

# The Senkaku/Diaoyutai Islands Dispute: A Diversion in Times of Need

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## Structured Abstract

Article Type: Research Paper

*Purpose*—The purpose of this piece is to examine the ongoing causal forces of the Senkaku/Diaoyutai islands dispute between Japan and China, arguing that a domestic impetus exists to sustain the crisis while offering a reformulation of the diversionary theory of war.

*Design, Methodology, Approach*—This article amends the diversionary theory of war, which argues that beleaguered states may be motivated to engage in external crises to divert domestic attention away from negative sentiment. This paper expands the traditional bounds of the theory to include both autocratic regimes and actions short of war, which represent two impediments to the advancement of diversionary theory, while creating linkages between negative domestic conditions within China to periodic increases in the intensity of the sovereignty dispute.

*Findings*—This paper finds that the Senkaku islands dispute remains stable and dormant for long periods of time with the dispute approaching ritualization, only to be punctuated by brief but intense spikes of attention and diplomatic fury. The findings conclude that China deliberately escalates the dispute when domestic needs arise to extract political utility to shore up concerns on the mainland. These findings are supported theoretically while illustrating the applicability of autocratic systems and lower-level actions to the diversionary theory of war.

*Practical Implications*—This paper represents the first steps in a theoretically stagnant literature to transform the diversionary theory of war from one of strict warfare into a theory of foreign policy, as well as considering alternate political needs and strategies to address them, whilst also representing an alternate explanation to a commonly cited flash-point of great power conflict.

*Originality, Value*—This paper remains one of the few to provide an alternate account

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of the continuation of the Senkaku Islands dispute, while also representing the first serious in-road to consider diversionary actions as accepted tools of foreign policy instead of a last resort due to an existential crisis.

Keywords: China, Chinese foreign policy, diversionary theory, domestic causes of conflict, international relations theory, Senkaku/Diaoyutai.

## I. Introduction

For years, scholars have argued that states may engage in warfare with an external enemy to increase domestic solidarity. While the diversionary theory of war has been cited as a tool of statecraft to distract the domestic audience from various internal ills, the enduring fixation on violence and democratic states has inhibited the rigorous study of both alternate regime-types and potential diversionary tactics as well as potential catalysts that may make external conflict more attractive due to domestic issues.

The diversionary theory of war has been hamstrung by the scholarly fixation on actual warfare, and thus our current body of work regarding international diversions has been unable to help us understand actions short of war (henceforth ASW), despite such events absolutely eclipsing true wars in virtually all conflict datasets. Scholars are left with two options. Either lower-level actions are worthless for diversionary purposes and the insufficient sample size of actual wars remains our only theoretical guide, or our understanding of these unique conflicts has not evolved past sociological precepts and assumptions. These limitations are reinforced by the continued analysis of democratic states, rather than the far more numerous autocratic nations.

To further develop our theoretical understanding of diversions, the Senkaku Islands dispute offers us fruitful opportunities. I focus on Chinese attempts to generate political utility from external disputes. As the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is not beholden to an electorate, the dispute offers us insight into alternate issues and catalysts that may make diversionary benefits necessary outside of democratic demands. Furthermore, the dispute is significant in that it has endured for decades while remaining peaceful despite brief but intense spikes of political engagement. Finally, it illustrates how a lower-level dispute, lacking the insecurity-generating effects of war can be manipulated and utilized for domestic benefits.

The findings suggest that the Senkaku Islands dispute and its occasional manipulation is diversionary in nature. It is worth distinguishing between the genesis of the dispute and its manipulation. While the issue has its roots in the aftermath of World War II and continues to this day, the intense “heating” between Japan and China can be explained by Chinese domestic unrest. Throughout the dispute, issues which cause inflammation during times of Chinese domestic duress do not evoke the same aggression and political anger during times of internal tranquility. The manipulation of the dispute on the part of the CCP, and the news surrounding it serves as a catalytic agent of disseminating diversionary utility from the dispute to the general population, which offers us an entirely different mechanism than the organic generation of threat inherent in armed conflict.

This finding suggests that the diversionary theory of war should be amended on several fronts. The first is that autocratic regimes are equally capable of diverting, but the organizational demands of their regimes and variable needs necessitate the search for alternate types and levels of external engagement given the inherent risk and unpredictability of war. Secondly, diversionary attention can be manufactured via the use of censorship media manipulation—often overlooked tools given the freedom of the press and transparency of democratic nations which rely on “organic” attention. Finally, diversionary intent is distinct from diversionary initiation, and an engaging nation may be inclined to make use of preexisting conditions as opposed to creating entirely new conflicts given the inherent vulnerability that necessitates external conflict in the first place and its commensurate risks given that ASW rarely lead to war. These amendments can begin to push diversionary theory towards a broader theory of foreign policy and regime maintenance.

This article proceeds in the following manner. First, this paper provides an overview of the development and enduring impediments to the diversionary literature. The second section discusses some theoretical amendments regarding diversionary utility, choice of dispute and capable actors. The third applies these theoretical expansions to a case study regarding the Senkaku Islands dispute between China and Japan, demonstrating the consistent use of political manipulation on the part of China to increase domestic attention towards diplomatic disputes in times of domestic duress, rather than engage in violent conflict to organically achieve the same result.

