

Chapter One: Nationalism and Chinese foreign policy

“The prospect of foreign policy being shaped by public opinion . . . that would send tremors of fear up and down the spine, and through the guts of any diplomat.”

Bob Carr, 2011 Lowy Institute Poll launch

In the early 2010s, is the Chinese Communist Party-state beholden to nationalist public opinion and, as a result, more likely to behave aggressively towards the outside world, even where this contradicts its own material interests? Growing numbers of analysts accept this dangerous assumption. The contemporary importance of scrutinising such “nationalism claims”, and the extent to which they now pervade thinking about PRC foreign policy outside China, is illustrated by its appearance in the most recent US Department of Defense (2011) report on China’s military and security activities, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China*.

Immediately prior to the ASEAN Ministers meeting in July 2011 the People’s Republic of China confounded overseas observers’ expectations by breezily agreeing to new guidelines for implementing the ‘Declaration on Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea’ signed with ASEAN in 2002. On the same day the agreement was announced, the state-run, commercially-oriented *Huanqiu Shibao* newspaper reported that five Filipino MPs had visited a disputed South China Sea island and raised the Philippines’ flag. The response on Chinese Internet forums was, overwhelmingly, condemnation for both the Philippines and the Chinese government. “A bunch of old men leaning on their walking sticks have squandered the property of the ancestors,” raged a reader from Anhui Province on Phoenix Online. “What face do we have left on this earth?” Two thousand other readers indicated their agreement with this view, and tens of thousands expressed similar levels of outrage. For more than 1,600 readers this was nothing less than “a day of national humiliation”.¹ This flagrant disregard of such nationalist outrage suggests the South China Sea issue is a good issue upon which to test the rising claims of Chinese nationalism’s influence on PRC

¹ Zhong Weidong 2011 ‘Feilübin 5 ming yiyuan dengshang nansha zhongye dao bing ancha fei guoqi [Five Filipino MPs land on Zhongye Island in the Spratlys and plant a Phillipines flag]’ *Fenghuang Wang* [Phoenix Net] July 20 http://news.ifeng.com/mainland/special/nanhaizhengduan/content-3/detail_2011_07/20/7819289_0.shtml
The comments thread on this story was deleted some time between July 27 and July 28. See Methods section regarding Phoenix forums.

foreign policy.

This chapter shows how claims about popular nationalism influencing the foreign policy of the PRC have become common in media, scholarship and even government circles, and that there is good reason for scepticism about many of these claims. It begins with a survey of the development of the study of Chinese foreign policy in the West, highlighting the shift towards greater emphasis on domestic Chinese factors to explain its development. It then introduces the once-unpopular notion of public opinion influencing the foreign policies of states, and proceeds to demonstrate how the idea has gained currency with regard to the still-authoritarian People's Republic of China. A number of different kinds of theoretical claims about Chinese nationalism influencing the Chinese party-state's foreign policy are identified and their implications and deficiencies discussed. It is argued that any theoretical claim for the influence of nationalism must be clearly situated within a contemporary model of the PRC's foreign policymaking processes. A list of case studies in which nationalist public opinion is claimed to have influenced the Chinese party-state's behaviour is then presented, with each claim assessed in terms of its theoretical plausibility. Particular attention is paid to claims about nationalism affecting PRC policy on the South China Sea issue. This forms the basis for the chapter's conclusion that the idea of popular nationalism influencing the foreign policy of the PRC requires careful consideration in relation to the full circumstances of each particular issue area or incident. First of all, two important working definitions are required.

Defining nationalism and Chinese foreign policy

The aim of this research project is to gauge the impact of nationalism on China's foreign policy in the South China Sea. The many usages of "Chinese nationalism" will be discussed in detail in Chapter Two, but I use the term here to refer simply to *manifestations of trends in PRC public opinion in favour of more assertive or aggressive foreign policy actions*.² Nationalism, then,

² As Jeffrey Wasserstrom has pointed out, Chinese nationalism is an amorphous concept that has pushed in very different directions at different times. Suisheng Zhao's (2004) oft-quoted concept has delineated three main streams: liberal, pragmatic and ethnic. Elsewhere, considering nationalism as an influence on Chinese foreign policy, Zhao (2009) includes both elite nationalism and popular nationalism, whereas here only popular nationalism is considered. Elite nationalism relates to the mentality of China's leaders, which is not the focus of discussion here, though it is relevant to the present CCP leadership's perception of their own position and degree of answerability to popular nationalism. These issues will be discussed in further detail in Chapter Two, which explores Chinese

includes not only street protests and demonstrations, but also mediated manifestations of public opinion, such as best-selling polemic books, commentaries in commercially-oriented newspapers, and discussions in online forums, as well as published or unpublished opinion polling. It should be noted at the outset that none of these examples necessarily imply support from a majority or even a large minority of the Chinese public.

By “foreign policy” I mean *the behaviour of the party-state of the People’s Republic of China towards the outside world*. This definition of is based on the Chinese term *dui wai zhengce*, meaning “policy towards the outside”. Understanding foreign policy in this way reminds us, as Robert Ross (1986) once wisely pointed out, to avoid mistaking words or actions that are actually directed at the domestic audience for actual shifts in foreign policy.

There is of course significant overlap between internally- and externally-directed policies. The early People’s Republic’s expropriation of foreign capitalists’ property may have been part of the new party-state’s effort to eliminate capitalism in China, but the effect of this policy on foreign interests was obvious and intended. Likewise, the introduction in the late 1970s of Special Economic Zones offering tax discounts to encourage foreign industrialists to operate in China, was both domestically and externally directed. In 1986 China’s then-Premier Zhao Ziyang described the country’s domestic and foreign policies as “an organic whole”.³ This dissertation takes as “foreign policy” those actions of the party-state that can reasonably be expected to impinge on foreign interests.⁴

The South China Sea issue is an area of PRC foreign policy in which the role of non-state actors, and the party-state’s relationship with them, must be carefully considered. The explicit or tacit authorization of non-state actors, if it can be discerned, to act in ways that impinge on other states’ interests, is considered foreign policy under the given definition.⁵ Non-state actors may act as agents of state organizations, such as in March 2009 when a motley flotilla of fishing trawlers, civilian maritime patrol ships and one Chinese Navy vessel harassed the US Navy intelligence

nationalism in the internet age.

³ Quoted in Wang, Jisi (1994, p.486).

⁴ This necessarily involves making assumptions about the Chinese state’s awareness of foreign interests, and foreign perceptions of interest, and of diplomatic corps of other states having adequately communicated their own state’s interests.

⁵ When the British East India Company started the First Opium War in 1840, the British government’s foreign policy was to allow the EIC to act how it saw fit.

gathering ship *Impeccable*. However, just as the actions anti-immigrant vigilantes on the US-Mexican border do not, in all likelihood, constitute the foreign policy of the US government, neither do the independent actions of Chinese citizens automatically represent PRC foreign policy. In August 2011, for example, a radio operator claiming to be the Chinese Navy warned an Indian Navy vessel that it was “entering Chinese waters” as it cruised about 45 miles from the coast of Vietnam.⁶ Yet, as defence analyst and former US Navy officer James R. Holmes (2011) has pointed out, the radio channel used indicated the caller was almost certainly a private citizen “with nationalist tendencies”.

In the absence of evidence of state connections to private citizens’ actions in international incidents, it is the Chinese state’s reactions to such incidents constitute foreign policy. While the actions of the Chinese fishing boat captain who rammed a Japanese patrol boat near the disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands in September 2010 cannot be assumed to represent the policy of the Chinese government, the Japanese government’s arrest of the skipper, and the Chinese diplomatic retaliations that ensued, were externally-directed and thus foreign policy actions.

Even having narrowed down “Chinese foreign policy” to the behaviour of the PRC state towards other states, we are still confronted with the reality that the Chinese Communist Party regime is not a monolithic actor but a large and complex organization with many competing bureaucratic, financial and political interests. It is therefore important to avoid exaggerating its internal cohesion, a point discussed in further detail later in this Chapter.

Internal and external sources of Chinese foreign policy

The question of whether domestic Chinese or international structural factors best explain the actions of the PRC state has been a recurring theme in the study of Chinese foreign policy since the Communist Party-state’s establishment in 1949. Debates over their relative significance mirror tensions between specialised China scholarship and general theories of international relations, especially those associated realism and liberal internationalism. Do the Chinese government’s

⁶FT ‘China confronts Indian military vessel’, 2011

foreign policy decisions reflect concern with the balance of power in a regional and global system underpinned by anarchy? Do they reflect engagement and participation in a highly beneficial liberal international order? To what extent is the international system constraining, or “socialising” the PRC in its international conduct?⁷ As China’s military and economic power grows, is it behaving as a “revisionist power” or a “status quo power”, in the categories of Organski’s power transition theory?⁸

US scholar John Mearsheimer has applied his theory of “offensive realism” to China, arguing that the need for security in an anarchic world of self-interested states will inevitably result in the PRC attempting to dominate the East Asian region. Mearsheimer argues: “To put it bluntly: China cannot rise peacefully.” However, he stresses that this will not be the case purely because of Chinese aggression, for the US is also likely to behave aggressively towards China as it seeks to maintain its own regional hegemony.⁹ Mearsheimer introduces his argument by referring to the concerns raised in the Australian Government’s 2009 Defence White Paper regarding the shifting balance of power in East Asia. Australian strategic analyst Hugh White has suggested the answer to this realist dilemma may lie in the formation of a “concert of powers” that includes both China and the US.¹⁰ However, both Mearsheimer and White’s theses basically sidestep the central problem in the study of Chinese foreign policy: In what ways does China behave like any state in the international system, and in what ways is it unique?¹¹

Taking up this challenge, in 1983 Michael Ng-Quinn wrote a widely-quoted and republished paper

⁷ Waltz 1979 p.74

⁸ Organski 1958; Beeson 2009.

⁹ Mearsheimer 2009, pp.381-2. Mearsheimer is famed for his dismissive attitude towards the impact of variations in internal politics. As his friend Robert Kaplan has written, “Mearsheimer counsels, the internal nature of a state is less important as a factor in its international behavior than we think. “Great powers are like billiard balls that vary only in size,” he intones. In other words, Mearsheimer is not one to be especially impressed by a state simply because it is a democracy. As he asserts early on, “Whether China is democratic and deeply enmeshed in the global economy or autocratic and autarkic will have little effect on its behavior, because democracies care about security as much as non-democracies do.”” (Kaplan 2012 'Why john j. mearsheimer is right (about some things)' http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2012/01/why-john-j-mearsheimer-is-right-about-some-things/8839/2/?single_page=true)

¹⁰ White, 2010. See also the debate on White’s thesis and realist theory at <http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/?d=D%20-%20Hugh%20White%27s%20Quarterly%20Essay>

¹¹ For a recent discussion of the performance of realist theory in explaining China’s foreign policy actions, see Lim 2011 ‘A tale of two realisms’

that listed out the discernible internal and external influences on the PRC's behaviour. He found that in general, China's domestic politics had negligible impact on foreign policy, which was basically determined according to the constraints of an international system of states seeking survival under structural anarchy. The evidence for this was the apparent continuity in the PRC foreign policy agenda while intra-Party political struggles were waged, and across transitions between very different idiosyncratic leaders.¹² In a similarly influential 1986 paper, Robert Ross made a compelling case that the "security triangle" of superpower alliance politics explained the overall direction of Chinese foreign policy. In the 1970s, facing a Soviet military buildup on its borders, the PRC leaned towards the US and took a conciliatory stance on Taiwan, at the same time as undermining detente between the US and USSR. After the normalisation of US-PRC relations on January 1, 1979, however, China was increasingly confident of US-USSR enmity, China was free to pursue its own detente with the Soviet Union and to toughen its position on Taiwan.¹³

In an important 1987 essay, James Rosenau suggested a systematic approach to combining the insights of general IR theory and specialist area studies to create a single-country theory of foreign policy, "rooted in the assumption that any country is a composite of both unique and general factors". This idea was illustrated with the vivid analogy of a doctor diagnosing a patient's kidney problems by considering both general theories of how kidneys function, and the patient's own unique medical history. Rosenau urged scholars to identify possible turning points and to be "explicit about the relative strength" they attribute to domestic and external factors in explaining the behaviour of states.¹⁴ Seven years later, Thomas Robinson & David Shambaugh (1994) made an ambitious attempt to assemble a collection of essays that would do just that.

In his survey of Chinese foreign policy from the founding of the People's Republic in 1949 through to the 1990s, Robinson (1994) found that during the Maoist era (1949-1976) the Chairman and his doctrines generally overshadowed the superpower rivalry and the international system in determining the course of China's international behaviour. The situation outside China's borders mattered more at times when "economic opportunity beckoned, necessity threatened, or when Zhou Enlai was at the foreign policy helm", but China's behaviour between 1949 and 1976 was primarily

¹² Ng-Quinn 1983, 36

¹³ Ross 1986

¹⁴ Rosenau 1987 pp.58-9, 65

explainable in terms of its domestic politics.¹⁵ Then, with the ascendancy of Deng Xiaoping in late 1978, came a fundamental shift in the party-state's priorities from the primacy of politics to the primacy of economics. This meant opening up to increased interactions with the West and Japan to secure investment, trade opportunities and technology transfer. As Robinson (1994, p. 568) put it, "Whatever appeared good for China's domestic economic development became Beijing's foreign policy." Therefore, China's own internal situation had become the major factor behind PRC foreign policy.

Rosenau's own contribution to the Robinson & Shambaugh collection clearly explained the relevance of generalist theories in analysing the Chinese state's behaviour. "To see China as different, as acting out of unique historical, strategic and cultural circumstances," he wrote, "is to have a theory of the established and recurrent patterns from which China deviates."¹⁶ Adopting Rosenau's approach, Allen Whiting presented two Mao-era case studies in which China's behaviour had defied IR theory. In the 1958 Taiwan Straits crisis, which resulted in the termination of Soviet nuclear assistance to China, the personal idiosyncrasies of the two superpowers' leaders were crucial. Alliance politics suggested that Mao would inform the Soviets of his plans to bombard Taiwan's offshore islands, and that the Soviets would have supported them, but Mao's recklessness led him to act unilaterally. In the 1962 Sino-Indian border war, China unilaterally withdrew when it could have advanced much further across the Indian frontier. This decision defied IR theory, according to Whiting, because the risk of further losses was low and China's military superiority had already been clearly demonstrated. The same was true in the Korean War, where US military strategists ignored warnings from their own China specialists to stay well clear of the Chinese border, the Yalu River, miscalculating that the newborn PRC would not enter a war against such an overwhelmingly superior force.¹⁷

Both Robinson's and Whiting's analyses also implied that to adequately account for PRC foreign policy, it is necessary to pay attention to the decision-makers and their environment, a point Carol Lee Hamrin took up in her contribution to the volume, which argued that the "inflexibility" of China's political system meant that the perception of foreign military threats had been necessary to

¹⁵ Robinson 1994 pp.555-7

¹⁶ Rosenau 1994, p.570

¹⁷ Whiting 1994 pp.520-1

provoke the major shifts in Chinese foreign policy observed since 1949.¹⁸ Wang Jisi took the analysis one step further by attempting to account for the impact of culture and ideology in shaping the perceptions of China's leaders. In particular, Wang argued, the traditional Confucian emphasis of ethics over laws, for example, helps explain the PRC's disinclination towards explicit, legally binding agreements in favour of vague and ambiguous statements of lofty principles, such as those regarding Taiwan.¹⁹ In the words of Henry Kissinger, "China is comfortable managing contradictions without assuming they are resolvable."²⁰

The makeup of Robinson & Shambaugh's collection itself suggested a shift had taken place in Western studies of Chinese foreign policy, with essays on domestic factors outnumbering those on external structural factors two to one. Since then, the emphasis on China's domestic affairs has continued to increase; in late 2010 Elizabeth Economy argued in *Foreign Affairs* that scholars outside China must still pay "far greater attention to the country's internal dynamics".²¹ At least two major turning points – one internal, and one external – have resulted in the increased importance of internal circumstances as sources of the overall direction of Chinese foreign policy.

