

## Hearing on “China's Maritime Disputes in the East and South China Seas”

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### INTRODUCTION

Popular nationalism is both a liability and a potential advantage in Chinese diplomacy. Just as the President can point to Congress and say his hands are tied in diplomatic negotiations, so can Chinese leaders point to nationalist sentiment and popular protests. As Deng Xiaoping told Japanese officials in 1987, “In regard to China-Japan relations, reactions among youths, especially students, are strong. If difficult problems were to appear still further, it will become impossible to explain them to the people. It will become impossible to control them [the people]. I want you to understand this position which we are in.”<sup>1</sup> Two years later, the government faced its gravest crisis of legitimacy. Protests against Japan in the fall of 1985 had given way to accusations of government corruption and calls for democracy in 1986 and 1989. For the Chinese leadership, nationalism is both a vulnerability and a source of strength: undermining the government’s legitimacy if seen as weak against foreign insults and provocations, and strengthening its legitimacy if seen as a staunch defender of the nation’s interests.

### DIPLOMACY AND DOMESTIC CONSTRAINTS

Popular nationalism, particularly in the form of anti-foreign street protests, constrains China’s foreign policy options. Yet demonstrations of popular anger can also be helpful when the leadership seeks to signal resolve and demonstrate its commitment to defending China’s sovereignty and national interests. After U.S. planes mistakenly bombed the Chinese embassy in Kosovo during NATO airstrikes in 1999, anti-American demonstrations across China conveyed domestic outrage and the government’s determination to stand up to the United States. Although the government stepped in to control the demonstrations on the second day, on the first night the American embassy was nearly overrun and the consul general’s residence in Chengdu set afire.

Domestic constraints make international cooperation more difficult but can also improve the government’s negotiating leverage. Popular anger enables the government to play “good cop” to the often xenophobic and racist voices in the street and on the internet. When Japan’s bid for a

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<sup>1</sup> *Cankao Xiaoxi*, June 30, 1987, cited in Whiting, Allen Suess, *China eyes Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 164.

permanent seat on the UN Security Council gained momentum in 2005, anti-Japanese demonstrations showcased popular anger over Prime Minister Koizumi's repeated visits to Yasukuni Shrine, which commemorates 14 A-class war criminals among Japanese war dead, helping China make a principled case against Japan's candidacy.

## REPRESSION AND REASSURANCE

But popular nationalism has not always forced the Chinese leadership to escalate when unwanted. China has repeatedly stifled popular nationalism when street protests would have jeopardized the government's efforts to improve diplomatic relations. During two crises over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the East China Sea in the 1990s, China repressed anti-Japanese demonstrations. Although China launched a patriotic education campaign to bolster the regime's diminished legitimacy, nationalist propaganda did not translate into permission for anti-Japanese protests. Determined to court Japanese assistance in breaking out of China's post-Tiananmen isolation, the government prevented anti-Japanese protests when Japanese activists constructed a lighthouse on the disputed islands in 1990. During a second lighthouse controversy in 1996, China again repressed protests, seeking to assuage Japanese concerns and mitigate the fallout of the 1995-96 Taiwan Strait crisis on the eve of revised U.S.-Japan defense guidelines.

Repressing nationalist sentiment and anti-foreign demonstrations is costly for the Chinese government, which has often been accused of being both unpatriotic and undemocratic in suppressing nationalist sentiment. After the 2001 EP-3 incident, when a Chinese fighter jet and American reconnaissance plane collided over the South China Sea, China prevented anti-American street demonstrations. Seeking to contain the damage to China's fragile rapport with the new Bush administration, Chinese authorities instructed students to stay on campus and told the media to tone down its coverage of the crisis. These efforts helped China send a signal of reassurance to the Bush administration as both sides negotiated a face-saving compromise over the release of the EP-3 crew. As John Keefe, special assistant to Ambassador Prueher, later recounted: "University students wanted to hold demonstrations to vent their anger. The government forbade them from taking such action [and] repeatedly stressed...that this event should not be seen as a major affair in U.S.-China relations."<sup>2</sup>

Japanese observers similarly acknowledged China's restraint in quelling anti-Japanese demonstrations during the 1990s, agreeing in two lighthouse controversies to return to the status quo ante. The Japanese government declined to recognize the lighthouses as official navigation markers and discouraged Japanese right-wing associations from further activities. However, mutual restraint of nationalist activities was imperfect, with a Japanese legislator landing on the islands and Chinese activists staging a small unauthorized demonstration during Prime Minister Hashimoto's visit to northeast China in 1997.