## **II. Diversionary Theory: Inordinate Attention, Inconsistent Progress**

The idea that quarreling with an “outside” group may increase the solidarity and cohesion of the “inside” group has a great deal of intuitive consistency. William Shakespeare noted this connection, writing, “Be it thy course to busy giddy minds with foreign quarrels; that action, hence borne out, may waste the memory of former days.”<sup>1</sup> Anecdotal, rather than “smoking gun” evidence abound with Vyacheslav von Plehve, the Russian Minister of the Interior reportedly stating, “What this country needs is a short, victorious war to stem the tide of revolution,” prior to the Russo-Japanese war.<sup>2</sup> Initial systematic treatments of the in-group/out-group hypothesis were equally promising. Sociology generated the first mechanistic theories linking external conflict with internal cohesion, with Georg Simmel, Louis Coser and Ralf Dahrendorf codifying the early explanation of the rally effect, with Coser contending that “war with the outside is sometimes the last chance for a state ridden with inner antagonisms to overcome these antagonisms or else break up definitely.”<sup>3</sup>

Originally conceiving the scapegoat hypothesis in terms of societal and tribal-level interactions and not as politically motivated (though this soon followed), the theory enjoyed brief consistency. The mechanistic interaction between violence, resultant insecurity and increased solidarity was likened to an inevitability, with Dahrendorf stating, “it appears to be a general law that human groups react to external pressure by increased coherence” and thus “statesmen may be driven to a policy of foreign conflict—if not outright war—in order to defend themselves against the onslaught of domestic enemies.”<sup>4</sup> Given that sociological pathbreaking presented the genesis of internal solidarity as nearly

guaranteed or “organic” in the face of violent conflict (devoid of political manipulation), methodological difficulties and global realities soon soured theoretical harmony once adopted by the international relations community, though the bias towards inevitable solidarity remained.

This theoretical stagnation and lack of knowledge accumulation has contributed to both the lack of acceptance and reticence to study diversionary theory as one of foreign policy, with one scholar contending, “seldom has so much common sense in theory found so little support in practice.”<sup>5</sup> Ostrom and Job’s work linking negative domestic sentiment to the American executive’s propensity to engage in external conflicts was among the first mechanistic studies to spark a lively debate.<sup>6</sup> Both the transparency of democratic regimes and reliable polling data provided scholars with unfettered access and a wealth of proxy measures for a demonstrable “diversion.” Democratic dominance endured, as did the fixation on the United States, with Fordham classifying the diversionary use of force as a unique strategy of the American Executive.<sup>7</sup>

It was not until Levy and Vakili’s pathbreaking work on Galtieri’s invasion of the Falkland Islands did nondemocratic regimes enter, though war remained at the forefront. According to their analysis, the decision to invade British territory was motivated by heightened economic issues, public strife, and a growing rift among the ruling Junta. Clearly applying the scapegoat hypothesis, the authors contend a successful seizure of the Islands would quell domestic demands on the Junta, while also increasing overall in-group cohesion amongst the ruling elite.<sup>8</sup> Given this alternate diversion relied on substantive empirical analysis rather than proxy measures, it was an outlier and subsequent case studies on autocratic diversions remain rare.

Though this did little to dethrone approval ratings as a demonstrable benefit, theory was nudged toward alternate modes of “success.” Comprehensively assessing autocratic regimes, Jessica Weeks analyzes various regime types and factors relating to external conflict, though she finds several types of autocratic leaders are not necessarily beholden to internal pressures, so an existential impetus to divert, à la democratic pressures, is less convincing in such states.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, variable “audience” compositions necessitate different reasons to divert outside of election cycles. As autocratic leaders encounter unique demands on their station, their response must be tailored to address these demands. Still, some scholars contend that diversions are useless in the first place, and resources are better spent solving domestic problems, though all this confusion is maintained due to the complete lack of case studies explaining why states choose one option over another.<sup>10</sup>

There are two enduring and outdated misconceptions that the literature retains, both of which are self-reinforcing in their action. The first is the scholarly fixation on democratic regimes. Given the relative wealth, technological superiority, and opportunities to divert, using democracies as the archetype was sound. Less sound however was the oversaturation of the United States in analyses due to (or consequent) of the abovementioned features. It is impossible to measure levels of distraction. Even in early studies when the literature exhibited academic harmony, weighing polling numbers or successful elections still constitutes substantive effects, not intangible diversions. A diversion is, in essence, useless from either a democratic or autocratic standpoint if no true utility is extracted from the event. Even Levy and Vakili’s analysis of the Falkland Islands War, one of the “gold standard” cases of diversionary theory, is not definitionally a diversion at all. The end goal of the war

was to foster cohesion amongst the military Junta, not distract the populace. In a definitional sense, the original meaning does not then apply to distracting the attention of the audience, but diverting some value from conflict X to issue Y. Given the ease of measuring polling numbers or voting patterns post-conflict, and the inherent difficulty of mechanistic case studies, they remain the prime measure of diversionary success, as limited and misleading as they may be.

Accordingly, democracies have nigh-cornered the diversionary market, and within this dominance remains a set of self-reinforcing conditions that has served as a retardant to both the adoption of ASW as acceptable diversionary actions and autocratic regimes as diversionary actors. Though the early intuitive logic has exhibited remarkable longevity, quantitative advancement without commensurate theoretical evolution persists. Levy noted the potential value of smaller-scale diversions, in that they may be safer and less costly than outright war, with Morgan and Bickers, as well as Tir, all noting the potential use of ASW as potential diversionary choices.<sup>11</sup> In the scholarship, extant research lacks a clear understanding of how states may be able to extract political benefits from their usage relative to the captivation and insecurity of violence.

