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Can the CCP Really Afford to Play the Nationalist Card?

BY SHENG DING

Foreign policy, whether hawkish or dovish, is an extension of domestic politics. After violent nationwide anti-Japan demonstrations last September, many China observers were surprised that the Chinese communist government would tolerate such widespread anti-Japan civil unrest just two months before the country's once-in-a-decade leadership transition. However, since then, Beijing has only become increasingly more assertive regarding its territorial dispute with Japan over the Diaoyutai/Senkaku islands. Not only has Beijing taken a series of concerted actions to respond to Tokyo aggressively, but it has also attempted to challenge Japan's effective control of the islands. This gives rise to the question: why is Beijing playing the nationalist card at this moment in time?

Sheng Ding, Associate Professor of Political Science at Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania, explains that “The difference today is that when the CCP played the nationalist card in previous diplomatic disputes, Beijing always talked tough but acted carefully. This time however, Beijing is talking tough and acting dangerously.”

Beijing's role in supporting anti-Japan protests and its assertive foreign policy can only be explained by its paramount emphasis on maintaining domestic stability (*weichi wending or weiwen*). The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has long endured a growing crisis of legitimacy among its own people since the Tiananmen protests in 1989. A government achieves legitimacy with its people, first and foremost, by adequately creating an environment in which citizens can achieve their individual aspirations. In the case of China, there has been a significant failure by the CCP to provide transparency in governance for the Chinese people. Indeed, in its three decades of economic modernization under an authoritarian development model, China has experienced many domestic problems including increased economic inequality, corruption, environmental degradation, human rights abuses, industrial accidents and public health challenges.

The CCP has consistently shown little interest in establishing an independent judiciary and has stubbornly refused any real political reform. As a result, many Chinese citizens have lost confidence and patience in their government. Whether via the Internet, public petitions, or organized protests, there is an increased awareness within China of the right to collectively organize, express opinions, exchange ideas and question government officials. Everyday thousands of citizens petition for justice on issues including unpaid wages, unfair compensation for confiscated property, police brutality, governmental corruption and freedom of religion. Today, Chinese citizens are more vocal and confident in addressing the failures of their government.

Moreover, as Chinese society becomes more pluralistic and educated, citizens are increasingly exposed to external ideas and systems of governance. It is becoming ever more difficult for the CCP to maintain its legitimacy through the fig-leaf of “socialism with Chinese characteristics.” The CCP leadership has consistently struggled to find appealing alternatives to its decaying communist ideology. Since the student protest



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movements in the 1980s, the CCP has placed nationalism at the center of its claim to maintain its monopoly on political power. From Deng Xiaoping to Xi Jinping, every CCP leader has spared no effort to assert the party's role as sole savior and guardian of the Chinese nation. For example, Xi Jinping recently drew on China's modern history to highlight the inseparability between the CCP's rule and traditional discourse of Chinese nationalism. According to Xi, the CCP's leadership is the key to the great revival of the Chinese nation.

The CCP's continuous “patriotic education” campaigns in China's education system and public media as well as its tacit consent to nationalist outpourings have given birth to this upsurge in Chinese nationalism. All governments encourage nationalism, either for promoting hostility towards enemies, or building national pride. For the CCP, the upsurge of nationalism has been specifically aimed at buttressing the communist regime's legitimacy amongst its people. Again and again, successive CCP rulers have successfully utilized nationalist sentiments to deal with governance crises during over the past two decades and in the aftermath of nationalist outbursts, domestic dissent and international criticism have been silenced, with the temporary outburst of anti-Western sentiment “demonstrating” so-called domestic public support for the communist government.

In this era of globalization and civic activism, multiple media outlets have challenged the government's efforts for omnipresent social control and media censorship. While Chinese citizens enjoy more economic freedoms and individual liberties, they are increasingly more sensitive to government controls and corruption. During 2012, the CCP scrambled to deal with political crisis after political crisis. These dramas include the attempted defection of Wang Lijun, the dismissal of Bo Xilai, the escape of Chen Guangcheng, the trial of Gu Kailai, to media revelations about vast wealth of Wen Jiabao's family. Today, to the dismay of CCP officials, citizens now have unprecedented access to these secretive and often scandalous stories about their unelected government leaders. With an increased lack of credibility, the CCP is attempting to divert media attention and public opinion from domestic political scandals to foreign policy challenges which may be less sabotaging to CCP legitimacy. Under these circumstances, it is “normal” for stability-obsessed Beijing to play the nationalist card.

The difference today is that when the CCP played the nationalist card in previous diplomatic disputes, Beijing always talked tough but acted carefully. This time however, Beijing is talking tough and acting dangerously. Certainly, the CCP leadership does not want to be perceived as soft amid such an unprecedented nationalist outburst. However, nationalism is always a double-edged sword in politics. Beijing must maintain a delicate balance between encouraging disgruntled Chinese citizens to express their anger in anti-Japanese protests and restraining the protesters' nationalist speeches and activities in the context of foreign policy. The question is how long will Beijing's diversionary tactics work? This is a question that no one knows the answer to at this moment in time.

There is always the possibility that the CCP may proverbially “shoot itself in the foot” by continuing to play such dangerous tactics. On the one hand, anti-Japan nationalist sentiment is very high among the Chinese public at this time. On the other hand, public discontent with the CCP government is also volatile and potentially combustible. An unexpected incident could quickly change the atmosphere and possibly turn these nationalist outbursts against the CCP itself. In keeping with an old Chinese saying, not only can water float a boat, it also can sink it. If the CCP misjudges the situation in its playing of the nationalist card, the consequences could be overwhelmingly negative for all concerned. Maybe the Chinese communist government should think twice before playing its overtly high-risk nationalist card.

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