Chinese Popular Nationalism and PRC Policy in the South China Sea

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Abstract

Is nationalist public opinion driving China’s assertive actions in the South China Sea? If not, what does explain the changes in Beijing’s maritime policy, and the apparent rise of nationalist sentiments on the issue? Has the country’s leadership been provoking confrontations or “whipping up” nationalism to bolster its domestic legitimacy? Does the state invite bottom-up mass participation in foreign policy for strategic advantage? This study of Chinese popular nationalism and PRC policy on the South China Sea issue details an important evolution in the complex relationship between the two. When it began in 2007, China’s shift to a more assertive policy was demonstrably unrelated to public opinion; in fact, until 2009 it was carried out almost entirely in secret. However, the resultant rise in international tensions, and greater state media publicity, soon began to attract attention towards the issue in China. The associated rise in popular nationalism was thus primarily a function of the state’s assertive policy shift, yet until mid-2011 authorities showed little sign of attempting to use it strategically. Since 2012, by carefully managing the genuine risks that it poses, the party-state has integrated popular nationalism into its assertive, but pragmatic, policy of advancing its claimed rights and interests in the disputed maritime space while avoiding military conflict. Such is the basic story told through this dissertation’s specific empirical findings. To explain this, the study develops and tests a hypothetical model of the nationalism-foreign policy relationship in the internet era, characterized by interdependent processes of strategic channeling of public sentiments, and management of the real risks inherent in doing so. The result is a hybrid state-led popular nationalism that generates an effect conceptualized here as “grassroots deterrence.”
Contents

Acknowledgements xi

List of Figures xv

List of Tables xvi

Translation Style xviii

List of Abbreviations xix

Chapter 1: Introduction 1
  Purposes of the study
  Key concepts
  Bottom-up models
    Nationalist legitimacy
    Intra-state contention
  Top-down models
    State-led pragmatic nationalism
    Strategic logic of nationalist protests
  Channeling and risk management
  Hypotheses
  Research design and methods
  Limitations
  Chapter structure

Chapter 2: Disputed claims, interests, and explanations for policy change in the South China Sea 43
  China's disputed claims
  Underlying drivers: PRC state interests
    Security interests
    Economic interests
    Political-symbolic interests
  Explanations for policy change
    Balance of power
    Increased value of disputed possessions
    Declining claim strength
    International legal regime
    Sub-state bureaucratic actors
    Strategic culture
    Individual leaders
    Elevated political-symbolic interests
  Conclusion
Chapter 3: Continuity and change in PRC policy in the South China Sea, 1970-2015

Perceptions of rising Chinese assertiveness
Assertiveness as a variable
Claim strength in maritime disputes
Types of assertiveness: declarative, demonstrative, coercive

PRC assertiveness, by the numbers
Rising Chinese assertiveness a constant, not a change
The layering effect
Assertive surges in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s
Breakpoint 2007

Implications for existing explanations for policy shifts
Balance of power
Increasing value of disputed possession
Declining claim strength
Public opinion: nationalist legitimacy models
Public opinion: intra-state contention models
Other factors

Conclusion

Chapter 4: China’s assertive shift, 2007-2008: power, insecurity, and the Law of the Sea

The territorialization of maritime space
“Opportunities and challenges:” the PRC and the UNCLOS
New laws, new enforcement capabilities
New opportunities
Increasing challenges

Tracing China’s policy shift: four representative cases
The Triton 626 incident
Threatening third-country oil and gas companies
Disrupting Vietnam’s continental shelf surveys
Regular rights defense patrols

Conclusion

Chapter 5: Assertive PRC policy and the rise of Chinese popular nationalism on the South China Sea issue

Unifying rights defense and stability maintenance
The rise of South China Sea nationalism
Citizens’ attitudes
Public attention
Popular mobilization

Summary
Nationalism-driven policy? Most-likely cases
The Impeccable incident, March 2009
Cable-cutting incidents, May-June 2011

Conclusion
Chapter 6: Grassroots deterrence: popular nationalism as a foreign policy “weapon”

Continuity and change since 2012
Building maritime consciousness
Public opinion warfare
Public diplomacy with CCP characteristics
External propaganda, at home and abroad
  The PLA “hawkish faction”
  The Huanqiu Shibao (and the Global Times)
Grassroots deterrence
The Scarborough Shoal crisis
  Events
  Causes
  Official comments
  State media
  Public attention
  Strategic channeling and risk management

2007-2016 in review
Conclusion

Chapter 7: Conclusion

Summary of findings
  H1: “assertive policy $\rightarrow$ popular nationalism”
  H2: “strategic channeling”
  H3: “no constraint from moderation”
  H4: “risk management $\rightarrow$ strategic channeling”

Contributions of the study
Potential extensions

Appendix 1: Data sources

Appendix 2: South China Sea events data set

Appendix 3: Implications of UNCLOS as a cause of maritime assertiveness

Appendix 4: PRC officials’ comments on “rights defense and stability maintenance,” 2008-2012

Appendix 5: PRC online media reporting on the South China Sea issue, 2009-2012

Appendix 6: PRC officials’ comments on public opinion and the South China Sea issue

Notes

Bibliography
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### List of Tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>Observable implications of bottom-up models</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>Observable implications of strategic channeling/risk management model</td>
<td>34-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>PRC-claimed island groups in the South China Sea</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>PRC maritime rights claims in the South China Sea</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>Observable implications of eight commonly proposed factors behind PRC policy shifts</td>
<td>74-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>Three-way typology of assertiveness</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>Estimated duration of cases of intensified PRC assertiveness, 1970-2015</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>Periods of rapidly intensifying PRC assertiveness in South China Sea</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>Independent samples $t$-test for equality of mean number of intensified assertive actions in pre- and post-2007 periods</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>Historical events data vs. expectations of bottom-up models of nationalist influence</td>
<td>124-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>Historical events data vs. expectations of eight explanatory factors for PRC policy shifts</td>
<td><em>Fold-out</em> after 128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>Observable implications of UNCLOS $\rightarrow$ assertiveness hypotheses</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>Comparison of three measures of popular nationalism</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>Survey respondents’ answers on suitability of 10 policy options for handling the Diaoyu and South China Sea disputes</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>Logistic regression on respondent approval and disapproval of ten policy measures, with three-way information source breakdown</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>Respondents’ agreement with China’s claims in the South China Sea</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>Logistic regression on respondents’ agreement with all three official island claims in South China Sea</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>Independent samples $t$-test for equality of mean number of assertive actions in 2007-2011 and 2012-2015 periods</td>
<td>253</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A2.1</td>
<td>Events data on PRC assertiveness in the 1970s.</td>
<td><em>Fold-outs</em> after 344</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A2.2</td>
<td>Events data on PRC assertiveness in the 1980s.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A2.3</td>
<td>Events data on PRC assertiveness in the 1990s.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A2.4</td>
<td>Events data on PRC assertiveness in the 2000s.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A2.5</td>
<td>Events data on PRC assertiveness in the 2010s.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Figures

Figure 1.1: Causal pathways of bottom-up nationalist influence on foreign policy

Figure 3.1: English-language media references to Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea

Figure 3.2: Yearly number of cases of intensified PRC assertiveness in South China Sea, 1970-2015

Figure 3.3: Overall PRC assertiveness in South China Sea, 1970-2015

Figure 3.4: Route of 1984-1986, and 1987, Spratly Islands Comprehensive Surveys

Figure 3.5: Expansion of geographic scope of China's "Comprehensive Surveys" into central South China Sea, south of the Paracel Islands, 1975-1979

Figure 3.6: PRC trade volume and value, 1978-2014

Figure 3.7: PRC oil production and consumption, 1980-2013

Figure 3.8: World oil prices, 1970-2015

Figure 3.9: PRC crude oil imports by volume and value, 1996-2014

Figure 3.10: PRC fuel imports by value, 1992-2014

Figure 3.11: PRC nonferrous metal imports by volume and value, 1994-2015

Figure 3.12: PRC annual economic growth, 1970-2014

Figure 3.13: PRC consumer price inflation rate, 1986-1998

Figure 3.14: Yearly number of PRC mass incidents in early 2000s

Figure 3.15: Yearly number of cases of anti-foreign mobilization in Mainland China, 1985-2012

Figure 4.1: 2007 Triton-626 confrontation location and on-scene footage

Figure 4.2: Baidu search activity for "South China Sea", January-December 2007

Figure 4.3: Vietnamese offshore energy exploration blocks, superimposed with PRC official nine-dash line map

Figure 4.4: Energy developments protested by Beijing, with theoretical median line

Figure 4.5: Yearly number of "regular rights defense patrols" in South China Sea, 2008-2012

Figure 4.6: Baidu search activity for "South China Sea", January-December 2007

Figure 4.7: Approximate route of a 2012 "regular rights defense patrol"

Figure 5.1: Print media information vs. approval of "sending in troops" and "compromise through negotiation"

Figure 5.2: TV information vs. approval of "sending in troops" and "compromise through negotiation"

Figure 5.3: Online information vs. 10/10 agreement with PRC official claims

Figure 5.4: State, national, and personal dignity at stake in the South China Sea disputes.

Figure 5.5: Quarterly average Baidu Search Index value for "South China Sea," 2006-2011

Figure 5.6: Baidu search activity on South China Sea, February-March, 2009

Figure 5.7: Prominent PRC print media coverage of South China Sea issue in June 2009
Figure 5.8: Baidu search activity on South China Sea, July-October 2010
Figure 5.9: Baidu search activity on South China Sea, March-May 2011
Figure 5.10: Popular nationalist cartoon view of the Philippines and Vietnam, June 2011
Figure 5.11: Small-scale anti-Vietnam protest, Canberra, July 21, 2011
Figure 5.12: Baidu search activity on South China Sea during Impeccable incident
Figure 5.13: Locations of PRC coercive actions against foreign energy survey ships, 2011-2012
Figure 5.14: Baidu search activity on South China Sea through mid-2011.
Figure 5.15: Censorship levels in mid-June 2011, sampled from 1,382 Chinese social media platforms
Figure 6.1: Yearly number of articles in CNKI database with “maritime” and “consciousness” in title
Figure 6.2: PLA media “hawks” in English-language media, 2006-2013
Figure 6.3: Global Times in the New York Times, 2009-2014
Figure 6.4: PRC print media coverage of Scarborough Shoal, May 10-11, 2012.
Figure 6.5: Quarterly average Baidu Search Index value for “South China Sea,” 2006-2015.
Figure 6.6: Baidu search activity on Scarborough Shoal April-June 2012.
Figure 6.7: CCTV coverage of Scarborough Shoal, May 9, 2012
Figure 6.8: Censorship of Weibo posts containing “Huangyan Island” or “Philippines” April-May 2012
Figure 6.9: CCTV News broadcast of interview with fisherman, maritime militia leader and Scarborough Shoal protagonist Xu Detan, May 16, 2012.
Figure A2.1: Yearly number of People’s Daily articles mentioning SCS islands and sovereignty, 1948-2015
Translation Style

Names of persons are rendered in pinyin, except for certain well-known historical figures. Names of media outlets are translated in the main text, for example, *People’s Daily* (人民日报), *PLA Daily* (解放军报), *CCTV Network News* (新闻联播), *China News Service* (中国新闻社). Exceptions are made for entities widely known by their pinyin names, such as Xinhua News Agency and *Guangming Daily*. The *Huanqiu Shibao* (环球时报) is rendered in pinyin in order to distinguish it from the English-language *Global Times*. 
# List of Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CCP</td>
<td>Chinese Communist Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCTV</td>
<td>China Central Television</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CLCS</td>
<td>Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CMS</td>
<td>China Marine Surveillance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CNOOC</td>
<td>China National Offshore Oil Company</td>
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<tr>
<td>CPPCC</td>
<td>Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DOC</td>
<td>Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EEZ</td>
<td>Exclusive Economic Zone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FLEC</td>
<td>Fisheries Law Enforcement Command</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GFC</td>
<td>Global Financial Crisis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GPD</td>
<td>General Political Department of the PLA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JMSU</td>
<td>Joint Maritime Seismic Undertaking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MFA</td>
<td>Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MSR</td>
<td>marine scientific research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nm</td>
<td>nautical miles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NPC</td>
<td>National People’s Congress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PLA</td>
<td>People’s Liberation Army</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRC</td>
<td>People’s Republic of China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ROC</td>
<td>Republic of China (Taiwan)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOA</td>
<td>State Oceanic Administration, Ministry of Land and Resources, PRC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UN</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US</td>
<td>United States</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 1

Introduction

Is nationalist public opinion driving China’s assertive actions in the South China Sea? If not, what does explain the changes in Beijing’s maritime policy, and the apparent rise of nationalist sentiments on the issue in China? Has the country’s leadership been provoking confrontations at sea to “whip up” anti-foreign sentiment and bolster its domestic legitimacy? Or does the state invite bottom-up mass participation in foreign policy for strategic advantage? This study of Chinese popular nationalist public opinion and PRC policy on the South China Sea issue details an important evolution in the complex relationship between the two. When it began in 2007, China’s shift to a more assertive policy was demonstrably unrelated to public opinion; in fact, until 2009 it was carried out almost entirely in secret. However, the resultant rise in international tensions, coupled with greater state media publicity, soon began to attract attention towards the issue in China. The associated rise of popular nationalism on the issue was thus primarily a function of the state’s assertive policy shift, yet until mid-2011 authorities showed little sign of attempting to use it strategically. Since 2012, by carefully managing the genuine risks that it poses, the party-state has integrated popular nationalism into its assertive but pragmatic policy of advancing its claimed rights and interests in the disputed maritime space while avoiding military conflict.

Such is the basic story told through this dissertation’s empirical findings. In the remainder of this chapter, the focus is broadened to provide an overview of the context from which the study springs. It begins by outlining the contributions the thesis makes to the analytic study of Chinese foreign policy and several related literatures, and defining the key terms used throughout. Next, based on a review of existing scholarly works on the relationship between popular nationalism and
Chinese foreign policy, I disaggregate four models of public opinion’s “bottom-up” influence on policy, and two “top-down” models in which the state's policy goals shape public opinion. Taking elements from both, I then outline a hypothetical model of the nationalism-foreign policy relationship characterized by two interdependent processes: strategic channeling of genuine popular sentiments, and management of the real risks inherent in doing so. The result is a hybrid state-led popular nationalism that generates an effect conceptualized here as “grassroots deterrence.”

The remainder of the chapter details the research design that structures the study, its methods of investigation, and the data sources that underpin its conclusions. It finishes with a discussion of the study’s important limitations, and a brief summary of the five chapters that follow.

 Purposes of the study

This dissertation contributes to three fields of academic literature, while addressing in detail a case of intrinsic importance to contemporary international politics in East Asia. First, within the analytic literature on China's foreign relations, speculation about the influence of popular nationalism on Beijing’s international conduct has proliferated in recent years, particularly in relation to the maritime disputes in the South and East China Seas. However, few systematic examinations of these conjectures on the causes of China’s maritime policy have yet appeared, and to my knowledge, none in regard to the South China Sea issue specifically. This dissertation conducts simple, high-certainty empirical tests, based on open-source material, to assess the likelihood of popular nationalist influence on China’s assertive maritime behaviour since 2007.

Second, the study broadens the scope of current theories of popular nationalism’s relationship with authoritarian foreign policy. In the PRC case, major recent works have focused on anti-foreign mobilizations as the study variable, rather than popular nationalist discourse more generally. Jessica Chen Weiss has examined the Chinese party-state’s tolerance or suppression of nationalist street protests against the United States and Japan, arguing this conveys credible signals of
resolve or reassure foreign observers in accordance with diplomatic requirements. This study builds on Weiss’s theory, arguing that a similar, though not identical, “strategic logic” also helps explain the relationship between China’s foreign policy and more banal, low-intensity manifestations of nationalism that are less risky for the state. It shows further that a state’s ability to manage these risks can improve over time through adaptation to social and technological developments, without necessarily reducing the effectiveness of popular nationalism as a medium for strategic signals.

These findings also add to the debate on the role of domestic audiences in international strategic communication. Audience cost theory, based on the rationalist international bargaining framework, holds that “going public” on a foreign policy issue can help states credibly signal their intentions by making it domestically costly to back down. However, a key criticism leveled at this literature is that it overlooks leaders’ common desire to maintain diplomatic flexibility, and their ability to mitigate or even avoid paying such costs when moderation becomes necessary. One recent experimental study even found that, given the right justification, audiences may actually reward rather than punish a leader for backing down in an international crisis. The South China Sea case suggests the strategic significance of authoritarian domestic audiences is often more subtle than establishing resolve through costly signaling. Drawing popular nationalist attention towards a contentious international issue, while actively managing the genuine risks this raises, communicates a calibrated combination of threat and reassurance that can help deter retaliation against assertive policies “on the cheap.”

More generally, this study adds to the burgeoning body of scholarship examining the evolution of authoritarian states in the 21st century. Works in this line of research have drawn attention to the institutionalization of political processes, the nature and sources of popular legitimacy, system-stabilizing effects of media commercialization, and authoritarian regimes’ embrace of internet technologies as tools of governance. In relation to contentious foreign policy issues, James Reilly showed how the PRC’s “responsive authoritarianism” allowed it to placate
storms of anti-Japanese sentiment in the early-to-mid 2000s.\textsuperscript{13} Conflict theorists have shed light on the post-Cold War evolution of many non-democratic states by analyzing the new “modes of political participation” that mediate social conflict in non-democratic polities.\textsuperscript{14} This study details how Chinese society’s increasing attention to the South China Sea issue, new technologies enabling direct expression of citizens’ sentiments, and the party-state’s adaptation to the changing information environment, have facilitated popular participation in the advancement of some of the PRC’s most important foreign policy goals.

Individual chapters also contribute to three other lines of inquiry. First, although research on territorial disputes is extensive, it does not provide a conceptual vocabulary for analyzing the subtleties of state behaviour in maritime disputes.\textsuperscript{15} This is apparent in the spiraling and somewhat chaotic range of modifiers attached to the word “assertiveness” in relation to China’s behaviour in the South China Sea in contemporary English-language analysis on the topic. Building on Taylor Fravel’s framework for assessing state strategies in territorial disputes,\textsuperscript{16} Chapter 3 develops a simple three-way typology of assertive state actions in maritime disputes – declarative, demonstrative and coercive – based on the propensity of each to result in escalation at sea. This allows for systematic assessment of the timing of quantitative and qualitative changes in states’ policies in maritime disputes such as the South China Sea.

Second, existing work on international legal regimes has tended to focus on explaining the constraints that international law may or may not place on confrontational state behaviour, rather than its constitutive and enabling aspects. In particular, recent research on the historic United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) has emphasized its conflict-reduction and cooperation-inducing effects, leaving the unintended consequences of its formalization and legitimization of competing claims under international law underexplored.\textsuperscript{17} Chapter 4 offers a counterintuitive argument that helps explain why tensions in the South China Sea have risen, not declined, in the UNCLOS era. Tracing the causes of key representative cases of China’s altered behaviour in the South China Sea in 2007 and 2008, it identifies four mechanisms by which international law has
contributed to assertive state actions in the South China Sea. Specifically, the UNCLOS prompted the enshrinement of disputed maritime claims in domestic law, spurred the development of coercive enforcement capabilities; encouraged a perception that assertive actions increase legal claim strength, and threatened the viability of extra-legal but longstanding claims. International law, it shows, does not only constrain confrontational state behaviour, but can also authorize, enable, and catalyze it.

Third, the extensive literature on contemporary Chinese nationalism has generally concentrated on its manifestations in relation to Japan, the United States, and “the West” in general. This is justifiable, given the prominence of former imperialist powers as the foils for China’s contemporary national identity, particularly since the institution of the CCP’s “patriotic education” campaign in the 1990s. Nevertheless, it has left a dearth of accounts of Chinese nationalism in relation to its Southeast Asian neighbours. Chapter 5 draws on an original survey on Chinese urban residents’ perceptions of the South China Sea dispute, along with internet search activity data, and several years of quasi-ethnographic observation of online discourse on the topic, in order to begin to fill this gap.

Key concepts

The two study variables whose relationship this dissertation examines are Chinese popular nationalism and PRC foreign policy. I define popular nationalism – used here interchangeably with nationalist public opinion or sentiments – as public actions or sentiments favouring more assertive foreign policy actions. The word nationalism describes an unwieldy array of social phenomena; for political scientists, the range of usages within academic works on the subject can be “annoyingly wide.” The narrow working definition above is designed to direct the focus towards those social phenomena that are both observable and capable of generating bottom-up pressure for confrontational state actions on an issue like the South China Sea. However, it is also broad enough to cover both nationalist mobilizations like street protests, boycotts and petitions, and also mediated
manifestations of nationalist sentiment such as online commentary, consumption of jingoistic media content, and opinion survey results. The word “popular” denotes that the sentiments or actions are shared among a large number of citizens, but this does not imply participation or agreement from a majority or even a significant minority of the population. This is particularly important in the case of China, where a million people constitute less than 0.08% of the population.