In this paper, the author defines diversion as the use of external engagement meant to increase or preserve political power. This paper departs from existing literature and focuses on utilitarian facets of diversionary behavior. Even in democratic regimes where external conflict may lead to higher approval ratings, this often does little to substantively increase the power of the executive as an office, nor is the regime imperiled, though they may maintain office. Autocratic regimes do not necessarily have these restrictions. In these states, diversionary actions may increase political control, necessitate censorship, grant emergency powers, or justify an expansion of the state. Distinguishing between “organic” and “inorganic” diversions is an essential difference between democratic and autocratic pursuits. Organic generation occurs separate from the state, without manipulation, wherein the domestic audience concludes that supporting the state is in their best interest because of insecurity or fear. Inorganic attention generation requires the manipulation of information, censorship, and guidance to draw the eyes of the audience towards a particular dispute, potentially magnifying issues which would otherwise generate lesser interest. Should the audience deem a diversion unworthy of attention, no benefit or support ensues.<sup>12</sup>

Democracies may be hamstrung in that the broader array of potential tools is outside of their reach, necessitating war as the only diversion. Given that repression and censorship is minimal, diplomatic disputes, small-scale violence and saber rattling lacks the ability to fully regale the nation, as democratic audiences may be able to assess whether these “small” issues are worth their attention. War simplifies this process due to the resultant insecurity, but ASW alone rarely has such an impact. Due to the seeming lack of utility of ASW for democratic states, compounded with the dominance of democracies generally in the diversionary literature, a comprehensive application, and more broadly, a theory of foreign policy, has remained elusive.

Risks of destabilizing state expansion are minor in democracies, possessing transparent channels of communication, minimal censorship, and access to alternate sources of information. Because of this, democracies are generally more constrained than their autocratic counterparts when it comes to potential diversionary actions. Speaking to the organic generation of the rally effect noted earlier, war is a logical choice for representative

states. The insecurity that follows warfare cuts across societal barriers as fear proliferates, whereas diplomatic disputes can be publicly assessed and potentially judged unworthy by the domestic audience of their mass attention. With war, the best chance of survival for the individual rests with the collective power of the state, thus theoretically a rally effect emerges.<sup>13</sup> Concrete mechanisms linking the audience's attention to a particular diversion is a deficit within the literature, though this has been largely circumvented and ignored by continuing to focus on the organic attentions towards violent conflict.<sup>14</sup> This reinforces the exclusivity of warfare as a democratic diversionary tool.<sup>15</sup>

The second enduring impediment within diversionary theory is the theoretical dominance of war.<sup>16</sup> The reason for this is simple: people tend to care about war. It increases feelings of insecurity, accentuates their reliance on the nation for their continued safety and as per theory, draws the populace closer to the state for survival. In strictly "diversionary" terms, wars grab headlines and attention with an unmatched air of importance and urgency. Between 1939 and 2003 the Correlates of War Database catalogs 88 interstate wars occurring, making warfare rare.<sup>17</sup> However, broadly defined militarized interstate disputes, which is to say ASW, drastically outnumber wars, and are often included in quantitative analyses despite a lack of theoretical justification.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, war is pursued as a last resort in terms of regime preservation. Given the unpredictability and potentially disastrous consequences should the war be lost, such foreign policy is only pursued under dire circumstances.<sup>19</sup>

A preoccupation with democratic states and war may have caused theoretical stagnation, but autocratic states present opportunities to expand theory. Though some nondemocratic leaders may be largely immune to domestic challenges, this is not sacrosanct. The list of potential challengers and destabilizing issues is greater than what would be found in democracies, which historically have avoided internal collapse.<sup>20</sup> Autocratic states may be more flexible in their approach to domestic ills than their democratic counterparts, while domestic challenges which may exacerbate rule are myriad. Whereas democratic states utilize war and violent conflict to galvanize political power due to the inexorable attention drawn to it, autocratic states may utilize external issues more frequently in part due to their smaller scale and manageability, but also due to the ability (or need) to divert for specific, rather than existential needs.

Theory has sidestepped the acceptance of ASW. Despite calls from the literature that more nuanced methods centering on historical analysis could yield more convincing results relative to statistical methods, the field remains slanted towards quantitative studies, without commensurate theoretical justification for the inclusion of all international disputes.<sup>21</sup> Suggestions to redirect focus to diplomatic, non-violent or merely threatening actions as a cheaper alternative to war exist, yet to glacial avail.<sup>22</sup> The acceptance of ASW could sever dependence on both democratic states and warfare, while increasing our available cases and understanding therein.

Autocratic leaders are often unbound by a free press and unfettered media. Governmental control often extends into the civilian and informational spheres, allowing for the restriction or release of information, as well as its manipulation, as the government sees fit. This allows for the tailoring of international disputes as domestic needs arise, while the choice of ASW imparting less risk one would find with violent conflict. As war rarely results from any interstate dispute, low-level actions can be heated and cooled as needs



dictate. Due to the ability to choose a wider range of potential options and targets, ASW allows states to be discriminant in their strategies, utilizing targets and options so as best to capitalize on potential benefits for specific purposes, not as a last resort. Manipulation and strategic choice allow for the state to aggrandize ASW in a way to mimic the organic urgency one may find with war in a democratic nation, with only a fraction of the risk.