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<sup>2</sup> Keefe, John, *Anatomy of the EP-3 Incident, April 2001* (Alexandria, VA: CNA Corporation, 2001), 10.

In the Koizumi era (2001-2006), the internet provided new platforms for nationalist sentiment and anti-Japanese activism in China, including signature campaigns against the use of Japanese high-speed rail technology and compensation for Chinese victims of chemical weapons left by the Japanese Army in World War II. Although Prime Minister Koizumi claimed to desire good relations with Beijing, his administration undertook a series of actions that angered China and other neighbors, including revisions to Japanese history textbooks and yearly visits to Yasukuni.

#### NATIONALISM, ESCALATION, AND RESTRAINT IN THE EAST CHINA SEA

After the Japanese government leased three of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands from their private owners in 2002, China began taking a more permissive stance toward grassroots “protect the Diaoyu Islands” (*bao diao*) activities, including attempted protest voyages and plans to develop tourist cruises. In August 2003, Japanese activists landed on the islands despite Tokyo’s claim that the leasing decision was meant to prevent “the illegal landing of third parties.”<sup>3</sup>

The surprise landing of seven Chinese activists in March 2004 prompted a potential crisis, as neither government had advance warning of the landing attempt. Japan arrested the Chinese activists for violating domestic immigration laws, and a senior Japanese foreign ministry official indicated that the government would follow the law in handling the matter and would “refrain from actions taken out of consideration for China.”<sup>4</sup>

Chinese authorities allowed small demonstrations outside the Japanese embassy in Beijing for three days. Up to 90 protesters participated in Beijing. Smaller protests took place in Guangzhou and Shanghai. In contrast, anti-Japanese protests over the islands and chemical weapons victims the year before had been limited to no more than ten participants. As the Japanese ambassador noted, “I cannot remember flag burning ever having happened in front of the embassy in the presence of Chinese police.” The crisis was defused when Japan deported the Chinese activists on the third day. Koizumi said he had “instructed government officials to consider how to handle the issue from a comprehensive view so as not to hurt the bilateral relationship with China.”<sup>5</sup>

Despite the quick resolution of the 2004 landing incident, both governments continued to take unilateral actions in the East China Sea, including surveys by Chinese and Japanese research vessels for natural gas resources. In early 2005, Japan for the first time announced that it would officially recognize and manage a lighthouse on the disputed islands. While preventing activists from continuing with plans for tourist cruises and sea voyages, Chinese authorities again allowed small protests in front of the Japanese embassy in February.

Large-scale anti-Japanese demonstrations broke out across China in March and April 2005, spearheaded by an online signature campaign against Japan’s UN Security Council bid. Organized by a collaboration of domestic and overseas Chinese activists, the internet petition

<sup>3</sup> “Japan’s Lease of Disputed Senkaku Islands Fuels ‘Ire’ from China, Taiwan,” *Mainichi Shimbun*, January 3, 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Japan deported Chinese protesters under political pressure, Japan Economic Newswire, April 1, 2004.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

was soon picked up by China's major net portals, signaling state support. Public security authorities in China's major cities knew of protest plans in advance but did not act to prevent them. Chinese security authorities warned Japanese diplomats to move their vehicles, instructed key nationalist activists to stay at home, and provided security cordons and guidance for protest routes, anticipating (correctly) that protests might be difficult to control.

China managed to curtail anti-Japanese protests after three weeks, preventing rumored protests over the May holiday. Yet repressing anti-Japanese sentiment would have been far more difficult had China not alleviated popular pressure by taking a tougher stance against Japan's bid and claiming diplomatic success. Koizumi apologized for Japan's wartime actions at the Asia-Africa Bandung summit. International support for swift action on Security Council reform waned, and the reform proposal never made it to a General Assembly vote.<sup>6</sup> Subsequent Japanese prime ministers refrained from visiting Yasukuni Shrine, including Shinzo Abe in his first term as prime minister (2006-2007).