**Hybridity** refers to the quality of being two different things at once. Rather than simply containing elements of both, with the contradictions between the two assumed to offset each other, theories of cultural hybridity highlight how a subject can strongly resemble two opposing referents at the same time, “in excess of the ‘parts’ of difference.” State-led popular nationalist discourse, as the product of both powerful mass emotions and pragmatic state choices, resembles both a state-led official nationalism, and a spontaneous bottom-up popular nationalism, but is not quite the same as either. As I have noted elsewhere, the quality of being, in Homi Bhabha’s words, “almost the same, but not quite,” can have significant political implications. The thesis will show how such a political logic has turned up in the perhaps surprising setting of deterrence signaling in the South China Sea.

**Foreign policy** refers here to the behaviour of one state towards other states and actors beyond its borders. This definition is based on the Chinese term *dui wai zhengce* (对外政策), meaning “policy towards the outside.” Understanding foreign policy in this way reminds us to consider whether or not a given action is actually directed towards the outside world. As Robert Ross points out, it is important to be conscious that words or actions impinging on foreign interests may actually be aimed at domestic audiences, and not foreign-directed at all. In the case of the South China Sea dispute, some officials or front-line agencies may prefer to consider policies there to be purely an internal affair, and not externally-directed. However, to the extent that the relevant decisionmakers are aware that a given action will impinge on foreign states’ interests, it will constitute behaviour towards the outside world, and fit the above definition of foreign policy.
Having defined the PRC foreign policy as the behaviour of the CCP party-state towards the outside world, we are still confronted with the reality that the party-state is not a monolithic actor but a sprawling complex of agencies, organizations and informal groupings with competing bureaucratic, financial and political interests. It is therefore vital to consider whether or not a given action taken by a front-line agency accurately reflects the state’s policy at central level. Although this may not be possible to know with certainty in individual cases, adherence with an established pattern, accordance with official policy statements, and evidence of cross-agency coordination, are all suggestive of central intent. By contrast, once-off actions taken by uncoordinated front-line actors, which cease after coming to the attention of central authorities, might be better termed state behaviour than state policy.

The role of non-state actors in the South China Sea, too, must be carefully considered. The tacit or explicit authorization of non-state actors to take actions that clearly impinge on other states’ interests is a foreign policy action under the definition used here. Where evidence of official connections to such non-state actions is lacking, however, only the state’s subsequent responses can safely be interpreted as foreign policy.

Central to the analysis of PRC policy on the South China Sea dispute is the concept of **assertiveness**, which I define as *the relative presence or absence of actions that strengthen one state’s position in a dispute at the expense of another’s*. This breaks down non-cooperative state behaviour on a territorial dispute into its observable component units – actions – thereby enabling measurements to identify continuity and change over time. A key feature of this definition is its breadth. Unless a dispute is dormant or subject to a cooperative agreement that simultaneously strengthens contending sides’ positions, such as joint resource development, it is hard for any state to advance their disputed territorial or jurisdictional claims without impinging on those of rival states. Thus, assertiveness is present to some extent in most states’ policies in territorial disputes; what matters are changes in its quantity and quality over time. Chapter 3 develops a three-way typology of assertiveness, and applies it to an original time series of year-on-year PRC behavioural changes in the South China Sea between 1970 and 2015.
Pragmatic foreign policy, as the term is used here, does not refer to objectively optimal decisionmaking. Since states are complex organizations with their own policy discourses and systems of understanding, the rationality of state behaviour is contextual and contested. Moreover, the opaqueness of China’s Leninist system means it is often not possible to know with certainty at what level (if any) the decision behind a particular action was made. Thankfully, a yardstick is provided by the central party-state’s official policy directives and instructions, which typically pass through numerous rounds of careful consideration. The pragmatic quality of a particular foreign policy, therefore, refers here to its degree of accordance with the party-state’s official policies and objectives. Of most direct relevance here is the centre’s guideline (方针) for maritime disputes mandating “the unity of rights defense and stability maintenance” (维权维稳相统一). As detailed in Chapter 5 (see also Appendix 4), this means simultaneously advancing China’s disputed maritime claims while avoiding regional conflict. Non-pragmatic policies, by contrast, are those that may conform closely to emotional or ideological imperatives, but which contradict stated policies or known strategic objectives. Having thus defined the key terms around which the study will revolve, the next two sections review existing accounts of the relationship between popular nationalism and Chinese foreign policy.

Bottom-up models

The impetus for this study was the rising prevalence, at least in English-language discussion of China’s foreign policy, of the idea that domestic public opinion, particularly nationalist sentiments or policy preferences, is a significant factor driving China’s assertive actions in the South China Sea. Speculation about popular nationalism’s influence can be found across academic works, government reports, think tank briefs, media commentary, and state officials’ remarks. Many of these discussions of public opinion’s influence do not specify the mechanism by which popular sentiments would influence the decisions of an authoritarian leadership that faces no direct system of accountability to the public. However, China scholars
have proposed at least four plausible pathways by which domestic nationalist public opinion may become a factor in PRC foreign policy decisions. The causal relationships they posit are stylized in Figure 1.1, and a summary of their observable implications appears in Table 1.1.

Nationalist legitimacy

The most straightforward models of domestic public opinion as a factor in Chinese foreign policy holds that confrontational actions result from leaders seeking to bolster or preserve their domestic political legitimacy among the public. A common starting point is the notion that China’s abandonment of revolutionary egalitarian communism in favour of market-oriented economic reform since the 1980s has created an ideological vacuum, and thus a legitimacy deficit. As Tom Christensen puts it, “Since the CCP is no longer communist, it must be even more Chinese.”32 Rory Medcalf and Raoul Heinrichs suggest some assertive Chinese behaviour at sea 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.”33 In a similar vein, Robert Ross argues the PRC’s maritime assertiveness is a response to widespread popular demand for “traditional symbols of great power status,” especially naval weaponry.34

The first version of this model will be referred to here as the nationalism card. This model is rooted in the theory of diversionary conflict, which highlights the domestic benefits leaders can derive from engaging in international confrontation.35 The basic conditions for diversionary conflict are arguably in place in the case of the PRC in the South China Sea.36 The party-state evidently is concerned with buttressing its domestic legitimacy, and its citizenry is often argued to harbour confrontational policy preferences and a desire for national aggrandizement. Perhaps most importantly, diversionary behaviour is theoretically most likely to occur when the pursuit of international goals through confrontation would have a high probability of success. The vastness of the disputed area in the South China Sea offers Beijing the opportunity to pursue
limited, incremental goals with a high likelihood of success due to its superior economic, military and logistical capabilities relative to its rivals. This explains why a play for domestic legitimacy is widely seen as a plausible explanation for China’s assertive policies at sea.\textsuperscript{37}

A second legitimacy-based model of bottom-up nationalist audience influence is termed here the \textit{Frankenstein’s monster} model. In this view, nationalist sentiments are a state-concocted behemoth that has taken on a life of its own in the internet era and now menaces its creator, the party-state. Chinese nationalism – aggrieved, irrational, empowered and intensely threatening – takes the CCP’s foreign policy hostage. As Yinan He observes, elites have long manipulated nationalism to build political support and national cohesion, but once embraced by the public it generates “strong momentum for uncompromising struggles with other countries.”\textsuperscript{38} Susan Shirk writes that, having stoked the flames of anti-foreign sentiment in order to stay in power after 1989, China’s leaders must now “strive to stay ahead of the wave of popular nationalism sweeping the country,” lest they find themselves with a revolution on their hands.\textsuperscript{39} Suisheng Zhao attributes a string of incidents in the South China Sea between 2009 and 2012 to the combination of media commercialization, international empowerment and responsiveness to nationalist public opinion fuelled by its own “patriotic education” program.\textsuperscript{40}

The \textit{Frankenstein’s monster} model mirrors a more general argument linking the partial liberalization of authoritarian political systems with international conflict. Developed in the 1990s to explain why democratizing regimes seemed to have statistically higher rates of involvement in wars, the theory holds that as leaders struggle to justify their rule over increasingly complex societies, they stoke popular nationalism as a unifying force – but this can subsequently spiral out of control, leading the state into irrational external conflict.\textsuperscript{41} The idea that such a process is behind the PRC’s assertive policy in the South China Sea also appears plausible. Commercialized media in China often stoke outrage over foreign affairs controversies in order to stimulate sales, while the rollout of the internet has provided a platform for angry patriots to publicly criticize the government and demand tougher action.\textsuperscript{42} If, as many analysts argue, China’s assertive policy in the
South China Sea has been sub-rational, then this could be due to the influence of technologically-empowered mass sentiment.43

Testing for the operation of these legitimacy-based processes in specific cases of assertive state conduct begins with a pair of “hoop tests.”44 The assertive actions in question must be publicized domestically, and the state must claim the nationalist credit for its confrontational actions – if not in its official version of events, then at least via mass media coverage.45 If this does not occur, it is not plausible that a desire to boost legitimacy or mollify popular nationalist criticism was a significant factor in the decision to engage in the assertive actions in question. A more unique implication of the nationalism card model's operation is that sources of domestic discontent (such as deteriorating economic conditions or political scandals) should be overshadowed by the assertive foreign policy actions. While no “smoking gun,” such an observation will increase analytic confidence in the idea that that rallying domestic support was among the state’s considerations. Further support for the Frankenstein’s monster model, meanwhile, can be sought by gauging public attention and mobilization levels towards the issue in question. As a general rule, the higher the level of public attention on a foreign policy issue, the more likely it is to become a factor in a state’s decisionmaking.46 If we find evidence of nationalist mobilizations, or unusually high public attention, prior to the state’s confrontational foreign policy actions, this will increase the likelihood that they were decided upon with at least an eye on appeasing nationalist public opinion.

Intra-state contention

More specified bottom-up models of the nationalism-policy nexus have posited that internal divisions can open the door to popular influence on foreign policy. In an early exposition of this idea, Joseph Fewsmith and Stanley Rosen argued that public opinion was most likely to have an impact “when joined with the concerns
Figure 1.1: Causal pathways of bottom-up nationalist influence on policy
or interests of those higher in the system." Sub-state actors or factions may seek to align themselves with nationalist opinion either to attack their political rivals, or to promote hardline policy preferences based on ideological proclivities or narrow bureaucratic interests. Linda Jakobson and Dean Knox reported in 2010 that many Chinese sub-state agencies "utilize nationalism to advance their own agenda." More recently, Jakobson reports that a nationalistic political atmosphere has contributing to Beijing’s assertive behaviour in the South China Sea by providing political cover for maritime security agencies to push the boundaries of their mandates. This type of explanation is referred to as the policy contest model.

James Reilly has developed the implications of elite contention a step further, arguing that intra-state divisions may reduce the state’s ability to curtail spontaneous nationalist mobilizations, which in turn can generate bottom-up influence on policy. Reilly points out that while authoritarian states are normally capable of suppressing popular mobilizations, and may allow them for a number of different reasons, distraction or disunity reduces their ability to act decisively to prevent an unwanted outburst of nationalist activity. Once a “wave of mobilization” swells in society, it not only strengthens the position of hardliners in any internal debates, it also creates incentives for other decisionmakers to adopt tougher stances to avoid damaging criticism. Adopting Reilly’s terminology, I refer to this as the wave of mobilization model of bottom-up nationalist influence on foreign policy.

The intra-state contention models are related to the theory of fragmented authoritarianism, which highlights how competing interests and bargaining processes within an authoritarian state affect its decision-making and policy implementation. More recently, the theory has been adapted to take account of the pluralization of Chinese society, highlighting the emerging role of “policy entrepreneurs,” including local officials, bureaucrats, activists, and media. Although the fragmented authoritarianism framework was primarily designed to explain domestic policy outcomes at local levels, analysts of Chinese foreign policy have applied its logic of sub-state variation to explain assertive PRC actions. There
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Bottom-up models</strong></th>
<th><strong>Observable implications</strong></th>
<th><strong>Certitude</strong></th>
<th><strong>Uniqueness</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Nationalist legitimacy”</td>
<td>Public informed of assertive actions</td>
<td>High – can’t be a ploy for popular nationalist support if public uninformed</td>
<td>Low – consistent with top-down explanation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>State claims credit for assertive actions</td>
<td>High – can’t be a ploy to address legitimacy issues if state does not claim credit</td>
<td>Low – consistent with top-down explanations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Nationalism card”</td>
<td>Assertive actions follow rise in legitimacy issues, which state then redirects attention away from</td>
<td>High – legitimacy issues are the trigger, and the assertive acts must stand to help alleviate</td>
<td>Medium – if observed, then diversionary incentive exists, though this does not rule out other factors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Frankenstein’s monster”</td>
<td>Rise in popular attention or nationalist mobilization precedes assertive action</td>
<td>High – to explain policy change, nationalist pressure must be higher than at relevant prior reference point</td>
<td>Low – may reflect state mobilization, or elite divisions; also, many available reference points for identifying “rise” of nationalist pressure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Intra-state contention”</td>
<td>Assertive actions coincide with periods of heightened intra-state contention</td>
<td>Low – internal contention may be unobservable</td>
<td>Low – assertive action may be subject to consensus within a leadership divided over other matters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Policy contest”</td>
<td>Uneven or inconsistent state media coverage of the issue, or linkage with elite political struggles</td>
<td>Low – policy or political struggles may be made behind closed doors</td>
<td>Medium – hawkish arguments claiming support of public opinion will be suggestive, but also consistent with top-down explanation unless there is evidence of opposition from moderate elements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Wave of mobilization”</td>
<td>Wave of nationalist mobilization precedes assertive actions</td>
<td>High – if popular nationalist mobilization not apparent, then unlikely to have been a factor in internal debates</td>
<td>Low – wave may be state-sanctioned for strategic or other reasons</td>
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Table 1.1: Observable implications of bottom-up models of nationalism-foreign policy relationship
are good reasons to believe public opinion may help explain China’s actions in the South China Sea in conjunction with intra-state contention. First, a diverse array of state and non-state actors operate there, suggesting possible variation in the interests of sub-state actors.\(^2\) Second, waves of nationalist mobilization have been observed on the issue in recent years (see Chapters 5 and 6). Third, the period covered by this thesis spans two CCP Congresses, 2007 and 2012, the latter coinciding with a major political scandal over Politburo member Bo Xilai. It is reasonable to infer that internal contention was relatively high during these periods, making the operation of these models of bottom-up influence more likely.

The intra-state contention explanations specify divisions within the state’s decisionmaking elite and, in Reilly’s case, popular mobilization, as key scope conditions for bottom-up nationalist influence on foreign policy.\(^3\) This can be difficult to falsify in individual cases as it depends on inferences about developments in highly secretive elite politics. But there are, nonetheless, several observable implications. First, we ought to find hardline actions coinciding with known periods of elevated contention in elite politics, such as the CCP’s five-yearly congresses, or acute political crises.\(^4\) Still, it is often difficult to know precisely when periods of leadership contention begin and end, so the predictions of contention-based models regarding the timing of assertive policy shifts will not be very specific.\(^5\) If this basic condition is met, we can seek further evidence to support the *policy contest* model by studying central media coverage for hints of elite differences over the issue, or linkages between the foreign policy issue and political struggles. If nationalist public opinion has become important, we may even find particular elites or their proxies publicly justifying hardline positions as the will of the people. Such an observation will significantly increase confidence in nationalism as a bottom-up factor if we find signs that other elites favoured a more moderate approach than the one eventually taken. If the *wave of mobilization* variant applies, we should see the assertive policy shift in question following after spikes in popular nationalist activity. However, this observation may also be consistent with a top-down process in which the state manipulates popular opinion according to its foreign policy goals. This is discussed in the next section.
Introduction

Top-down models

A top-down model of the relationship between popular nationalism and PRC foreign policy is one that takes the state’s foreign policy to be a key determinant of developments in public opinion. The CCP’s role in promoting and shaping public opinion for domestic purposes is widely recognized, with numerous studies documenting the CCP’s systematic program of “patriotic education” after the 1989 political crisis and the collapse of several other communist regimes. Most proponents of the models discussed above would agree that state mythmaking has been central to the emergence of the popular nationalist sentiments they now see driving China’s assertiveness. The key difference with top-down models, as I use the term here, is that the latter take the state’s influence on popular nationalism to follow not only from its domestic agenda, but also from its foreign policy goals.

State-led pragmatic nationalism

During the Maoist era, many observers noted the CCP’s remarkable ability to mobilize China’s enormous population for all kinds of socialist political campaigns and, seemingly, to engineer thoroughgoing transformations in traditional patterns of thought and action. Anti-foreign sentiments were often part of this process, starting with “resist America, aid North Korea” campaign during the Korean War. Yet, as Yinan He has shown, from the 1950s to the 1970s, when painful memories of Japanese wartime atrocities were at their freshest, the CCP nonetheless directed anti-foreign sentiment away from Japan, in accordance with its aims of securing Japanese diplomatic recognition and undermining the US-Japan alliance. By the early 1980s, Allen Whiting observed the emergence of “assertive nationalism” in the CCP top leadership’s rhetoric, but found this to be symbolic, not substantive. The leadership, Whiting concluded, remained firmly in control of popular sentiments, and the new assertive rhetoric did not "introduce or foreshadow a dangerous irrationality in foreign policy."
While state-led nationalist mythmaking intensified in the 1990s, so too did the importance of friendly ties with the outside world. The apparent tension between these two aims led Erica Downs and Philip Saunders to identify the "trade-offs [that] exist between nationalism and economic performance" as a key issue for Beijing. Examining China's handling of the Diaoyu Islands issue in the 1990s, Downs and Saunders concluded that pragmatic foreign policy goals continued to trump nationalist posturing, though the study did not focus on how the state managed this. Today, top-down models must take account of the profound developments in China’s society and information environment since that time, and demonstrate how the state can reduce, mitigate, absorb, or dodge the legitimacy costs it faces in pursuing a pragmatic policy that resists popular nationalist pressures for unwanted confrontation.

Sun Yun goes further than most analysts in refuting the idea that the rise of the Chinese internet has facilitated nationalist influence on PRC foreign policy. Sun emphasizes that the state possesses various layers of control over online content and commentary. Propaganda authorities issue daily directives to all major online news media – whether state-run, commercial, or a mix of the two – regarding which topics are to be publicized or suppressed. “Internet police” monitor online discussions, and can intervene directly to ensure compliance with state security priorities. Meanwhile paid commentators – the so-called 50-cent party (五毛党) – actively guide discussion in the party’s preferred direction. For Sun, this means “most 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.”

While these mechanisms of state influence are important, especially during crisis situations, Sun’s account overstates the degree of state control, both actual and desired, over internet-era popular nationalism in China. Rather than being tightly screened, censorship of online comment threads on foreign affairs issues has usually been relatively relaxed compared to many domestic issues. Millions of PRC internet users act as a self-styled “volunteer 50-cent party” (自干五), loyally defending the party and state of their own volition. And surveys indicate most
Introduction

PRC urban citizens approve of public participation under state guidance as a policy for handling China’s maritime disputes (see Chapter 5). This suggests that, on matters like the South China Sea at least, nationalist citizens are neither enemies of the state, nor its puppets. This thesis will argue they are more like radical allies, whose emotive, public, collective expressions of desire for more militant policy postures can help realize shared goals – disagreeable as these may be from the perspective of foreign interests or even regional peace and security.66

In his classic 2004 study of the intellectual and political development of Chinese nationalism, Suisheng Zhao argued that CCP leaders continued to exercise top-down restraint on nationalist sentiments in order to serve their pragmatic foreign policy goals.67 Zhao observed that the leadership in the early 2000s avoided stirring up nationalist demands for “assertive international positions that the leaders are not in a position to satisfy.”68 The flipside to this observation is that when pragmatic leaders are in a position to satisfy nationalist demands – as they have been in the South China Sea since the mid-2000s – they may well find it in their interests to cease damping them down. Zhao’s observation implicitly foreshadowed a future PRC foreign policy that was both assertive and pragmatic, such as the one that this study will argue has emerged on the South China Sea issue.