Variable needs aside from democratic concerns necessitate flexibility and consideration. Having considered this, actions are not necessarily invoked with diversionary intent in mind, but rather changes to a preexisting conflict can be tailored to utilitarian pursuits. Despite having a genesis in alternate issues, the Vietnam war as an offshoot of American containment policies of Cold War geopolitics is not often described as diversionary in nature due to the preoccupation with proxy measures in assessing intent, but later actions fit with this paper's substantive definition of diversionary action. It has been argued that the later escalation of the war was a result of President Johnson's efforts to court the support of more hawkish senators to support forthcoming legislation on civil rights.<sup>23</sup> The sovereignty dispute over Taiwan was not initiated for diversionary purposes, though subsequent escalations of the crisis have been argued as being motivated for domestic political purposes.<sup>24</sup> Diversionary intent is not static nor is contingent upon initiation, rather ongoing issues may become diversionary should an internal need arise, demonstrating almost predatory intent on the part of states. This strategy is often overlooked, though useful as it sidesteps the need to begin another unpredictable and potentially damaging crisis rather than utilize one which currently exists.

### **III. Cultivating Diversions: China, Japan and the Senkaku Islands**

The ongoing dispute regarding ownership of the Senkaku Island chain offers a significant case by which to observe the usage and manipulation of diplomatic actions for diversionary purposes. In contrast to other cases observed within the diversionary literature, the CCP in this case is not faced with an existential crisis endangering the regime or executive. This argues against the misconception that diversions are utilized as a last-ditch effort, and instead analyzes the targeted use of small-scale, manageable tension to address more focused domestic issues. The issue of sovereignty over the island chain hinges upon two distinct claims of ownership: Japan approaches the question from an international-legal perspective, while China's claims are more historical.<sup>25</sup>

Disputes in the past do not discount the possibility of resolution in the future, making the continued endurance of the dispute unique for a few reasons. The first of which is the seeming insignificance of the islands, being both militarily vulnerable and economically unimportant.<sup>26</sup> The second issue involves geopolitics in that once the Communist Party prevailed in the civil war, China diligently worked to settle disputed borders throughout the country.<sup>27</sup> The issue of sovereignty was deliberately put on hold in 1978 by Deng Xiaoping himself, contending that the current generation of leaders lacked the wisdom to properly settle the question of ownership.<sup>28</sup>

Since then, the issue has remained largely benign and often forgotten. However, China has seen fit to escalate the sovereignty dispute on more than one occasion, in correlating

with domestic issues requiring the CCP's attention to ameliorate. It is worth noting that the escalations explained in the cases presented in this paper are often a response to a move by Japan. This paper demonstrates an almost singular desire to remain within the ritualized dispute management techniques by both nations, with China responding to comparable situations calmly when domestically secure, but aggressive when politically preoccupied, implying deliberate action in the dispute.<sup>29</sup> Diversionary strategies are often pursued by states facing severe economic crises, political instability or with virtually no other option to bolster the regime, but China's domestic situation and political system have been highly robust in the years since Deng, contradicting the traditional catalyst to external conflict within the literature. However, between 2010 and 2012, two distinct escalations of the dispute occurred concurrently with governmental weakness: the labor protests and public disdain for corruption of 2010, and the Bo Xilai scandal prior to the ascent of Xi Jinping. Neither situation existentially threatened the regime, but they served as impediments to stable rule and thus necessitated a response.

The enduring tenets of diversionary theory are outdated and even inapplicable for the majority of states and cases. This study expands and reformulates our understanding of the domestic impetus to conflict. While the dispute is considered ongoing since the end of World War II, both Japan and China have inflamed tensions on and off for decades. In utilizing the dispute for domestic purposes of a substantive nature, China needs not be the initiating nation or aggressor. In fact, responding to seeming sleights with increased resolve of their own helps to enhance the dispute and China's position within their own country. This interaction is enhanced via the presence of a stated rival.<sup>30</sup>

#### IV. The 2010 Escalation

The CCP maintains stability as their prime concern above all others and have adopted a long-term strategy of performance legitimacy to ensure this. Utilizing a pattern of ostensibly achieving goals whilst raising China's collective standard of living has proven robust, though economic prosperity does not equal stability.<sup>31</sup> Double-digit growth for several decades did bolster the image of the CCP, but with economic prosperity came promises of international strength—specifically promises to rectify the wrongdoings of foreign powers during the “Century of Humiliation.”<sup>32</sup>

Shame from previous weakness and the resultant nationalist support towards the central government has been cited among the CCP's most powerful perpetuation tools, as without the communist party the country is vulnerable.<sup>33</sup> This has led to consistent opposition towards seemingly unjust actions as the party strives to continuously legitimate itself as the bulwark against those who would do China harm.<sup>34</sup> It is important that fervent nationalism does not grow out of control however, as anti-enemy protests can quickly evolve into anti-government protests should the response of the CCP be sluggish or lacking.<sup>35</sup> This has necessitated for decades Jiang Zemin's strategy of “yulun daoxiang” (舆论导向) which ensures expression of public grievances are properly guided to coincide with the party line.<sup>36</sup>