As both governments sought to repair relations, the Chinese government tamped down anti-Japanese sentiment. Former diplomats and senior analysts were dispatched to university campuses to explain the importance of the overall context in Sino-Japanese relations. Protests outside the Japanese embassy in Beijing were confined to small demonstrations on important war anniversaries and occasional incidents, such as the detention of a Chinese man at the Tokyo airport for throwing a water bottle at former Taiwan president Lee Teng-hui. During important state visits by Prime Minister Abe in October 2006 and Prime Minister Fukuda in 2007, Chinese authorities kept nationalist activists under strict surveillance and censored discussions on nationalist forums. An online petition to declare a "Diaoyudao" national holiday was forced to close in 2006. In October 2007, mainland activists set sail for the islands from Fujian province but were repelled by the Japanese Coast Guard. On their return, Chinese security authorities interrogated the activists and required them to sign papers promising not to try again.<sup>7</sup>

When China and Japan reached a consensus on joint development of East China Sea resources in 2008, nationalist protest was limited to a dozen activists, carefully monitored by police in front of the Japanese embassy. After activists posted an open letter to the Central Military Commission and National People's Congress, accusing the government of sacrificing the interests of Chinese on both sides of the Taiwan Strait, the website was told to delete the letter or be shut down.<sup>8</sup> Authorities halted attempts to organize protest voyages to the islands in 2009.<sup>9</sup>

## CHINA'S EVOLVING MANAGEMENT OF ANTI-JAPANESE PROTESTS

<sup>6</sup> The "G4" proposal also included Brazil, Germany, and India as well as Japan as prospective permanent members.

<sup>7</sup> Kenji Minemura, "Activists in China find it harder to stage anti-Japan protests," *Asahi Shimbun*, December 13, 2007.

<sup>8</sup> Li Nan, "Bao Diao lianhehui luntan zui hou yi tie," CFDD.org.cn, June 26, 2008, last accessed July 21, 2008, reposted at <http://www.cfdd.org.cn/bbs/viewthread.php?tid=55307>.

<sup>9</sup> Reinhard Drifte, "Territorial Conflicts in the East China Sea - From Missed Opportunities to Negotiation Stalemate," *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, Vol 22-3-09, June 1, 2009.

In the fall of 2010, anti-Japanese demonstrations again broke out in cities across China, the first time thousands of Chinese citizens had staged protests over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands.<sup>10</sup> Two dozen cities witnessed anti-Japanese demonstrations after a Chinese fishing boat and two Japanese Coast Guard vessels collided near the islands on Sept. 7, 2010. Accusing the Chinese captain of reckless and aggressive behavior, Japanese Coast Guard officials arrested him on charges of obstructing official duties and indicated that the case would be handled in accordance with domestic law. Chinese officials reacted forcefully to this break with precedent, summoning the Japanese ambassador several times, including once at midnight.

Yet Chinese authorities only allowed small-scale anti-Japanese demonstrations during the initial phase of the fishing boat crisis, tamping down large-scale demonstrations that were rumored for September 18, the anniversary of Japan's invasion of Manchuria in 1931. The web forum of the China Federation for Defending the Diaoyu Islands, where multiple threads had been started for protests in various cities, including Beijing, Nanjing, Xiamen, Shenzhen, Shenyang and Zhengzhou, was shuttered during the anniversary.<sup>11</sup> Activists were invited to "drink tea" with police officers and reported that many of their QQ chat groups were also shut down.<sup>12</sup> Online comments by popular figures such as Ai Weiwei and Han Han also fed government fears that anti-Japanese protests might be used to air grievances over other issues, including forced evictions and land disputes.<sup>13</sup>

Despite China's efforts to stifle nationalist protests, the crisis escalated the next day, when Japanese authorities extended the Chinese trawler captain's detention. China responded with a tougher stance, postponing talks on joint development of gas resources and cultural exchanges, while warning that Japan would face "further steps" and countermeasures if Japan did not immediately and unconditionally release the captain. On September 23, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton assured Foreign Minister Maehara that the US-Japan alliance covered the islands. The same day, news media reported that China had effectively halted the export of rare earths to Japan. On September 24, China arrested four Japanese Fujita employees on charges of illegally entering military zones in China.