Strategic logic of nationalist protests

Leading analysts of nationalism’s role in contemporary China’s foreign relations have argued that the state’s foreign policy priorities can inform its decisions to either tolerate or suppress anti-foreign protest movements.69 Examining the CCP’s handling of street protests targeting Japan and the United States in the reform era, Weiss shows that when the party-state has taken a hardline stance in international crises, it has been more likely to allow or even encourage nationalist demonstrations. Because such outbursts are more costly to suppress once they gather momentum, Weiss argues, permitting them is a credible demonstration of the state’s determination to stand firm on the issue at hand. Conversely when the
party-state has sought to de-escalate tensions and stabilize ties, it has demonstrated this by suppressing nascent mobilizations. Absorbing the costs of offending angry nationalists and attentive members of the wider public underscores the credibility of the conciliatory signal. However, if it chooses not to do this at an early stage, Weiss argues, the costs of suppression increase dramatically and a bottom-up “hawkish commitment” mechanism kicks in, constraining moderation and potentially driving assertive actions.70

Being based on rationalist bargaining framework, Weiss’s theory focuses on how China’s tolerance or suppression of nationalist street protests is informed by trade-offs between credibility and diplomatic flexibility.71 Bargaining leverage, in Weiss’s view, depends on “[c]onvincing foreigners of the risk to stability and the cost of repression.”72 Reilly similarly characterizes the CCP’s use of nationalist street protests as a “hand-tying” tactic.73 Yet, in practice, Chinese authorities have never sought to hide their own role in facilitating and managing anti-foreign demonstrations – nor their decisive ability to shut them down.74 If the party-state is sending a message to international audiences via domestic anti-foreign protests, then its own ability to stay in control appears to be part of the signal too. The inbuilt credibility-flexibility trade-off in the rationalist model suggests the state’s role in minimizing the risks of nationalist activities will only “cheapen” the signal and thereby reduce its effectiveness. As Weiss writes, “Large-scale protests are a stronger signal of resolve than small-scale demonstrations, which in turn communicate more than online comments.”75 Yet, the proliferation of speculation about bottom-up nationalist influence on Beijing’s policy in the South China Sea – an issue on which no large-scale street protests have ever been permitted – suggests the international political impact of China’s popular nationalist “cheap talk” may be more significant than the bargaining framework allows.76

The “strategic logic of anti-foreign protest” outlined by Weiss is a starting point for this study of the relationship between popular nationalism and PRC policy on the South China Sea. Nationalist citizens have mobilized street protests on the issue on several occasions, but the state has so far never tolerated them.77 Applying the original theory without modification would suggest the continuous absence of
street protests on the South China Sea issue reflects the party-state’s desire to send continuous signals of “reassurance” to its adversaries there. But as the following chapters will show, China’s policy on the issue has hardened significantly since 2007, and Beijing has stood firm, and even threatened escalation, during crisis situations. This thesis will argue there is a strategic role in China’s foreign policy for other, less risky, forms of popular nationalism besides street protests. Moreover, thanks to increasingly effective propaganda and information management, China’s policy on this issue has not been subject to a nationalist feedback loop constraining the state from pragmatic moderation. The following section outlines a somewhat more stridently state-led – but by no means simply top-down – hypothetical model to explain the nationalism-policy nexus on the South China Sea issue.

Channeling and risk management

In the internet era China’s population is more informed, attentive, and empowered to speak publicly on national-level political developments than at any time since the founding of the People’s Republic, and probably in China’s long history. Although the CCP state operates a vast censorship apparatus, citizens today have myriad new ways of accessing information, expressing political views, and even mobilizing to assert their interests and rights. Blogging, and especially microblogging, has enabled ordinary people to set up political information-sharing channels and generate their own news commentary, privileges once reserved for state-run news agencies and mass media. The internet has also further altered the Chinese media’s ownership structure, with privately-owned, overseas-listed new media conglomerates snatching a large part of the online news delivery market. Against this backdrop, the view that China’s party-state state can manipulate nationalist sentiments has become somewhat old-fashioned. Many observers have quite reasonably concluded that these social forces have simply become too strong, and too independent, to be effectively controlled by the state. In a limited way, this study pushes back against this trend, showing how, on the
South China Sea issue, China’s authoritarian state has continued to lead public opinion through well-established propaganda practices, while learning to manage nationalist participation in the pursuit of pragmatic foreign policy goals.

Below, I sketch a model of the nationalism-policy relationship that characterizes its key features by two interrelated processes that produce state-led popular participation in the state’s foreign policy: (1) Strategic channeling of popular nationalist sentiments towards pragmatic goals, and (2) Risk management, which refers to the reactive management of domestic discourse to prevent domestic instability or irrational influence on foreign policy. The first builds on the resolve-signaling mechanism of Weiss’s “strategic logic of anti-foreign protest,” while the second is a continuation of the “pragmatic state-led nationalism” that Zhao and others described, together with Reilly’s account of the responsiveness and adaptability of the PRC party-state. Within this framework, then, the bottom-up models of nationalist influence on the state’s foreign policy are understood as failures of risk management. The model implies that better risk management should make strategic channeling more likely, but it also presumes that future social or technological developments favouring bottom-up influence on foreign policy outcomes will demand further adaptation if the state is to maintain those capabilities.

**Strategic channeling**

State-led popular participation has been a recurring feature of Chinese politics since the founding of the People’s Republic in 1949.\(^80\) Mobilization of popular sentiments was integral to both the party’s victory in the civil war, and the implementation of the Party’s revolutionary program of land reforms and economic construction.\(^81\) During the Cultural Revolution, Chairman Mao directed the energies of millions of young people into overthrowing much of the party’s enormous bureaucracy.\(^82\) When Deng Xiaoping took charge of the party’s political direction in 1978, he too guided the ostensibly spontaneous Democracy Wall movement to a climax in order to demonstrate his popularity and discredit his
opponents. “If the masses have opinions, let them release their anger,” Deng stated at the time. “Sometimes it is necessary to use this method to encourage mass movements. Foreigners may panic, but we sit tight.” Somewhat less dramatically, party leaders have since the late 1980s endorsed the idea of “supervision by public opinion” (舆论监督), or the exposure of corruption and social ills through mass media in order to curb their occurrence.

In 2008, in response to the new challenges of the internet era, Hu Jintao launched a major push to increase the party's ability to “channel public opinion” (引导舆论), that is, to actively draw spontaneous popular sentiments in useful directions, rather than just limiting the public agenda through media guidance (舆论导向). This firmly state-led mode of popular participation has continued with the subsequent development of social media in China, notably in relation to Xi Jinping’s anti-corruption campaign. Such processes can also serve the state's foreign policy. The raising of broad-based social support for a war effort has long been regarded as vital to winning in conflict, both in the PRC and more generally. But this thesis shows how a state seeking to avoid war while advancing its position in an international dispute can channel nationalist sentiments into deterring opposition to its new patterns of action.

The CCP's concept of “public opinion channeling” references China’s extensive traditions of flood control and irrigation. Adopting this hydrological analogy, we can imagine China's networked authoritarian state apparatus as a high-tech dam, behind which swirls the elemental force of mass sentiments. The dam has dozens, perhaps hundreds, of sluice gates that its operators, party policymakers, can open up to varying degrees, allowing the force of public opinion to flow in particular directions, towards particular issue areas. China's policymakers have three levers that can open up the flow of popular sentiments towards foreign policy controversies like the South China Sea.

The first is official information. Media and citizens in all kinds of polities tend to be heavily dependent on the state for their information about foreign policy issues. The PRC today is no exception. When the Foreign Ministry, Defense Ministry, or
leading officials comment on a contentious issue like the South China Sea, it routinely becomes headline news. Similarly, party media like the People’s Daily and CCTV’s 7pm news broadcast (which has the unique feature of being both politically authoritative and targeted at mass audiences) can draw widespread attention towards foreign policy matters simply by mentioning them. Central news agencies supply the overwhelming bulk of foreign affairs news on China’s commercial and online media, and party-state and military departments have greatly increased their online and social media presence. When these official information sources open up on issues like the South China Sea, its salience on the popular online news agenda is certain to increase (see Chapter 5). Because the South China Sea dispute is remote from the vast majority of the population’s experience, a larger volume of official information about the issue naturally attracts more attention to the issue, while also giving already-attentive citizens more to talk about.

Nationalist opinion leaders constitute a second channel through which the party-state can allow public sentiments to flow towards foreign policy matters. In liberal democracies, media commentary on foreign policy issues has been shown to be tightly “indexed” to the often narrow range of views expressed by the government and opposition. China has no organized political opposition, but the CCP today does not simply push a singular “party line,” it guides a range of acceptable viewpoints. On nationalist hot-button issues, the editorials of the Huanqiu Shibao, a market-oriented tabloid subsidiary of the People’s Daily, and the PLA’s cadre of “hawkish” media pundits are especially influential opinion leaders. They routinely draw both domestic and foreign attention with colourful, belligerent language that enlivens China’s foreign policy discourse. They may at times even be critical of the policy status quo from a nationalist perspective. In any given instance their rhetoric may reflect a sincerely held opinion, or be primarily commercial or even careerist behaviour. But the close institutional integration of this nationalist commentariat enables authorities to regulate its agenda and tone, and intervene at short notice when required (see Chapter 6).

Systems of media guidance and internet censorship are a third gate through which nationalist sentiments can be channeled towards foreign affairs. Commercial mass
media and online news platforms need no encouragement to stoke the fires of patriotism; normally, on sensitive international disputes, the state’s instructions to mass media and commercial online news sites caution editors against “stir-frying” (hyping) the issue, or running commentaries.\(^9\) Subtle attenuations of this guidance open up space for market-oriented operations to “attract eyeballs” and generate traffic, expanding both the attentive public, and the volume and tenor of online discussion.\(^9\) Internet discourse in China, as elsewhere, naturally tends to be dominated by extreme views. A 2011 report from a research team at the CCP’s official theoretical journal *Seeking Truth* noted the “irrational” and unrepresentative qualities of online public opinion.\(^9\) But this challenge has also created new opportunities to involve genuine popular sentiments in China’s international affairs. Among the many negative aspects of online opinion, the *Seeking Truth* team’s report identified one shining light: “patriotic netizens have walked onto the stage of the epoch” as a “righteous force that often appears in intense or even extreme forms.”\(^9\) Such surges in emotive online commentary on contentious issues have often attracted foreign observers’ attention, making them a potentially useful medium for strategic communications.\(^9\)

There are several reasons why a state might open these faucets: to appeal for international support, release a “safety valve” allowing citizens to let off steam, test the public’s reaction, or even due to simple inability to operate the floodgates.\(^9\) But on the South China Sea issue in recent years, I argue, the most consequential has been the delivery of ambiguous yet easily understood threat signals. This occurs across two timeframes. Over the medium-to-long term, raising public awareness of the issue, as Beijing has done through its campaign to build “maritime consciousness” (Chapter 6), not only builds support for the disputed claims, but also ensures a steady drumbeat of more radical popular demands for their realization. The steady buzz of criticism of the “weakness” of the policy status quo – or, more commonly, particular agencies such as the Foreign Ministry – projects an image of both the state’s domestically-imposed limitations and the risk of uncontrolled escalation should some unforeseen incident occur. In the South China Sea, it stands to reason that this should help deter interference with China’s
assertive activities. For as Robert Jervis has noted, if decisionmakers believe crises are uncontrollable, they will be less likely to take actions that create them.\textsuperscript{100}

This longer-term channeling process lays the groundwork for popular participation in crises and periods of heightened tension. At such times, a pragmatic state aiming to deter escalatory retaliation against its assertive stance can draw a surge of emotional popular outrage towards the issue that displays steely “popular will” behind its position, as well as fanatical demands for what would likely be a mutually destructive military confrontation. This vividly foregrounds the possibility, remote as it may be, of uncontrollable escalation in the event of further confrontations, encouraging adversaries to set aside any recent losses and act cautiously to avoid the prospect of even worse losses from uncontrolled escalation. From the perspective of prospect theory, it helps pull the other side out of the “domain of loss,” reducing the likelihood of their engaging in risky retaliation against China’s advances.\textsuperscript{101} These processes, conceptualized in Chapter 6 as “grassroots deterrence,” serve the goals of an assertive but pragmatic policy seeking to advance the state’s position in a dispute while avoiding military conflict – such as China’s stated policy of “the unity of rights defense and stability maintenance” in its maritime disputes. But the international use value and the domestic premise for strategic channeling of popular nationalist sentiments both hinge on the state’s ability to manage the particular risks that this poses.

\textit{Risk management}

As the hydrological notion of “channeling” makes clear, popular nationalist sentiments are never only a tool of foreign policy, but remain an elemental force that a political party like the CCP can either harness or be swept away by. Nationalist political principles can both legitimize and delegitimize particular ruling elites, so authoritarian governments in the twenty-first century ignore public opinion at their peril.\textsuperscript{102} Internal and external stimuli can draw surges of public sentiments towards an issue that are neither anticipated by the state, nor helpful to its policy goals. Furthermore, in the internet era, information can spread
rapidly, and the density of interactions between citizens is unprecedentedly high. This creates greater potential across a range of scenarios – notably some kind of serious incident at sea – for citizens’ private anger to transform into real-world demands for escalation that China’s leaders could find difficult to resist. As detailed in Chapter 6, the party-state’s concepts of “public opinion warfare” and “public diplomacy” recognize public opinion as posing two main risks: domestic instability and diplomatic inflexibility. The plausibility of these risks enables popular nationalism to draw foreign attention and accentuate the prospect of uncontrolled escalation. In combination with the party-state’s risk management measures, as discussed below, it delivers composite signals of threat and reassurance that can help deter escalation.

Because the risks involved are real, channeling mass attention towards a foreign policy issue is a form of brinkmanship – the upward manipulation of an “appreciable danger” to persuade the adversary to behave in desired ways. But contrary to the expectations of rationalist models of strategic communication, minimizing those risks does not necessarily deprive the threat signal of its effectiveness. A key reason for this is that the networked authoritarian state’s capabilities for managing these popular nationalist risks are partially visible to outside observers, and partially opaque. To the extent that state risk management is opaque, it can open an information gap between the channeling state and its adversaries regarding the level and nature of the risk. With much of their work being conducted behind closed doors, the CCP’s security and propaganda authorities have superior intelligence on developments on their “home turf,” and understand their own capabilities for managing public opinion better than outside observers do. Risk-managed popular nationalism can thus deliver Schelling’s “threat that leaves something to chance” – but one side knows more about that something than the other side.

The transparent aspects of the state’s risk management are even more important. Deterring escalation not only requires a plausible threat, it also depends on reassurance that compliance will ease the risk. Absent any obvious sign of state involvement, a wave of popular jingoism could leave adversaries unsure as to
whether it was in fact intended as a signal from the state. If they concluded that the
war buzz was fundamentally spontaneous and beyond the state’s control, they
would have little reason to believe that complying with the state’s more limited
demands would actually ease the situation. Most importantly, open state
management of the intensity of nationalist discourse clarifies that the purpose is
not simply mobilization for a war that has already been decided upon – an
interpretation that would likely increase rather than decrease the adversary’s
incentive to escalate. By establishing the hybrid official/popular nature of the
nationalist phenomenon – neither fully spontaneous, nor fully state-controlled, but
resembling both – the state’s visible risk management measures clarify the
dualistic signal content (threat and reassurance) required for deterrence.

One pillar of Beijing’s ability to manage the risks of channeling public opinion
towards sensitive foreign policy issues like the South China Sea is intelligence on
public opinion itself. China’s leaders have long paid close attention to public
opinion using specially commissioned survey research. But in the internet era,
propaganda and public security authorities have access to large volumes of real-
time data on the currents in online commentary and information sharing across
the PRC internet via systems of “public opinion monitoring” (舆情监测).

Originally touted in party documents in 2004, and rolled out at the central level
between 2006 and 2008, by 2013 more than 2 million people were employed in
the public opinion monitoring industry nationwide. Most of these online public
opinion analysts work for local governments and private companies, but the
central authorities possess the most extensive systems. Combining human
research with resources like internal reference reporting, data scraped from social
networks by automated software, and statistics from major commercial internet
platforms, these systems help the state ascertain what information is being viewed
and shared, the volume of online discussion on a given topic, and provides
quantitative analysis of the sentiments being expressed. This helps inform
decisionmakers on when to increase or decrease the information supply, tighten or
relax censorship, or introduce particular kinds of information.
The three channeling levers described above are also important risk management mechanisms. Less official information, or cooler state rhetoric, gives the media and public less to discuss, and can ease speculation about looming conflict. Moderating the tone of nationalist opinion leaders can reduce agitation among attentive citizens, replacing war talk with reassuring narratives that the nation's interests are not in danger. Restraining commercial media sensationalism also reduces the sense of drama, and stepping up censorship makes online commentary less worthwhile. Information blackouts can be imposed if required, but in the internet era more subtle techniques are available. When authorities have a grasp of online information flows, they can stifle the spread of information on a given issue among the general public, while allowing it to circulate among particular audiences. They can, for example, permit reporting of a fast-breaking development, but order that it be kept out of the top headlines, thereby allowing already-knowledgeable citizens to access information, while tempering the rise in the general public's attention until the state is ready to lead the discourse.\textsuperscript{111} Alternatively, they can permit reporting on a given issue, but require the use of central news agency copy only.\textsuperscript{112} PRC authorities also have the option of ordering internet search engines to display only results that come from a “white list” of trusted sources, allowing a modicum of diversity in coverage, while restricting the range of information contained.\textsuperscript{113}

Selective releases of compelling information offer another effective risk management technique. Policymakers generally have much more information on foreign policy developments than their respective domestic publics, and this “information gap” can help prevent unwanted popular nationalist influence on a pragmatic foreign policy.\textsuperscript{114} This is especially so on unobtrusive issues, such as remote maritime disputes, which do not directly affect the lived experience of most citizens.\textsuperscript{115} Powerful human-oriented content, such as interviews with participants in dramatic international events, or coverage from state media reporters embedded with state agencies, can emphasize and personalize the assertive measures the state has taken, helping satisfy citizens’ desire to feel close to the issue, and to see the national interest protected. If necessary, governments can announce symbolic measures that do not substantially impinge on foreign
interests, such as postponing bilateral meetings, or military exercises in non-disputed areas of a disputed water body such as the South China Sea – while engaging in reassuring diplomacy behind the scenes. The state can choose when to inform the public about past assertive actions that were previously kept secret, allow frontline agencies to release more information about their activities, or give state media new access to disputed areas. By providing new publicity to already-existing assertive measures the state may even be able to finesse an ostensibly moderate stance to appear tough.

Real-world nationalist mobilizations, especially street protests, entail special risks that require matching measures to minimize them. These can include setting up roadblocks to create contained protest zones – often in the vicinity of the target country’s embassy – where security presence can be concentrated. Plain-clothes security forces within the columns of protesters (or perhaps at the forefront) can keep an eye on the movement’s development. When the mobilizations are to be wound down, reopening the area to traffic powerfully demonstrates this intent, and text messages can inform all mobile phone users entering the area that the time for protests has finished. Information designed to quell public anger can be pushed out through commercial and online media, which research has suggested increases its credibility among media consumers. Many patriotic activists may be persuaded to abandon mobilizations by the withdrawal of state permission. More obstinate mobilizers can be painted as false patriots, troublemakers, or even agents of foreign hostile interests seeking to foment chaos. Finally, a state with loyal and capable security forces can directly suppress any extremist mobilizations – and they may have widespread public support in doing so.

If strategic channeling of public opinion depends on domestic risk management, the reverse can also be true. As the CCP’s flood control analogy suggests, if the dam’s operators fear the reservoir of mass sentiments is in danger of spilling over uncontrolled, they might open extra sluice gates, potentially including those that flow towards foreign policy issues. The bottom-up nationalism card and Frankenstein’s monster models describe scenarios in which authorities fear the dam may collapse, and try to reduce the danger by channeling public sentiments
Introduction

towards a hardline foreign policy stance. In the *policy contest* model, individual operators with hawkish policy preferences open the floodgates of patriotism either to irrigate their own fields, or to deliberately inundate those of their moderate rivals. And if the dam’s operators are inattentive or divided, a wave of *popular mobilization* from upstream could make closing the sluice gates prohibitively risky. But this only results in bottom-up influence on foreign policy when the state’s risk management measures fail. Technologically advanced authoritarian states can develop a range of options for identifying and responding to bottom-up trends in public opinion without changing their foreign policy or using coercive force or information blackouts at home. If so, as a state’s risk management capabilities improve, it should have more incentive to draw on the power of public opinion when this can help achieve its foreign policy goals.