First, the launch of Deng Xiaoping's "reform and opening" policy in 1978 made economic development the number one priority of the PRC state. As Renmin University's Zhang Shiming points out, developing China's economy has become "a reliable source of national power" and the best safeguard of social stability – that is, the CCP regime's survival, both internationally and domestically. Domestic economic objectives, namely facilitating external investment, technology transfer, materials and energy sources, and the simultaneous export of Chinese products and, recently, outbound investment, have been "the main variable" underpinning Chinese foreign policy since 1978, according to Zhang.²² However, Barry Naughton has argued that this new foreign policy imperative was itself enabled by changed international circumstances, for it was the "Chinese perception of a relaxation in the international environment" that created the possibility that domestic development policy could have an independent influence on China's international relations

¹⁸ Hamrin 1994 p.

¹⁹ Wang 1994

²⁰ Kissinger 2011 <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/01/13/AR2011011304832.html>

²¹ Economy 2010

²² Zhang Shiming 2006.

in the first place.²³

The second major turning point to have increased the importance of China's domestic politics was the emergence of Mikhail Gorbachev as the USSR's paramount leader in 1984, and the eventual collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The resulting increased importance of domestic factors in Chinese foreign policy can be summed up using Robert Ross's (1986) argument to the contrary:

The relative importance of domestic politics has been a function of the range of choice allowed by the pattern of triangular politics. When the range of choice was narrow, domestic politics had a small impact on China's US policy. When the choices expanded, domestic critics wielded greater influence on foreign policy making.²⁴

The elimination of the "security triangle" of the Cold War thus left China freer to act according to its own domestic agenda, and the result, observes David Shambaugh, was that by the 1990s, in US-China relations at least, "indigenous factors remain[ed] more important than exogenous ones".²⁵

The wave of anti-communist revolutions that culminated with the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 did create a fear among China's top decision-makers and policy experts that China would be subject to a process of "peaceful evolution" (*heping yanbian*) to capitalism and liberal democracy. But the outcome of the ensuing debate was not a change in Chinese domestic or foreign policy, but rather an affirmation of the continued prioritisation of domestic economic development as the best defence against such "peaceful evolution".²⁶

Present-day China is ruled by a regime whose survival to a great extent depends on continuously improving economic conditions, a fact that has placed the national economy at the heart of the country's foreign policy goals. China no longer needs to straddle a position between two superpowers as it did during the Cold War, and the country is militarily much stronger now than at any time in the 20th century. In addition, China's ability to influence its external environment has greatly increased. Samuel Kim (2006) has described this aptly as an increase in <"international sovereignty">; however, he also argues that this has been accompanied by a decrease in <"domestic sovereignty">, a point which the following section will consider in more detail.²⁷

²³ Naughton 1994 pp.48-50

²⁴ Ross 1986 in Ross 2009 p.202

²⁵ Shambaugh 1994 p.222

²⁶ Quoted in Zhang Baijia 2009 pp.21-24

²⁷ Kim 2006 in Johnston et al (eds)

Status quo: a two-level game, fractured authority

Denny Roy (1998) has taken the approach of starting with neo-realism's assumption that the Chinese state is like any other state in amorally trying to secure itself from external threats. However, Chinese leaders often see regime security and national security as overlapping; internal and external security threats are often "interrelated" in minds of CCP officials. Chinese leaders have a long and continuing history of linking domestic security threats to hostile external forces, as encapsulated in the powerful couplet still often used to explain China's period of weakness in the 19th and 20th centuries: *waihuan neiluan* – "foreign aggression, internal chaos".²⁸ The abortive "Jasmine protest" movement in early 2011, named with reference to revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, and originating with a message posted on a US-based website, is a good example of how real or perceived domestic security threats within China can involve the outside world. Chinese leaders have often used overseas scapegoats to attempt to absolve themselves of responsibility for domestic troubles. Following the 1989 Beijing massacre, CCP leaders claimed the turmoil was whipped up by anti-China forces abroad. Although the massacre was carried out under the orders of the CCP state, the claim had some validity since the presence and actions of the Western media exacerbated the crisis, and the protesters had received support from Hong Kong and overseas.²⁹ In another recent example, the CCP state blamed an overseas "Dalai Clique" for riots in Tibet in March 2008.

"Reform and opening", or *gaige kaifang*, the catchphrase used to sum up the overall direction of the Chinese party-state's agenda under Deng Xiaoping after 1978, similarly illustrates how the policy of opening up to the outside world was intimately connected with the policy of reform at home. According to Zhang Baijia (2009), *kaifang*, which refers to the policy of opening to the outside world, was always intended to drive *gaige*, the domestic economic reforms that the party's top leaders saw as vital to the regime's survival.³⁰ China's determination to join the World Trade Organization through the 1990s is a compelling example of a domestic agenda driving international behaviour, while the external world itself influences China's domestic environment. China made the

²⁸ Roy 1998 pp.4-5

²⁹ References in honours thesis intro

³⁰ Zhang Baijia 2009 p.24

necessary concessions to gain WTO entry, and this was driven by the party's domestic economic agenda. But, Zhang adds, the external trend of deepening globalization and intensified international economic competition after the end of the Cold War also drove China's efforts to align its economy with the WTO's stipulations.

Partially as a result of its successful accession to the WTO in 2001, China today is more enmeshed with the global political economy than ever before. Recessions in 2009 in major consumer economies many thousands of kilometres distant resulted in mass layoffs in China; at the same time the modernisation of the PLA has prompted other regional powers to reinforce their own military forces. Changes in the value of the US dollar or other currencies alter the competitiveness of the Chinese economy; but Chinese decisions on sovereign bond purchases affect stock markets around the world. Clearly the external environment still sets parameters for PRC actions, and demands responses, but the Chinese party-state has an unprecedented capacity to influence the external environment, as the ongoing intense negotiations over the value of China's currency, the Renminbi, illustrate. Though the distinction between the external and domestic environments is useful for analytic purposes, these examples indicate that the two are in many ways inseparable. PRC decisions, on this level, occur in a single context. Thus, if we are to draw an artificial analytical distinction between the external and internal influences on foreign policy, we cannot assume that the CCP party-state is primarily constrained in its internationally-directed behaviour by either the external world or its domestic politics. Rather, we should say that both international and domestic circumstances can constrain the PRC's foreign policy, and both can demand and shape responses. The position of China's leaders can thus be usefully be understood through the metaphor of the two-level game that Robert Putnam (1988) described, in which the two levels themselves are entangled, and in constant interaction with each other. "The unusual complexity of this two-level game is that moves that are rational for a player at one board . . . may be impolitic for that same player at the other board." As Putnam noted, this approach recognises two basic realities that IR theories struggle to account for: that foreign policy decision-makers must pursue domestic and international goals simultaneously, and that domestic conflict is inevitable over the nature of those goals, or how to go about achieving them, or both.³¹

³¹ Putnam 1988 pp.433-5, 460

The domestic parameters of Chinese foreign policy, from the state's own perspective, can be discerned in the three "core interests" identified by Chinese State Council member with responsibility for foreign policy, Dai Bingguo in a speech in 2010:

- 1.) Communist Party rule;
- 2.) Sovereignty and territorial integrity; and
- 3.) Continued economic development.³²

Chinese scholars including Yu Jianrong (2009) and Sun Liping (2009), have documented how the first of these, often framed as "maintaining stability" (*wei wen*), is an ever-more challenging task for China's ruling party.³³ The seemingly disproportionate force rolled out to suppress the near-nonexistent "Jasmine" protest gatherings in early 2011 – and any coverage of them by foreign journalists in Beijing – showed the seriousness with which the Chinese regime, or at least its security apparatus, views potential domestic security threats.³⁴ Indeed, in the same year, while China's rising military budget attracted international scrutiny, the country's officially declared domestic public security spending overtook military spending for the first time.³⁵ As historian Jeffrey Wasserstrom has commented, the reaction to the "Jasmine" demonstrations showed a "strange mixture" of confidence towards the outside world and insecurity at home.³⁶ As Susan Shirk has contended, the People's Republic today is "strong abroad but fragile at home".³⁷

Official statements also suggest how domestic concerns can drive aspects of the Chinese party-state's foreign policy. Back in the early 1980s Deng Xiaoping declared that the purpose of China's foreign policy was to serve its domestic economic development (Y. Zheng 1999, p.117), but Deng's successor Jiang Zemin actually stated in 2002 that he perceived a "20-year period of strategic opportunity" that would allow the Chinese state to attend to domestic tasks (quoted in J. Wang

³² Dai Bingguo 2010.

³³ American researcher Kevin O'Brien (2009: 27) has argued that the tens of thousands of rural protest incidents recorded each year are a sign of the regime's confidence, and that allowing this "dollop of dissent" is in fact "part of the regime's high-wire legitimization strategy".

³⁴ Unlike the Soviet and Eastern Bloc regimes, which carried out political assassinations and military interventions, the PRC regime has to date shown little interest in actually influencing such faraway events.

³⁵ Branigan 2011. This claim has been denied by a Ministry of Finance spokesperson who argued that China's RMB624 billion of "public security" expenditure included, among other things, spending on public health, public transport and building safety. ('不存在维稳预算 6244 亿是公共安全支出') The wider point is clear, however: while military spending has increased rapidly, public security spending has increased even more quickly.

³⁶ Buckley & Lee 2011 'Fear and swagger.'

³⁷ Shirk 2007

2011). There is little indication that this basic approach has changed. In 2006 the CCP's Central Committee reaffirmed that Chinese foreign policy "must maintain economic construction as its centerpiece, be closely integrated into domestic work, and be advanced by coordinating domestic and international situations" (quoted in J. Wang 2011). In March 2011 the current Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi described China's "integrated approach" of making foreign relations serve the PRC's domestic interests, which echoes Hu Jintao's emphasis on the domestic relevance of international soft power.³⁸

The aftermath of the 2010 Sino-Japanese diplomatic confrontation over an incident in the disputed Diaoyu Islands also demonstrated one of the most important limitations of most general IR theory in explaining Chinese foreign policy behaviour: the implicit assumption of the PRC as a rational, unitary actor.³⁹ In the diplomatic standoff that followed Japan's detention of a Chinese captain who had rammed a Japanese Coastguard vessel, Chinese exports of rare earth metals vital to Japan's high-technology industries slowed to a trickle, and this is widely believed to have been the result of a deliberate decision, rather than coincidence. Yet this seriously harmed China's reputation as a reliable trading partner, and has spurred a worldwide search for alternative sources of rare earth metals. It was unclear as to who or what authority ordered this decision, let alone why: it could plausibly have been the Politburo Standing Committee, the military or even the PRC's Customs Department. This also illustrated the challenge of pinning down the sources of specific Chinese foreign policy behaviour.

The Chinese state in the early 2010s is a gigantic and complex collection of bureaucracies, and foreign policy can come from many sources. Besides the traditional Chinese foreign policy actors – the central Party leadership, the PLA and the State Council – many other arms of the state, including state-owned enterprises, the domestic security apparatus, propaganda authorities, provincial governments, academic foreign policy analysts and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, have their own views of China's interests, as well as their own institutional agendas.⁴⁰ Economic and

³⁸ S. Ho 2011 'Chinese foreign relations to focus on more active diplomacy', VOA <http://www.voanews.com/english/news/asia/Chinese-Foreign-Relations-to-Focus-on-More-Active-Diplomacy-117511453.html> On the Chinese concept of soft power, see Cao Qing (2010)

³⁹ This was one of the most important findings of Robinson & Shambaugh's 1994 edited collection, being found in both editors' contributions to the volume – see Robinson (1994, p.592), and Shambaugh (1994, pp.214-216).

⁴⁰ See Robinson 1994 p.592; Shambaugh 1994 p.XXX; Roy 1998 p.XXX; Wang Jisi 2011

political leaders in China's wealthy southeastern coastal provinces, for example, are reportedly less inclined to support military action against Taiwan than the PLA as their economic interests depend on good cross-straits relations.⁴¹ The Ministry of Commerce and the People's Bank of China compete vigorously to influence exchange rate policy, and the fiasco at Copenhagen is believed to have partly been the result of conflicting positions between, on the one side, the National Development and Reform Commission, which officially headed the PRC's delegation, and on the other, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Prime Minister Wen Jiabao. On other issues, the interests of some these diverse players can align. The National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) has authored the PRC's approach of attempting to directly secure energy resources "at the well", a policy which offers the PLA Navy a convenient justification for expansion of its capabilities, and state-owned oil companies the opportunity for subsidies.⁴²

Final responsibility for major foreign policy decisions almost certainly rests with the Politburo Standing Committee, as advised by the Foreign Affairs Leading Small Group (*zhongyang waishi gongzuo lingdao xiaozu*), within which the ostensibly domestically-focused Ministry of State Security holds a seat.⁴³ Yet China's highest leaders must also maintain a basic level of consensus among domestic stakeholders in order to guarantee their own authority. As a result, decisions are believed to often reflect compromises between competing domestic Chinese influences. In these circumstances, which Jakobson & Knox (2010, p.51) describe as a situation of "fractured authority", analyses of Chinese foreign policy decisions must attempt to unpack as far as possible the bureaucratic and other interests that may be capable of driving or constraining PRC actions on each particular foreign policy issue. Chapter Three will take up this task in relation to the South China Sea dispute, showing it to be a compelling example of the point demonstrated in this section: how both domestic and international factors drive the PRC's actions, which are in turn constrained by both internal and external circumstances. However, alongside the robust competition and collusion among China's state-affiliated foreign policy stakeholders as described above, popular nationalist public opinion is increasingly being ascribed a role in influencing the behaviour of the PRC, as the following examples indicate.

⁴¹ Johnston 2004 'China's militarized interstate dispute behaviour 1949-1992' p.261.

⁴² Jakobson & Knox 2010 pp.8-11, 26.

⁴³ Jakobson & Knox 2010, p.5

Public opinion and foreign policy

The idea of public opinion influencing any country's foreign policy has been a deeply controversial idea, especially among realist IR scholars like Hans Morgenthau, who bemoaned how rational foreign policy in accordance with a state's best interests had no guarantee of support from the public, with its "emotional rather than rational" preferences.⁴⁴ Bob Carr, now Australia's Foreign Minister has said, "The prospect of foreign policy being shaped by public opinion . . . would send tremors of fear up and down the spine, and through the guts of any diplomat."⁴⁵ Australia's diplomatic corps faced just such a situation in 2011 when, responding to public outrage at a documentary report exposing cruelty to Australian cattle in Indonesian slaughterhouses, the Australian government ordered a halt to all live cattle exports to that country, straining ties between the two governments.