China's coercive tactics—particularly the stoppage of rare earth exports and the arrest of Japanese employees—succeeded in conveying China's resolve and forcing the captain's release on September 24. The Kan administration denied political involvement in the captain's release, but the local prosecutor's office cited the impact on China-Japan relations in its public remarks. However, the ruling Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) paid a high domestic price for appearing to back down, made worse by images of the Chinese captain signing "V" for victory on television

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<sup>10</sup> The islands were not a major theme of the 2005 anti-Japanese demonstrations.

<sup>11</sup> For example, <http://www.cfdd.org.cn/bbs/forum-90-44.html>, <http://www.cfdd.org.cn/bbs/redirect.php?fid=90&tid=72164&goto=nextoldset>; "China breaks up anti-Japan protests." *Al Jazeera*, September 18, 2010.

<sup>12</sup> For example, <http://www.cfdd.org.cn/bbs/redirect.php?fid=90&tid=72170&goto=nextoldset>.

<sup>13</sup> "Police snuff out anti-Japanese protests," *South China Morning Post*, September 18, 2010.

and China's repeated demands for an apology and compensation. Opposition Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) members berated the DPJ for its handling of the incident, calling it "our nation's biggest foreign policy blunder since the end of World War II."<sup>14</sup> Prime Minister Kan apologized to the Japanese public, criticized China's behavior, and reaffirmed Japanese sovereignty over the islands. Amidst growing pressure to release the Coast Guard video of the collision, Foreign Minister Maehara stated that the footage clearly demonstrated that the Chinese trawler had been at fault. In Tokyo, a few thousand protesters staged anti-China demonstrations.

Between October 16 and 26, anti-Japanese protests took place in roughly two dozen second- and third-tier Chinese cities, including Chengdu, Xi'an, Zhengzhou, Wuhan, Mianyang, Lanzhou, and Deyang.<sup>15</sup> In images broadcast on Japanese television, some protest banners called for multiparty competition and criticized high housing costs.<sup>16</sup> It remains unclear to what extent the government authorized these protests, although Shi Yinhong, a prominent expert on Sino-Japanese relations in Beijing, pointed out: "If the government very consciously opposed or didn't want these demonstrations, if they resolutely didn't want them, then there would be nothing."<sup>17</sup> No protests attempts were reported in Beijing, where leaders gathered for an annual plenum of the CCP Central Committee.<sup>18</sup> Although thousands were allowed to protest in Chongqing for two hours before authorities dispersed the demonstration,<sup>19</sup> police prevented demonstrations in Shenzhen, Changsha, and Nanjing by detaining activists and stationing heavy security along planned protest routes. In Changsha, where calls for protests outside a Japanese clothing store had circulated, school authorities required students to attend extra classes over the weekend to prevent them from participating in protests.<sup>20</sup>

#### DANGERS OF MISPERCEPTION: UNDERESTIMATING CHINA'S RESPONSE IN 2012?

The uneven timing and local handling of anti-Japanese protests in 2010 has left considerable room for diverging interpretations. Many observers speculate that the Chinese government has tolerated nationalist protests in order to let citizens blow off steam. An editorial in the *Yomiuri Shimbun* noted that "leaders of the Chinese Communist Party are apparently most afraid that young people's frustrations, which are now taking the form of anti-Japan protests, could transform into antigovernment movements demanding democracy. That is why some observers suspect Chinese security authorities are maneuvering anti-Japan demonstrations to alleviate young people's discontent."<sup>21</sup>

<sup>14</sup> "Parties unite in demanding Senkaku video," *Japan Times*, October 1, 2010.

<sup>15</sup> "Postmortem: Official OK to anti-Japan rallies backfired in China," *Asahi Shimbun*, October 23, 2010.

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-Pacific/2010/1026/Beijing-now-worried-anti-Japan-protests-could-backfire>, last accessed October 27, 2010.

<sup>17</sup> Associated Press, October 18, 2010.