Hypotheses

If the model described above accurately captures the relationship between Chinese popular nationalism and PRC foreign policy for the case at hand, then empirical observations should confirm the following four hypotheses. Their observable implications, described below, are summarized in Table 1.2.

*H1: “assertive policy → popular nationalism”*

The first hypothesis concerns the causation of rises in popular nationalism: *assertive foreign policy is a key cause of increases in popular nationalism on a given issue* (H1). Two predictions flow from this claim. First, rises in popular nationalism on a given issue should follow after increases in the state’s assertive activities on the issue, not before. This can be tested by comparing the timing of an assertive policy change with increases in popular mobilization or sentiments calling for tougher policy. Accessible indicators of popular nationalist activity include public online commentary, internet search activity on the issue, commercial media sensationalism, and real-world mobilizations. If the policy shift
indeed precedes a rise in the value of such metrics, then the hypothesis will pass its first basic test of plausibility. However such an observation will not strongly validate it; the correlation between a rise in nationalism and an assertive foreign policy may be coincidental. If, on the other hand, indicators of popular nationalist activity levels show a rise before the assertive shift in policy, the hypothesis is falsified for the case at hand (unless we find evidence that the state has secretly engineered a rise in nationalism in preparation for the assertive policy shift).

While this initial prediction concerns the sequence of longer-term shifts in public opinion and policy, the second prediction flowing from this hypothesis concerns short-term crisis behaviour. If the state’s assertiveness is the cause of an acute surge in popular nationalist activity during periods of elevated tensions, we should see spikes in popular attention or mobilization occurring after escalatory moves by the home state, rather than external developments. If we find the rise in nationalism occurred before the state hardened its stance, then the hypothesis will be disconfirmed for the case in question. However, even if the sequence of events is as the hypothesis predicts, this still will not significantly bolster our confidence in the overall model’s ability to explain the nationalism-policy relationship, since the same observation is also consistent with a nationalism card explanation, according to which the state diverts public attention towards international issues for domestic legitimacy reasons. Stronger validation of state channeling as a significant cause of a given case of heightened nationalist activity will require evidence of the state’s strategic intentions, discussed next.

H2: “strategic channeling”

The second hypothesis proposes that if the patterns above support the first hypothesis, they result from the state’s strategic intentions: The state understands popular nationalism as a strategic resource and channels it towards its foreign policy goals (H2). Three observable implications follow. First, there should be evidence that state authorities recognize popular nationalism as a strategic resource. At a minimum, expert analysis should characterize it as such. This prediction is low in
Introduction

certainty, since a state has reasons to downplay or conceal such ideas. If, however, state policy documents do affirm the usefulness of public opinion in the case at hand, then confidence in this strategic channeling hypothesis will be significantly boosted. This observation will not contradict the expectations of the nationalism card model, since policymakers could be aware of the international benefits of an increase in nationalist discourse, yet still be primarily motivated by domestic considerations in their foreign policy choices. The observation will be inconsistent with the Frankenstein’s monster and both intra-state contention explanations, however, as they view popular nationalism as a hindrance to the state’s pragmatic pursuit of foreign policy goals.

Second, the state should draw attention to popular nationalism in externally directed communications. If diplomatic communications or foreign-directed propaganda content does not refer to public opinion, then the idea that the state is intentionally using it to bolster its hardline stance becomes less likely. On the other hand, it is possible that officials may leave the popular nationalist “voice of the people” to speak for itself. This observation will not contradict the bottom-up models, which would expect such remarks from a state feeling besieged by nationalist sentiments, or officials whose cooperative intentions had been frustrated by public opinion, perhaps in conjunction with hawkish political opponents.

Third, popular nationalist sentiments should have been channeled towards the issue through official comments and central state media, rather than being fueled by commercial entities or sections of the media that may have been acting on behalf of sub-state interests. If a wave of nationalist outrage follows hardening diplomatic rhetoric and intensified coverage of the issue across key state media, we can be confident that, at a minimum, the state’s diplomats and propaganda authorities were aware of such coverage, and did not intervene. If, on the other hand, we find evidence of inconsistent public opinion guidance instructions, or if coverage is concentrated on particular sectors of the media, this may be a sign that particular contending elite policy advocates or political groupings were seeking to garner public support for a tougher foreign policy position.
Chapter 1

H3: “no bottom-up constraint from moderation”

The strategic channeling/risk management model’s third hypothesis is that *popular nationalism on an issue does not constrain the state from moderating its foreign policy* (H3). This conjecture can be tested via two simple observable implications. First, moderate shifts in behaviour will be observed, even when public attention and popular nationalist mobilization levels are high. This observation will strongly validate the hypothesis for the case in question, since all the bottom-up explanations of the nationalism-policy nexus expect moderation to be unlikely while public mobilization levels are high. The hypothesis will not be falsified if this is not observed, however, as a state may choose not to moderate its policy for a range of reasons unrelated to public opinion.

This leads to a second implication of the hypothesis, which is that there should be sufficient alternative explanations for observed *absences* of moderation. If other factors are sufficient to preclude moderation on the issue at hand, then it will not make sense to view public opinion as having constrained the state's conduct. Conversely, if alternative explanations for the state's uncompromising stance are tenuous, the likelihood of a popular nationalist constraint increases. If we find signs that the state leadership gave consideration to a more moderate policy, or that a policy struggle occurred, then a popular nationalist constraint will be quite plausible as a factor leading to the absence of moderation. This will suggest the state's risk management capabilities have probably not been sufficient to prevent bottom-up influence on policy in the case in question.

H4: “risk management $\rightarrow$ strategic channeling”

The fourth hypothesis of the model proposed above is that the *state can strengthen its risk management capabilities, making it more likely to channel popular nationalism for strategic gain* (H4). If such a process is present in the South China Sea case over the 2007-2016 period we should first of all observe new techniques of information management that effectively prevent social instability or “public
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Channeling/risk management model</th>
<th>Observable implications</th>
<th>Certitude</th>
<th>Uniqueness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>H1:</strong> assertive foreign policy → popular nationalism</td>
<td>Medium- and long-term rises in popular nationalism follow after assertive policy shift, not before</td>
<td>Medium – plausible, if unlikely, that state could secretly engineer a rise in nationalism ahead of assertive policy shift</td>
<td>Low – rise in nationalism may have a variety of other causes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Short-term spikes in popular attention or nationalist mobilization follow hardening of state’s position, rather than external developments</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low – consistent with nationalism card legitimacy ploy or “safety valve” mechanism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>H2:</strong> strategic channeling</td>
<td>Policy documents and strategic analysis identifies usefulness of public opinion in foreign policy</td>
<td>Low – state has reason to conceal</td>
<td>Medium – doesn’t contradict diversionary nationalism card, but the two other bottom-up explanations expect the state to find public opinion inconvenient to pragmatic foreign policy goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>State’s foreign-directed communications refer to public opinion as influence on policy</td>
<td>High – absence will strongly suggest no intention to project image of nationalist public’s influence</td>
<td>Low – consistent with bottom-up explanations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Central state media lead popular nationalist discourse with consistent coverage</td>
<td>Medium – possible, though unlikely, that state could secretly use commercial media only as vehicle for strategic channeling</td>
<td>Medium – also consistent with diversionary nationalism card, but competing policy or political groupings should produce inconsistent coverage</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### H3: no bottom-up constraint from moderation

“Popular nationalism on an issue does not constrain the state from moderating its foreign policy.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Implication</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low – even if moderation not pursued, state was not necessarily constrained from pursuing it by public opinion</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Implication</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No evidence that moderation was under consideration, and lack of moderation sufficiently explained by other factors besides popular nationalism</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Implication</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High – if assertive policy was debated, and lack of moderation is hard to explain, nationalism quite a likely factor</td>
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<tr>
<th>Implication</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Medium – bottom-up impact on policy strongly implies insufficient alternative explanations, but lack of evidence cannot prove moderation was not given consideration</td>
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### H4: risk management → strategic channeling

“The state can strengthen its risk management capabilities, making it more likely to channel popular nationalism for strategic gain.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Implication</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New and effective techniques of information management on foreign policy issues are observed</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Implication</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>High – hypothesis claims that state undergoes learning process, so absence of this observation will strongly disconfirm</td>
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<tr>
<th>Implication</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Medium – bottom-up explanations view state as struggling to cope with online discourse, but new techniques do not imply strategic purpose</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Implication</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>State becomes increasingly willing to draw popular sentiments towards the issue over time</td>
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<tr>
<th>Implication</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Medium – if better risk management facilitates strategic channeling then, all else equal, they should correlate; but improved risk management could coincide with fewer international situations in which popular nationalism would be useful</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Implication</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low – also consistent with nationalism card legitimacy ploy</td>
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Table 1.2: Observable implications of strategic channeling/risk management model of nationalism-foreign policy relationship
opinion crises” over the issue in question. If so, confidence in channeling and risk management as the key processes should increase relative to bottom-up models that characterize the state as incapable of controlling popular nationalist opinion due to the technological empowerment of society or elite disunity. Conversely, if the state’s ability to control the flow of information on the issue is observed to diminish across time, then the channeling and risk management model will explain correspondingly less about the relationship.

If better state risk management enables more strategic channeling, then we should expect to find increased tolerance for popular nationalist activity over time periods where improving risk management capabilities are observed. This is another hoop test. If comparison of cases over such time periods does not show any increased willingness to draw popular nationalist sentiments towards the issue, this will not support the idea that better risk management facilitates strategic channeling, though as noted in Table 1.2, it will not decisively rule it out. Meanwhile, if the expected pattern is observed, it could also be consistent with a nationalism card legitimacy ploy. Conclusions as to which model offers the better explanation will depend on how the various other pieces of evidence fit together – assuming equal prior confidence in each explanation.

Research design and methods

The study’s design attempts to combine methods drawn from political science and Sinology. The first pillar of the structure is systematic consideration of domestic and international explanations for the observed foreign policy outcomes. Popular nationalism is only one of many plausible factors that may explain Chinese policy outcomes in the South China Sea. Bayesian logic holds that the probability of one causal explanation’s validity depends not only on how closely the evidence conforms to its observable implications, but also on the likelihood of alternative explanations accounting for what is observed, and our prior confidence in its validity for the given class of cases. Accordingly, to Chapter 2 lays out the observable implications of eight variables that have been proposed to help explain
shifts in China’s policy the South China Sea at different times, and Chapter 3 assesses the relative strength of each in explaining China's past behaviour in this area. Four are general factors related to China’s external environment, while the other four are internal factors related to domestic politics in China, of which popular nationalism is one. All will require consideration, as Michael Ng-Quinn has suggested, “in a prioritized fashion,” to explain PRC foreign policy in the South China Sea, and thereby to discern any possible role for popular nationalism.126

The second pillar of the study's design is the use of “events data” to gauge the timing of changes in China’s behaviour, and to guide the selection of case studies for in-depth process tracing. As James Rosenau suggested, the comparison of one country’s actions across time should aim to identify “breakpoints separating the before-and-after patterns” in its behaviour.127 Drawing on internal-circulation chronologies and Chinese- and English-language open source reporting, this study assembles a continuous time series of the changes in the PRC’s behaviour on the South China Sea issue from 1970 to 2015.128 This forms the basis for the study’s focus on the period from 2007 onwards, identifying this as a turning point when China’s policy underwent a major qualitative change. The events data also guide the selection of seven “typical” cases of China’s altered behaviour for close causal analysis.129 These cases, in turn, form another time series with which to identify changes in the relationship between Chinese popular nationalism and PRC foreign policy over the period under study.

The principal method by which the study’s hypotheses are tested in specific cases is process tracing, which Andrew Bennett defines broadly as “the technique of looking for observable implications of hypothesized causal processes within a single case.”130 The rich data this method requires are available thanks to a proliferation in Chinese-language sources and new indicators of online activity. These include: party and government policy documents; internal research and advisory reports; leaders’ speeches and other official comments; maritime agency and diplomatic yearbooks; open-source Chinese-language scholarship; online search activity data from China’s dominant internet search engine Baidu; Chinese and English transcripts of government press conferences; data on PRC internet
Introduction

censorship; and leaked instructions from propaganda authorities. These data are supplemented by original survey research; quasi-ethnographic observation in online and offline spaces; a large volume of collected PRC media content; and semi-structured interviews with diplomatic officials from China and other regional countries, media practitioners, internet company executives, and academics at state-affiliated institutions. Appendix 1 offers further details on these data sources.

Process tracing allows reconciliation of the inferential methods of contemporary political science with the older tradition of Sinology. While comparative foreign policy has tended to stress empiricism, the “New Sinology” elucidated by Geremie Barmé emphasizes the need for humanistic intellectual and linguistic engagement with both the PRC and the broader Sinitic world, especially its past traditions and present forms of meaning-making. Process tracing works well within this rubric, testing the expectations of specific hypotheses against the observed and unobserved actions and utterances of Chinese political actors in their political, social and cultural context. Examining the sequence and timing of events and statements is an important element of both process tracing and the effort to understand Chinese meaning-making at official and popular levels. To this end I have, throughout the project and more generally, tried to maintain critical engagement with China rather than critical distance.

Several personal disclosures are relevant. First, as a UK-born Australian researcher with no (known) Chinese background, my work relies heavily on less than a decade of inelegant attempts to understand modern Chinese language and thought, and a thoroughly inadequate knowledge of the histories and traditions that shape their contemporary forms. Second, while I benefit greatly from Australian citizenship, I can see no defensible argument for automatically regarding my own political community’s material interest above another’s, much less those of humanity as a whole. Rejecting this basic principle limits my ability to understand the nationalist experience. Third, having no affiliation with any of the contending parties in the South China Sea dispute (save for a Cebu-born mother-in-law who claims ignorance of the dispute’s existence), I regard the claims of each disputant to exclusive sovereignty over disputed territories in the South
China Sea to be fundamentally flawed. Fourth, while this study leaves aside questions of the legality of the state behaviours discussed within, I do believe that international law, and particularly the UNCLOS, which all the South China Sea claimant states have ratified, offers the best chance of a sustainable solution to the maritime rights dimension of the dispute. Chapter 4 argues that the development of this area of international law has had unintended consequences, but now that the legal regime exists, I consider it preferable that states compete in this way rather than through violence. Finally, I hold the techniques of mass persuasion central in the analysis here to be morally neutral. Propaganda and publicity can be used for both positive and negative purposes, often simultaneously. This dialectic is nowhere more apparent than on this issue, where anti-foreign sentiments are frequently reined in or neutralized through state propaganda, even as they are maintained and stimulated through the same channels.

Limitations

The empirical investigations in this study are limited to the causes and effects of popular nationalism and PRC policy on the South China Sea issue between 2007 and 2016. Thus, even if validated in these pages, the strategic channeling and risk management model proposed above will still only constitute a simplified representation of key features of the relationship between popular nationalism and the foreign policy of one technically sophisticated authoritarian party-state on a contentious but unobtrusive issue under good economic conditions in the internet era. The South China Sea case could be regarded as a “plausibility probe” for this type of model. The question of whether it might shed some light on other Chinese foreign policy issues, in other states, under different background conditions, will be explored in the Conclusion.

Of the many criticisms that could reasonably be leveled at the picture of the state-society relationship sketched out in these pages, two stand out. First is its partiality. Sentiments and actions towards the South China Sea issue are only one aspect of the complex and contested phenomenon of Chinese nationalism, which
itself is only one sub-category of Chinese public opinion. The South China Sea, meanwhile, is only one element of China's foreign policy, which in turn constitutes only one of the party-state’s many policy agendas. The principal justification for this narrow focus is the South China Sea dispute’s complexity and importance in regional and global politics, which make the dissertation’s findings policy-relevant. The detailed studies of the nationalism-policy relationship in specific cases may also offer some consideration for analysts of PRC foreign policy inside and outside China. And, as noted above, despite its narrowness the study nonetheless contributes to filling gaps in several academic literatures.

Another reasonable criticism of this study would be that its assertions of strategic intentions mediating popular discursive trends rely on a conspiratorial view of China’s complex state and pluralistic society. To be sure, the party-state is not, on a day-to-day basis, a unitary actor in its management of public opinion on this issue. No single action necessarily reflects the wishes, let alone strategic calculations, of top leadership. But the South China Sea issue is a potential site of international conflict, and public opinion on the issue concerns the domestic ideological legitimacy of the CCP. On that basis, I proceed on the assumption that (1) during crisis situations and (2) across the medium-to-long term timeframe that this thesis addresses, the central guidance of public opinion on this issue has reflected the will of the officials at the top of the propaganda system, for which two Politburo members are formally responsible. In turn, I take the intentions of these officials as equivalent to the party-state’s intentions in this area of policy. If evidence subsequently indicates the CCP leadership opposed the propaganda system’s handling of the issue but were unable to prevent it, then the state’s actions may be better understood as a result of bureaucratic policy capture.

A further limitation of this study is that it leaves aside the role of nationalism, or national identity, in guiding Chinese policymakers’ decisions. There is little doubt identity and ideology do influence the perceptions of China’s decisionmakers. The PRC’s South China Sea policy evidently accords with particular views of China’s nature, history and destiny, but few reliable data currently exist on Chinese elites’ specific foreign policy preferences, so even preliminary indications of their precise
effects remain elusive.\textsuperscript{143} Within this study, then, nationalist ideology among leaders is a given. This means they are assumed to sincerely believe in the legitimacy and validity of China’s claims in the South China Sea.\textsuperscript{144} It is further assumed that decisionmakers believe in the primacy of their own ideas about how best to advance those disputed maritime claims, and therefore feel no normative compulsion to follow public opinion on the issue. If these assumptions were shown to be invalid, the findings outlined here might require significant adjustment.

\textbf{Chapter structure}

The remainder of this dissertation is divided into five substantive chapters and a Conclusion. Chapter 2 outlines the general characteristics of the South China Sea dispute, with a focus on China’s claims and interests, and introduces a range of existing explanations for changes in PRC policy on this issue. Chapter 3 lays out a framework for assessing continuity and change in state policy on maritime disputes, using assertiveness as the key variable. Comparing the quantity and quality of PRC assertive actions year-on-year from 1970 to 2015 demonstrates that the most important shift in China’s policy occurred in 2007, when coercive actions first became a regular feature. Chapter 4 examines the causes of China’s increased assertiveness in the South China Sea in 2007 and 2008, when its policy first shifted. Close examination of four case studies representative of the change in the PRC’s behaviour demonstrates the assertive shift had little or nothing to do with popular nationalism. Instead, it was a result of the intertwining of China’s growing capabilities and resource insecurity with the development of the UNCLOS regime governing maritime claims.

Chapter 5 analyzes the relationship between China’s assertive policy and the rise of domestic popular nationalism on the South China Sea issue between 2009 and 2011. Examining original survey data, internet search activity levels, and online nationalist discourse shows that Beijing’s assertive policy was a key driver of the public’s increased attention on the issue, Paradoxically, however, popular discourse overwhelmingly framed the party-state’s policy as passive and weak,
and the state made no concerted attempt to use these sentiments for strategic advantage until at least 2011. The evolving state-society relationship over the issue during this period is investigated by tracing the two cases most likely to involve bottom-up influence: the Sino-American Impeccable incident in March 2009, and the 2011 Sino-Vietnamese cable-cutting incidents. These cases also show little evidence of bottom-up influence on Beijing’s conduct, but the 2011 case shows the first hints of strategic channeling of public sentiments toward the issue.

Chapter 6 details the emergence of popular nationalism as a component part of China’s assertive maritime policy. It first examines the conceptualization of nationalist public opinion as a strategic resource in the CCP’s concepts of maritime consciousness (海洋意识), public opinion warfare (舆论战) and public diplomacy (公共外交). It then discusses the application of their basic principles in the CCP’s domestic and foreign propaganda. Turning to the specific function of popular nationalism in disputes like the South China Sea, it explains how state-led, risk-managed popular nationalism generates low-cost “grassroots deterrence” that helps China dissuade its adversaries from escalatory retaliation against its assertive policy. The 2012 Scarborough Shoal standoff provided the ideal conditions for bottom-up influence on policy, and the toughest test of the party-state’s public opinion risk management on the South China Sea issue across the period under study. A detailed reconstruction of events shows the wave of popular nationalism arose during the crisis in response to heightened official rhetoric and a state media campaign, rather than events on the water. The party-state’s carefully timed channeling of popular sentiments towards the issue supported the policy objective of “the unity of maritime rights defense and stability maintenance” by helping deter the Philippines from escalating the confrontation as Chinese ships took control of the disputed shoal. The final section outlines the continued advancement of the CCP’s public opinion risk management capabilities on the South China Sea issue since 2012.