Another alleged recent example of public opinion's influence on foreign policy is found in former Thai Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva's harsh rhetoric against Cambodia over the disputed Preah Vihear Temple from 2008 onwards. Following the Thai administration's decision to send troops into the area, up to 28 people were killed in cross-border skirmishes. According to *Foreign Policy* magazine's, Joshua Keating (2011) this was in large part to public pressure from the conservative "Yellow Shirt" movement, whose mobilization had led directly to the then-Prime Minister taking power in 2008.⁴⁶ In relation to US foreign policy, Chengqiu Wu has argued that both America's military adventurism under George W. Bush in the early 2000s and its multilateralist turn under Barack Obama since 2008 reflected trends in American public opinion.⁴⁷ The idea of public opinion influencing foreign policy now even finds resonance with state leaders themselves. In a once-secret account of a 2009 meeting between US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd revealed by Wikileaks, Rudd expressed the view that "Russians' awareness of how their leaders were viewed internationally" meant President Dmitry

⁴⁴ Morgenthau 1978 p.558 quoted in Holsti 1992 p.440.

⁴⁵ Carr made the comment at the launch of the 2011 Lowy Institute Poll. A recording is available <http://www.loyyinstitute.org/Publication.asp?pid=1626>

⁴⁶ J. Keating 2011 'The stories you missed in 2011' http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/11/28/the_stories_you_missed_in_2011?page=full

⁴⁷ Wu 2011

Medvedev may increase his domestic standing by directing his country in a more liberal direction.⁴⁸

However, the relationship between public opinion and foreign policy is far from a simple linear one of public opinion as the cause, and foreign policy as the effect. Reviewing a large body of existing literature on US foreign policy and public opinion, Matthew Baum and Philip Potter (2008) posited a complex framework of multidirectional interactions between foreign policy decision-makers, mass media and public opinion in liberal democracies, which they likened to a “marketplace”. The key commodity in Baum & Potter’s foreign policy marketplace is information, and the key variable is the “information gap” between the public and the government. The information gap is largest when the government acts in secret, or when the public pays little attention, and at such times governments can make their foreign policy decisions relatively free of public opinion’s influence. Conversely, when widespread attention is focused on a given issue, leaders are more likely to be constrained, though rarely if ever driven, by public opinion in their foreign policy actions.⁴⁹

Moving beyond the US example, different dynamics again have been observed. Richard Ned Lebow (1981) has argued that in the lead-up to the Sino-Indian border war of 1962, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru “apparently found anti-Chinese sentiment useful in strengthening his hand against Peking and did his best to encourage it”, but later “became the prisoner of the crude nationalist passions he had helped to arouse”, eventually resulting in India fighting a war it was not capable of winning.⁵⁰ A similar line of thinking can be seen in Edward Mansfield & Jack Snyder’s (1995) theory that elites in partially-liberalised states may “drum up nationalist sentiment” to justify their continued rule, only to see such sentiment spiral out of control and push the state down a warlike path.⁵¹ Snyder (2000) has speculated that this theory could apply to the PRC, causing it to become an irrational, bristling military power akin to pre-WWI Germany. According to Snyder, this “surly, Wilhelmine-style nationalist China” could emerge as a result of a nationalist-driven democratic revolution, a possibility that has since been discussed elsewhere, including in a 2006 Australian Strategic Policy Institute report.⁵² But, Snyder notes, it also may occur if threatened military and

⁴⁸ State Department, ‘Secretary Clinton’s March 24, 2009 Conversation with Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd’

⁴⁹ Baum & Potter 2008. The literature in Baum & Potter’s study overwhelmingly ignored or discounted the idea of public opinion driving, as opposed to simply constraining foreign policy.

⁵⁰ Quoted in Snyder & Borghard (2011, p.450)

⁵¹ Mansfield & Snyder 1995

⁵² Hale 2006. See also Rachmann “more prickly”

party elites invoke nationalism to attempt to stay in power, and then find themselves beholden to the demands of public opinion for hardline actions.⁵³ As the following sections show, such ideas of “rising Chinese nationalism” as a kind of Frankenstein's monster, leering menacingly at its creator, the Chinese party-state, underpin many of the growing claims of nationalism's influence on Chinese foreign policy.

Nationalism Card I: the ‘Frankenstein’s Monster’ theory

With its people-power overtones and dangerous implications, the notion of Chinese people dictating policy to their Communist rulers is an understandably appealing one for media pundits, but it is now found in both English and Chinese sources from academic analyses to reports and even government publications. Some of these theories are cautious and elegant, like Jakobson & Knox's (2009) concept of competing PRC state or party agencies try to co-opt public opinion as they attempt to influence foreign policy, or Jessica Chen Weiss' (2009) theory of states deliberately sanctioning domestic nationalist criticism to strengthen their international bargaining position. But other claims are crude and sweeping, like that of Sydney University's John Lee (2009), who states that “the nationalism card is already being played”. Without citing examples of how the PRC is doing so now or has done in the past, Lee nonetheless warns, “The possibility of the regime fuelling the fires of a chauvinism they helped nurture to placate a restless and frustrated people is a distinct danger.”⁵⁴ This idea of a “nationalism card” is the simplest and most direct theoretical claim for the influence of nationalism on Chinese foreign policy: that the Chinese party-state engages, or will engage, in assertive or aggressive behaviour in order to bolster fading public support among its subjects.

The first kind of nationalist theory, then, is that Chinese foreign policy is (or can be) driven by the preferences of nationalistic strains of public opinion. Back in 1997, Richard Bernstein & Ross Munro proclaimed that China was on a mission to dominate Asia that was “driven by nationalist sentiment, a yearning to redeem the humiliations of the past, and the simple urge for international power”. Most likely, they argued, China was becoming a “corporatist, militarized, nationalist state”

⁵³ Snyder 2011 pp.338-9

⁵⁴ Lee 2009, p.177-8

akin to fascist-era Italy or Spain.⁵⁵ Steven Mosher (2002), in the midst of a similarly hysterical polemic on China's hegemonic ambitions, casually declared that "the passionate nationalism of the Chinese, shared by elite and ordinary people alike, is a constant goad in the direction of belligerence in speech and act".⁵⁶ Of course, these types of claims are not always just stated as fact. Jonathan Holslag (2012), for example, has argued that rising expectations will lead the Chinese public to demand tougher stances in the PRC's international diplomacy:

"China's next generation of leaders is expected to play hardball in the international arena. With China's economic future looking grim, those expectations could offer Party bosses like Xi Jinping a new opportunity to shore up their esteem with a much more troublesome brand of nationalism."⁵⁷

In 2004 Peter Hays Gries argued that popular nationalists were "beginning to influence the making of Chinese foreign policy", pointing to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' efforts to solicit the opinions of ordinary people to argue that the MFA was "actively seeking to appease them".⁵⁸ Australian security analysts Rory Medcalf & Raoul Heinrichs (2011) assert that nationalism is an increasingly strong influence on "defence policy and posture" in China because it is "a key pillar of legitimacy for the Chinese Communist Party". As a result, "some assertive Chinese maritime behaviour may be intended as a demonstration of naval capacity to Chinese audiences, designed to reinforce the status of China's leadership and military as defenders of sovereignty."⁵⁹ The authors cite the work of Harvard Associate Robert Ross as the source of this idea.

Once a self-proclaimed realist who advocated the primary importance of external constraints on Chinese foreign policy (1986), and the "conservative" nature of Beijing's foreign policy (2004), Ross (2010) has more recently written a lengthy paper that argues the PLA Navy's modernisation program is based not on national interest, but "naval nationalism". By this he means that "widespread nationalism, growing social instability, and the leadership's concern for its political legitimacy drive China's naval ambition". Ross uses the historical lens of maritime competition as the basis for this claim. The piece with Alfred Thayer Mahan's distinction between "land powers"

⁵⁵ Bernstein & Munro 1997 p.29

⁵⁶ Mosher 2002 p.104.

⁵⁷ Holslag 2012 'Have Chinese had enough?' <http://the-diplomat.com/china-power/2012/02/02/have-chinese-had-enough/>

⁵⁸ Gries 2004 p.133

⁵⁹ Medcalf & Heinrichs 2010 p.21

like China and Russia that have large territorial frontiers to defend, and “sea powers” like England and Japan, which enjoy geographical protection from natural moats as well as ready access to the world’s oceans.⁶⁰ Over the past 200 years numerous land powers have pursued naval expansion, Ross argues, *against their own material interests*: in the 19th and early 20th centuries, France, Germany and Russia drained their finances on futile attempts at naval superiority over Britain and Japan. The reason for this irrational foreign policy behaviour, according to Ross, was the emergence of European popular nationalism. Leaders pursued what Mansfield and Snyder (1995) called “prestige strategies” to bolster their own domestic legitimacy by satisfying public demands for international success, or a sense thereof.⁶¹

“The emerging U.S.-China naval competition,” writes Ross, “occurs within the enduring context of competition between continental and maritime powers.” Ross’s argument hinges on the proposition that, as a “land power”, any investments China makes in naval capabilities beyond access denial (weaponry such as anti-ship missiles that presents a plausible enough threat to keep the US Navy away in a crisis situation) in China’s immediate vicinity constitutes “sub-optimal” foreign policy. The prime contemporary example of this, according to Ross, is the PRC’s pursuit of an aircraft carrier. The PLA Navy, like all military forces, naturally wishes to maximise its capabilities, and has been pushing for an aircraft carrier since the mid-1980s. The real culprit behind this irrational and counterproductive behaviour, Ross tells us, is popular Chinese nationalism, for it “drives a widespread popular demand for . . . traditional symbols of great power status” and “dismisses the costs of a U.S.-China maritime rivalry”. According to Ross, Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials even admit that they oppose the carrier program, but “recognize that they cannot offset the pressure

⁶⁰ Given a land power’s need to adequately defend its continental homeland, their best maritime strategy, Ross argues, was traditionally to concentrate on raiding the commerce of rival states. However, this strategic calculus was fundamentally altered with the arrival of the aircraft carrier, which allowed sea powers to threaten land powers without even coming ashore. Since then, land powers have needed to possess effective anti-access capabilities, usually led by submarine fleets, to render their coastal waters off-limits to enemy carrier groups.

⁶¹ “Louis Napoleon’s legitimacy depended on satisfying this nationalist desire,” Ross writes, which caused him to overspend on naval modernisation. Kaiser Wilhelm II “valued the German Navy as the personal flotilla of a world leader” and wanted it to express the country’s “place in the sun”. Czar Nicolas II wanted to avoid war with a militarily superior Japan but succumbed to “excessive confidence in Russian cultural superiority over Asians”, resulting in the rout of the Russian military in Manchuria in 1904-05. The Soviet Union’s ill-advised naval development from 1972 onwards was the result of “Russian nationalism and the intrinsic militant ideology” of the CPSU. And: “The Meiji effort to create a national identity fostered a nationalist culture that sought validation for Japan through empire and forced industrialization. Once unleashed, this nationalism dictated Japan’s security agenda and, in the context of economic depression and social instability, became the foundation of the government’s legitimacy. Japan thus pursued a relentless expansionist agenda even as it encountered growing economic difficulties and diminished resources.”

from Chinese society”.⁶²

Nationalist media, new media, and fear of the people

Comments from anonymous Chinese officials are also crucial to Susan Shirk’s (2010) claim that “public opinion has become an important influence on the process” of foreign policy decision-making in China. The influence of public opinion is particularly pronounced, Shirk notes, on issues that “stimulate Chinese popular nationalism”, namely those involving Japan, the United States, Taiwan and Tibet. A former US State Department official, Shirk relies on interviews with Foreign Ministry officials, government think tank scholars and media executives such as newspaper editors, to develop a theory that locates the Chinese media as the link between nationalistic public opinion and official foreign policy actions. The combination of commercialisation and continuing party control in China’s current media environment creates incentives for media outlets to report international news with a “nationalist slant”. Except for the official mouthpieces of the central and provincial CCP governments, most Chinese news organisations must now attempt to turn profits by attracting audiences, and newspaper editors told Shirk that international news is a particular drawcard for Chinese audiences, second only to sports according to market research. Mirroring sensationalist media around the world, then, Chinese editors seek to expand their readerships by “dramatizing international news events, exaggerating threats, and emphasizing conflict over cooperation”. But at the same time as they seek to satisfy these commercial imperatives, Chinese media must also satisfy the dictates of the CCP’s Propaganda Department. “The interaction of these two drivers,” Shirk argues, “has produced mass media that stir up nationalist sentiments that feed back into the foreign policy process in a kind of echo chamber.” The feedback loop that Shirk posits rests on the idea that the PRC’s foreign policy decision-makers view the Chinese media and internet as indications of public opinion on a given issue. “When government decision makers read the media, they come away with an impression that nationalist ardor is sweeping the country. This perception of an intensely nationalist public opinion influences their foreign policy choices.”⁶³

Another major conduit between public opinion and foreign policy decision-making, according to

⁶² Ross 2009 p.XXX

⁶³ Shirk 2010 pp.225-227

Shirk, is the internet. The widespread use of the internet in the PRC means it is no longer possible for the party-state to control what news reaches the Chinese people. Despite the party-state's elaborate censorship apparatus, "internet communication is just too fast, too decentralized, and too internationalized for the censors to block breaking news before it reaches the online public". Widespread public outrage about international events, including the words or actions of other countries' governments, can necessitate official public responses where the party-state would otherwise prefer to keep things in the hands of professional diplomats. In short, says Shirk, the internet "sets the international news agenda". With China's top leaders and official media emphasising the attention that the CCP government is now paying to internet opinion, Shirk claims that online nationalism not only demands official PRC responses on foreign policy issues, but can also influence the nature of the those responses. The PRC's demand for an apology and compensation after WWII-era Japanese mustard gas canisters were accidentally dug up by construction workers in the city of Qiqihar in 2003, killing one and injuring more than 40, was driven by the need to "appease public opinion". China's announcement in 2005 of its opposition to Japan's bid for a UN Security Council seat, is further cited as a clear example of online opinion's impact on PRC foreign policy because it followed the gathering of nearly 30 million signatures for an online petition demanding the same.⁶⁴

Underlying Shirk's theory of popular nationalism as a driver of PRC behaviour are two basic assumptions: 1.) that the Chinese party-state today is afraid that domestic criticism of its foreign policy as being too conciliatory could lead to its downfall;⁶⁵ and 2.) that decision-makers view commercialised media and the internet as representative of public opinion.⁶⁶ The first assumption may be true for Shirk's sources from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which is charged with the difficult role of conducting the PRC's diplomatic relations with other countries, as well as explaining China's foreign policy positions to domestic and foreign audiences simultaneously. The MFA is often subject to withering criticism online with little or no apparent censorship. Like the diplomats Bob Carr alludes to in the epigraph of this chapter, the MFA's job would be much easier were they not subject to such pressure. Yet as Shirk notes, the *Huanqiu Shibao* (the Chinese-language edition of the *Global Times*) which is published by the official *People's Daily*, frequently

⁶⁴ Shirk 2010 pp.232-234, 243. The claims are found also in Shirk 2007 pp.101-2

⁶⁵ See Shirk 2010 pp.227, 242, 247

⁶⁶ See Shirk 2010 pp. 226-7, 230, 239, 241

publishes hawkish articles that implicitly or explicitly criticise the foreign policy status quo as insufficiently protective of the national interest. By far the most influential nationalist-leaning media outlet in the country, *Huanqiu Shibao* articles are widely republished online, from mainstream news portals to esoteric military enthusiast forums, where they frequently provoke criticism of the policy status quo as too weak. The *Huanqiu Shibao*, as Shirk herself explains, works closely with the central Propaganda Department.⁶⁷ If the party-state was so afraid of nationalist criticism, why allow or even deliberately provoke it? More likely explanations are that the *Huanqiu Shibao*'s slant reflects the policy preferences of the central propaganda apparatus, or that the government as a whole finds the steady stream of hawkish criticism useful, as other theories detailed below suggest.