<sup>18</sup> "China-Japan row simmers as protests enter third day," *Agence France Presse*, October 18, 2010.

<sup>19</sup> "Thousands join anti-Japan protests in China's Chongqing," *Xinhua*, October 26, 2010.

<sup>20</sup> "More anti-Japan protests in China," *The Japan Times*, October 24, 2010.

<sup>21</sup> "Chinese leaders must calm anti-Japan rallies," *The Daily Yomiuri*, October 19, 2010.

But diverting domestic grievances toward foreign policy issues does not strengthen the government's legitimacy if it cannot claim diplomatic victory or point to tough countermeasures that the government has taken to protect the nation's interest. In today's porous and pluralistic information environment, including access to overseas websites and news media, the government cannot erase domestic criticism by "brainwashing" citizens with positive propaganda. Citizens and activists may restrain their actions, understanding that the window of opportunity for protest has closed. But their criticism cannot be completely silenced online and in private, as evidenced by domestic opposition to the 2008 agreement on joint development in the East China Sea.

Nationalism helps prop up the Chinese regime but may also be its downfall. Popular nationalism is not just the product of state-led patriotic propaganda but is also deeply rooted in society. Indeed, the last two Chinese regimes, the Qing Dynasty and Kuomintang, fell to popular movements that accused them of being weak-kneed in defending the national interest. The government does not have perfect control over anti-foreign street protests, which can easily stray off message. During the 2012 anti-Japanese protests, some participants attacked government offices and demanded unpaid wages. Many protesters carried portraits of Mao, leading to speculation that some demonstrators sought to show support for the disgraced leader Bo Xilai, who had featured Maoist paraphernalia in his public campaigns. Given limited channels for political mobilization, citizens may seize the opportunity to advance other objectives.

Visible efforts to reduce the risk that protests get out of hand—such as police guidance and passive presence—may also undermine the perceived sincerity and spontaneity of popular demonstrations. After the embassy bombing in 1999, many anti-American protests arose spontaneously.<sup>22</sup> As protests nearly got out of hand on the first day, Chinese authorities sent buses and orchestrated protest routes in an effort to maintain control. As a senior diplomat in the U.S. Embassy recalled:

This thing got out of control. The government and the Foreign Ministry did not realize how determined and angry these people were.... at the United States, but also, as it went on, partially directed at the Chinese government. That's when I think the government decided that the better part of wisdom was to join the students and try to bus them over there to the American embassy. Because who knows? They might have stopped in Tiananmen and said bad things about the government.<sup>23</sup>

The increasingly viral mobilization of protests via social media requires greater government effort to prevent large-scale protests. Local variation in protest size, level of violence, and security measures makes it increasingly difficult to discern China's intentions. A concerted effort to prevent large-scale protests can still succeed, as the anniversary of September 18<sup>th</sup>, 2010

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<sup>22</sup> Zhao, Dingxin, "Nationalism and Authoritarianism: Student-Government Conflicts during the 1999 Beijing Student Protests after the Belgrade Embassy Bombing," *Asian Perspective* 27, no. 1 (2003).

<sup>23</sup> Author's interview with senior U.S. diplomat, Washington, D.C., March 11, 2009.

demonstrated. The Japanese government was aware of Chinese attempts to restrain nationalist sentiment in September 2010. As Foreign Minister Maehara stated in an interview, “Japan received credible assurances through diplomatic channels that the Chinese government was working to cool off these protests as soon as they began cropping up.”<sup>24</sup>

Yet China’s efforts to limit the size of anti-Japanese protests during the 2010 crisis may have unwittingly led Japan to underestimate Chinese resolve in 2012. The Japanese government announced a plan to buy the islands from private Japanese owners, indicating that nationalizing the islands would be less offensive than allowing the rightwing Tokyo governor to purchase and develop them.<sup>25</sup> Japanese officials apparently anticipated that protests would occur if Japan nationalized the islands but also expected Chinese authorities to take measures to contain the demonstrations before too much damage was done, particularly on the eve of planned activities to commemorate the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Sino-Japanese normalization. Given the international backlash against Chinese restrictions on rare earth exports in 2010, including a WTO investigation, the Japanese government appears to have misjudged China’s willingness to risk international criticism and respond forcefully to Japan’s nationalization of the islands.