Due to assertions that Japan has yet to offer a full apology for their crimes against China during World War II, Japanese actions occupy correspondingly larger amounts



of attention.<sup>37</sup> Given the salience of territorial issues, the ongoing dispute over the Senkaku island chain should be similarly magnified, yet both sides have exercised remarkable restraint over the decades while ensuring territorial issues do not impede economic cooperation, which remains a cornerstone of performance legitimacy. In accordance with such a strategy of mutual economic cooperation, both sides have seen fit to abide by a nearly ritualized modus of conflict resolution.<sup>38</sup> In light of slowing economic growth and President Hu Jintao's "Harmonious Society" initially failing to meet its goals, the overreliance on nationalism and history as proxy fuel for performance legitimacy has altered the sensitive dynamic between Japan and China.<sup>39</sup> This attention to nationalism, however, necessitates a mode of caution, as China is well aware that unrestrained fervor can be devastating.

The nuance of this dynamic demonstrated its variability when trawler captain Zhan Qixiong was detained by Japanese authorities while fishing in the vicinity of the Senkaku Islands on September 7, 2010. As per history, there was reason to believe he would be returned quickly, despite the captain's refusal to allow the Japanese Coast Guard to board and then allegedly ramming a Japanese vessel in the ensuing pursuit. Japan conducted the detention according to established protocols given their administration of the islands as sovereign territory.<sup>40</sup> Similar situations in 2004, involving Chinese activists trespassing on the islands, and 2008, which saw a similar collision and the sinking of a Taiwanese fishing vessel culminating in a Japanese apology and compensation, hopefully foreshadowed a similarly expeditious resolution, though these occurred under comparatively stable domestic circumstances.<sup>41</sup> Prior arrangements between Tokyo and Beijing sought to curb bilateral tension, with Japan implicitly promising to minimize detention of Chinese nationals, while China curbed anti-Japanese sentiment at home to avoid diplomatic damage.<sup>42</sup>

Widespread protest regarding unfit working conditions, calls for increased representation, wages and upward mobility for factory workers forced the government into confrontation with organized labor groups that shook prevailing stability.<sup>43</sup> Issues regarding governmental overreach and economic immobilization came to a head on September 10 in Yihuang county, when a family of three, opposing the local government's attempt to seize their home for development, self-immolated in protest. Noted activist Ai Weiwei sought to use the current level of anti-Japanese fervor and calls for a harder line against Japan as a catalyst to transform public outrage into anti-governmental protest.<sup>44</sup>

Chief Cabinet Secretary of Japan Yoshito Sengoku refused to acknowledge sovereignty when pushed by Beijing's ambassador, Cheng Yonghua, who claimed the fishing was legal given the disputed nature of the islands.<sup>45</sup> Tokyo's continued legalistic handling publicly revealed Beijing's weakness, which resulted in the first spontaneous protest outside the Japanese embassy in Beijing.<sup>46</sup> The CCP's political impotence was revealed in tandem with increased public calls for retaliation against Tokyo, which led China to continue to pursue a muted resolution. Cognizant of unfettered nationalism, Beijing clamped down on anti-Japanese protests in large cities and engaged its censorship apparatus while grassroots activism in interior provinces continued outside of strict control.<sup>47</sup> The continued detention of the trawlers crew in contrast to past situations was inopportune, as the September 18 anniversary of the "Manchurian Incident" drew close on the wings of growing anti-Japanese sentiment, with Chinese control waning in the face of public outrage.<sup>48</sup>

Japan soon released the 14-person crew without the captain. Though initially touted as a breakthrough in the dispute while the primary leaders of the CCP escaped criticism, the

captain's continued detention enflamed domestic anger, with many questioning the government's suppression of anti-Japanese rhetoric. The day after the anniversary of the Manchurian incident, Tokyo announced the captain was to remain detained for an additional ten days, catalyzing an uncontrollable level of anti-Japanese activism that greatly worried senior leaders of the CCP.<sup>49</sup> China's netizens accused Beijing of "drinking tea" with protestors to soothe the outrage as opposed to substantively delivering on their promises. Bloggers were varied in their message but consistent in anger, questioning the continued suppression of patriotism, denouncing the spineless handling of the incident in the eyes of Tokyo's legalism, and even calls for a struggle against Beijing itself.<sup>50</sup>

Senior leaders were worried. Performance legitimacy was now a two-front promise. The Chinese economy continued to grow, but these benefits were relegated to the coasts, not the countryside, with rural and factory workers questioning Beijing's commitment to widespread prosperity. The protests and their implications were significant in that if China accommodated the demands of the laborers, China's growth strategy of cheap exports and labor would be put at risk. Consequently, nationalism had begun to grow as a source of legitimacy for some time, but now China lacked the resources to quickly respond to the labor protests, as rapid accommodation could cascade into similar concession throughout the nation. Additionally, the CCP's role as a shield against foreign humiliation was now under scrutiny.

Beginning a new crisis or militarizing the current one was unwise as the presence of Japan's relatively innocuous actions had already begun to tear at the fabric of society, and a militarized dispute would likely conflagrate internal tension. However, behaving with newfound resolution saved Beijing the task of alternate target selection, aggrandizing the issue, and directing attention. This stood in stark contrast to previous spats with Japan, as the censorship apparatus of the CCP and congruent societal stability did not necessitate breaking from the ritualized channels of dispute management. Domestic conditions had exceeded domestic capacity however, with the CCP seeking to supplement its image.