The second assumption, that decision-makers see newspapers like the *Huanqiu Shibao*, and online discussion threads, as representative of public opinion, is even more questionable. To begin with, if Shirk is aware that the *Huanqiu Shibao*'s coverage is shaped by the requirements of the Central Propaganda Department, it is reasonable to assume that China's foreign policy decision-makers also know this. Shirk also believes it necessary to tell Chinese officials that they "should be aware that the information they obtain from the Web is skewed toward extreme nationalistic views".⁶⁸ Once again, it requires the assumption of a total breakdown in cognitive function on the part of China's leaders for them not to be aware of this. If Chinese officials really did see online comments and the *Huanqiu Shibao* as reliable indicators of public opinion, why would the Ministry of Foreign Affairs bother commissioning opinion polls on foreign policy issues?⁶⁹

The same assumption of a monolithic party-state in fear of its people's nationalistic views underpins Willy Lam's (2010) analysis. Noting the increased opportunities that the internet has created for PRC citizens to express negative views about the government's policies, Lam argues that "Beijing's apparent effort to pre-empt criticism from nationalist Internet users has resulted in a radicalization of Chinese diplomacy" which has harmed China's international relations. Lam cites the slowing of rare-earth metals exports and the discouraging of tourism in Japan as examples of steps taken to appease "nationalists" following the 2010 Diaoyu Islands incident. The restrictions on

⁶⁷ Shirk 2010 pp.227-230

⁶⁸ Shirk 2010 p.241

⁶⁹ Johnston 2006; Fewsmith & Rosen 2001

the anti-Japanese protests over the incident are taken as a sign of the same fear, but Lam offers no explanation for why they were allowed in the first place. Lam also links the lack of implementation of the 2008 Chunxiao gas field agreement to criticism of the deal on the Chinese Internet. Other examples, the Chinese government's fear of a nationalist backlash led it to insist on conducting its negotiations over joining the WTO, and with Russia over Heixiazi Island (Bolshoy Ussuriysky), in secret. Yet this latter two examples suggest just the opposite of what Lam is arguing: that Beijing is often still confident enough to conduct its foreign policy in contravention to the wishes of domestic nationalism. By connecting all these isolated cases up, Lam creates a false impression of a united, monolithic party-state entity. On the one hand, he argues that "Beijing's" fear of nationalist criticism is driving it to suppress activists who are in favour of tougher foreign policy stances. Yet he also notes that "hard-liners including military hawks have openly expressed disapproval" of the policy of shelving sovereignty disputes and promoting joint development. On Lam's own evidence, then, some elements within the party-state are quite closely aligned with the trends in popular nationalist public opinion that he seeks to demonstrate "Beijing" fears.

The "double-edged sword"

Theories of popular nationalism as a driving force behind PRC foreign policy actions is not limited to Western academics writing in English. As we have seen, officials in the PRC's Ministry of Foreign Affairs have been prominently cited as sources of these ideas, and numerous Chinese academics have made claims for the influence of popular nationalism in PRC scholarly journals. Back in 2006, for example, Renmin University's Zhang Shiming wrote of the "obvious increase in the role of public opinion (*gongzhong yulun*) in the state's foreign policy". Zhang listed several areas of foreign policy on which public opinion was strong: economic diplomacy; the need for a more extroverted foreign policy; anxiety over resource security; an "intense" awareness of maritime rights; the idea that America was fundamentally China's enemy and that war was highly likely between the two countries; and worsening anti-Japanese sentiment. "As social resources, these public opinions and sentiments provide Chinese policy-makers with the opportunity to act, and as social support they provide the motivation to act." Mass nationalism (*dazhong minzuzhuyi*), asserted Zhang, had risen greatly since the 1990s, and this had created both opportunities and challenges for

the PRC government. On the one hand, the “universal appeal” (*pubian de haozhaoli*) of nationalism could mobilise the population’s emotions in support of government policies, thus increasing national cohesion. Examples of this included the widespread joy at the return of Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty in 1997, and the protests against the US bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999. However, other heated issues (*redian*) such as historical issues and fast-developing crises, could result in Chinese domestic public opinion driving significant downgrades in the PRC’s foreign relations, especially with Japan. “Nationalism,” concluded Zhang, “is a double-edged sword.”⁷⁰

Zhang Nisheng of the China Foundation for International Strategic Studies has written that popular opinion is liable to leave China’s foreign relations in “a passive state” – being driven by domestic political agendas. Zhang (2010) writes: “With the increase in social contradictions and the increases in nationalistic sentiment, foreign policy may become an outlet for explosive social dissatisfaction.” The government’s policy positions towards Japan and America, particularly in relation to Taiwan, are the most likely to become vents for social anger. Echoing Zhang Shiming, Zhang Nisheng concludes that public opinion, as a consideration in policy decision-making, may be helpful, but it may also be a constraint on the government’s actions.⁷¹ Indeed, just as the literature surveyed by Baum & Potter (2008) generally found evidence of public opinion as a constraint, rather than a driver, of US foreign policy, the idea of Chinese nationalism as a straightjacket constraining the PRC state from making compromises enjoys more widespread acceptance. As we shall see, however, since it relies on counterfactual alternative scenarios (if it wasn’t for Chinese nationalism the PRC would have done taken action *x*), it is a hypothesis that is difficult to falsify.

The US Department of Defense’s 2011 report *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China* views popular nationalism as both a tool of the ruling regime and a constraint on its actions. The report notes that, “Communist Party leaders and military officials continue to exploit nationalism to bolster the legitimacy of the Party and deflect domestic

⁷⁰ Zhang Shiming 2006 p.31. Zhang Baijia also writes the return of Hong Kong and Macao to Chinese sovereignty in 1997 and 1999 were domestic issues that affected the PRC’s foreign policy in the 1990s. Zhang writes that the two handovers were such major events for the Chinese public that: “Chinese leaders were somewhat preoccupied with the return of these territories, to the extent that they did not feel free to deal with other diplomatic issues until the turnover was accomplished.” (p.23)

⁷¹ Zhang Nisheng (2010)

criticism.” This may imply that the CCP would take hardline foreign policy stances to satisfy nationalistic public opinion, but, unlike analysts such as Lee (2009), Ross (2009) and Shirk (2010), the report stops short of making such a claim. The Department makes a more subtle claim for the influence of popular nationalism: “Nationalistic appeals for a more muscular PRC posture, particularly during times of crisis, effectively constrain more moderate, pragmatic elites in China's foreign policy establishment.”⁷² The presence, in an official US government publication, of even this relatively modest claim, illustrates just how widespread the notion of nationalistic public opinion as an influence on PRC foreign policy has become. Indeed, Thomas Barnett (2011) claims that the idea of China being pushed into war by nationalism is now an “unshakeable line of reasoning” within the Pentagon. The reason for this, according to Barnett, is that the US Navy and Air Force need to establish China as a “big-war foe” as they do bureaucratic battle with the US Army and Marines for a bigger share of the defence budget. Given China's vast foreign exchange reserves, it has very little to gain strategically from a war with the US. The US has no interest in preventing PRC access to strategic resources, and unlike previous rising powers, China does not need to resort to gunboat diplomacy to open foreign markets, for it has already done so. “The ease with which these threat scenarios can be dismissed,” Barnett writes, “explains why the Pentagon is left hanging its big-war hopes on Chinese nationalism exceeding the Chinese Communist Party's ability to keep it in check.”⁷³ While Barnett provides little in the way of evidence of the Pentagon's sponsorship of nationalism claims, his argument illustrates the potentially dangerous implications of theories of Chinese nationalism influencing PRC foreign policy and, thus, the urgency of the task of rigorously examining such theories. In particular, this means examining these claims in a framework that takes account of what is known about China's contemporary foreign policymaking process.

Tri-Level Interaction/Policy Competition: a theoretical framework

As noted earlier, major Chinese foreign policy decisions are believed to be made by the Chinese Communist Party's top leadership group, the nine-person Politburo Standing Committee. However, its decisions on a range of issues are believed to reflect compromises between the interests or

⁷² DOD 2011 p.14

⁷³ Barnett 2011

preferences of competing groups within the state, including those with well established foreign policy roles like the military and the State Council's ministries, and more marginal players like provincial governments, state-owned enterprises, and ostensibly domestic policy-making bodies like the NDRC and the public security authorities. The concept of a PRC state made up of competing groups is of course not new,⁷⁴ but Jakobson & Knox provide compelling examples of "omnidirectional" interactions between these groups as they attempt to influence decision-makers, elite opinion, public opinion and each other. These foreign policy actors may find support for their position among China's academic foreign policy elite or try to enlist wider public opinion to bolster the case for their policy preferences.⁷⁵

Jakobson & Knox's analysis of marginal foreign policy actors recalls Joseph Fewsmith & Stanley Rosen's earlier (2001) concept of a foreign policy "subelite" situated below the decision-makers but above the attentive masses, and in dynamic interaction with both. This subelite included not only government policy experts and public intellectuals, but also vested interests such as state-owned enterprises, all of which were in a position enlist popular opinion to support their policy positions. The three-level opinion model underpinned the study's most useful and important theoretical finding, that public opinion "can have an impact when joined with the concerns or interests of those higher in the system".⁷⁶ The idea of elite, subelite and popular opinion in dynamic interaction was a useful way to situate public opinion within the wider conceptual framework of domestic influences on Chinese foreign policy. Of course, mere alignment of public opinion with higher-up foreign policy actors does not necessarily translate into an influence on a given foreign policy outcomes. The likelihood of public opinion having an influence depends on a number of variables: degree of public mobilisation, decision-maker unity, and external constraints.

As this chapter suggests, numerous commentators outside China have linked what they see as assertive or intransigent Chinese behaviour to nationalism. Many, however, have struggled to provide specific evidence for such a link – such as a correlation between specific indicators of "nationalistic" public opinion and acts of aggression by the Chinese state. Fewsmith & Rosen (2001) made one of the first attempts at tackling this task in their 2001 collaborative paper. Their

⁷⁴ See Robinson 1994 p.592; Shambaugh 1994 p.XXX; Roy 1998 p.XXX

⁷⁵ Jakobson & Knox 2010 pp.1, 43

⁷⁶ Fewsmith & Rosen (2001), p.155.

analysis was based on their identification of three distinct phases in Chinese policy towards the US over the period from 1995 to 1999. In the first phase, from 1995 to 1996, the authors characterized Chinese policy as relatively hostile based on China's decision to undertake military exercises during the Taiwan Straits crisis. The second phase, from 1996 to 1998, saw examples of much more conciliatory Chinese foreign policy culminating in Chinese President Jiang Zemin's visit to the U.S. in 1997. Jiang's counterpart Bill Clinton also travelled to China in 1998. In the third phase, from the beginning of 1999, Sino-American relations deteriorated markedly, and when NATO accidentally bombed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, the Chinese government even provided buses to facilitate anti-American demonstrations.

Fewsmith & Rosen found evidence that the interplay of three variables determined whether or not public opinion could have a significant influence on Chinese foreign policy towards the US: tensions in Sino-American relations, conflict among the Chinese ruling elite, and public mobilization. China's domestic political situation, Fewsmith and Rosen noted, is an important part of the decision-making environment in which China's leaders make the country's foreign policy. They contended that when a wave of "nationalistic views", as expressed through popular books like the mid-1990s sensation *China Can Say No*, coincided with intense pressure on Jiang Zemin's leadership group from the CCP's "leftist" elements, and tensions between the U.S. and China over the Taiwan Straits crisis, public opinion made it "difficult [for Jiang] to resist appeals to 'do something' ". However, once Jiang managed to neutralize the leftist attacks over the course of 1996 and 1997, he was able to pursue improved Sino-American relations and compel positive media coverage of the US, which itself served to pacify public opinion. When relations once again turned sour in 1999, popular media criticism of the government's alleged weakness re-emerged, along with rifts in the leadership group. "In this period," the authors asserted, "public opinion had a clear impact on both the conduct of elite politics and on Chinese foreign policy." The causal arrow, however, was by no means one-way, Fewsmith and Rosen noted, for the mobilization of public opinion was partly spontaneous, and partly officially inspired.⁷⁷

Fewsmith and Rosen (2001), both eminent American Sinologists, provided ample documentation of

⁷⁷ Fewsmith & Rosen (2001), 'Domestic Context of Chinese Foreign Policy: Does "public opinion" matter?', in Lampton, D. (ed.) *The Making of Chinese Foreign and Security Policy in the Era of Reform*, Stanford University Press, pp.175-187.

the rifts among the elite in 1995-1996 and 1999. However their study contained little evidence of any genuine shift in China's US policy in 1999. Furthermore, the study's assumptions about the nature of "public opinion" were based largely on popular nationalist literature and a small number of disparate surveys conducted during the 1990s, many of which, as the authors themselves noted, may have been subject to political interference. Nonetheless, their approach of comparing available manifestations of public opinion with foreign policy actions is worth following. Chapter Four of this dissertation will combine original survey research with existing poll data to build a more complete picture of popular Chinese attitudes on PRC foreign policy in general, and territorial disputes in particular. The aim is to create a robust new set of reference points upon which to base theories of public opinion's influence on Chinese foreign policy in relation to the South China Sea dispute.

James Reilly (2008) has made a systematic investigation of the impact of popular nationalism on the PRC's actions towards Japan between 1997 and 2007, finding that public opinion prompted Chinese foreign policy to become less co-operative between 2001 and 2005. However, Reilly emphasises that the Chinese state's own tacit approval of public demonstrations and inflammatory commentary in China's commercial media was a crucial enabling factor for mobilised public opinion to have an effect on foreign policy. As the material costs of downgraded Sino-Japanese cooperation began to mount, the CCP quelled the protests, compelled positive Chinese media coverage of Japan, and subsequently shifted its policy towards Japan in a moderate, conciliatory direction. The CCP itself, Reilly's study concluded, could still exert significant influence on Chinese public opinion and suppress nationalist mobilisation when required.⁷⁸ Chapter Two of this dissertation will explore to what extent this remains the case in the early 2010s.