More than two hundred Chinese cities witnessed anti-Japanese demonstrations in the fall of 2012. After activists from Hong Kong and Japan landed on the islands in mid-August, nearly sixty anti-Japanese demonstrations took place in cities across China. Despite the protests and high-level Chinese warnings not to proceed with the purchase, including President Hu Jintao’s conversation with Prime Minister Noda on September 9, the Japanese government announced its decision to proceed with the purchase on September 10. Viewing Japan’s decision as a change to the status quo and a violation of a tacit agreement to “shelve” the territorial issue, China demanded that Japan “correct its mistakes” and took a series of countermeasures to demonstrate resolve and assert Chinese sovereignty over the islands, including drawing baselines around the islands, increasing maritime patrols, and allowing further protests. Although demonstrations in Beijing and Shanghai were relatively orderly, many protests in second and third tier cities became violent and destructive. In Qingdao, a Panasonic factory was set on fire and a Toyota dealership destroyed.<sup>26</sup> On September 18, anti-Japanese demonstrations took place in more than 125 cities across China.

One of the greatest dangers is that foreign governments will underestimate the extent to which popular nationalism constrains China’s diplomatic options. Less than two weeks after announcing Japan’s decision to nationalize the islands, Prime Minister Noda admitted to underestimating the strength of China’s opposition, stating: “I understand the nationalization

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<sup>24</sup> Translated from “Kongo mo Nippon no genri gensoku o mamoru,” *Chūō Kōron*, December 2010, pp. 106–11, accessed at <http://www.japanechowebsite.jp/jew0403/>.

<sup>25</sup> Foreign Minister of Japan Koichiro Genba, “Japan-China relations at a crossroads,” *International Herald Tribune*, November 21, 2012.

<sup>26</sup> Ian Johnson and Thom Shanker, “Beijing mixes messages over anti-Japan protests,” *New York Times*, September 16, 2012.



would bring reactions and tensions to some extent, but the scale is broader than expected.”<sup>27</sup> Statements by Prime Minister Abe have suggested that his government may discount the genuine sentiment that drives popular nationalism in China as well as years of patriotic education. In an interview with the *Washington Post*, Abe acknowledged that China’s tough measures against Japan are “resulting in strong support from the people of China, who have been brought up through this educational system that attaches emphasis on patriotism.”<sup>28</sup> Abe stated that “it is fully possible to have China to change their policy” once Beijing recognizes the economic harm that the standoff is having on Japanese investment and employment in China—but without acknowledging the steep legitimacy costs that China’s leaders would pay for making unilateral concessions.

## CONCLUSION: NATIONALISM IN CHINA’S MARITIME DISPUTES

Although leadership transitions in China and Japan are now complete, the situation in the East China Sea remains tense and unstable. With both sides actively patrolling the waters and skies surrounding the islands, the risk of an accident and inadvertent military conflict is high. One of the chief dangers is that government leaders will underestimate the degree to which their counterparts are constrained by domestic politics and nationalist sentiment. Just as leaders in Japan and the United States have no interest in appearing to concede before Chinese “coercion,” as Prime Minister Abe put it, neither can China’s leaders return to the status quo ante without evidence of diplomatic success to show domestic audiences. Although both sides have demonstrated their willingness to restrain nationalist activities and shelve the territorial issue in the past, doing so has a domestic price—a price that may become too high if restraint is not reciprocated.

When nationalist protests take place, the likelihood of conflict escalation is greatest if popular sentiments are sincere yet foreign observers dismiss them as a cover for domestic grievances rather than a genuine constraint. Skepticism concerning the sincerity of nationalist sentiment is likely to persist, particularly in light of Chinese efforts to guide online opinion and hire internet commentators. A more open airing of views in China would give greater credibility to the sentiments that are expressed. When citizens, netizens and intellectuals feel safe in expressing their opinions without fear of reprisal from government censors or “human flesh search engines,” external audiences are more likely to believe that these sentiments are genuine rather than deference to the party line.