Beijing's weakness necessitated a break from previous behavior. For the first time, China engaged in the arrest of a citizen for a web post, implicitly indicating that unfettered discussion was no longer acceptable, and coverage of the captain's detention must be positive.<sup>51</sup> Diplomatically, China began to harden, with Ma Zhaoxu, a spokesperson for the office of Foreign affairs, declaring further delays in releasing the captain would see Beijing take strong countermeasures, "for which Japan shall bear all the consequences."<sup>52</sup>

China's media approach capitalized on domestic anger, with the citizenry responding positively to Beijing's reorientation from restraint to anger. Online discussion, though still guided, now occurred en masse, with media outlets ceaselessly covering the dispute. Despite signs Japan was willing to expediate the captain's return, Beijing pressed its advantage, extracting support from the dispute. Premier Wen Jiabao cancelled several high-level meetings with Tokyo, as well as arresting four Japanese citizens on charges of suspected military espionage whilst encouraging protests throughout the nation.<sup>53</sup> The CCP shifted from the desire to ritualize the dispute once more, to aggrandizing it. Japan soon relented under diplomatic and economic pressure, and Zhan was released on September 24.

The captain's return was not celebrated. Previous patterns would see the dispute cool, but China's intent was now clear as they enjoyed their newfound concert with the protestors. Emboldened by assuming the upper hand, Beijing pressed Tokyo for further

concessions to placate the populace by calling for an official apology, which Tokyo immediately rejected.<sup>54</sup> This move was unprecedented, as official apologies were reserved for Japan's wartime atrocities. This demand inextricably tied the issue with the "shield" offered by the CCP in asserting Chinese power, and rectifying blows to the nation's dignity. Though Japan continued to maintain ownership of the islands, Premier Wen remained resolute, enjoying great domestic support. Protests against Japan saw crowds in excess of 50,000 attendees in large cities, with demonstrations allowed to occur so long as they did not become unruly.<sup>55</sup> Protests accelerated at such a pace, any and all coverage of ongoing labor disputes were overwhelmed by the coverage of anti-Japanese sentiment.<sup>56</sup>

Relations continued to sour between Japan and China, though both nations were unwilling to foster irreparable damage. Chinese protests diminished until the 26th of October when the mouthpieces of the CCP once again switched to a strategy of restraint. Given the previous inflammation, tacit acceptance and synergistic relations between protestors and the CCP, the image of China showing strength and resolution in the face of Japan was strengthened, with calls for struggle against Beijing rapidly dissipating. Protests, previously stamped out before they began, were allowed to occur as China extracted social benefits from the public's anger. Given that the external strife between China and Japan was integral to amelioration of protest and negative sentiment, devoid of an external engagement, China would have had a much more difficult time fending off domestic ills using the demonstrably failed tactics of soft repression.

## V. The Challenges of 2012

The 18th Party Congress in 2012 heralded a once-in-a-decade transition in leadership for the CCP. As the stalwart shield and "best bet" for continued societal stability, transitions are carefully orchestrated, as any ripples of instability within the top leadership could translate into tremors amongst the greater populace. Corruption, which only grew during the tenure of Hu Jintao, was revealed at the highest levels as rising star and party secretary of Chongqing, Bo Xilai was enmeshed within the controversial death of Australian businessman Neil Haywood in a hotel in Bo's city on November 14, 2011. Initial coverage of his death garnered mild interest, but damaging reports began when Wang Lijun, police chief of Chongqing and previous advisor to Bo, was dismissed from his post after a falling-out with Bo and subsequently made the journey to the American consulate in Chengdu with alleged evidence implicating Bo in the death of Heywood.<sup>57</sup> Chongqing's party secretary subsequently ordered security forces from his city to Chengdu to prevent Wang's testimony.<sup>58</sup>

Bo's grandiose reaction indicated a greater problem. Word had previously circulated that the popular and successful party secretary had been under watch by President Hu.<sup>59</sup> Bo resembled a neo-Maoist in that he espoused state-led development which abhorred the Deng era policies endorsed by Hu and his successor Jiang, their distaste made clear when the entire Politburo Standing Committee, without the current and former executive, visited Chongqing, offering warm remarks. Bo soon became a rising star in contrast to Hu's weakness. Allegations that he had ordered his bureaucratic apparatus to wiretap the president offered the executive both cause and reason to counter Bo when previously he would have been loathed impeding economic growth.<sup>60</sup> Netizens inferring a rivalrous relationship

regarding the installation of China's new president, with Hu seeking to remove Bo to pave the way for Li Keqiang to become the new executive, which would weaken the prospects for heir apparent Xi, whom shared a close relationship with Bo. It is said that only through the involvement of Jiang was the squabble put to rest.<sup>61</sup>

The discussion of darker party dynamics represented a clear threat to stability. The truth of this incongruous relationship was irrelevant as even a fanciful discussion of this sort was dangerous, as was Wang's continued occupation of the American consulate and Bo's overcompensation. Beijing's censorship machine began suppressing all talk regarding corruption.<sup>62</sup> Discussion remained muted even as Wang was apprehended whilst leaving the American consulate, and though Bo's media appetite was diminished, an impromptu press conference on March 9 saw him justify his handling of Wang's flight as following in the footsteps of Zhou Yongkang, a politburo standing committee member famously tough on crime. Bo subsequently attended annual events in Beijing, only to be publicly denounced by Premier Wen on March 14, and lose his Chongqing position the following day.<sup>63</sup>