Both Reilly (2008) and Fewsmith & Rosen (2001) found that public opinion was most likely to influence the CCP's foreign policy during periods of disunity within the leadership. This is a reasonable proposition for two main reasons. First, a divided leadership is likely to be less effective in adopting measures to shape public opinion and control mobilisation. Second, and perhaps more significantly, public criticism of the foreign policy status quo works to the advantage of any

⁷⁸ Reilly, J. (2008), 'The Role of Public Opinion in China's Japan Policy', PhD thesis, George Washington University, pp.249-50.

competing groups within the leadership that share the policy preferences of a mobilised population. As the Chinese Communist Party moves towards and beyond its next major leadership transition in 2012, competition for leadership positions will make an increased degree of intra-Party conflict inevitable. Given the evidence of strongly-held and possibly widespread public dissatisfaction with the South China Sea policy, at least among internet users, the 2011-2013 period is a particularly opportune time to use the South China Sea to further explore and re-test the theory that divisions among state leadership can open the door for public opinion to become an influence on foreign policy.

We can combine Jakobson & Knox's (2010) theory of omnidirectional influences on foreign policy decision-making with the findings of Fewsmith & Rosen (2001) and Reilly (2008) to form a unified model of the role of public opinion in the in the following way. Interactions between decision-makers, subelite foreign policy actors and the public are dynamic and omnidirectional. With the necessary level of unity, the decision-making elite, and state entities among the subelite have significant means to influence the views of the public and degree of mobilisation via mass media and censorship to shape online discussion. Non-state groups among the subelite, such as industry lobbies and policy experts, either have some capacity to use the media to influence the public, or some degree of proximity or access to decision-makers, or both. At the same time, academic policy experts and mobilised sections of the wider PRC citizenry (including online activists) can influence internal contests for foreign policy supremacy.⁷⁹ Consciously or unconsciously, they may align themselves with perceived allies among the foreign policy actors, or provide harmful public criticism that weakens their policy opponents.

<MODEL DIAGRAM>

Reilly (2008) also noted the Chinese party-state may be less capable of influencing the views of "groups with diverse sources of information".⁸⁰ Since Internet use in China has increased

⁷⁹ Besides Fewsmith & Rosen's findings, the Democracy Wall Movement that began in late 1978 is believed to have been crucial to Deng Xiaoping's foreign and domestic policy victories at the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Party Congress. See MacFarquahar 1997 p. XXX

⁸⁰ Reilly (2008), p.251.

dramatically since the period covered in Reilly's study,⁸¹ this thesis will build on and attempt to further update this finding as it considers more broadly the ongoing relationship between public opinion, mobilisation and the PRC state in China's so-called "internet age" (*wangluo shidai*). This dynamically evolving state-subelite-popular dialogue will be examined in Chapter Two, and the above model modified accordingly. These interactions have been increasingly apparent over the South China Sea issue in recent years, as the brief examples canvassed above indicate, and this will be a major subject of analysis in Chapter Five, as it describes the influence of nationalism – mobilised public opinion – on China's South China Sea policy.

The diagram above represents a detailed model of arrangements around the domestic "table" in Putnam's two-level game. However, on any foreign policy issue the international "table" must also be accounted for. Adopting Reilly's approach of describing Japanese policy towards China and accounting for its impact during each case study, then, Chapter Three will plot the recent history of the South China Sea dispute, concentrating on the international "table" and its degree of persuasiveness in explaining the PRC's actions. For a "two-level game strategy" is exactly what Reilly observed during 2004 and 2005, as China's leaders allowed genuinely spontaneous anti-Japanese demonstrations to take place at home in order to extract concessions from the Japanese side.

Nationalism Card II: the two-level game

Jessica Chen Weiss (2008) has developed a compelling Nationalism Card II theory for authoritarian states that she calls "the strategic logic of anti-foreign protest". The theory holds that by allowing anti-foreign protests to make strident demands and criticisms of their government's foreign policy, authoritarian states can gain in international negotiations.⁸² This concept draws on established literature on two-level games, highlighting how domestic constraints or weakness can be an advantage at the international negotiating table. For example, a government for whom an international agreement must pass through a bicameral parliament, or a president facing a hostile

⁸¹ See 'Statistical Report on Internet Development in China' (2009), Beijing: China Internet Network Information Center, www.cnnic.cn/gywm/ndbg/201009/P020100909431583147068.pdf

⁸² Weiss 2008 p.xi-xii

congress, or even a democratically elected leader who must face an election, can drive a harder bargain by claiming a higher baseline negotiating position – the least beneficial arrangement that would be feasible under their domestic constraints. Such a government or leader genuinely must drive as hard a bargain as the upper house, congress or electorate would demand. Putnam (1988) refers to this as the effect of “reducing win-set size”.⁸³

Under normal circumstances an authoritarian party-state or a dictator who is largely unaccountable to domestic constituencies cannot narrow the range of possible outcomes (win-sets) during international negotiations in order to avoid making concessions. Weiss’s theory holds that the mobilisation of anti-foreign nationalist protest can accomplish this. The PRC may attempt to avoid making concessions by claiming to be subjected to domestic pressure. However, the success or otherwise of this strategy depends on the credibility of the idea of domestic constraints in the minds of their international opponent. If the PRC genuinely is constrained by nationalist public opinion, it needs to demonstrate this to its international opponent. Therefore, according to on occasions, the PRC state has proved willing to endure the risks inherent in subjecting *itself* to the demands of nationalism.

As this chapter has emphasised, the idea of nationalism as an influence on foreign policy is overused and under-theorised, with different incarnations ignoring the way foreign policy is actually made in the early 2010s. But where the government facilitates, influences, prompts and benefits from the mobilisation of public opinion, as the Nationalism Card II suggests, can we really even talk of nationalism as an influence at all? Maintaining that public opinion on foreign policy issues in China remains a result of top-down control, Sun Yun (2012) argues that neither Nationalism Card I nor Nationalism Card II can be seen as instances of mobilised public opinion influencing foreign policy. For Sun fostering nationalist public opinion is a deliberate means by which the Chinese government tries to “reaffirm its legitimacy” at home. Appealing to nationalistic beliefs, Sun writes, is “an easy way to score points with the public” – particularly in the case of the PRC, whose population carries an aggrieved collective historical memory. Sun is also open to the idea that the CCP encourages or at least tolerates criticism of itself on nationalist grounds in order to sure up its international position. Governments portray themselves as forced by public opinion to take a

⁸³ Putnam 1988 p.441

relatively hard bargaining position, driven to seek greater gains to satisfy the public's demands or constrained to refuse concessions on the grounds that the domestic audience would never allow them. However, according to Sun, we should not mistake public opinion as a source of Chinese foreign policy, when in fact the Chinese government is in control of both public opinion and foreign policy.

The “ferocious” official PRC reaction to US weapons sales to Taiwan in early 2010, Sun tells us, was both an attempt to score points with the Chinese public, and as an example of the Chinese party-state deliberately using public opinion as a “tool to show Washington how angry the Chinese people are and how severe the consequences could be”. Similarly, the anti-Japanese demonstrations that took place in the aftermath of the Diaoyu Islands incident the same year “complement[ed] and reinforce[d] the government's hawkish positions”, enabling the Chinese government to win its negotiations with Japan over the fate of the fishing boat captain at the centre of the spat. Although the demonstrators criticized the Chinese government's alleged weakness, if the government did not want the demonstrations they would not have been allowed to occur, therefore the mobilisation of public opinion should not be considered a factor.⁸⁴ However, without particular trends in public opinion, the PRC could not play either Nationalism Card in its foreign policy. These trends in public opinion – receptiveness to foreign policy belligerence in the case of Nationalism Card I, and willingness to mobilise in the case of Nationalism Card II – are necessary enabling factors for the foreign policy actions that Sun describes.

Sun's position is that both ‘Nationalism Card I’ and ‘Nationalism Card II’ operate simultaneously as a single integrated tactic of the state. However, the two theories of state-society interaction should not be confused, much less conflated as they are in Sun's article. When playing the first Nationalism Card, the government seeks nationalist agreement, as it attempted to do in the Taiwan weapons sales. With the second, it promotes hardline disagreement and intransigence, as in the aftermath of the Diaoyu Islands spat. If the state is using its own belligerent foreign policies or rhetoric to bolster its domestic legitimacy, then the task is to attempt to shape public opinion to agree with its position. Nationalism Card II, on the other hand, rests on the idea of a state credibly demonstrating to other states that domestic public opinion is beyond its control or at odds with it. The government playing

⁸⁴ Sun 2011 http://www.brookings.edu/opinions/2011/1213_china_public_opinion_sun.aspx

the card must be able to point to obvious displays of popular hardline criticism in order to lend credence to its claims of being unable to back down or compromise in international negotiations. However sanctioned or tacitly approved they may be, such mobilisations are quite the opposite of reaffirming domestic legitimacy; on the contrary, as Weiss (2008) emphasises, the key to effective use of Nationalism Card II is that they must represent a credible bottom-up challenge to the regime, however marginal or easily put down once they are no longer useful.⁸⁵

There is a further problem. We cannot simply assume that it is untrue that a state is constrained, or forced to act, by nationalistic public opinion simply because they claim this is the case during international negotiations. There is nothing mutually exclusive about these processes - they are both plausible explanations for China's behaviour at different times. However, they do not of themselves demonstrate the absence of bottom-up flows of influence or causation.

Sun outlines how the media in China remain subject to intense supervision, and how reporting on foreign policy issues still serves the government's agenda, like in November 2010 when the North Korean shelling of Yeonpyeong Island was referred to in PRC media as an “exchange of fire”. Another, more recent example is Chinese media coverage of the Arab Spring uprisings, which, according to Sun, “rarely focuses on the governments' authoritarian records” and emphasises “the negative aspects of domestic instability and the dangers of foreign intervention”. However, even if coverage of the Arab uprisings has indeed focused on these aspects, this has certainly not been the message taken away by most participants in comment threads on major mainstream PRC news portals, which have regularly expressed enthusiastic support for the protesters, contempt for the dictators and cynicism about the Chinese government's dealings with them. In fact, mere expressions of agreement with the dangers of turmoil and chaos are commonly denounced as being the work of the “Fifty Cent Party” of commenters paid by the government. What use is a raft of popular comments criticizing the Chinese government for its collusion with Colonel Gaddafi be in international negotiations, or in bolstering domestic legitimacy?⁸⁶

Sun's analysis discounts the internet as a source of independent public opinion. While the majority

⁸⁵ REFERENCE PAGE NO.

⁸⁶ Translations on SSC: China no friend of Gaddafi; Syria

of the Chinese population do not use the internet, more than 500 million do.⁸⁷ Furthermore, internet users are overwhelming urban, economically better-off, on average better-educated, and young – exactly the kinds of groups least likely to be passive receivers of state-transmitted propaganda. Sun describes three layers of internet control: directives regarding topics to be publicized or suppressed, the “internet police” of the PSB which monitors discussions, and the Fifty Cent Party. According to Sun:

“[M]ost discussion on the internet in China is carefully screened, and much of it is pre-approved, by the government—including inflammatory comments and nationalistic criticisms about foreign policy issues. If it wished to, therefore, the government could shape and influence the direction of the internet content and netizens’ discussions to tone down nationalistic sentiment. The fact that it does not in many cases raises the question not about its ability, but its intentions.”

This overstates the CCP’s ability to control internet discussion, and an understatement of the degree of freedom found in its mainstream spaces inside the “Great Firewall”. Even Zhao Suisheng, author of a widely-cited paper titled ‘A state-led nationalism’, and one of the leading experts on the party-state’s influence on Chinese nationalism, emphasises that it is in fact “partially spontaneous and partially state-led”.⁸⁸ The thoughts and actions of human beings do not become any less genuine simply because the state can make use of them.

Finally, Sun neglects internal differences of agenda within the party-state’s foreign policy actors, implicitly discounting the possibility that different arms of the state, even different figures within the government, may have different foreign policy preferences and means by which to pursue them. Sun assumes that the whole state acts in unison when it makes use of nationalist criticism and protest, but as the Tri-Level/Policy Competition model suggests, it could merely be parts of the state with differing agendas. Ironically, by assuming the party-state to be a unitary actor, Sun’s argument for the irrelevance of public opinion proceeds on the same flawed premise as many similarly strident claims *for* the influence of the public, as the case studies in the following section reinforce.

⁸⁷ CNNIC 20011

⁸⁸ Zhao 2000 quoted in Reilly 2008 p.16

Nationalism claims: case studies

Outpourings of national indignation and pride in the PRC have become prominent media events in the West. From the reaction to the 1999 Chinese embassy bombing, to the 2001 Hainan EP-3 spyplane standoff, anti-Japanese riots in the mid-2000s, rallying round the flag over Tibet and the Olympic Torch in 2008, and the 2010 Diaoyu Islands incident, the forces driving mobilisations of national outrage have been subjected to some rigorous analysis, which Chapter Two will detail. As this section indicates, claims about this “rising Chinese nationalism” influencing the foreign policy behaviour of the PRC state have themselves been on the rise.

Taiwan: the Chinese public's bottom line?

The original issue over which popular nationalism purportedly has an influence is the People's Republic's stance on Taiwan. In 1996 Tom Christensen wrote that the PRC “may well be the high church of realpolitik in the post-Cold War world”, referring to the tendencies of Chinese officials and scholars towards balance-of-power analysis and narrow definitions of national interest. However, Christensen wrote, the Taiwan issue involves much less rational considerations. If Taiwan were to seek or declare formal independence, the PRC would be highly likely to respond with military force. Since Taiwan already enjoyed de facto independence, it was “puzzling” that China would be so willing to ruin its domestic economy and risk war with the world's only superpower, the US. The reason for this, according to Christensen, was that the CCP state understood that it would lose all ideological legitimacy among its population if it failed to militarily oppose Taiwanese independence. Following the party's abandonment of Marxism-Leninism-Maoism, nationalism had, by the mid-1990s, become “the sole ideological glue that holds the People's Republic together and keeps the CCP government in power”. Christensen surmised: “Since the Chinese Communist Party is no longer communist, it must be even more Chinese.” And Taiwan, as a symbol of China's century of humiliation at the hands of foreign powers, was a core nationalist issue: “[I]n all sectors of politically aware Chinese society a consensus remains on the legitimacy of using force, if necessary, to prevent Taiwan's independence.”⁸⁹

⁸⁹ Christensen 1996 in Guoli Liu (ed.) 2004, pp.59, 65-67

Christensen's claim was, therefore, that the PRC's apparent willingness to use force against Taiwan stemmed from the fact that mainstream public opinion among the Chinese population demanded it. In 2005 the PRC ratified an "Anti-Secession Law" (*fan fenlie guojia fa*), Article 8 of which explicitly mandated the use of "non-peaceful" means if Taiwan were to declare independence. This caused widespread anxiety outside China and derailed efforts to have the European Union's embargo on arms sales to the PRC lifted. It was interpreted by some, particularly in the media, as a sign that popular nationalism was dictating Beijing's foreign policy on Taiwan. Hu Jintao, according to the *Washington Post's* Edward Cody, was "weighing domestic considerations as well as foreign policy" in enacting the law.⁹⁰ Suisheng Zhao (2007) has challenged the idea that the Anti-Secession Law was merely a response to nationalism, arguing that the law represented a continuation of China's long-standing policy of "talking tough but acting prudently" in order to deter Taiwan from declaring independence. As noted earlier, the distinction between mere words aimed at domestic audiences, and genuine foreign policy actions, is an important one. However, the Anti-Secession Law can be considered a foreign policy action because it legally obliges the PRC to use force in the event of formal Taiwanese independence, a situation that directly impinges on the interests of not only Taiwan but also its security guarantor, the US. Zhao (2007) concludes that: "Nationalism has set the rhetoric as well as the bottom line of Beijing's policy toward Taiwan".⁹¹

The 'Nationalism Card II' theory would suggest that Beijing could use this constraint to its advantage. According to Yongnian Zheng & Lye Liang Fook (2005), the leadership was already convinced that failure to act in the event of a Taiwanese declaration of independence would result in the downfall of the regime. Zheng & Fook therefore argue that the Anti-Secession Law was intended to "convince skeptics among the public, both domestic and foreign" of Beijing's resolve to use force if necessary to prevent Taiwan's independence. Its ratification meant that any *failure* by the CCP government to respond to a Taiwanese declaration of independence would be a flagrant violation of the law of the land in the eyes of its own population. The picture that emerges has authorities in Beijing essentially intentionally subjecting themselves to an even greater degree of

⁹⁰ Cody 2005 'China's law on Taiwan backfires' *Washington Post*, March 24 p.A13

⁹¹ Zhao S. 2007 'Chinese nationalism and Beijing's policy toward Taiwan: The making of the anti-secession law' in I. Yuan (ed.) *Is There a Greater China Identity?* (Institute of International Relations English Series No.53) pp.173-192 http://iir.nccu.edu.tw/chinapolitics/NO53TH/Part1_08.pdf

constraint by public opinion, and at the same time emphasising this fact.