After reviewing the dissertation’s findings and the contributions they offer to different lines of research, the Conclusion explores the possible broader relevance of the channeling and risk management framework.
Chapter 2

Disputed claims, interests, and explanations for policy change in the South China Sea

This chapter introduces the South China Sea dispute, its underlying drivers, and explanations for change in China’s policy there. First, it outlines the PRC’s disputed historical claims to sovereignty over islands in the area, and its more ambiguous claims to maritime jurisdictional rights. Next, it examines the strategic, economic and political stakes of the dispute, paying particular attention to how the PRC understands its interests in the disputed area. Using Chinese sources dating back to the 1980s, it shows that the party-state’s estimations of the material stakes have consistently exceeded those of outside observers, and that the symbolic interests for CCP politicians are also significant and longstanding. These underlying drivers help explain persistent features of PRC policy on the issue, but explaining changes will require identification of variation in the factors that animate China’s policy. The second half of the chapter, therefore, reviews a range of existing explanations for assertive shifts in China’s policy in the South China Sea, laying out the evidentiary basis and observable implications of each. As noted in Chapter 1, systematic consideration of these alternative explanations will be integral to providing a proper account of the role of popular nationalism in China’s policy.

Four explanations for PRC behavioural change in the South China Sea are external factors, relating primarily to the international structure within which the PRC state operates. Besides the regional balance of power, increasing material value of disputed possessions, and rapid declines in the PRC’s bargaining position, a fourth external factor, the development of the supranational legal regime of UNCLOS, has been briefly alluded to in some recent analytic works, but has not previously been systematically tested. Another four explanations for policy shifts relate to specific characteristics of China’s system of government, culture and leadership. These
include sub-state bureaucratic actors, strategic culture, individual leaders, and elevated domestic political-symbolic value. The bottom-up models of the nationalism-policy relationship (see Chapter 1) belong in this latter category.

**China’s disputed claims**

The PRC’s disputes in the South China Sea involve two distinct elements: territorial sovereignty and maritime rights. First, the PRC lays claim to territorial sovereignty over the entirety of four “island groups” (群岛), three of which are disputed by neighbouring countries (Table 2.1). Like the claim to the Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea, each of these claims is officially based on the contention that the first people to discover, name, exploit and exercise jurisdiction over these disputed features were Chinese.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English name</th>
<th>Chinese name</th>
<th>Territorial status quo</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Paracel Islands</td>
<td><em>Xisha Qundao</em> (西沙群岛)</td>
<td>PRC has controlled in part since 1956 and in full since 1974. Vietnam also asserts sovereignty over the entire archipelago.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spratly Islands</td>
<td><em>Nansha Qundao</em> (南沙群岛)</td>
<td>PRC occupies seven rocks and reefs, upon which it has built artificial islands. Vietnam occupies 21 features, the Philippines nine, Malaysia five, and the ROC one. The PRC claim of sovereignty may even extend to James Shoal (曾母暗沙), a submerged atoll 80 kilometres from Malaysian Borneo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Zhongsha Islands”</td>
<td><em>Zhongsha Qundao</em> (中沙群岛)</td>
<td>A large area of open sea which includes the Macclesfield Bank. Its only territorial feature is Scarborough Shoal, an unoccupied atoll also claimed by the Philippines.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2.1: PRC-claimed island groups in the South China Sea

At present, China controls the entire Paracel archipelago and, since May 2012, the waters around Scarborough Shoal. Overall, however, the territorial status quo in the South China Sea is unfavourable from Beijing’s perspective. In the largest group, the Spratly archipelago, which covers a vast area of the southern part of the sea, the PRC occupies none of the dozen or so naturally formed land features of any appreciable size. Its outposts there have all been constructed artificially on submerged reefs with at most small rocks above the waterline at high tide. In total, Vietnam occupies more than 20 features there, the Philippines nine, the PRC seven, and Malaysia five. In the PRC’s official view, then, much of this sprawling
archipelago is sovereign Chinese territory under foreign occupation. While there is little doubt the PRC intends to eventually resolve the disputes in its favour, a more immediate aim of Chinese policy has been to consolidate its tenuous position in the Spratly Islands, and “maintain the dispute.”

The second element of China’s disputed claims in the South China Sea is to sovereign rights in the maritime spaces around the disputed island groups. There are significant ambiguities regarding to the nature and geographic scope of these claims, referred to in CCP official discourse as its “maritime rights and interests.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Claim</th>
<th>Geographical scope</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sovereign territorial seas and internal waters</td>
<td>Territorial seas measuring 12 nm from territorial sea baselines, internal waters within baselines</td>
<td>Under the UNCLOS, to which China is a party, states are entitled to sovereign territorial seas measuring 12 nautical miles (nm) from coastal baselines, and around islands or rocks that are naturally above the waterline at high tide, and sovereign internal waters within those baselines. In 1996 the PRC published straight baselines enclosing the entire area of the Paracel archipelago as its territorial seas and internal waters. Although highly problematic legally, the baselines nonetheless clearly define the extent of the PRC’s claim to sovereign waters there. In the Spratlys and around Scarborough Shoal, by contrast, China has not yet declared baselines, leaving the extent of its claims unclear.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EEZ and continental shelf rights</td>
<td>200 nm around claimed sovereign territories, plus continental shelf</td>
<td>The UNCLOS also provides for exclusive state jurisdiction over fisheries and seabed resources up to a limit of 200 nm from territorial sea baselines, plus seabed resource rights on the continental shelf out to 350 nm. The PRC claims that at least some of the disputed Spratly Islands generate such entitlements, though it has not specified which.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historic rights</td>
<td>Suggested to cover nine-dash line area</td>
<td>PRC domestic law claims further as yet unspecified “historic rights,” probably including the non-exclusive exploitation of fisheries, in unspecified other areas, possibly the area within the nine-dash line.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regulation of military activities</td>
<td>EEZ and continental shelf, possibly whole nine-dash line area</td>
<td>The UNCLOS allows states to regulate “marine scientific research” (MSR) in the EEZ and on the continental shelf. Beijing argues this gives it the right to regulate foreign military surveillance activities in “waters under [PRC] jurisdiction” (管辖海域), a term that encompasses all of the areas subject to the claims listed above. This position conflicts with that of the US, which argues military surveillance is a category of activity that is distinct from MSR, and therefore permissible in the EEZs of other states. The PRC also requires foreign warships to obtain permission before conducting innocent passage through its territorial seas and internal waters, a position the US opposes.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2.2: PRC maritime rights claims in the South China Sea
China’s claims to territorial sovereignty, and perhaps also to some maritime rights (see Table 2.2), in the South China Sea are illustrated on official maps by the “nine-dash line” (九段线), also known as the “U-shaped line” (U形线) or the “dashed line” (断续线). The PRC inherited the line from the ROC government, which published it for the first time on an official map in 1947, two years before it retreated to Taiwan after its defeat on the Mainland.¹¹ The ROC government has maintained the original dashed line to the present day, and the PRC has required its inclusion on all maps published in the country since the early 1950s.¹² The nine-dash line has long been the subject of international concern because it suggests the area of China’s maritime claims extend almost to the coasts of Vietnam, the Philippines and Malaysia, and overlaps with Indonesia and Brunei’s declared maritime jurisdictional boundaries. The controversy grew in 2009 when the PRC attached the map to an official note to the United Nations Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS), prompting official objections from Malaysia, Vietnam and the Philippines. Indonesia, too, registered its concern, declaring the line to have no basis in international law.¹³

Neither the PRC nor the ROC have specified the geographical coordinates of the line, nor have they officially explained the meaning of the claims depicted. However, as Zou Keyuan has pointed out, China’s 1996 declaration of baselines for its territorial sea claim around the Paracel Islands effectively rules out the possibility of the nine-dash line being a depiction of the PRC’s territorial seas.¹⁴ Chinese officials may have hinted at a “minimalist” interpretation – that the line merely depicts the PRC’s claim to sovereignty over the islands contained within it – as early as 1995 and as recently as 2012.¹⁵ However, recent English-language works by officially connected legal scholars have advanced an elaborate argument justifying the line as depicting the area in which China enjoys “historic rights,” to fisheries in particular. Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi also linked the line to maritime rights claims in a 2016 interview, suggesting the ambiguity of the PRC’s claims will remain for the immediate future.¹⁶
The PRC maintains that its disputes in both the East and South China Seas can be resolved through peaceful negotiations, and since the 1980s it has officially advocated joint exploration and development of economic resources in disputed areas.\(^{17}\) Although China signed fisheries agreements with Japan covering part of the East China Sea in 1997, and with Vietnam over the Gulf of Tonkin in 2000, its co-claimants in the South China Sea have generally resisted the PRC’s proposals for joint offshore oil development in areas far from the Chinese mainland and relatively close to their own coastlines. Indeed, Vietnam and Malaysia already operate their own resource development projects in some of these areas. Despite offering to share maritime resources in such areas, the PRC has never indicated willingness to compromise on its claims of sovereignty over any of the disputed territories in the South China Sea.\(^{18}\) This uncompromising stance contrasts with the PRC’s approach to many land-based territorial disputes on which it has made substantial compromises.\(^{19}\) Behind this inconsistency, I argue, lies Beijing’s enormous and often underappreciated strategic, economic, and political stake in the disputed possessions of the South China Sea. As the following sections show, it has long been CCP doctrine that the disputed areas are of vital importance to the PRC’s national security, economic wellbeing, and even political stability.

**Underlying drivers: China’s interests in the South China Sea**

Although the strategic, economic and political importance of the South China Seas is widely recognized in English-language works, it is nonetheless common to encounter the view that the objects of these disputes are basically worthless. The discounting of the material value of the islands and maritime spaces seems particularly common among analysts who explain changes in China’s behaviour by reference to irrational forces such as nationalist public opinion.\(^{20}\) As shown below, however, in Chinese sources the realization of these disputed maritime claims has long been portrayed as a matter of national survival.
Security interests

China’s security interests in the South China Sea revolve around its seaborne trade and naval strategy. Since the 1970s at the latest, PRC official media have routinely described the South China Sea as the “gateway to the outside world.” As PLAN South Sea Fleet deputy commander Qu Zhenmou told a navy symposium in 1987, the South China Sea connects the Indian and Pacific Oceans, and hosts some of the world’s busiest sea lanes, making it a site of struggle for control among great powers. As China’s trade has grown, so has its reliance on its sea approaches, particularly for its energy and food imports. China became a net oil importer in 1993, and since then its foreign oil and gas imports have continued to increase. The country imported almost 2 billion barrels of oil in 2012. In 2011 domestic production of oil was only 42 percent of consumption, a figure projected to drop to 11 percent by 2030. China has also faced a long-term dearth of arable land relative to its population, and soil pollution, desertification and urbanization have exacerbated the problem. Between 1999 and 2011 China’s population increased by 80 million, while its area of arable land fell by more than 6 million hectares. Accordingly, the volume of its food imports has risen significantly, the bulk being delivered by sea. Another common term in PRC sources, “lifeline” (生命线), is indicative of how acutely Beijing’s dependence on the area’s sea lanes is felt.

The maritime spaces of the South China Sea have been a key focus of the Chinese Navy’s operations for several decades. In the words of Admiral Liu Huaqing, the South China Sea offers a potential “protective screen” (屏障) for China’s southern approaches. As PLAN commander in the mid-1980s, Liu advocated and oversaw a major revision of China’s naval strategy, shifting the focus away from coastal defense and towards “offshore” or “near seas” areas (近海). This area of operations includes the disputed expanses of the South China Sea, along with the East China Sea and Yellow Sea. A 2002 report from a state-run research institution states that securing control of the south sea maritime area (南海海区) would “add more than 1000km to our country’s defensive depth, with great significance for defending against strategic air attacks and shielding strategic adjustments to land
deployments.” It also described the area as “an important exit for our country’s maritime forces to break through enemy blockades during wartime,” adding that effective control of it would “greatly increase our comprehensive strategic deterrent ability.”

The construction of a base for the PLA’s newest ballistic missile submarines at the southeastern tip of Hainan Island in the mid-2000s suggested the deep waters of the South China Sea may even be important to China’s nuclear deterrent. The South China Sea’s disputed maritime spaces thus appear vital to the state’s national defense strategy.

While some outside observers argue the disputed islands are too small to be militarily useful, CCP sources heavily emphasize their significance. The 2002 internal report draws a clear link between control of the islands and control of the strategically vital maritime spaces:

“occupation of these islands and reefs is equivalent to directly or indirectly controlling most of the lines of communication from the Straits of Malacca to Japan, from Singapore to Hong Kong, from Guangdong to Manila and even from East Asia to West Asia, Africa and Europe.”

The ongoing upgrades of China’s facilities on the seven Spratly reefs it occupies, most recently with massive land reclamation works, deepwater ports and three large airfields, reflect Beijing's belief in the potential military applications of the islands. Knowledgeable US observers have noted that new facilities there will help to increase China’s “maritime domain awareness,” and can also host large numbers of fighter jets and missiles that would significantly expand the range of the PLA’s advanced weapons systems.

Beijing perceives significant overlaps between economic rights and strategic security. The PRC’s long-held opposition to military surveillance activities in the EEZ is rooted in a belief, expressed formally during the UNCLOS III negotiations in the early 1970s, that “all marine scientific research activities have potential military applications . . . therefore constitute a danger to national security and sovereignty.” From the PRC’s perspective, establishing economic rights therefore carries the potentially enormous strategic payoff of expanding the area within
which foreign military reconnaissance can be designated illegal under international law. China has used the land features it controls in the South China Sea to construct civilian infrastructure, such as harbours, staff accommodation and processing plants, that facilitates more effective exploitation of the resources of the area. This helps secure the sea lanes that carry the country’s imports of strategic commodities, and could even directly alleviate the dependence on those imports. As the 2002 report describes it, the South China Sea is not merely a channel that China depends on for its security, it is also “a potential base for energy supplies in the future.”\textsuperscript{34} As detailed below, Beijing’s economic interests in the South China Sea are not limited to hydrocarbons, but also include other seabed minerals and fish – and its estimates of their value far exceed those of outside observers.

\textit{Economic interests}

Open-source and internal Chinese estimates of the hydrocarbon resources in the South China Sea have consistently been many orders of magnitude higher than those from foreign sources. A 1993-1994 US Geological Survey study estimated total oil reserves at 28 billion barrels, but the PRC Ministry of Land and Resources’ preliminary estimates are up to ten times higher at 138-240 billion.\textsuperscript{35} PRC estimates have been high since preliminary surveys carried out by the Chinese Academy of Science (CAS) in the 1980s investigated large sedimentary basins northwest of James Shoal, the southernmost point of China’s claim.\textsuperscript{36} In November 2012, China National Offshore Oil Company (CNOOC) estimated undiscovered reserves of 125 billion barrels of oil (bbl) and 500 trillion cubic feet (tcf) of gas in the South China Sea.\textsuperscript{37} As of 2012, China’s total proven reserves were just 20.35 bbl and 0.107 tcf respectively.\textsuperscript{38} Clearly, then, securing control of the South China Sea’s resources would have major strategic and economic significance for Beijing.

Often overlooked altogether by outside observers are the potential reserves of zinc, iron, manganese, copper, nickel, cobalt, titanium and even diamonds that may, according to PRC sources, lie beneath the seabed in the disputed area. While independent estimates of these mineral reserves are lacking, they have been
routinely alluded to in both public and internal-circulation materials from across the party-state and military bureaucracies for many years. Some PRC estimates of resource bounties are likely to have been exaggerated by vested interests hoping to benefit by persuading the CCP leadership to pursue particular policies in the area. But given the consistency of these seemingly exaggerated Chinese estimates since the late 1970s, and the range of authoritative and internal sources in which they have appeared – from the PLA mouthpiece to the People's Daily, China Central Television, China Youth Daily and internal academic and military reports – it seems reasonable to conclude that this view of the value of the resources is widely shared across the party-state. In short, if optimistic future resource estimates were once advanced by particular bureaucratic interests, they appear to have gained general acceptance within the party-state system.

The divergent Chinese and foreign estimates may reflect the importance the CCP attaches to maintaining the future availability of these potential resource deposits. While western estimates have tended to focus on recoverable reserves that can feasibly be extracted using current technologies, many CCP estimates assume future technological developments will enable exploitation of once-unrecoverable reserves. As John Garver observed in 1992:

“From the [Chinese leaders’] perspective of China’s national interest, control over the South China Sea will substantially enhance China’s ability to provide prosperity for its people and achieve a position of global power in the future. It is not a question of oil, or gas, or fish, or manganese nodules, but of all these and other now unknown resources taken together and exploited long-term by a land with a population of 1.13 billion people. Nor is it a question of China’s technological capabilities now or even in the near future. Rather it is the Chinese people’s ability to exploit these resources in 50 or 100 years’ time.”

Recent advances in deep-water oil and gas drilling technology, and the successful extraction of “combustible ice” (gas hydrate), have probably strengthened the CCP’s perception of the significance of as-yet unrecoverable resources.
Also of immediate interest to all sides are the fisheries resources of the South China Sea, which were estimated in 2002 at 30 million tons per year. The value of the disputed area’s fisheries has been recognized by the PRC since the 1980s. In 1985, directing Chinese fishing activities away from depleted coastal areas towards the near-pristine environs of the Spratlys became official government policy, ending three decades in which the PRC actually barred its own fishers from travelling there. As of 2004, according to FAO statistics, Chinese boats took 3.6 million tons of fish from the South China Sea, equal to 25 percent of the country’s catch. Today, the disputed archipelagos offer relatively untapped stocks for voracious fish processing conglomerates, as well as coastal fishing communities, many of whom face declining catches close to home due to overfishing and environmental damage. CCP reports point out more than 1000 kinds of aquatic resources across more than 200,000 square kilometres of fishing grounds, and describing the South China Sea as “our country’s largest tropical fishing ground” has become a standard line in official sources. In summary, like the hydrocarbons and minerals, the fisheries resource stakes that the PRC state perceives in the South China Sea are massive, and easily underestimated.

**Political-symbolic interests**

The CCP has longstanding political stakes in its maritime disputes in the South China Sea. China’s self-ascribed position as a victim in its relations with Japan and the West has been closely examined, but the self-righteousness of the PRC’s position on the South China Sea is less widely understood. In fact, even though none of its Southeast Asian rivals were imperialist powers, the party-state’s official positions on the South China Sea disputes place the issue within a near-identical narrative of past and present victimization (see Chapter 5). Party-state writings on the dispute routinely begin by describing China as a victim of “violation” (侵犯) and “occupation” (侵占) at the hands of its rivals. As Jie Chen writes:

“In their eyes the nature of the Spratly dispute is crystal clear: initially taking advantage of China’s turbulent domestic politics and its
preoccupation with superpower threats in foreign policy, regional countries have occupied China’s islands and reefs, carved up its sea areas, looted its marine resources, and violated its national sovereignty.\textsuperscript{49}

The embedding of the South China Sea claims within this discourse of self-righteous victimization gives CCP leaders and sub-state institutions strong political interests in advancing the PRC’s position. This helps explain Beijing’s consistent assertiveness in the disputes over more than four decades (see Chapter 3), and its willingness to use military force to achieve its aims.\textsuperscript{50} Liu Huaqing describes the decision to move against Vietnam in the Spratly Islands in 1988 as "a matter of principles, directly related to national standing and national dignity."\textsuperscript{51} Although it is difficult to know with certainty, the promotion and public lionization of leaders associated with policy success in the South China Sea suggests the dispute also offers individual leaders the potential to accrue political capital.\textsuperscript{52}

The linkage of the South China Sea issue to the national narrative of historical humiliation also gives the party-state a strong interest in “maintaining the dispute,” and not compromising until it can be resolved on its terms. As Taylor Fravel writes in relation to the Sino-Japanese deadlock over the Diaoyu Islands, politicians in either country who proposed compromise on the sovereignty question would risk losing domestic political support, reducing the political capital available for other policy initiatives, and even jeopardizing their leadership positions.\textsuperscript{53} Greg Austin noted a similar dynamic applied in the South China Sea in the 1990s.\textsuperscript{54} Not only could elites cite the righteousness of China’s long-held official positions to criticize a rival who advocated compromise, they would also find it relatively easy to demonstrate popular support for their position, as per the \textit{policy contention} model of bottom-up influence.\textsuperscript{55} As a publicly declared matter of sovereignty and national dignity, the dispute clearly relates to the legitimacy of the party-state, understood as the moral justification for its rule among the population.\textsuperscript{56} The precise relationship between any such legitimacy concerns and China’s assertive policy since 2007 is a key focus of this study’s empirical investigations in subsequent chapters. For present purposes, however, the point is that the political-symbolic significance of the South China Sea dispute is probably
sufficient to explain China’s consistent refusal to compromise on any of its claims to sovereignty over disputed territories, as well as its dogged insistence on the nine-dash line map. Yet, as shall see, however, this inability to compromise on territorial claims and symbolic maps does not imply an inability to moderate assertive behaviours in pursuit of maritime rights.