The prospects for de-escalation in the East China Sea will depend on a number of factors, including whether the Japanese government can be persuaded that diplomatic compromise will

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<sup>27</sup> “Japanese Prime Minister Noda admits ‘miscalculation’ over Diaoyus,” *South China Morning Post*, September 21, 2012.

<sup>28</sup> “Transcript of interview with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe,” *Washington Post*, February 20, 2013, available at [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/transcript-of-interview-with-japanese-prime-minister-shinzo-abe/2013/02/20/e7518d54-7b1c-11e2-82e8-61a46c2cde3d\\_print.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/transcript-of-interview-with-japanese-prime-minister-shinzo-abe/2013/02/20/e7518d54-7b1c-11e2-82e8-61a46c2cde3d_print.html).

bolster a moderate Chinese leadership and help restore stability to bilateral relations, and whether the Chinese government can credibly demonstrate its willingness to reciprocate rather than exploit Japanese goodwill. Neither government wants war, but both sides appear to believe that the other side cannot afford the economic fallout of political tensions. Such statements suggest that neither party is prepared to back down in the absence of creative diplomacy and credible assurances that good faith actions will be returned.

Popular nationalism is more likely to jeopardize efforts to stabilize the East China Sea than the South China Sea. In China, nationalist anger at Vietnam and the Philippines has been limited to online sentiments, not street protests. Nor is anger at these countries rooted in the same historical memories that drive anti-Japanese sentiment in China. With the status quo in the Paracel Islands and Scarborough Shoal favoring China, there is little reason to expect China to engage in public displays of resolve vis-à-vis Vietnam and the Philippines. Even the relatively nationalist *Global Times* has cautioned that “indulging anger and fantasizing confrontation” is not the right way to manage disputes in the South China Sea, including pressure from Chinese netizens calling for the government to “teach Vietnam a lesson.”<sup>29</sup> Fortunately for Beijing, anti-China protests in the Philippines were short-lived, and Vietnam has arrested many liberal activists who participated in demonstrations over China’s actions in the Paracel and Spratly Islands. Yet China may also underestimate the domestic constraints that leaders in Vietnam and the Philippines face regarding their respective territorial claims. In 2011, some Chinese scholars remarked that anti-China nationalism was also a “double-edged sword” for Vietnam and the Philippines and could get out of control. But they also warned that these smaller countries were more economically dependent on China and would be injured more severely if tensions continued to rise.<sup>30</sup> Xinhua went further, describing most of the anti-China protests in Manila as instigated by a handful of “pro-American” organizations that had obtained U.S. assistance.<sup>31</sup>

Despite temptations to downplay the domestic constraints facing its counterparts, Beijing would be wise to look for opportunities to demonstrate restraint in the East and South China Seas, given the damage to China’s image in Asia in recent years. If China’s leadership wants to prevent a counterbalancing coalition of states from forming against China’s rise, it will need to temper demonstrations of resolve with credible reassurances. Just as Henry Kissinger notes that “a prudent American leadership should balance the risks of stoking Chinese nationalism against the gains from short-term pressures,”<sup>32</sup> so should a prudent Chinese leadership balance the risks of stoking anti-China sentiment against the desire for short term gains.

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<sup>29</sup> “Fen Nu Bushi Chuli Nanhai Wenti De Zhengdao,” June 9, 2011, *Huanqiu Shibao*, <http://opinion.huanqiu.com/roll/2011-06/1744966.html>, last accessed May 9, 2012.

<sup>30</sup> “Xuezhe Cheng Yunan He Feilvbin Fangren Fanhua Qingxu Jiang Rang Ziji Shoushang,” June 24, 2011, *Huanqiu Shibao*, <http://mil.news.sina.com.cn/2011-06-24/0806653716.html>, last accessed March 26, 2013.

<sup>31</sup> “Feilvbin De QinMei FanHua Jiyin, Wenhua Shou Mei Lao Yin, Wai Zhang Shou Mei Jiaoyu,” Xinhua, October 28, 2011, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/mil/2011-10/28/c\\_122208416.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/mil/2011-10/28/c_122208416.htm), last accessed March 26, 2013.

<sup>32</sup> Kissinger, Henry, *Does America need a foreign policy? Towards a diplomacy for the 21st century* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001).