2001: the EP-3 Spyplane incident

In April 2001, a US Navy EP-3E ARIES II reconnaissance aircraft and a Chinese Shenyang J-8 jet fighter collided in mid-air near the Chinese island province of Hainan. The Chinese pilot was killed, and the US aircraft was forced to make an emergency landing, without permission, on PRC territory. The 24-person crew of the aircraft were taken prisoner for 11 days while the Chinese government demanded an official apology as a condition for their release. Eventually China released the crew after the US State Department delivered a letter to PRC Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan stating that the US was “very sorry” for the unauthorised entry into PRC airspace and landing, and for the loss of the pilot, Wang Wei.⁹² Peter Hays Gries (2004) suggested China’s actions in detaining the crew and insisting on an apology were driven by a desire to satisfy nationalistic public opinion. Gries quotes former US diplomat John Keefe, who was present in China during the incident, as saying the Chinese government was “acutely sensitive to Chinese public opinion” during the crisis. On this basis, Gries concluded that “Western policymakers ignore how this new factor affects Chinese foreign policy at their own peril”.⁹³ However, as many commentators, including Secretary of State Colin Powell, noted at the time, the US letter did not constitute an official apology at all.⁹⁴ The PRC’s acceptance of the letter was a compromise with the US much more than an attempt to appease domestic public opinion. Indeed, as Suisheng Zhao (2009) has noted, the PRC authorities had to go to great lengths to spin the crisis’ resolution as a victory in the Chinese media. Thus, in the case of the EP-3 spyplane incident, while the PRC state’s tough official rhetoric may have been aimed at satisfying domestic nationalism, its actions ignored domestic public opinion.⁹⁵

⁹² See Kyodo 2001 ‘Bush pleased by release of U.S. crew from China’, April 12
<http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Bush+pleased+by+release+of+U.S.+crew+from+China-a073374676>; CNN 2001 ‘China promises releases of US crewmembers’, April 11,
<http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0104/11/bn.24.html>

⁹³ Gries 2004 p.133

⁹⁴ Kyodo 2001 ‘Bush pleased by release . . .’; CNN 2001 ‘China promises releases of US crewmembers’

⁹⁵ Zhao 2009 p.250

2003: Qiqiha'er chemical weapons

In 2003, the year Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao took full control of the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, a succession of internet-based expressions of popular outrage, and subsequent actions by the PRC government, led many observers inside and outside China to posit the influence of nationalism on the PRC's foreign policy actions. An article by Yang Jinlin in Chinese news magazine *Nanfeng Chuang* (*Southern Window*) argued, "China's new leadership group's concept of governing for the people and putting the people first is being quietly brought into the foreign policy arena." In Qiqihar, Heilongjiang Province in August, one worker was killed and dozens injured when they accidentally dug up World War II-era Japanese Army mustard gas canisters. On October 3, according to Yang, the PRC's Foreign Affairs Minister Li Zhaoxing urgently summoned the Japanese ambassador in Beijing, telling him that Japan's slow response and conflicting comments from its leaders were causing intense anger among the Chinese people. On the same day, a Foreign Ministry spokesperson spoke of the "serious harm" Japan's abandoned chemical weapons had caused the Chinese people. These diplomatic attacks were highly unusual, Yang noted, taking place during the week-long National Day (*guoqing jie*) holiday.⁹⁶ Although Yang wrote that it was impossible to know whether Li Zhaoxing's demand was a result of domestic pressure, Susan Shirk's (2010) sources in the Foreign Ministry claim that the demand for an apology and compensation were "an attempt to appease public opinion", following the collection of almost 1 million online signatures for a petition demanding the same.⁹⁷

2003-2006: The bullet train deal

As of early 2003, according to James Reilly (2008), the PRC government had all but decided import Japan's *shinkansen* bullet train technology for its high-speed rail project. However, when news of this plan spread around the Chinese internet several mass petitions against the plan appeared, one of which likened the idea of a Japanese railway on Chinese soil to those of the Japanese occupation of Manchuria. By August 2003, when Japanese Transport Minister Chikage Ogi visited China she was snubbed by the Ministry of Railways and other top leaders, and told by NDRC Vice-Director Zhang

⁹⁶ Yang Jinlin 2003

⁹⁷ Shirk 2010 pp.235, 243. James Reilly (2008 pp.213-4) concurs.

Guobao that China would make its decision on the technology import “after listening to Chinese citizens’ public opinion”. After waiting another year, the Chinese government announced in August 2004 that Japanese companies would supply only half the initial order of high-speed trains. This immediately sparked more online petition campaigns demanding this be reversed, which were shut down after one day. In March 2006, the Railways Ministry announced it would use only Chinese technology on the Beijing-Shanghai high-speed line. According to Reilly’s sources within the Ministry, officials were worried that “people might damage Japanese-built trains or otherwise sabotage the project if Japanese technology was used”. Reilly writes that “the wave of public mobilization was clearly an important factor” in the eventual decision to first reduce the input of Japanese companies to the initial order, and then not award them any further contracts. “It broadened the scope of the decision-making process, delayed decisions, interjected the element of public emotion into officials’ calculations, and so affected the final decision.”⁹⁸

2003-2004: The demise of “New Thinking” on Japan

Susan Shirk (2010) quotes “Chinese foreign policy experts” as saying Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao commenced their time in office with a plan to improve relations with Japan. One sign of this was an article in a prominent PRC academic journal by a senior *People’s Daily* editor Ma Licheng, which criticised anti-Japanese nationalism and argued for “new thinking” (*xin siwei*) on Sino-Japanese relations, with less emphasis on historical atrocities. Shirk (2007) writes that the article was seen as a “trial balloon from the new leaders to gauge reaction to a more pragmatic approach to Japan”.⁹⁹ However the author, and others who tried to defend the article, was subjected to such ferocious attacks that, according to Shirk (2010), “Hu and Wen backed down.”¹⁰⁰ Peter Hays Gries (2005) makes a similar claim at the conclusion of his discussion of the “new thinking” debate: “As nationalist sentiments become fiercer, the expert community is largely reduced to pleading for moderation, while the political leadership is increasingly held hostage to nationalist opinion in the making of China’s Japan policy.”¹⁰¹ The following episode suggests this is plausible.

⁹⁸ See Reilly 2008 pp.203-4

⁹⁹ Shirk 2007 p.177. See also Gries 2005 p.843

¹⁰⁰ Shirk 2010 p.243

¹⁰¹ Gries 2005 pp.849-50

2005: Japan's UN Security Council bid

In March 2005, in the wake of the above-mentioned episodes and a March 2004 diplomatic incident over the Diaoyu (Senkaku Islands), and in spite of a series of provocative moves by Japanese leaders, the Chinese leadership was, according to Reilly (2008), attempting to improve relations with Japan. On March 14, Wen Jiabao announced a conciliatory policy of “Three Principle and Three Suggestions”, which proposed increased high-level exchanges and described the PRC’s relationship with Japan as of “the utmost importance”. However, this began to unravel, Reilly says, on March 21 when UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan announced a plan to expand the Security Council to reward those countries who contributed most to the UN with increased involvement in decision-making. Interpreting this as a sign that Japan might be close to realising its long-sought goal of permanent UN Security Council membership (Japan is the second-largest financial contributor to the UN’s regular budget), overseas Chinese activists launched an online petition against any move to include Japan.¹⁰² The petition spread like wildfire across the PRC internet; Reilly (2008) notes that it notched up 2.5 million signatures in its first week, Peng Lewu (2005) writes of ten million by March 31; Weiss (2008) cites a Hong Kong magazine’s figure of 28,230,000; Shirk (2010) places the number above 40 million.¹⁰³ Boycotts of Japanese goods followed, then starting on April 2, 2005 large and at times violent anti-Japanese street protests broke out in major Chinese cities. On April 5 the Japanese government approved new history textbooks that people in both China and Korea saw as downplaying Japan’s wartime misdeeds. This was, according to one Chinese activist, “like pouring oil on the fire”. The protests spread lasting for three weekends before being suppressed.¹⁰⁴

Reilly (2008) writes that “even as the Chinese government was cracking down on public protests, policy toward Japan shifted sharply to reflect protesters’ demands”. Wen Jiabao’s March 14 proposals for closer diplomatic ties were cast aside in an April 23 statement from Hu Jintao, which pointedly and specifically criticised Japan’s WWII aggression and demanded Japan show remorse.

¹⁰² Reilly 2008 pp.232-237

¹⁰³ Reilly 2008 p.237; Peng Lewu quoted in Reilly 2008 p.237 note 130; Weiss 2008 p.90; Shirk 2010 p.235

¹⁰⁴ Weiss 2008 pp.100-102

On May 1, China's UN envoy announced that the PRC would veto the proposal to extend permanent membership of the Security Council to four countries, including Japan.¹⁰⁵ Shirk (2010) characterises this move as a direct result of the nationalist outpourings.¹⁰⁶ Reilly (2008) is more circumspect, noting that China already had "almost no reason" to support Japan's bid for Security Council membership. He does suggest the protests prompted the decision to make explicit China's intention to veto the four nations' proposal. In other words, popular nationalism probably affected the *timing* of the announcement, but not the content of China's policy. In Reilly's view the reversal of the conciliatory proposals that Wen Jiabao had announced in March reflect the impact of the April protests to a greater degree. Reilly concludes by quoting Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Japan expert Feng Zhaokui, who wrote that "public opinion reduced the [Chinese and Japanese] governments' space and flexibility to implement a policy toward each other from a long-term, reasonable, strategic perspective".¹⁰⁷ That is to say, popular nationalism prevented the PRC state from carrying out a series of initiatives for friendlier ties with Japan.

Weiss's (2008) analysis diverges from Reilly's in one important regard. Weiss claims that before the protest movement China *did* have a reason to allow the proposal. If a motion to expand the Security Council's permanent membership to nine, including Japan, passed the UN General Assembly and thus came before the Security Council for approval, China would have faced the "painful choice" of blocking, alone, a motion supported by two-thirds of the countries of the world. Weiss thus presents the episode as a case study supporting the 'Nationalism Card II' theory: that the PRC government deliberately allowed the protests in order to make its decision to veto the proposal more acceptable. The US, meanwhile, had been ambivalent about the proposal as it would add four new veto-holding players to the Security Council, but had likewise not been willing to oppose it due to concerns about its international image. But on April 11, as the protests continued into their second week, US ambassador to the UN John Bolton declared that the events in China meant it would be "politically very difficult" for the Security Council reform to proceed. Soon afterwards the US announced that it did not "think any proposal to expand the Security Council . . . should be voted on at this stage". By allowing to them take place, the PRC had effectively co-opted the protests to *force itself* to declare it would have no choice but to block the proposal, which in turn gave the US the opportunity to do the

¹⁰⁵ Reilly 2008 pp.238-243

¹⁰⁶ Shirk 2010 pp.243-4

¹⁰⁷ Reilly 2008 p.243

same, with minimal cost to its reputation.¹⁰⁸ The claim that prior to the protests George W. Bush's unilateralist administration, represented at the UN by arch-neoconservative John Bolton, was genuinely intending to allow the proposed Security Council expansion, is questionable to say the least. However, the possibility that China's leaders themselves believed the US was planning to allow Japan to become a Security Council member is less far-fetched. This, combined with Weiss's clear, first-hand evidence of the PRC authorities' tacit encouragement of the protests make this explanation quite plausible.

2006-: China's aircraft carrier

The PLA Navy is believed to have been pushing for an PRC aircraft carrier programme since the mid-1980s. This project came to fruition in late 2011 with the launch of a refurbished Soviet vessel for sea trials, and today several more indigenous carriers are believed to be in development.¹⁰⁹ According to Robert Ross (2010) the crucial driving force behind this buildup of power projection capabilities, which Ross considers contrary to China's national interest, is the support of public opinion. While the PLAN had struggled for decades to win approval for its desired blue-water navy, and China's shipbuilding companies have always had a vested interest in pushing such a program, Ross argues, something changed in the minds of the decision-makers in the mid-2000s. The difference now is that "support for a naval buildup has spread to the provinces and to all sectors of Chinese society, including to universities, government think tanks, industrial circles, the political elite, and the general public".¹¹⁰ To the extent that it implies a policy alliance between public opinion and the PLA Navy over the issue, Ross's claim accords with Fewsmith & Rosen's theoretical framework, which suggests that manifestations of public opinion can influence the outcome of internal policy debates. However, as Michael Glosny & Philip Saunders (2010) have argued, the simplistic dismissal of China's pursuit and aircraft carrier as irrational and therefore nationalism-driven ignores numerous interest-based rationales for the program: "[T]o protect expanding overseas interests, to perform nontraditional missions, to conduct military diplomacy, to

¹⁰⁸ Weiss 2008 pp.107-8

¹⁰⁹ See Department of Defense 2011 p.3

¹¹⁰ Ross 2010

demonstrate international responsibility, and to increase China's prestige".¹¹¹ The most basic premise of Ross's claim, therefore, is questionable.