The CCP’s official framing of the disputes also invokes traditional discourses of filial duty and harmonious hierarchy, lending further moral significance to assertive policies and refusal to compromise. As noted above, the CCP has consistently claimed, both internally and externally, that the four “island groups” have belonged to the Chinese people since “ancient times.” The idea that ancestors of the modern “Chinese nation” (中华民族) discovered, named and exercised sovereignty in the disputed areas frames their eventual recovery as a matter of filial duty. The characterization of China’s rivals as “small countries” (小国) also invokes the Confucian moral imperative to act in accordance with one’s place in a hierarchy, which in this case would mean recognizing, and perhaps deferring to, the PRC as a “major country” (大国) and regional great power. If they refuse, it may be incumbent upon China to teach then a lesson, using force if necessary, to uphold a harmonious (hierarchical) regional order. As Johnston has shown, the efficacy and necessity of the use of punitive military force is a common theme across many traditional Chinese texts on statecraft. To the extent that CCP policymakers or political constituencies’ views are shaped by such ideas, this may help explain the long-term assertive and uncompromising features of PRC behaviour detailed in the next chapter.

On the other hand, invoking the vision of a hierarchical regional order also implies the PRC’s proper role to be one of a benevolent and generous ruler of the region. This, in turn, offers moral justification for the CCP’s policy of setting aside maritime territorial disputes for later resolution, while offering joint development of resources with rivals on the (often overlooked) condition that they implicitly acquiesce to China’s sovereignty claims. This is reflected the official formulation of the PRC’s proposal, which it has maintained since the mid-1980s: sovereignty is
ours, shelve the dispute, jointly develop [the resources] (主权在我，搁置争议，共同开发). This is not to say China’s proposal is driven by such moral imperatives to beneficence; indeed, to date joint development has only been proposed in areas that are not already under China’s administrative control. Internal CCP research refers to joint development as a pragmatic “temporary arrangement” that helps to “stabilize our peripheral security environment.”

The Chinese government and population’s deep-seated belief in the rightfulness of China’s claim is far from new. It was widespread well before the often-noted “rise” of Chinese nationalism in the 1990s. As Chen points out, speaking from experience as a student and researcher in the 1970s and 1980s: “Systematic education and energetic propaganda under both Nationalist and especially Communist governments since the 1910s have all contributed to entrenching this concept [of the absolute correctness of China’s claims] among the Chinese population.” Austin concurs, noting in his 1998 book that the disputed islands were “seen almost universally in the country as the ‘sacred territory of China’.” In this sense, Chinese nationalism has been an important underlying driver of the CCP’s lack of compromise in the South China Sea, and its near-constant assertiveness in pursuit of its claims, across the decades. But explaining continuity in China’s behaviour is not the same as explaining change, the subject of the next section.

**Explanations for policy change**

The previous section has shown that the CCP state has enormous geostrategic, economic and political interests in the disputed areas of the South China Seas, and that this has been the case since the 1980s at the latest. It explained how the existence of each of these incentives for China to pursue its claims in the disputed areas can explain basic continuities in China’s policy in its maritime disputes over the past few decades, specifically its refusal to compromise on territorial sovereignty or modify its maritime rights claims, its willingness to resort to military force, the consistently assertive nature of its policy (see Chapter 3), and even its ostensibly conciliatory policy of advocating “joint development.” However,
a crucial distinction must be drawn between the underlying drivers of the dispute, which can explain *continuities* in China's pursuit of its disputed claims, and variables that can explain assertive policy *change*.

This section reviews a range of internal and external explanations that have been put forward to explain changes in China's behaviour in the South China Sea. Foreign policy change, as Bjorn Jerden has suggested, occurs when "a state's foreign policy apparatus routinely starts to handle similar situations differently." 64 Explanations for such changes in the PRC's behaviour in the South China Sea include international variables such as (1) favourable changes in the regional balance of power; (2) heightened value of the disputed area's resources; (3) declining claim strength; (4) international legal regime development; and domestic factors such as (5) sub-state bureaucratic interests; (6) Chinese strategic culture; (7) personal traits of particular leaders; and (8) elevated symbolic political interests. The bottom-up influence of popular nationalism, various models of which were detailed in Chapter 1, are a subset of the latter category.

Observable implications of each explanation are summarized in Table 2.4 at the end of this section. From this, it is apparent that these eight factors are generally not mutually exclusive, and may interact. Accordingly, analysts seeking to explain China's past policy shifts have typically pointed to some combination of these factors. As Rosenau pointed out, to understand how a state's foreign policy may reflect particularistic domestic circumstances – such as nationalist public opinion – it makes sense to start by identifying the general patterns from which its actions may deviate. 65 The first group of explanations for Chinese maritime policy shifts, therefore, focus on changes in the structure of the state's external environment.

1. *Balance of power*

Looking at China's maritime behaviour from an historical perspective, Marwyn Samuels argued China's policy on the South China Sea has usually depended on its own (relative) capabilities, with the area of its activities expanding during periods
of strength and contracting during periods of weakness. In a more recent context, Swaran Singh has argued the collapse of the Soviet Union removed a powerful naval presence from the region, creating a “power vacuum” in which the PRC had “physical space to manoeuvre.” This, according to Singh, helps explain a rapid expansion of China’s maritime activities in the 1990s, including in the Spratly Islands. There has been debate over whether individual countries’ foreign policies are even within the scope of neorealist theory but, as we shall see, there are good reasons to believe that favourable changes in the regional balance of power has been a factor behind assertive Chinese maritime behaviour in the past.

A more conditional power-focused explanation is “windows of opportunity.” Jie Chen argues the hardline shifts of PRC policy in the South China Sea that culminated in its use of force in 1974 and 1988 resulted from the CCP leadership’s observation of changes China’s external environment. When the PRC expanded its military presence into the southwestern half of the Paracel Islands in 1974, it needed only to evict remnants of the doomed South Vietnamese regime, whose principal backer, the US, was drawing down its involvement in the region. However, this timing was more than simple opportunism: the impending unification of Vietnam made the move a matter of urgency, particularly since Beijing also understood the ascendant North Vietnamese regime to be a close ally of the USSR, China’s primary security threat at the time. China, in short, availed itself of a fleeting opportunity to achieve full control of the Paracel Islands.

A similar pattern attended the PRC’s push southward from the Paracels into the Spratlys from 1987 onwards, which culminated in the use of military force against Vietnam to establish China’s first outposts in the South China Sea’s largest archipelago. The move coincided with the weakening of the Soviet commitment to Hanoi. Chen, then a researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, assessed that

"Moscow's greatly reduced alliance commitment to Hanoi and the normalization of Sino-Soviet relations convinced Beijing that Moscow was
highly unlikely to come to Hanoi’s help if China attacked in the Spratlys. Nor would the U.S. help Vietnam resist a coercive approach by China since Vietnam-U.S. relations had not been restored.”

Chinese military analysts in 1987 argued, correctly, that targeting Vietnam for “military struggle” in the Spratlys would not provoke much international reaction. Just 18 months later, Hanoi had withdrawn its troops from Cambodia and emerged from its international isolation, closing this window of opportunity to act with relative impunity against Vietnam. Evidence uncovered by Fravel suggests the CCP leadership may not have authorized the use of military force in 1988. However, Beijing clearly did authorize a series of major assertive actions – large research missions, live-fire naval exercises, and the establishment of six reef outposts. This was premised on favourable assessments of the naval balance of power, and confidence that neither superpower would intervene.

In another possible example of favourable power shifts contributing to assertive PRC policy change, the closure of United States bases in the Philippines in late 1992 afforded Beijing the chance to advance its position in the Spratly Islands. China subsequently expanded its presence eastward into the Philippines-controlled area of the archipelago for the first time, occupying Mischief Reef. Although an unprecedentedly strongly-worded statement from ASEAN may have helped moderate China’s actions over the following three years, in 1998 it built its largest and most extensive new facilities on the reef. According to Christopher Joyner, this reflected “how the balance of power has tipped in [China’s] favor since the onset of the East Asian financial crisis” of 1997-1998.

Changes in the regional balance of power are also a common explanation for China’s assertive behaviour in the 2000s. Publicly available Mainland Chinese analyses of the causes of the PRC’s policy shift are relatively rare, since they implicitly contradict the official line that China’s policy has been consistent and unchanging. However, in one such analysis, Zhai Kun argues the US’s economic troubles in 2008 explain the timing of the PRC’s recent behaviour in its maritime disputes:
“After the Global Financial Crisis, the power differential between China and America was reduced, while that between China and its neighbours increased further. The economies of the 10 ASEAN countries put together do not even make up 40 percent of China’s. Therefore, on the issue of the South China Sea, the temporary spirit of liberal cooperation receded, and realist power politics took the lead.”

Relatedly, based on more than two dozen anonymous interviews, Andrew Scobell and Scott Harold report that many Chinese analysts view “premature triumphalism” – exaggerated assessments of the power shift between China and its rivals – as a primary driver of increased PRC assertiveness between 2008 and 2010.

Gauging the likelihood of power-based explanations requires, above all, careful examination and comparison of the timing of the assertive actions relative to the posited change in the regional power structure. This must include consideration of when the relevant decisions behind a given action are likely to have been taken, given what is known about the policy implementation process. Newly assertive patterns of action, particularly new on-water operations in disputed areas, may take months or even years of preparation, so the timing of the actions themselves may not be the most accurate indication of the timing of any change in state policy. Second, the likelihood of power-based explanations will be strengthened if government policy or analytical documents suggest the perception of opportunities for advances in the dispute, as they did in 1987-1988.

These types of external structural explanations have the most trouble explaining the PRC’s lack of use of force in the past 25 years. Until well into the 1990s China’s use of its navy to advance its interests in the sea appeared to be increasing commensurate with its material capabilities. Since that time, China’s large-scale naval modernization program, which began in earnest in the early 1990s, has accelerated. Given China’s increasing superiority in naval hard power since that time, we might expect China’s assertive shifts to have become both more frequent and more intense. Yet the PLA Navy has not fired a shot in anger there since the
Claims, interests and explanations for policy change

1980s. This indicates that other moderating factors are at play – China’s increasing economic interdependence with the outside world perhaps principal among them. Paradoxically, as the next section shows, this situation of increasing interdependence is also argued to have been an important driver of assertive shifts in PRC policy.

2. Increasing value of disputed possessions

As China’s economic growth began to take off in the 1980s, its increasing dependence on trade boosted the importance of its shipping lanes. At the same time, the CCP’s switch in governing strategy away from ideology and towards economic development increased the importance of the natural resources underlying the disputed area, arguably adding to the PRC’s motivation to push into the Spratlys.80 A similar logic could have applied in the 1990s. As noted above, China became a net importer of oil in 1993, and its energy dependence has only increased since that time. According to Singh, China’s grain imports also rose rapidly in the 1990s, and its growing shipbuilding industry depended for its future on “assured access and control over its adjacent seas.” The reform-era Chinese economy’s simultaneous growth and increasing reliance on trade thus created an “expanding spiral” of motivations for the PRC to seek greater control of its maritime periphery, especially the South China Sea, where it expanded its military and civilian presence in the Spratly Islands and elsewhere.81

The basic hoop test for this type of explanation is to assess whether the value of the disputed possessions has changed prior to the policy change. Estimating changes in strategic value tends to be speculative, and in the case of the PRC in the South China Sea increased dependence on the area’s sea lanes creates incentives for both assertiveness and moderation.82 The market prices and domestic consumption volumes of relevant commodities are therefore the most accessible measure of the value of the disputed possessions. If this indicates an elevation in the value of the area’s resources before the policy shift, then the basic expectation of a material value explanation is satisfied. However, where a state presides over a
rapidly growing trading economy, demand for resources and reliance on sea lanes will be increasing at most points in time. A more unique implication is that we may evidence of increasing importance being placed on the disputed area’s resources in government advisory documents, reports and scholarly analysis on the topic. Of course, the true reasoning behind an assertive shift may be kept secret, but if the strategic- or resource-value rationale is so strong as to be a significant driver of policy change, then publicly available analysis should contain some signs of this.

Another test of increased value of the disputed possessions as an explanation for assertive policy change can be made by examining the assertive actions themselves. It is also difficult to establish whether strategic control of sea lanes is a distinct motivation for a policy shift because most assertive actions in these offshore disputes can be seen as serving this goal. But if the actions in question are directly connected to the pursuit of the area’s resources, this will support the idea that they were a factor. This applies to operations that directly advance the state’s ability to access the resources, as well as actions that serve this goal indirectly by preventing rival states’ access to them. In the case of the South China Sea dispute, the sponsorship of domestic fishing activities or energy surveys would appear to be directly aimed at securing resources, while indirect pursuit of resources may involve threats or interference against rival claimants’ attempts to explore or exploit them. The more actions of this type are observed, the stronger this factor will become in an explanation of any more general shift in policy.

3. Declining claim strength

Extending the idea of preventive war, Fravel’s theory of escalation in territorial disputes holds that states have a greater incentive to use force when their already-weak position in relation to the disputed possession deteriorates further.83 In contrast to the expectations of conventional balance of power analyses, Fravel argues China has been more likely to use force in its territorial disputes when its bargaining power has declined, rather than strengthened.84 This is because under
such conditions decision-makers are likely to perceive the possibility of resolving the dispute in their favour to be in danger of declining to zero.

“When a state controls little or none of the contested land, even just political pressure that consolidates such a disadvantageous status quo can appear threatening, as this reduces the long-term ability of the state with an inferior claim to achieve its territorial goals.”

The theory specifies several conditions associated with the operation of this mechanism, including increasing value of the disputed possession, and the basic viability of the prospect of seizing at least some of the disputed territory by force. Other internal or external threats in the state’s overall security environment can be an important catalyst, as this increases leaderships’ sensitivity to the prospect of territorial loss. The key cause of escalation, however, is declining bargaining power, without which “neither internal nor external threats to a state should create incentives for the escalation of territorial disputes.”

Fravel argues adverse shifts in China’s position are a better explanation than “windows of opportunity” for its moves in the South China Sea in 1974 and 1988. However, Fravel also shows evidence that the PRC leadership did not actually intend to use military force in either instance; this implies that assertive shifts that risk the use of force should also lie within the theory’s explanatory scope. This makes it a potential explanation for China’s assertive shift in the South China Sea dispute in the present era, despite absence of the direct use of military force. In a 2011 co-authored article, Swaine and Fravel argue coercive on-water actions against Vietnamese and Philippine energy survey activities that year were largely a result of the threat to China’s position that these new surveys posed.

If this theory helps explain China’s recent behaviour in the South China Sea, we should expect to find policy shifts following after negative changes in Beijing’s position in the dispute. This type of reactive policy shift should be more likely during episodes of elevated domestic or international insecurity. Confidence in this explanation will be strengthened if Chinese state-connected analyses emphasize the need for corrective action to prevent the loss of claimed possessions, or to
reverse unfavourable trends. Although the following chapters raise doubts about this interpretation of China’s escalations in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, they find good reasons to believe declining claim-strength was a factor in the initiation of China’s assertive shift around 2007.

Viewing declining claim-strength as a factor usefully focuses attention on how one disputant country’s seemingly aggressive actions may in fact be better understood as loss-averse responses to developments that threaten the basic viability of its position.\textsuperscript{90} However, where change is apparent in China’s pattern of responses to such challenges to its claim-strength, other factors besides the adversaries’ actions were likely at play. The problems of, as China saw them, Southeast Asian countries’ delinquency, bad faith, and unilateral development were already acutely perceived before 2007.\textsuperscript{91} The international legal regime explanation discussed below, and developed in detail in Chapter 4, offers additional, complementary insight into the causes of change in the PRC’s responses to its rivals’ activities.

4. International legal regime

A counterintuitive driver of assertive behaviour found in some analysis of PRC policy in the South China Sea is the development of UNCLOS, the new international legal institution governing state jurisdiction over large areas of what were formerly high seas.\textsuperscript{92} This explanation, as developed in Chapter 4, proposes three mechanisms by which this has occurred. First, the implementation of the global maritime legal regime has authorized and enabled new assertive actions by upgrading the status of disputed maritime rights claims in domestic law, and spurring the development of enhanced enforcement capabilities. Second, the UNCLOS has created incentives for assertive state actions in disputed maritime areas with the aim of maintaining the legal strength of jurisdictional claims. Third, the development of the international legal regime has also severely weakened China’s bargaining position over certain valuable areas, a situation that Beijing has on occasions sought to reverse through coercive measures. These mechanisms,
and the observable implications of their operation, are set out separately in Table 4.1.

5. Sub-state bureaucratic actors

The narrow bureaucratic interests of sub-state actors are an important factor to consider in any instance of China’s behaviour in the South China Sea. There are several ways assertive shifts may be linked with the narrow interests of sub-state foreign policy actors. First, they may lobby the central leadership to take assertive actions that suit their institutional interests, but not necessarily the national interest. Second, the vague and general terms in which central policies are laid out affords considerable room for interpretation, allowing functional agencies to potentially stretch their mandates. Third, some front-line agencies active in disputed maritime areas may be inexperienced in foreign affairs issues and take actions without appreciating the international repercussions.

John Garver has identified China’s policy of expansion into the Spratly Islands in the 1980s as in large part the result of a successful PLAN-led lobbying campaign. The Navy set the policy agenda by presenting “specific proposals” to the CCP leadership, while PLAN research offices developed compelling arguments emphasizing the value of maritime resources to the party’s primary reform-era goal of economic development. Thus, Garver characterizes China’s assertive push into the Spratlys as a result of the “the intersection of bureaucratic and national interests,” in which the PLAN successfully framed its own interests as amenable to the stated priorities of the CCP leadership. An important reason for this success, in Garver’s account, was its ability to rally bureaucratic allies. Hainan Province stood to gain from economic exploitation of the area, as well as from investment in infrastructure to facilitate expanded control. Meanwhile, emotional nationalists in the propaganda system willingly advertised the PLAN’s arguments for radical action. The MFA, if it favoured more moderate policies, was overruled.
The occupation of Mischief Reef in late 1994 – expanding the PRC’s permanent presence into the eastern part of the Spratlys for the first time – has been cited as another example of assertive policy driven by sub-state actors rather than the central leadership. Continuing Garver’s line of analysis, Allen Whiting characterized the incident as an example of how “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.”95 After Philippines authorities discovered the PRC’s new outpost, China’s embassy in Manila stated the action had been initiated by “low-level functionaries acting without the knowledge and consent of the Chinese government,” allegedly to the surprise of Politburo Standing Committee Members.96 Subsequent information suggests the operation was coordinated at the Vice Ministerial level or above.97

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agency</th>
<th>Chinese</th>
<th>Parent ministry</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>China Marine Surveillance</td>
<td>中国海监总队</td>
<td>State Oceanic Administration, Ministry of Land and Resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fisheries Law Enforcement</td>
<td>渔政总队</td>
<td>Fisheries Administration Bureau, Ministry of Agriculture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maritime Safety Administration</td>
<td>海事局</td>
<td>Ministry of Transport</td>
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<tr>
<td>Customs Anti-Smuggling Bureau</td>
<td>海关缉私局</td>
<td>General Administration of Customs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Border Protection Maritime Police98</td>
<td>边防海警</td>
<td>Ministry of Public Security and People’s Armed Police</td>
</tr>
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Table 2.3: Chinese maritime law enforcement agencies, pre-2013

Uncoordinated and adventurous maritime-related departments have featured prominently in explanations of China’s assertive maritime policy in the 2010s. The identity and number of these “dragons stirring up the sea” varies in different accounts, but the phrase has most commonly referred to the five law enforcement fleets that were active in the PRC’s claimed maritime jurisdictions until the establishment of the China Coast Guard 2013 (Table 2.3).99 In an influential 2012 report, the International Crisis Group (ICG) found these fleets had incentives to behave aggressively in disputed areas, and often justified their actions by adopting expansive interpretations of central policy guidelines. Their parent agencies and other bureaucratic allies are argued to have had vested interests in keeping
tensions high in order to justify higher budgetary allocations. This may have been exacerbated while the proposal for a unified China Coast Guard (CCG) was under consideration, with each agency competing to establish its “patriotic” credentials and demonstrate its indispensability ahead of the long-anticipated merge.\textsuperscript{100} But even since the formation of the CCG, according to Linda Jakobson, “systemic problems and fractured authority in China leave substantial room for myriad maritime security actors to push their own agendas, especially in the South China Sea.” Combined with China’s increased capabilities, Jakobston argued this, and not central strategic decisionmaking, explained why China had “continually antagonised its neighbours by its assertive actions at sea and in the air.”\textsuperscript{101}

Examining the possibility of narrow bureaucratic interests as a cause of China’s assertive actions, as opposed to the leadership’s preferences or a state-wide consensus view of the national interests, is a core task of Chinese foreign policy analysis. The answer is inevitably one of degree: what level of agreement exists among the actors with the ability to influence policy regarding the acceptability of a given course of action? In any case of foreign policy decisionmaking it is likely that at least some individuals in positions of influence hold differing views. But there is a difference between disapproving of a given course of action and actively opposing it. If those who disapprove of a policy choose not to oppose it – whether due to expectations of inevitable defeat, knowledge of central intentions, or careerism – then it effectively becomes the subject of consensus. And if sub-state actors convince the central leadership to support their preferred courses of action, then those actions by definition become the centre’s policy.