Chinese political tradition meant Zhou's seeming link to Bo was dangerous. Zhou supported Bo's neo-Maoism in Chongqing, which if widely adopted, could disrupt China's current developmental course. This ostensible corruption was merely conjecture when Bo first implicated Zhou, but this sudden instability and revelation at a period of transition was worrying. The internal decision to strip Zhou of his position lent credence to corruption allegations, and despite imminent retirement, Zhou's ability to appoint a successor as well as his previous governing programs were removed. A resultant investigation saw Zhou sentenced whilst retired.<sup>64</sup> This spiraling was predictable under the pseudo-patronage system of "mishu," wherein attacks on the upper levels of Chinese leadership often result in subordinates falling from grace. If the accusations grew out of control, many feared chaos could sweep through the lower levels of the CCP in absence of "elder statesmen" such as previous Chairman Deng to settle the crisis.<sup>65</sup>

Evidence of corruption prior to a transition necessitated a calm and measured response by Beijing as the seeming veil of competence and strength was tarnished, though this was insufficient. Japanese relations offered a fortuitous opportunity to utilize external tension yet again for internal consolidation. Less than a week after Bo and his wife were put under investigation for the death of Heywood, Tokyo Governor Shintaro Ishihara announced on April 16 prospective plans for the city to purchase three privately held islands in the Senkaku chain. Official use of said islands had occurred previously, with Tokyo leasing several in 2002, to a muted response by Beijing. Though several protestors landed upon the islands and a small demonstration occurred in Beijing outside the Japanese embassy, Beijing was not laboring under corruption allegations and the ritualized response mechanisms of the bilateral relationship largely mitigated tension.<sup>66</sup> Despite the anti-Japanese highs of 2010, Beijing was similarly calm, reiterating old claims but maintaining stoicism for fear of a similar outpouring of unrestrained nationalism during such a tumultuous time.<sup>67</sup>

Beijing was unable to fight a two-front war controlling both narratives. Bo's position continued to publicly degrade at home as attacks levied against both him and Zhou led to their effective ostracization from party politics. Bo's successor Zhan Dejiang publicly noted the damage both politicians wrought to the party's image of stability and strength.<sup>68</sup> Given the upcoming transition and the preoccupation with a steady transfer of power, Beijing saw fit to escalate tensions with Japan in contrast to nearly identical dealings in the past,

with their hand being forced as public attention drifted to Beijing's seemingly limp-wristed response to Tokyo.<sup>69</sup> Tokyo was aware of Beijing's current political climate and sensitivity regarding stewardship of the islands. In response to brewing trouble, Prime Minister Noda publicly announced the intention for the government of Japan, not Tokyo, to nationalize the islands for all of Japan, not just Tokyo's local government. Given the nature of the purchase, Noda argued such a purchase could be completed smoothly and efficiently.<sup>70</sup>

From the standpoint of regime maintenance, Beijing was faced with two options. They could rely on their sophisticated censorship apparatus to stifle discussion regarding the ongoing corruption scandal, but by now talk had exceeded their capacity to fully quiet. People had begun to demand substantive change with calls going back to 2008.<sup>71</sup> Censorship was failing, and substantive results were necessary. While it would typically be risky to engage in external conflict, even diplomatic conflict during periods of unrest, utilizing the preexisting Senkaku dispute was wise as it had remained stable from the 2010 escalation, with rivalry dynamics in place to ensure that it remained extant while remaining manageable.<sup>72</sup>

Noda's move was meant to cushion the blow of nationalization. Mayor Ishihara was a known hawk, prone to inflammatory remarks, as were the private owners of the islands. By nationalizing the islands, the central government would become Japan's sole arbiter in the dispute, predicating a return to the ritualized pattern of resolution the dyad previously enjoyed.<sup>73</sup> China initially remained committed to a measured response since April despite domestic unrest, but in the meantime the societal situation worsened, and China needed to galvanize its political situation. When the announcement on August 3 that both Bo and his wife, Gu Kaili, would be tried on August 9, put alleged corruption on full display, China began to alter the status quo. In contrast to previous attempts which were turned back, protestors from Hong Kong were allowed to leave port and sail to the largest island in the Senkaku chain. The timing and publicity were notable in that previous attempts were outlawed, while this attempt was televised to great fanfare.<sup>74</sup>

The protestors were detained and released without incident, but the interim period of August 18 saw the most domestic criticism of the CCP for the weak-handed negotiations regarding their detention. In response, virtually all censorship of the China-Japan dispute was relaxed, with the CCP calculating patriotism would drown out criticism.<sup>75</sup> Protests were only curtailed the day Gu received a suspended death sentence, a perceived "slap on the wrist" of one convicted of corruption and murder.<sup>76</sup> The protests were a powerful distraction while the government settled the Chongqing incident, but the fact they were largely quelled even in light of more "soft" news meant that previous unrest was deemed socially functional, and not the result of uncontrollable rage demonstrating clear manipulative intent. Tensions flared soon after September 11 as Noda continued with his nationalization plans prior to the CCP's transition to avoid "punch[ing] the new [Chinese] leaders in the face." Though Beijing's analysts noted the status quo endured, the symbolism was dangerous.<sup>77</sup>