2008: Tibet & the Olympic torch

In the wake of violent anti-Chinese riots in Tibet in March 2008, the Beijing Olympic Torch relay was disrupted by pro-Tibetan independence activists in the US, UK, France, Australia and other countries. Chinese nationalist activists staged counter-demonstrations that expressed loud support for the torch relay, denunciations of Tibetan separatism and anger and disappointment at "biased" Western media reporting. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in turn, condemned the "irresponsible and unethical reports that infuriated our people". Shirk (2010) points out that criticising the Western media just before they flocked to Beijing to report on China's Olympics was counterproductive because it harmed China's international image. To explain this, she quotes a Foreign Ministry official as saying the reason that the public outrage compelled the government to issue the critique: "The people on the Internet weren't just criticizing the bias of the Western media; they were criticizing us[.]" According to Shirk, this "tough stand" was the result of fear of domestic nationalism.¹¹² However, it should be pointed out that these words were not accompanied by any new sanctions or restrictions on foreign media reporting. Although journalists were prevented from entering Tibet following the riots (which contributed to the "biased" nature of their coverage since it increased their reliance on second-hand sources of information, including the Tibetan independence movement), this was in place before the nationalist mobilisation. As such, it is questionable whether this should be considered a foreign policy action. Jakobson & Knox (2010) raise a more solid example when they quote Foreign Ministry officials as attributing the cancellations of the 2008 China-EU summit and Wen Jiabao's scheduled state visit to France to concern about a likely barrage of criticism from "netizens". France had been one of the main targets of nationalist ire during the Olympic Torch furore, with online nationalists had mobilised boycotts of French goods and rallies outside Carrefour supermarkets.¹¹³

¹¹¹ Glosny & Saunders 2010

¹¹² Shirk 2010 p.247

¹¹³ Jakobson & Knox 2010 p.44

2008-2009: Japanese aid for the Sichuan earthquake, and the Chunxiao deal

Following the catastrophic earthquake in Sichuan Province in May 2008, the PRC won international praise for its unprecedentedly open approach in accepting international aid.¹¹⁴ Chinese official media emphasised the goodwill that the contribution of Japan created, publishing internet comments expressing gracious thanks to China's "Japanese friends".¹¹⁵ According to Shirk (2010), however, a plan for Japanese Self-Defense Force aircraft to deliver aid directly to the quake zone was reversed after internet protests. "[N]egative online reaction to the very idea of having a Japanese military jet land on Chinese soil let the two governments to cancel plans to fly in earthquake aid."¹¹⁶

Before the earthquake struck, Hu Jintao had visited Japan. Shirk writes that the two countries had already agreed to jointly develop the Chunxiao gas field in a disputed area of the East China Sea – a mutually beneficial compromise for both sides, as well as an important confidence-building measure. However, no mention was made of this breakthrough at the time. Shirk says officials from both the Japanese and Chinese Foreign Ministries told her this was deliberately kept secret until "the Chinese public would be paying less attention and would be less likely to criticize the government for conceding too much". When it did come, the announcement was extremely low-key.¹¹⁷ According to Michael Swaine & M. Taylor Fravel (2011), nationalist opposition to the agreement has "stymied" its implementation, and joint development has still not commenced.¹¹⁸ However, the connection to public opinion is not clear. It is plausible that the "nationalist opposition" that has prevented to the agreement is in fact not among the public but within the party-state.

2010: Diaoyu Islands crisis

¹¹⁴ Lanteigne 2009 p.13

¹¹⁵ People's Daily Online 2008 'Netizens' positive responses to Japan's assistance', May 21
<http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90001/90776/90882/6415648.html>

¹¹⁶ Shirk 2010 p.245

¹¹⁷ Shirk 2010 p.244

¹¹⁸ Swaine & Fravel 2011 pp.9-10

The territorial dispute between China and Japan over the Diaoyu (Senkakau) Islands in the East China Sea has sparked diplomatic incidents at fairly regular intervals over the past 20 years. Japan has maintained actual control over the uninhabited outcrops, and Chinese activists attempting to land on the islands and proclaim sovereignty have been at the centre of many of these incidents. However, the Chinese government is not believed to have encouraged or supported their activities, and has maintained a policy of *gezhi zhengyi, gongtong kaifa*, or “shelving (sovereignty) disputes and jointly developing” the area’s hydrocarbon resources, such as the Chunxiao gas field. This has been the subject of domestic criticism on the grounds that it is too weak. Student demonstrations in support of a voyage to the area in 1996 by Hong Kong activists, according Reilly (2008), “generated popular criticism of the leadership”, and were promptly suppressed.¹¹⁹ In 2004, when mainland activists were arrested by Japanese authorities after reaching one of the islands, China demanded their immediate release, lest the incident, in Vice Foreign Minister Zhang Yesui’s words, “arouse the powerful indignation of the Chinese people”. After small but angry protests outside the Japanese embassy in Beijing the activists were released, but they were arrested on their return to China, and the protests quickly suppressed. Reilly concludes that the PRC’s verbal emphasis on Chinese public opinion and its decision to allow the small anti-Japanese demonstrations, was a strategy to force Japan to cooperate in resolving the crisis.¹²⁰

In September 7, 2010, Chinese fishing boat captain Zhan Qixiong was arrested by Japanese authorities near the Diaoyu Islands after allegedly ramming two Japanese Coastguard ships with his trawler. China described his detention as “illegal and invalid” and made a series of high-profile diplomatic gestures, including cancelling planned high-level exchanges, postponing negotiations over the disputed area, and advising Chinese tourists not to visit Japan. While Zhan was in custody, the PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs summoned the Japanese ambassador five times, including at least once during the middle of the night. Anti-Japanese demonstrations involving a few hundred people took place in Beijing on September 18 (the anniversary of Japan’s invasion of Manchuria). By September 23 reports were emerging of Chinese customs officials preventing rare earths, an export commodity vital to Japan’s high-technology industries, from being loaded onto ships bound for Japan. The following day Japan backed down, releasing Zhan and declaring, after holding him

¹¹⁹ Reilly 2008 p.226. Stenseth 1998 includes a first-hand account of the suppression of the 1996 protests.

¹²⁰ Reilly 2008 pp.226-231

for 17 days, that he had not intended to ram the patrol vessels.¹²¹ Michael Swaine and M. Taylor Fravel (2011), Zhu Zhiqin (2011) and Willy Lam (2010) are among the numerous analysts who have attributed the PRC's response to this incident to public opinion. Lam calls Beijing's reactions "dubious if not irrational measures to appease nationalists".¹²² Zhu writes that the incident shows that PRC foreign policy can sometimes be "hijacked by public opinion".¹²³ Swaine and Fravel (2011, pp.9-10) write that in the wake of the incident, "Beijing clearly overreacted, almost certainly in part due to domestic pressure."¹²⁴ The nature of the "nationalists", "public opinion" and "domestic pressure", and their connection to Beijing's reactions, however, is not specified. The implication is that the party leadership resorted to relatively extreme measures because they felt compelled to get Zhan Qixiong home, fearing a public backlash had they failed. However, other explanations are possible: hard-liners within the decision-making group, motivated by their own sense of outrage at Japan's actions, may have won an internal debate on how to deal with the situation. Or China's response may have been less coordinated than claimed: the Foreign Ministry may indeed have taken its tough diplomatic stance to avoid public criticism, but the blocking of rare earth exports may have been the initiative of any individual or group with influence in the General Administration of Customs. In summary, the connection between public opinion and China's actions in the Diaoyu Islands incident is far from clear.

2009-2011: China's "increased aggressiveness"

The 2010 Diaoyu Islands incident often appears on lists of PRC diplomatic actions from early 2009 to mid-2011 that commentators outside China proclaim represents a change in China's overall foreign policy direction. From the confrontation between a US reconnaissance ship and Chinese navy and civilian boats in the South China Sea in March 2009, to China's refusal to condemn North Korea for the torpedoing of the South Korean ship the *Cheonan* and China's abnormally strong

¹²¹ See BBC 2010 'Japan frees Chinese fishing boat captain amid diplomatic row', September 24 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-11403241>; AFP 2010 'High seas collisions trigger Japan-China spat' September 7 <http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5gfux6suEvEhsCmNJgxMYAYK68ZIQ>; Bradsher, K. 2010 'Amid tension, China blocks crucial exports to Japan' *New York Times* September 23 <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/24/business/global/24rare.html?pagewanted=all>

¹²² Lam 2010

¹²³ Zhu Zhiqin 2011 p.190

¹²⁴ Swaine & Fravel 2011 pp.9-10

protests against US-Korean naval exercises in the Yellow Sea, the Diaoyu standoff, and the PRC negotiating team's stance at the Copenhagen climate change conference, many analysts have written that China has become more assertive in its behaviour towards the outside world. The International Crisis Group's Stephanie T. Kleine-Ahlbrandt (2011), for example, talks of China's "new assertiveness", while the Foreign Policy Initiative (2011) likewise refers to "China's increasingly assertive foreign policy".¹²⁵ In a 2011 article in *Foreign Affairs*, Tom Christensen made another bold claim for the influence of nationalism on China's foreign policy: overconfidence in the wake of the US economic downturn, combined with increased sensitivity to nationalist criticism at home, had resulted in a "new, more truculent posture".¹²⁶ Robert Ross (2011) has been even bolder, explicitly refuting Christensen's idea that the US recession had been a factor: "[T]he source of all the aggressive Chinese diplomacy," he writes, is "the party's effort to appease China's nationalists[.]"¹²⁷ Especially prominent in this alleged Chinese aggressiveness has been its actions over the South China Sea dispute.

Nationalism claims and the South China Sea dispute

Security analysts such as Medcalf and Heinrichs (2011) and Paal (2011) believe that the South China Sea a flashpoint for armed conflict that may even precipitate a major war.¹²⁸ The South China Sea is the subject of what is surely one of the world's most intractable territorial disputes. Citing historical reasons, the PRC, the Republic of China on Taiwan, and Vietnam claim historical sovereignty over several hundred islands, islets, rocks, and even submerged reefs spread across a vast expanse of strategically important maritime space believed to harbour vast untapped energy resources. The Philippines claims sovereignty by discovery of some of the islands in the sea, while Malaysia claims and Brunei each claim jurisdiction over part of the sea as exclusive economic

¹²⁵ Kleine-Ahlbrandt, S. (2011, July 5), 'Rocky Times Ahead in the South China Sea', *GlobalPost*, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/asia/north-east-asia/rocky-times-ahead-in-south-china-sea.aspx>; 'Time for a Strategic Reassessment of U.S. Policy Towards China' (2011, January 17), *FPI Analysis*, <http://www.foreignpolicyi.org/content/fpi-analysis-time-strategic-reassessment-us-policy-toward-china>

¹²⁶ Christensen 2011

¹²⁷ Ross 2011

¹²⁸ Medcalf & Heinrichs (2011), *op. cit.*; Paal, D. (2011, July 15), 'Beware the South China Sea', *The Diplomat*, <http://the-diplomat.com/2011/07/15/beware-the-south-china-sea/>

zones under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. The dispute centres on sovereignty over two major archipelagos, the Spratly Islands (Nansha Qundao, meaning Southern Sands Archipelago in Chinese), and Paracel Islands (Xisha Qundao, or Western Sands Archipelago). China and the Philippines also both claim Scarborough Shoal (Huangyan Dao), an isolated atoll several hundred kilometres north of the Spratlys.

The several hundred features that make up the Spratly Islands, only 15 of which are islands in any meaningful sense, are scattered over more than 425,000 square kilometres of open sea in the southeast corner of the sea. The Paracels are centred roughly 200 kilometres south-southeast of China's island province of Hainan and about the same distance east-northeast of Vietnam's Quang Nam Province. The PRC has exercised actual control over the Paracel Islands since 1974, when the PLAN evicted the tottering South Vietnamese army. In the Spratlys the situation is more complex. At present, Vietnam is known to occupy 21 features, the Philippines 10, the PRC seven, Malaysia four and Taiwan one. Before 1988 the People's Republic of China did not occupy any feature in the Spratly Islands, but in March of that year it wrested control of several reefs in the Union group from Vietnam in a battle in which 70 Vietnamese soldiers were killed. It took control, by stealth, of one previously Filipino-controlled reef in 1995 and has constructed fortified compounds on each of the seven features it now occupies.

China's official policy position on the issue is similar to that on the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands dispute: it will not negotiate on the issue of sovereignty, but it is willing to "shelve disputes and develop jointly" the resources of the area with fellow claimant states. On a day-to-day level, China demonstrates its "sovereignty" through the presence and activities of civilian maritime law enforcement agencies. These vessels, particularly China Maritime Surveillance (CMS) vessels from the State Oceanic Administration, have been involved in many of the small-scale incidents, such as disruption of Vietnamese and Filipino fishing activities, that have drawn protests from China's fellow claimant states in recent years. However, the issue of China's behaviour in the South China Sea rose greatly in prominence among Western analysts after March 2009, when an assortment of Chinese vessels, including fishing trawlers, a CMS patrol boat, another from the Ministry of Agriculture's Fisheries Law Enforcement Command, and, surprisingly, a PLA Navy intelligence collection ship, harassed an unarmed US Navy surveillance ship. Although no other incidents have

occurred between PRC ships and the US Navy, China's actions have nonetheless been subject to increased outside scrutiny, much of it perceiving an increase in the forcefulness of the PRC's pursuit of its claims, though as Chapter Three of this dissertation will suggest, such conclusions are based on incomplete readings of the situation. Nevertheless, "assertiveness" and "aggression" have been two of the most commonly used terms to describe China's recent actions; the Australian Defence Force Academy's Carlyle Thayer even titled his paper on the subject 'China's New Wave of Aggressive Assertiveness'.¹²⁹ Accordingly, many analysts have attempted to discern the drivers of China's actions in the South China Sea dispute, and the spotlight has frequently fallen on "nationalism".

To begin with, it must be noted that in the remote atolls of the South China Sea there may be considerable scope for front-line authorities, in particular the State Oceanic Administration and CMS personnel, to independently interpret their brief of enforcing China's position. That is to say, in the South China Sea the state of "fractured authority" in the making of China's foreign policy is likely to be particularly acute. This suggests that the causes of particular actions may be especially difficult to identify, or may diverge significantly from more general policy orientations.

Nonetheless, Christensen (2011) and Ross (2011) both locate recent PRC actions in the South China Sea within a wider pattern of elevated assertiveness. For Christensen it was the CCP's confidence in the wake of the US financial crisis, combined with its sensitivity to hawkish nationalist criticism that resulted in an alleged aggressive turn in .¹³⁰ In keeping with his "naval nationalism" theory outlined above, Ross (2011) views China's "increasingly forceful" pursuit of its claims in the South China Sea as part of a long list of "blunders" by the PRC between 2009 and 2011. From intransigence at Copenhagen to harsh words about US arms sales to Taiwan, the hardball stance in the 2010 Diaoyu Islands standoff, denouncing the selection of Liu Xiaobo as Nobel Laureate, and even its treatment of Google, Ross writes, the singular cause of *all* of this is appeasement of nationalist public opinion in the context of China's ruling party's declining legitimacy.¹³¹ John Lee (2009), another proponent of the domestic legitimacy-crisis theory, speculates that the potentially disastrous consequences of the PRC's irrationality, as he sees it, over the Taiwan and Diaoyu Islands

¹²⁹ Thayer 2011 <http://csis.org/publication/chinas-new-wave-aggressive-assertiveness-south-china-sea>

¹³⁰ Christensen 2011

¹³¹ Ross 2011

issues are also present in the South China Sea disputes.¹³² Vikram Nehru of the Carnegie Institute (2012) identifies three reasons why tensions will continue to rise in the South China Sea: the US's "pivot" towards the Asia-Pacific region, China's increased capacities and China's "rising level of nationalism and self-confidence", stoked by "an increasingly vocal press".¹³³ Each of these claims is based on the predictions of the 'Nationalism Card I' theory regarding the consequences of an unproven and possibly irrelevant legitimacy crisis. They should thus be seen as speculative hypotheses. However, since they appeared in influential policy-oriented periodicals like *Foreign Affairs*, they ought to be rigorously scrutinised.