One relatively strong indication of uncoordinated actions by sub-state actors is the absence of a timely and consistent official narrative of the event. Two sources in particular can provide insight. One is the MFA’s press conferences, whose function is to state official positions of the PRC government to domestic and international audiences.\textsuperscript{102} If the MFA claims to have no knowledge of the event in question, this may indicate a lack of coordination, although there are of course other plausible explanations for MFA reticence. Slightly stronger evidence in favour of sub-state explanations is found where the MFA spokesperson publicly refers questions on
the topic to another agency, as this may suggest divisions within the state over the issue. If, on the other hand, the MFA spokesperson – who is usually an official 1 or 2 levels below Vice Ministerial rank – is ready with an authoritative version of very recent events on behalf of the entire PRC government, the plausibility of the action resulting from uncoordination is greatly reduced.

Literature from front-line agencies can be a rich source of insight. Responsible officials’ speeches and articles offer an indication of sub-state actors’ interpretations of central policies, and many agencies publish their own periodicals that report current events from their perspective. Of particular interest here are the yearbooks of China’s maritime agencies, which review each year’s major activities and achievements. These voluminous reference books are not easily accessible to the general public, and their content is presented in extremely dry bureaucratic jargon, indicating their main audiences are within the party-state system. Arranged into chapters according to different areas of functional responsibility, each section is attributed to leading officials from the relevant departments, allowing them the opportunity to detail and claim credit for their work over the previous year. The absence of any mention of a major assertive operation in these official agency annals may suggest it resulted, at least in part, from uncoordinated frontline agency actions. However, such a finding will still not constitute particularly strong corroborating evidence, since such omissions could result from accidental oversight or state secrecy considerations.

The sub-state actors explanation is generally easier to falsify than to prove in specific cases. The involvement of many bureaucratic agencies in a given assertive operation will contradict the uncoordinated sub-state actor hypothesis as an explanation for an associated policy change. Given China’s “fragmented authoritarian” system, in which equal-ranked agencies lack authority to compel each other to act, joint actions are probably difficult without coordination from above, through mechanisms such as Leading Small Groups or involvement from higher-ranked officials. Where agency literature explicitly describes the action as taking place in coordination with other agencies and departments, such as the MFA, the sub-state bureaucratic explanation becomes unlikely.
6. Strategic culture

Strategic culture, used here as a shorthand for allegedly distinctive Chinese ways of understanding international politics, has often been proposed as an explanation for PRC actions in the South China Sea. Culturally-based explanations risk a number of pitfalls. China’s traditions of strategic thought – both the corpus of ancient texts themselves, and their varied interpretations across the centuries – provide a smorgasbord of ideas for analysts (as well as Chinese policymakers) to choose from. As Johnston showed in his study of classic Chinese texts on military affairs, many of these traditions hew closely to central tenets of supposedly “other” strategic cultural traditions, notably realpolitik. Another strain of Chinese strategic thought, the moralist Confucian-Mencian tradition, meanwhile, has an emphasis on reciprocity that appears to accord with theories developed to explain various behaviours of Westphalian nation-states. The following discussion therefore is limited to two of the more distinctive and commonly cited cultural influences on Chinese foreign policy in its maritime and territorial disputes: a supposed preference for strategic probing, and the guerilla warfare tactics commonly attributed to Mao Zedong.

Perhaps the most prominent cultural explanation for Chinese maritime assertiveness centres on the purported influence of the game of weiqi, which has been argued to lead PRC leaders to place a premium on discerning the adversary’s intentions and weaknesses through strategic probing moves. Doug Paal argues this desire to identify weaknesses helps explain the timing and targets of the PRC’s assertive shifts, as “China asserts itself at points of weakness or less resistance for its neighbors.” Another element of China’s assertive behaviour learned from the game, Paal argues, is the expansion of PRC influence in disputed areas “through steps that are not a threshold to violence and do not trigger a forcible response.” Philippine diplomats reportedly believed this probing strategy explained the occupation of Mischief Reef and a series of other moves in 1994-1995, such as the laying of markers at several other features, and the subsequent dispatch of gunboats to the area. China was aware that the Philippines had little ability to resist, but according to news reports at the time, Manila believed Beijing’s main
objective was to test the willingness of its treaty ally, the US, to become involved. The answer being negative, the expanded Chinese presence was consolidated.

Analysts and officials have cited strategic probing as an explanation for some of the major incidents comprising China’s most recent assertive shift in the South China Sea. Andrew Erickson has argued that, following the favourable power shift brought about by the US economic recession in 2008-2009, China’s leaders did not simply switch to a more assertive foreign policy, but rather created a “test,” in the form of the Impeccable incident (see Chapter 5), for a newly-elected President facing an economic recession at home. Following a similar line of reasoning, a Vietnamese official suggested that the location of many of China’s assertive actions in the South China Sea close to the edge of the disputed area resulted from the PRC’s desire to gauge its rivals’ intentions before consolidating control in a given area: “It’s like someone puts one foot in your house – if you don’t say anything, they will come inside.” The evidence for weiqi as a distinct inspiration behind assertive PRC actions can be questioned, but such observations also accord with ideas from a much more likely source of influence on contemporary PRC policy: ideas set out by the state’s founder, Mao Zedong.

In his classic On Guerilla Warfare, Mao averred: “When the enemy advances, we retreat; when the enemy makes camp we harass; when the enemy is exhausted we fight; and, when the enemy retreats we pursue.” The success attributed to this approach in wars against the materially superior forces of Imperial Japan (and later the KMT) ensures it remains in high esteem within the CCP. Geremie Barmé explains the PRC’s contemporary maritime assertiveness this way, arguing that it “purposely creates an atmosphere of uncertainty and tension” in line with Mao’s injunction to “harass, attack, disperse, exhaust and annihilate” the enemy.

Another Maoist explanation for assertive PRC shifts in the South China Sea is that they reflect deliberate attempts to provoke crises that force rivals to the negotiating table. Henry Kissinger, for example, contends that this explains the PRC’s use of force against India in 1962. Edward Luttwak claims Chinese strategic culture has validated this kind of tactic to such an extent as that it blinds
PRC leaders to its severely negative consequences – namely, “alerting and alarming and mobilizing elite and even mass opinion in the target country.” When the PRC engages in such tactics in the South China Sea today, according to Luttwak, it is due to this “strategic unwisdom of the ancients” producing an especially severe case of “great state autism.”

It is obviously not feasible to test for all possible cultural influences on a state’s conduct, but there are at least some observable implications of the above-mentioned group of theories. If strategic probing or Maoist-inspired mobile warfare tactics are a valid explanation for a spike in assertiveness, PRC actions should follow a pattern of advance or retreat, depending on the response by China’s adversaries. Where China encounters strong resistance, we would expect to see assertive acts occur only once, or for short periods of time, before being withdrawn. If the pattern of assertive action continues over a period of many months or years, despite strong resistance, this will suggest that it was neither a tactical attempt by China’s leaders to gauge their adversary’s reactions, nor to employ a strategy of “advancing when the enemy retreats.” If probing was the intention, the action should subside once the adversary’s intention to resist is established. If only weak resistance is encountered, this type of explanation implies that further advances, or consolidation of the new position, should follow.

References to traditional strategic concepts in policy documents, official comments or strategic analyses, often delivered in the form of idiom or analogy, are perhaps the strongest way to establish confidence in traditional strategic culture as an explanation for an assertive shift. The observation is still far from a smoking gun, since invoking historical texts – especially Mao’s works – to justify existing policy preferences makes good sense both for central leaders and for sub-state actors in the CCP system. However such an observation will increase the plausibility of such an explanation. Of course, such arguments may well be made behind closed doors, so an absence of this observation will not falsify the proposition. Luttwak’s claim that Chinese strategic culture has given the PRC a uniquely severe case of “great state autism” will be falsified if we find evidence that the CCP party-state has in fact understood the regional backlash against its assertive policies.
Chapter 2

7. Individual leaders

The influence of the personality and beliefs of China’s top leaders on PRC foreign policy has been the subject of ongoing debate among specialists. Mao’s impetuous character, for example, may have been behind assertive PRC behaviour, such as the confrontations with Taiwan in the 1958, or the border war with India in 1962. But as Whiting points out, since the reform era began in 1978, the shift to a more rational decisionmaking system – or at least one involving greater numbers of people – ought to have made China’s policy more likely to reflect general theories of inter-state behaviour than idiosyncrasies of particular individuals.

Nonetheless, leaders have continued to be a common explanation for changes in China’s foreign policy behaviour. You Ji cites the leadership of Xi Jinping as key in the PRC changing the “passive” style of foreign policy under Hu Jintao. Robert Sutter and Chin-hao Huang similarly link the “most important [foreign policy shift] in a decade,” namely a series of assertive actions in disputed maritime areas, particularly the South China Sea, to Xi’s personal “stance” on safeguarding China’s maritime rights and interests.

These explanations tend to be difficult to test, as they hinge on processes within the “black box” of top-level decisionmaking, and the personalities of inaccessible and highly guarded individuals. One clear implication is that the state’s behaviour ought to shift after the new leader assumes power. However, leaders’ ability to influence policy may be realized either before or after they officially take their position. Hu Jintao, for example, became CCP General Secretary in 2002, and took charge of the Central Military Commission (CMC) in 2004, but he was also a Vice Chairman of the CMC, a position of significant influence, from 1999, and was understood to be Jiang Zemin’s successor from the mid-1990s onwards. Likewise, Xi Jinping took control of the party and military in 2012, but he became a Politburo Standing Committee member in 2007, and his heir-apparent status was confirmed with his elevation to CMC Vice Chairman in 2010. Thus, it is difficult to know with certainty when an ascendant leader’s influence over the policy area in question actually began. Moreover, it may be some time before a new leader’s power is consolidated, so even if policy does not shift in the expected direction after they
assume formal control, this will not necessarily rule out their personal policy preferences as an influence on policy change. In short, comparing the timing of an assertive shift with an individual leader's ascendancy offers only a “straw in the wind” test for the hypothesis that their personal influence was a cause of a policy shift.

A slightly stronger indication can be gleaned by analyzing and comparing a CCP leader's speeches and writings with those of their predecessor. If a shift in behaviour is significantly related to a particular leader’s policy views, then we might detect greater emphasis or altered instructions in official statements to lower levels of the state apparatus. The frequency of a leader’s use of key words, such as “maritime rights defense” (海洋权益维护) in the South China Sea, might increase. A leader's linkage of a given policy area to important overarching themes also may give impetus to sub-state agencies’ activities. However, most leader speeches available for analysis are carefully crafted public statements that do not necessarily represent the views of the individual delivering them. A given speech may express a collective view, or it may be an attempt to persuade and build consensus, and it is often difficult to tell the difference. Indeed, on some occasions top CCP leaders have been compelled to “state a position” (表态) that is in some measure contrary to their personal views.

Published accounts of important top-level meetings can also be a guide to the kinds of policy signals an individual leader wishes to hand down. These can be compared with the timing of the policy change in question, and with the accounts of similar meetings under previous leaders. For example, in the July 2013 Politburo meeting on China’s “maritime rights and interests,” Xi Jinping stated that the “two overall situations” of maritime rights defense and regional stability maintenance ought to be subject to “unified planning” (统筹), echoing the phrase his predecessor Hu Jintao had used in relation to the “two overall situations” of China’s domestic and international interests. This arguably indicated an upgrading of the task of defending China’s maritime claims (see Chapter 6) – so if tougher policies followed, this would be consistent with a leader-based explanation for that
policy shift. However, published accounts of CCP meetings are rarely more than summaries, and almost never contain any indication of the progression of the meeting, especially any disagreements or debates. Therefore, it is often not possible to know whether the meeting reached its outcome by consensus naturally, or if the leader's personal authority defined the consensus.

8. Elevated political-symbolic interests

The domestic political-symbolic value of disputed possessions, discussed earlier in this chapter as an underlying driver of the dispute, could plausibly explain assertive policy change if we can discern an elevation in the importance of these intangible stakes. A rise in intra-state challenges to the top leadership's authority from sub-state actors, including hawkish ideologues, vested interest groups, or competing factions, could increase the incentive for assertive actions to build or maintain political authority within the party. Second, a decline in other sources of popular support, such as economic growth and rising living standards, could leave the CCP more dependent on national aggrandizement to maintain its rule. Third, rising levels of popular nationalist activity focused on the South China Sea, whether state-inspired or spontaneous, increase the domestic political benefits leaders stand to gain from pursuing assertive actions there. The bottom-up models of popular nationalist influence outlined in Chapter 1 belong to this category of explanations for Chinese policy change based on elevation of the domestic political importance of the disputed possessions. They each operate via some combination of the above-mentioned factors. The observable implications of these models were summarized in the previous Chapter. However, internal challenges to the top leadership's authority, whether from intra-party contention or hawkish sub-state actors, could increase the domestic political value of the disputed possessions without the involvement of popular nationalism.

At least some degree of elevated contention within the ruling party is presumed to arrive each five years, ahead of leadership transitions; if this affects China's
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Observable implications</th>
<th>Certitude</th>
<th>Uniqueness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Balance of power</td>
<td>Favourable international power shift precedes assertive policy shift</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low – timing may be coincidental</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Policy assessments and strategic writings allude to international power shift or opportunity</td>
<td>Low – good reasons to keep such assessments secret</td>
<td>Medium – contradicts sub-rational explanations and declining claim-strength</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Increasing value of disputed possession</td>
<td>Increasing prices or domestic consumption of resources present in disputed area precedes assertive actions</td>
<td>High – increased strategic value cuts both ways, so resource value or dependence should increase for this to be plausible</td>
<td>Low – timing may be coincidental</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>State estimates indicates greater emphasis on the disputed area's resources or strategic importance before assertive shift</td>
<td>Medium – may be kept secret, but if it is a consensus view then unlikely to find no public assessments to this effect</td>
<td>Low – does not contradict other explanations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Assertive actions are directly or indirectly related to control of disputed area’s strategic space or resources</td>
<td>High – many on-water actions can be construed this way</td>
<td>Medium – strongly suggestive of resource motivation, but does not rule out other factors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Declining claim strength</td>
<td>Negative shift in bargaining position precedes assertive policy change</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low – arguably contradicts balance of power explanation, but better overall capabilities could also underpin assertive response to declining claim strength</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>State assessments emphasize unfavourable trends threaten the state's ability to maintain the dispute</td>
<td>Low – such assessments may be kept secret</td>
<td>Medium – prediction is quite specific, but such assessments could be exaggerated by sub-state interests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. International legal regime</td>
<td>(See Table 4.1)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Sub-state bureaucratic actors</td>
<td>No rapid official response to incidents involving assertive actions</td>
<td>High – MFA ready with authoritative explanation strongly implies central coordination, given low rank of MFA &amp; spokespersons</td>
<td>Low – lack of official response suggests uncoordination, but other explanations exist: action may have been centrally mandated but still without MFA input; or MFA reticence could be designed to deceive foreign observers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Strategic culture</td>
<td>Agency publications do not claim credit for assertive actions in question</td>
<td>High – officially claiming credit implies at least an absence of central dissatisfaction with agency action</td>
<td>Low - omissions could result from state secrecy concerns or accidental oversight</td>
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<td>---------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Single agency involved: no visible inter-agency coordination, and agency publications do not describe inter-agency coordination</td>
<td>High – naming of coordinating central authorities falsifies this explanation</td>
<td>Low - single agency action often centrally mandated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(For probing or Maoist guerilla tactics): Assertiveness increases in times of uncertainty, subsides when met with resistance</td>
<td>High – if assertiveness continues despite resistance then probing is falsified</td>
<td>Medium – contradicts expectations of most alternatives, except sub-state actors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Allusions to indigenous strategic concepts in official statements and/or policy analysis</td>
<td>Medium – good reasons for leaders and strategists to claim legitimacy from tradition, but also good reasons to hide reasoning behind policies from adversaries</td>
<td>Low – many strategic ideas are not culturally specific; and traditions may be invoked post facto by leaders or vested interests to justify policies;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Individual leaders</td>
<td>Increase in assertive actions follow after new leader’s ascension</td>
<td>Low – influence over policy may precede official position, or there may be a lag as they consolidate power</td>
<td>Low – coincidence of increased assertiveness and new leadership may result from policy compromise, or from projects set in motion by predecessor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Content of leader’s speeches and instructions from top-level meetings indicate greater emphasis on assertive actions than under previous leader</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low – leaders’ speeches may reflect consensus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Elevated political-symbolic interests</td>
<td>Assertiveness increases during periods of elevated intra-elite contention</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low – unless pattern is repeated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Criticism of policy status quo in pages of official periodicals</td>
<td>Low – debate may be kept internal</td>
<td>Medium – if link exists between the observed criticism and political contenders, then this explanation becomes much more likely</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Popular nationalism-related explanations: see Table 1.1)

Table 2.3: Observable implications of eight commonly proposed factors behind PRC policy shifts
conduct in its maritime disputes then increases in assertive activity should
 correspond to roughly five-year or ten-year cycles. Other periods of uncertainty
 or contention among the top leadership can sometimes be inferred from the
 subsequent political downfall of prominent leadership figures. Assertive PRC
 actions in the South China Sea during the period of internal challenge are
 consistent with the idea that this affects China's behaviour but, unless some
 linkage between intra-elitist contention and the foreign policy issue can be
discerned, this line of reasoning will remain speculative. Contending state actors
 and sub-elitist policy entrepreneurs have incentives to rally popular support behind
 their ideas via mass media (consistent with the policy contest model of popular
 nationalist influence), but concerns about social instability, the state's image of
 unity and intra-party discipline may deter such tactics. If so, the outward signs of
 internal contention over the issue are likely to be both subtle and scarce. Implicit
 criticism of the foreign policy status quo in party media or theoretical journals,
 attributed to individuals or institutions associated with particular contending
 parties or factions, is probably the strongest indication of this type of linkage
 between domestic and international politics.

**Conclusion**

This chapter began by outlining the PRC’s disputed claims to territories and
 maritime rights in the South China Sea. It then examined the underlying strategic,
 economic and political drivers of China’s pursuit of its claims in the South China
 Sea, showing that all been present since the 1980s at the latest. It drew attention to
 how China’s material interests in the dispute are often greater than outside
 analysts assume, and that the CCP’s strong symbolic-political interests in the
 dispute predate the party-state’s “turn to nationalism” as a legitimation strategy
 after 1989. Drawing a critical distinction between underlying drivers of the dispute
 on one hand, and explanations for policy change on the other, the second half of
 the chapter reviewed a range of external and internal variables that could explain
 the timing of assertive shifts in PRC behaviour, and unpacked the observable
implications of each. This situated the models of bottom-up popular nationalist influence on policy (Chapter 1) in their proper context among the many overlapping domestic and international factors that may influence PRC maritime policy.

