = Normal presence of merchant marine surveillance ships
2 = Increase in the number of surveillance ships in the area
3 = Introduction of armed, PLAN ships, PLAAF jets or PLA troops to the islands
4 = Incidents of direct confrontation with Japanese forces around the islands
5 = Intentional military confrontation with Japanese forces in the disputed area