Back in 1995 Allen Whiting (1995) noted that on the South China Sea issue, "the "purported linkage of territorial sovereignty, national security and economic resources provides the PLA with a powerful political claim to policy as well as weaponry". This suggests a more theoretically plausible way that popular nationalism could influence China's policy in the South China Sea dispute in accordance with the evidence-based Tri-Level Interaction/Policy Competition framework outlined above. Major-General Luo Yuan is one senior military figure who has been publicly pushing for a more activist policy on the issue via the *People's Daily* and *Huanqiu Shibao*.¹³⁴ In March 2012 Luo commanded a great deal of media attention with a proposal at the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference to declare the South China Sea a Special Administrative region, increase troop numbers and naval patrols, and encourage more Chinese fishermen to trawl in the area.¹³⁵ If Luo's proposal represents the preferences of parts of the military, as well as other relevant foreign policy actors, in particular the State Oceanic Administration, the widespread support that has been expressed for it online would likely strengthen its chances of becoming PRC policy either in full or in part.

Some analysts have avoided claiming that China's past actions in the South China Sea have been driven by nationalism, but nonetheless believe that it is likely to figure prominently in future crises, similarly to how public opinion is alleged to have shaped China's handling of recent incidents in the

¹³² Lee 2009 p.182

¹³³ Nehru 2012 Rising tensions in the SCS – <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2012/03/03/rising-tensions-in-the-south-china-sea/>

¹³⁴ Luo's recent articles include, 'Philippines don't keep bullying, China is giving peace its last chance' (*Huanqiu Shibao* April 9, 2012) and 'Three reasons for Japan's involvement in the south china Sea issues' (*People's Daily*, October 13, 2011)

¹³⁵ CD 2012 'South China Sea special region proposed', March 6

Diaoyu Islands. Stephanie Kleine-Ahlbrandt puts this case succinctly: “Given the nationalist sentiment underlying all parties’ claims in the South China Sea, future incidents would be extraordinarily difficult to de-escalate.”¹³⁶ This possibility accords with the theory of nationalism as a drag on the likelihood of China’s leaders to compromise, as put forward in the US Department of Defense’s (2011) *Military and Security Developments* document, which suggests that those in the PRC favouring moderation would be at a disadvantage in intra-party bargaining. However, this may mischaracterise the situation, since it overlooks the possibility that the PRC’s decision-makers may seek to make use of Weiss’s “nationalism card” strategy, intentionally constraining themselves by allowing public attention to focus on the issue. As we have seen, the PRC has used this approach effectively in diplomatic standoffs with Japan, and perhaps also on the Taiwan issue, but with the US bolstering the confidence of rival claimant states, it could backfire if deployed in a South China Sea standoff. Should the other party refuse to back down like Japan has in the recent Diaoyu Islands episodes, the issue could burn the party domestically. As Zhang Shiming (2011) points out, whether endorsed by the state or spontaneous, “As soon as nationalism flares up in politics, demands for territorial integrity take precedence above all else.”¹³⁷ On an issue like the South China Sea, in which the status quo, in both official and popular perspectives, is that China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity are currently being violated, this would suggest the presence a strong impulse towards aggression both inside and outside the state. However, such a flare-up has yet to be seen. As Chapter Three will suggest, China’s actions in the South China Sea are best characterised as pragmatic realpolitik in the face of significant external constraints.

Mark Valencia (2010), a respected expert on the South China Sea issue, believes that nationalism is one of the main drivers behind the actions of all parties to the dispute. “China, Taiwan, the Philippines and Vietnam have enacted domestic laws that incorporate the islands into the nation’s territory and the national psyche and they have thus become symbolic of the nation and the legitimacy of the government.”¹³⁸ Anecdotal evidence does suggest significant popular dissatisfaction in China with the policy status quo in the South China Sea. Readers at mass-market Chinese-language news websites and forum communities not only express intense indignation at

¹³⁶ Kleine-Ahlbrandt 2011 globalpost

¹³⁷ 张世明 2006 ‘...若干因素’

¹³⁸ Valencia 2011 <http://southchinaseastudies.org/en/conferences-and-seminars-/502-whither-the-south-china-sea-disputes-by-mark-j-valencia>

developments in the disputed waters of the South China Sea, but also openly denounce the Chinese government's reluctance to take stronger action to uphold China's territorial integrity and national dignity. Opinion on huge comment threads attached to online news stories on the South China Sea consistently demands military action to recover islands occupied by the Philippines or Vietnam. The official policy position of setting aside disagreements over sovereignty to jointly develop the resources of the South China Sea (*gezhi zhengyi, gongtong kaifa*) is routinely attacked, and perhaps most worryingly for the party-state, this alleged "weakness" in foreign policy is often linked to domestic grievances. As one user from Jiangxi Province wrote in July 2011, "Corrupt officials running amok, unable to fight, let's just give the South China Sea away."¹³⁹

Some commentators have suggested that this kind of public outrage acts as a constraint on the government, hobbling its ability to develop conciliatory or cooperative measures to promote stability. Pointing to some hawkish commentary in the *Huanqiu Shibao* in September 2011, Elliott Brennan (2012) of the Institute for Security and Development Policy in Stockholm writes that "it is becoming increasingly difficult for China to back down in the territorial dispute given the rising nationalist sentiments over the issue in the country."¹⁴⁰ Similarly, Wu Shicun, Director-General of the Hainan provincial government's Foreign Affairs Office has claimed that the Chinese government will not dilute its claims over the disputed islands because "nationalism prevails strongly in China."¹⁴¹ In fact, the PRC has never given any indication that it would back down in the territorial dispute; as Chapter Three will show, its claims to the South China Sea were inherited from Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang government and have not changed substantially since then. But is it really the case that China cannot make conciliatory moves on the South China Sea dispute due to domestic nationalist pressure? The evidence thus far suggests that it clearly still can, for the July 2011 China-ASEAN agreement on the implementation of the 2002 Declaration of Conduct, which ruled out any moves to change the status quo, was signed at a time when public attention on the issue was relatively high following the succession of incidents in the first half of 2011. Media sensationalism and online comments over the provocative actions of the Philippines and Vietnam

¹³⁹ See the author's recently-established group blog for translations of Chinese conversations on South China Sea-related issues: <http://southseaconversations.wordpress.com>

¹⁴⁰ Brennan 2012 'Rising tide of conflict in the South China Sea' <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/China/NC03Ad01.html>

¹⁴¹ 'Keep off South China Sea...' http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2012-04-05/india/31293728_1_spratly-islands-south-china-sea-maritime-areas

were just peaking, yet the PRC's decision-makers showed no sign of being afraid of the anger of those advocating a firmer stance.

One commentator who has noticed this apparent disregard of the online nationalist criticisms – either in terms of obeying or suppressing them – is Pacific Forum CSIS scholar Matt Anderson (2011). Picking up on Vice-Foreign Minister Cui Tiankai's comment in June 2011 that “the Chinese public is following very closely whether the United States will adopt a just and objective position” on the South China Sea disputes, Anderson suggests this may indicate the PRC is deploying the Nationalism Card II strategy. Internationally, Anderson writes, Cui's comment may be “a warning to the other disputants and the United States that, if they are not careful, China will open the floodgates of outrage from its citizens and therefore greatly reduce its room to compromise”. Simultaneously, it could be “a cue for the patriotic online community to respond to the disputes and call for a more hard-line stance”. Such calls were in no short supply during subsequent weeks.¹⁴²

On February 2, 2012, former US Defense Secretary Robert Gates stated:

“They're a growing power, so why are they so paranoid? . . . Because the government's only legitimacy is in a steadily growing economy. As that begins to wane, they are increasingly turning to nationalism to protect their exaggerated territorial claims, like in the South China Sea for instance.” - former US Defense Secretary Robert Gates, February 2, 2012¹⁴³

Gates' claim appears at first glance to be a standard ‘Nationalism Card I’ argument: a legitimacy crisis is causing the party-state to try to impress its people with nationalistic belligerence. However, the phrase *to protect their exaggerated territorial claims* suggests Gates may have had a much more sophisticated idea in mind, which will be referred to here as ‘Nationalism Card II’: that the PRC is promoting or allowing nationalistic pressure at home to help in international negotiations. On the other hand, the phrase *as that [economic legitimacy] begins to wane* suggests Gates may have been mixing the two nationalism card theories together. In the case of the South China Sea the two are incompatible on a basic logical level, for Nationalism Card I implies the state seeking domestic

¹⁴² SSC blog from June, July

¹⁴³ ‘Robert Gates’ warning for the world...’ <http://www.advisorone.com/2012/02/02/robert-gates-warning-for-the-world-td-ameritrade-c?page=2>

support via foreign policy belligerence, while Nationalism Card II would involve provoking or allowing domestic *criticism* of policy moderation.

Nationalism Card I theories cannot explain the PRC's recent behaviour in the South China Sea. The idea that PRC foreign policy actions are a direct play for domestic nationalist legitimacy rests on the premise that actions considered “hardline” or “assertive” outside China will be interpreted largely the same way within China, thus distracting the population from the government's domestic failings. On the South China Sea issue in recent years, the opposite has been the case. Nationalist outbursts among the public on the issue have not deflected criticism from the CCP at all – rather, they have prompted it. But a constant hum of criticism could be useful, as Nationalism Card II theory would suggest. The hardline slant and regular appearance of sensationalistic articles in the *Huanqiu Shibao* – “prepare for the sound of cannon fire” and turn the South China Sea into a “sea of fire” were two lines that attracted international attention in 2011¹⁴⁴ – suggest that this approach may have been present on the South China Sea issue, since it is a publication under the auspices of the *People's Daily*, the CCP's official mouthpiece.

In a more recent example, on February 29, 2012 Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hong Lei made a very deliberate statement that “neither China nor any other country lays claim to the entire South China Sea”.¹⁴⁵ Although this position has been implicit for years in China's ad hominem declarations of sovereignty over the sea's “islands and their adjacent waters”, it was nonetheless news to most people. Chinese and foreigners alike usually think of China's eye-catching nine-dashed line as a maritime boundary claim. However, while foreign analysts argued over whether the statement constituted a concession at all, comments on mainstream PRC news websites expressed disbelief at what they were hearing, with many seeing the statement as a backflip on everything they had been taught: “The entire SCS and all the islands are ours,” thundered the top-rated comment on a NetEase thread, “they were before, they are now, they will be even more so in the future.” An almost equally popular view was: “What's China's belongs to China. What use are feeble spokesmen?” The PRC's five main news portals, ostensibly competing commercial enterprises but subject to the same propaganda and censorship edicts, all ran exactly the same

¹⁴⁴ Long Tao 2011 ‘The present is a golden opportunity to use force in the South China Sea’ *Huanqiu Shibao* September 27 <http://opinion.huanqiu.com/roll/2011-09/2038046.html>

¹⁴⁵ <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xwfw/s2510/t910855.htm>

headline: ‘Foreign Ministry: China does not claim sovereignty over the whole South China Sea’. This was a clear indication that some central authority had ordered the provocative statement publicised. One possibility is that this was simply the Foreign Ministry trying to educate the population. The Three-Level Policy Competition model would suggest the Foreign Ministry’s policy rivals were pouncing on an opportunity to provoke nationalistic criticism of the policy status quo. Nationalism Card II theory offers the most compelling explanation for this otherwise baffling episode. Just two days after Hong Lei’s comment, the *People’s Daily*-owned English-language *Global Times* ran a story claiming that although China does not resort to rallying its population around the flag, all governments have to bow to public will “in certain circumstances”.¹⁴⁶ From Hong Lei’s carefully worded provocation of nationalist critics, to its mandatory display on the front pages of China’s news portals, and finally the *Global Times* article declaring that even the PRC sometimes can’t withstand the pressure of public opinion, it can be seen as a demonstration to rival claimant states that China *is* beholden to public opinion and therefore cannot possibly be expected to make any further concessions, nor give an inch through the upcoming incident season in the Spratlys.

Conclusion

Nationalism claims are dangerous, but they are also important. They should be handled with care. This chapter began with the question of whether, in the early 2010s, the Chinese Communist Party-state is beholden to nationalist public opinion. The answer, we have seen, is: *sometimes, under certain circumstances, and sometimes because it chooses to be.*

Since the ascendancy of Deng Xiaoping and the policy of Reform and Opening, and even more so since the end of the Cold War, scholars have perceived a rise in the importance of domestic sources of Chinese foreign policy. However, the reality remains that the People’s Republic’s leaders make policy while sitting at two tables. Both international and domestic circumstances can constrain the their foreign policy initiatives, and both can demand and shape responses. They must pursue

¹⁴⁶ Xu Ming 2012 ‘Public will increasingly swaying diplomatic policies’ *Global Times* March 2
[http://www.globaltimes.cn/DesktopModules/DnnForge%20-%20NewsArticles/Print.aspx?
tabid=99&tabmoduleid=94&articleId=698257&moduleId=405&PortalID=0](http://www.globaltimes.cn/DesktopModules/DnnForge%20-%20NewsArticles/Print.aspx?tabid=99&tabmoduleid=94&articleId=698257&moduleId=405&PortalID=0)

domestic and international goals simultaneously, and they inevitably face conflict over the nature of those goals, and/or how to go about achieving them.

The CCP is far from a unitary actor, and different arms of the state itself compete for foreign policy supremacy or influence. In recent years a raft of new foreign policy actors have arrived on the scene, and among them, according to increasing numbers of analysts, is mobilised public opinion in favour of tougher state actions toward the outside world – Chinese nationalism.

However, some claims about nationalism's impact are based on questionable assumptions such as subjective definitions of China's national interest, an exaggerated emphasis on the relevance of the Chinese state's legitimacy issues, the PRC as a unitary actor, and the party-state's alleged fear of the Chinese people's nationalism. Attempting to avoid these pitfalls, I have described two evidence-based theoretical frameworks that posit dynamic and contingent pathways of causation between the mobilisation of public opinion and foreign policy outcomes.

This chapter has pointed out the speculative, questionable and even flawed theoretical underpinnings of many of these nationalism claims in relation to Chinese foreign policy in the recent past and present. However, it has also canvassed instances where mobilised public opinion has influenced the Chinese party-state's behaviour. The two areas this has been shown most convincingly in is PRC policy towards Japan, and the actions of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which is subject to more public scrutiny than any other foreign policy actor.

However, well-grounded research also indicates that decision-makers have on several occasions *chosen* to subject the party-state to the influence of nationalist mobilisation. When it comes to the question of popular nationalism's influence on China's South China Sea policy, it is this latter theory that fits best on current evidence. However, the possibility of manifestations of public opinion becoming a factor via policy competition is far from excluded; on the contrary, as the top PRC leadership undergoes transition, this theory holds that it will become more likely.