Online discussion shifted once more, with even the patriotic "Strong Nation Forum" exhibiting an alarming number of critical posts.<sup>78</sup> The infighting revealed after Chongqing was no longer hidden, and the narrative escaped centralized control. Merely allowing the public to speak about Japan had failed to deliver substantive results as they demanded action. Additionally, a date for the government's transition had not yet been set, which



signaled internal instability. Xi Jinping had disappeared from the public eye for two weeks since September 1, which saw all rumored causes of his absence censored on Weibo beginning on the 6th. Such public events were crucial for continuity purposes, so his disappearance was publicly unsettling.<sup>79</sup> China's soft stance towards Noda's nationalization rapidly changed. Seeking to divert attention from Xi's ordeal, all references of him were purged from the internet one full day after the Noda's finalization.<sup>80</sup>

Beijing responded with new maritime boundaries, the first covering disputed territory, which would count all Japanese entries as intrusions. ICG interviews conducted post-hoc revealed that the plan was already in place, so the timing of the revelation demonstrated political intent.<sup>81</sup> Analysts noted nationalization changed nothing, and so a hasty unveiling of the new boundaries would similarly offer nothing substantial, though it demonstrated strength and resilience.<sup>82</sup> Chinese censorship enhanced this image. Bo's corruption and the looming 18th party congress placed pressure on Beijing to conclude the protests. In tandem with censoring speculative discussion regarding Xi Jinping, the internet exploded with discussions regarding the Diaoyutai (China's name for the islands). Anti-Japanese protests and extensive media coverage soon followed online discussion, with the Chinese public once again rapidly shifting their attention.<sup>83</sup>

Protests became more violent as the September 18 anniversary of the Mukden incident neared, and the government worked to mitigate damage.<sup>84</sup> Though China continued to remain resolute against Japan, sending hundreds of fishing vessels into the disputed waters and warning of two decades of economic pain should Japan continue its actions, the government began to directly shepherd patriotism.<sup>85</sup> Deliberate guidance became increasingly obvious. Protestors filing with local authorities to demonstrate for anti-corruption measures were frankly told to direct their ire towards Japan.<sup>86</sup> Chongqing had all but been subsumed by Japan. Utilizing this width of freedom, the trial of police chief Wang began on September 17, only to secretly conclude a day later. The government only revealed the outcome on the 24th with tangible progress addressing the suppressed calls for anti-corruption action.<sup>87</sup> The effect was immediate. The day after Wang was sentenced, all censorship regarding his actions or trial were removed while words relating to the dispute with Japan were blocked with increasing frequency, signifying the social function of the protests had run its course.<sup>88</sup>

Steps to stability prior to the 18th party congress had been assured, and further announcements from the CCP regarding a coming punishment for Bo once again demonstrated competence on the part of the CCP. His name, along with his son, Bo Guagua, were de-censored on the 28th, the same day his expulsion from the CCP was announced, denoting that the CCP no longer feared anti-governmental protests.<sup>89</sup>

## VI. Conclusion

This paper demonstrates that the behavior of China at various points during the Senkaku islands dispute exemplifies the discretionary escalation of a preexisting issue to garner increased political utility and for targeted domestic purposes. China's usage of diplomatic escalations demonstrates deliberate attempts to manipulate external conflict to address both the destabilizing demands of the population and their anger over perceptions



of governmental weakness, but also to increase the width of political freedom and utility Beijing then utilized to take substantive efforts assuage concerns regarding corruption and infighting.

Given China's ability to end protests rapidly throughout both escalations, it is possible that fully engaging the bureaucratic strength of the state could have stifled anti-government movements, but this is merely a salve and not a cure. The CCP was able to make the protest socially functional through proper guidance and generated utility through the adept use of political manipulation. Though war is likely to remain theoretically paramount as a diversionary strategy, the utilization of ASW highlights the potential benefits of cheaper, more manageable, and more manipulatable actions or even alterations within ongoing actions, to target domestic issue areas, as public ire was directed away from damaging the regime, whilst Beijing used this manufactured freedom to address internal issues.

China's actions in these two periods demonstrate that diversionary behavior is not the express property of democratic regimes, nor do opinion polls and muddling through another election denote success resulting from a short-term boost of popularity. Rather, it reveals broader interactions between the international and domestic environments, especially in regimes where elections and opinion polls may not exist. Instead, this paper highlights the variable needs and catalyzing conditions nondemocratic states may face and how external action may be a valid strategy to strengthen the state's ability to respond to domestic concerns.

In summation, these findings demonstrate a sensitivity to alternate domestic demands and flexibility in approach that diverges from the near-organic status of violent conflict. Variable needs can be addressed through variable strategies that may be less costly, safer, and more susceptible to orchestration in addressing domestic pressure wherein internal mechanisms may be insufficient or ineffective in combatting strife, only to then deescalate conflict once internal divisions have been addressed. When taken together, this study offers important inroads in conceptualizing small-scale actions as offering diversionary utility along a spectrum of domestic needs.

## Notes

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15. David Clark, Benjamin O. Fordham, and Timothy Nordstrom, "Preying on the Misfortune of Others: When Do States Exploit Their Opponents' Domestic Troubles?," *The Journal of Politics* 73(1) (2011), p. 252.
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## Biographical Statement

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