These various explanatory factors outlined above are generally not mutually exclusive, but identifying the precise timing of changes in state behaviour – and of the decisions that underpinned them – will offer a useful basis on which to judge their relative importance in explaining the PRC’s recent assertive maritime actions. Assessing the explanatory power of each of these factors in relation to China’s past conduct in the South China Sea may also help inform our degree of prior confidence in each as a cause of the PRC’s current actions. These two tasks are the focus of the next chapter.
Chapter 3

Continuity and change in China’s policy in the South China Sea, 1970-2015

This chapter assesses the recent changes in PRC behaviour in the South China Sea through quantitative and qualitative comparison of China’s assertiveness in the dispute in each year since 1970. To this end, it develops a typology of confrontational state policy in maritime disputes, taking assertiveness as the key variable, and breaking this down qualitatively into declarative, demonstrative and coercive actions. Applying this framework to an original set of events data on China’s actions in the dispute reveals, first of all, that assertiveness has been the norm in PRC policy since 1970 rather than the exception. Within this basic trend, four major assertive surges are apparent, in 1973-75, 1987-89, 1992-95, and from 2007 onwards. Most importantly, it shows that the critical difference between China’s maritime policy in the present era and the past has been the introduction of qualitatively coercive actions, which account for much of the overall quantitative change in the PRC’s level of activity in the disputed area since 2007. This finding will guide the selection of cases for close causal analysis of the nationalism-policy nexus in the remainder of the thesis. The chapter concludes by comparing the historical events data with the expectations of various domestic and international explanations for Chinese policy change, including bottom-up nationalist influence. This will inform the level of prior confidence we should have in each explanation as we assess China’s contemporary policy in the next three chapters.

Perceptions of rising Chinese assertiveness

“Assertiveness” has emerged as a key term in English-language analysis of China’s foreign policy in the 2010s. Despite scholars’ misgivings over the accuracy or
usefulness of the term, it has arguably come to define the West’s discourse on the PRC’s actions in the South and East China Sea.\textsuperscript{1} Efforts to use assertiveness to describe China’s policy in these disputes have produced a spiraling list of modifiers: from “non-confrontational assertiveness” and “reactive assertiveness,” to “creeping assertiveness,” “militant assertiveness” and “aggressive assertiveness.”\textsuperscript{2} Above all, this assertiveness seems to be widely regarded as new.\textsuperscript{3} Western media references to assertive Chinese policies on its maritime periphery began rising in 2009, and accelerated from 2010 onwards. Figure 3.1 suggests the term’s popularity in English discourse about China’s maritime disputes has tended in the past to follow the involvement of the US in incidents there – first in the EP-3 spyplane collision in April 2001, then in the Impeccable incident in March 2009 – before exploding since that time.

![Figure 3.1: English-language media references to Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea. Factiva: search string {South China Sea AND China near10 [assertiv* OR aggressive*]).](image)

Perhaps reflecting the importance of media reporting to policy discussion, many analysts writing in English have drawn similar conclusions on the timing of China’s assertive maritime policy shift. Iain Johnston, in a meticulous rebuttal of claims that China’s overall foreign policy became more assertive in 2010, nonetheless upholds the South China Sea as an exception, writing that “in 2009 and 2010
China’s military and paramilitary presence in the South China Sea was more active than in previous years. John Ciorciari and Jessica Chen Weiss agree that the tensions associated with China’s behaviour in the South China Sea rose from 2009. Robert Ross also points to 2009-2010. US State Department diplomats relayed reports of a “dangerous direction” in China’s policy in 2009, as well as encouragement from regional countries for the United States not to “acquiesce to a PRC assertion of primacy” in the South China Sea. Other analysts identify the PRC’s major maritime policy shift as starting even later. According to Robert Sutter and Chin-hao Huang, the PRC’s shift began in mid-2012 with the standoff at Scarborough Shoal. You Ji argues it was from late 2012 that China changed its “passive style toward maritime disputes” to a more proactive one.

Relatively few observers identify a shift before 2009. From the perspective of Vietnamese analysts such as Tran Truong Thuy, the PRC’s behaviour changed around 2007, marked by zealous enforcement of fishing bans and coercive diplomacy directed at third-country companies considering involvement in Vietnamese offshore maritime resource projects near the nine-dash line (see Chapter 4). Fravel testified to the US Congress that China was “much more assertive” on the South China Sea issue from 2007 onwards, and one of the Pentagon’s annual reports on Chinese military affairs noted that tensions had “resurfaced” that year. In fact, as early as 2005, State Department officials were hearing “regularly from senior Vietnamese [Foreign Ministry] officials that the United States should do more to ‘counter’ China’s efforts to ‘dominate’ Southeast Asia,” although the extent to which this view prevailed in Hanoi was unclear. For the Armed Forces of the Philippines, China was already displaying its “assertiveness” back in 2002 when it fortified its reef outposts in the Spratly archipelago, increased the frequency of its visits to Scarborough Shoal, and held amphibious warfare drills in the Paracels.

The main issue with the existing body of analysis is that few if any have provided definitions, let alone measurements, of the assertiveness by which they characterize the key changes in China’s approach. A more systematic method for assessing continuity and change in China’s policy – and state policy in maritime
disputes more generally – is needed. My starting point is Fravel’s theory of state behaviour in territorial disputes, which identifies three generic strategies facing state leaders: 1.) delay the resolution of the dispute, 2.) offer compromise, or 3.) use or threaten to use military force. In this scheme, China has pursued a near-continuous delaying strategy in its maritime disputes in the South China Sea and East China Sea, having used force only twice, in 1974 and 1988. The first challenge, then, is how to reliably identify continuity and change within a general delaying strategy. The following section will offer a typology designed for this purpose. Although contested and so far under-theorized, this shows assertiveness can be a useful variable by which to measure continuity and change in a state’s policy on territorial disputes.

A second challenge is the present-centric bias in the information available for identifying changes in China’s behaviour. Today, the South China Sea dispute is regarded as one of the world’s conflict “hot spots,” with widespread media, government and academic attention generating vast amounts of information on recent and ongoing developments. However, this was not always the case. On one hand, the arrival of internet technologies has dramatically increased the volume and accessibility of information about all current topics. At the same time, the PRC’s increased military power has naturally led to increased attention on Chinese security issues like the South China Sea from governments and media. The Chinese government’s own increasing openness about its activities has further exacerbated the present-centric bias in the information supply. PRC activities in the disputed area were generally kept secret until well into the 2000s, and official remarks on incidents at sea were rare. In the 2010s, by contrast, Chinese media have actively publicized the PRC’s actions in disputed maritime areas, and party-state spokespersons regularly comment on developments there. This skewed information supply creates a risk of overestimating the recent changes or discontinuities in China’s behaviour. The best way to avoid this will be to use a continuous time series of historical events data.

Assembling events data, as Rosenau pointed out, can help identify turning points in a state’s foreign policy. The analyst can then examine and compare the values on
the possible explanatory variables before and after the policy shift, allowing inferences regarding the causes of the change.\textsuperscript{19} One Washington-based think tank has assembled a database of claimant activity in the South China Sea dispute since 1995, detecting a major rise in PRC overall activity commencing in 2009.\textsuperscript{20} These data have not yet been made available publicly, but being compiled from reports collected by the Open Source Center, their quantity at different times may be in part a function of the level of interest among US government analysts, and not just the level of state activity.\textsuperscript{21} Recognizing these limitations, the reports published on the basis of these data have not attempted to track qualitative changes in the states’ activities across time.\textsuperscript{22} The set of events data used in this dissertation was compiled from government chronologies as well as open-source reporting. It compares, year by year, the quantity and quality of PRC’s assertive actions – but not those of other claimants – in the South China Sea dispute since 1970. This is a logical starting point because it follows closely after preliminary surveys suggested the possible presence of major resource deposits in the area. This “discovery” created one of the key elements of the high-stakes dispute that exists today.\textsuperscript{23} The methods and sources used in the preparation of these events data, together with details of the 130 individual cases it includes, are outlined in Appendix 2.

**Assertiveness as a variable**

As Johnston has noted, *assertiveness* has so far not formed part of any established typology of state behaviour in international relations. Based on common usage in US commentary, Johnston inferred that it denotes “a form of assertive diplomacy that explicitly threatens to impose costs on another actor that are clearly higher than before.”\textsuperscript{24} In response, Dingding Chen and Xiaoyu Pu proposed a distinction between offensive, defensive, and constructive variants of “assertive” foreign policy. The first kind referred to the unilateral use of coercion to pursue expanding interests, the second to growing capabilities and willingness to defend existing interests, while the third denoted proactive leadership in seeking solutions to international problems.\textsuperscript{25} However, since the PRC’s claims in the South China Sea have changed little since its foundation (see Chapter 2), Chen and Pu’s typology
would inevitably find the PRC’s policy there to have been continuous “defensive assertiveness” for the past four decades, thereby obscuring, rather than identifying, policy changes. In order to gauge the variation in a state’s policy in disputes like the South China Sea, it will be necessary to develop a more detailed set of criteria designed to categorize the various kinds of actions states take in disputed maritime spaces.

Some authors have questioned whether the concept of assertiveness is necessary or useful. Johnston, for example, suggests existing international relations concepts may be adequate to describe China’s foreign policy. I make no claim here for the applicability of assertiveness as a general scheme for characterizing the grand strategies or overall foreign policy behaviour of states, as Chen and Pu propose. However, the intense discussion of Chinese maritime assertiveness, with its mushrooming list of modifiers, strongly suggests the field has been grasping for conceptual vocabulary to describe the recent development of state policies in this area. Existing conceptual language does not capture the nuances of the diverse combination of means by which the PRC and its rivals have pursued their interests in these disputes within generic delaying strategies. After laying out a framework designed for this purpose, the remainder of the chapter will employ it to gauge continuity and change in China’s level and type of assertiveness in the South China Sea, and test the strength of various explanations, including popular nationalism, for China’s past assertive shifts.

Claim strength in maritime disputes

Assertiveness refers here to the relative presence or absence of actions that strengthen one state’s position in the dispute at the expense of another’s. As noted in Chapter 1, this definition captures the widest possible range of non-cooperative state actions. Unless a dispute is dormant or subject to an arrangement that simultaneously increases the security of multiple states’ positions, such as cooperative resource management or joint development, it is difficult for any state to pursue a disputed claim without impinging on the claims of its rivals. Most
states’ policies in maritime and territorial disputes therefore involve some level of assertiveness under this definition. The utility of this definition is that it breaks assertiveness down into its observable component parts – state actions – to enable quantification, qualification, and comparison across time periods.

The key term within the definition of assertiveness is position in the dispute, which refers here to three elements:

1. a state’s overall administrative presence in the disputed area,
2. its ability to secure its interests there using military power, and
3. its ability to sustain the claim in international law.

This is a broadened version of Fravel’s concept of a state’s bargaining position in a territorial dispute as comprising “the amount of the disputed land that it occupies and its ability to project military power over the entire area under dispute.” The strength of disputed claims under international law is explicitly excluded from Fravel’s formulation. The first modification to this concept, as used here, is to use overall administrative presence rather than the amount of disputed land occupied. The second is to add legal claim viability as an element of a state’s bargaining position. As detailed below, these adjustments take account of the peculiar nature of maritime spaces as disputed possessions, and the special importance of international law in twenty-first century maritime disputes.

*Overall administrative presence* includes, but is not limited to, the amount of disputed land under occupation. It refers to all state assets in the disputed area – from mobile units like ships and aircraft, to fixed facilities like ports, airstrips, buildings and sovereignty markers, and also less visible manifestations of state presence such as cellular network coverage, and buoys for scientific data-gathering. Although islands can be occupied, maritime disputes such as those in the South China Sea concern sovereign rights over vast tracts of open sea, and remote territorial features that cannot easily be occupied without controlling the surrounding waters. In contrast to land disputes, where lines of actual control keep each state’s official presence largely separate, disputed maritime spaces and uninhabited features are often subject to simultaneous or overlapping control. In
these cases administrative presence, rather than occupation, is the main mode by which state authority is exercised over the disputed possession. China, for example, has strengthened its position in the space around the Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea, and around features in the South China Sea including Scarborough Shoal and Second Thomas Shoal, through regular patrolling. Therefore, in maritime disputes, the first aspect of a state's position is its overall administrative presence, which includes, but is not limited to, the amount of disputed land under occupation.

Legal claim viability is the second adjustment to Fravel's original definition of a state's bargaining position in a territorial dispute. The ability to project military power over the disputed area is a key component of a state's position in a maritime dispute, just as it is in land-based territorial disputes. However, in disputes over maritime jurisdiction and resources the viability of a state's claim in international law also forms an important component of its bargaining position. The ability to sustain a claim using international law forms an important element of states' own understanding of their positions in maritime disputes, for at least three reasons.

First, unlike legal claims to sovereignty over land territories, which concern the nebulous body of customary international law, state claims to maritime rights are overwhelmingly derived directly from UNCLOS, a fully codified international legal regime with near-universal global legitimacy. The strength of Brunei’s claim in the South China Sea, for example, rests on the international legitimacy of UNCLOS and the 200nm EEZ it assigns to coastal states. This study seeks to explain state behaviour in situations in which all sides have sought to advance their claims while avoiding military conflict. In such circumstances, the ability to control the disputed area through military force remains an important element of a state's bargaining power, but it is not the only “bottom-line” course of action, especially for weaker disputant parties. Following its loss of administrative control over Scarborough Shoal in 2012, for example, the Philippines sought to consolidate its position in the South China Sea by requesting an arbitral ruling against various Chinese activities under Article 287 of the UNCLOS. The formal accession of most of the world's states to the UNCLOS, and the demonstrated practice of resorting to
its provisions, indicate that states do consider the ability to sustain their maritime jurisdictional claims using international law to be important.

Second, the use of international law in territorial disputes more generally has risen sharply since the end of the Cold War. Debate continues as to why states have submitted such issues to supranational authority, given that they concern vital sovereign rights to territory and resources. Beth Simmons suggests that by resorting to international legal proceedings, states stand to gain increased opportunities for economic and social projects that help solidify their domestic positions, while avoiding the costs of military confrontation. They can also benefit from increased certainty and stability in their international environment. If so, it follows that the stronger a state believes its claim to be under international law, the higher its perceived likelihood of securing such benefits without facing the costs and unpredictability of using military force. Conversely, when the international legal legitimacy of a state’s claim is weakened or challenged, it is likely to perceive its overall position in the dispute to be compromised, since its potential for cheaply accessing such favourable outcomes will diminish.

Third, even where a state can project military force over a disputed area, the costs of doing so will depend significantly on international perceptions of the legality or otherwise of doing so. The fact that even claimants with strong military advantages over their rivals in territorial disputes, such as China, have launched major historical and legal research efforts aimed at justifying their claims in international law suggests that this is widely understood. Taking legal strength as a component of a state’s overall position in an international dispute does not mean viewing international law as a constraint on the actions of great powers, especially the use of military force. It means recognizing that developments that threaten or undermine a state’s ability to sustain its claims in international law will increase the likely costs of any future use of military force. If this is so even for great powers with significant military capabilities, then it is even more so for weaker maritime disputant states. Thus, the viability of a state’s claim to disputed maritime rights in international law should be regarded as a significant element of its bargaining position in the dispute.
Taking account of the legal factor in maritime disputes does not mean assessing the actual legal strength of one state’s claim relative to its rivals. Stating the obvious, that is a task for legal experts and international courts. It only requires the identifying the perception of potential legal significance of certain actions – and patterns of action – taken in disputed areas. This is important to consider because, as Chapter 4 argues, it may help explain the sensitivity of states to what appear to what would otherwise appear as relatively innocuous developments.\(^{34}\) Having clarified the components of a state’s position in a maritime dispute, integral to the concept of assertiveness used here, the next section develops a three-way typology of assertive state actions.

**Types of assertiveness: declarative, demonstrative, coercive**

Assertive actions vary widely in their implications for international stability, ranging from simple verbal announcements all the way to the deployment of military force. To account for the major qualitative differences between different kinds of assertive actions, I disaggregate three kinds of actions in territorial disputes, distinguished by their increasing tendency to result in escalation and elevated tensions.\(^{35}\)

1. **Declarative** actions are official verbal claims to sovereignty or rights in the disputed area that make no obvious immediate threat to impose costs on rival states. Such statements fit the broad definition of assertiveness outlined above because they weaken competing claims, at a minimum by demonstrating non-recognition, but also because official statements are often used as evidence in international legal proceedings. Declarative actions include remarks by state officials, domestic laws and regulations, diplomatic declarations, submissions to international authorities, and changes in domestic administrative arrangements governing the disputed area. Their significance is evident in the fact that they can often prompt vigorous official protests from other states. Out of 40 official diplomatic protests lodged by Vietnam against China regarding the South China Sea issue between January 2009 and January 2014, more than one-third concerned
purely declarative acts, such as the promulgation of domestic laws, official maps and administrative adjustments, rather than physical actions in the disputed areas. Acts of declarative assertiveness are also significant because they generally stay in effect unless actively renounced, which rarely occurs. But because they involve no threat or physical action in the disputed area they should be, of themselves, less likely to prompt escalation from rivals.

2. Demonstrative actions are those that involve the unilateral exercise of administrative practice in a disputed area. They include real-world actions that manifest a state’s physical presence in the area, such as air and sea patrols, maritime surveys, unilateral resource exploitation, construction works and any state involvement in the management of other ostensibly non-state activities such as tourism or activist voyages. Certain kinds of non-physical actions also constitute unilateral administration, such as agreements with third parties for resource development, domestic judicial proceedings, and ownership transfers. Like declarative actions, demonstrative actions involve no explicit threat to impose punishment on other parties, and they may not even be aimed at undermining rival claims. But because they consolidate state authorities’ ability to operate in the disputed area, and demonstrate effective administration or international recognition of the claim, they compromise the position of other states in the dispute more seriously than declarative actions, making them more likely to prompt countermeasures and increased tensions.

3. Coercive actions are those that attempt to compel other parties to alter their behaviour by imposing, or threatening to impose, some form of real punishment. There are, therefore, two components to a coercive action: 1.) intent to change another side’s behaviour and 2.) the threat or imposition of costs. Some actions inherently satisfy these criteria, such as military attacks, the firing of warning shots, or physical interference with foreign activities in a disputed area. Verbal statements, diplomatic communications and administrative acts can be coercive if they threaten other states with punishment for the continuation of existing patterns of action. Examples of this include the promulgation of territorial
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Declarative: verbal, no implicit or explicit threat issued</th>
<th>Demonstrative: unilateral administration</th>
<th>Coercive: threat aimed at changing behaviour</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Physical</strong></td>
<td>• Occupation of territory</td>
<td>• Depiction of disputed possession in diplomatic documents (e.g. passports)</td>
<td>• Military attacks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Construction works</td>
<td>• Resource exploration or development contracts with third-party states</td>
<td>• Physical interference with foreign activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Non-combat military exercises</td>
<td>• Joint scientific expeditions (e.g. 1987 UNESCO station, ham radio enthusiasts at Scarborough Shoal)</td>
<td>• Detention of foreign personnel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Patrols by government boats</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Fisheries “protection”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Research expeditions</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Military combat exercises in disputed area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Sovereignty markers</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Warning shots</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Support for fishing or activist actions in disputed areas</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Blockades</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Tourism</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Offensive military infrastructure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Immigration</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Installation of navigational aids</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Diplomatic</strong></td>
<td>• Diplomatic protests</td>
<td>• Official statements containing threats to rival claimants or third-parties</td>
<td>• Territorial sea baselines in disputed area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Submissions to international institutions</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Intimidation of rivals’ foreign partners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Lobbying of third-party countries for support</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Economic sanctions on claimants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Domestic administrative</strong></td>
<td>• Authoritative media articles</td>
<td>• Resource exploration or development contracts</td>
<td>• Designation of military zones (e.g. ADIZs, “danger zone”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Officials’ statements</td>
<td>• Ownership transfers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Legislation mentioning disputed possessions</td>
<td>• Prosecution of rival claimants’ personnel under domestic law for actions in disputed area</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Requirement for disputed claim to be depicted on official maps</td>
<td>• Weather reports</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.1: Three-way typology of assertive actions in maritime territorial disputes, across three domains.
baselines that upgrade disputed waters to sovereign territorial seas under domestic law, establishing Air Defense Identification Zones in contested airspace, and threats of economic or other punishment directed at rivals or their third-country partners. The intent behind a specific action is often unclear, and threats are often veiled, raising the likelihood of misinterpretation by outside analysts. It is important, therefore, to critically evaluate the intent behind the actions in question, as well as the existence or otherwise of a threat, by considering the context and, wherever possible, official accounts of the incident in question. Coercive actions are the most serious and, from the perspective of all parties with an interest in stability, undesirable, type of assertiveness. This is because they present a relatively narrow set of choices to other states: change their behaviour, continue and risk incurring punishment, or escalate the situation in response.40

Table 3.1 provides examples of each type of assertive action drawn from China’s maritime disputes, across three domains: domestic administration, international diplomacy, and the real-world disputed areas. Some actions straddle two categories: the PRC’s creation of Sansha City in 2012, for example, was an ostensibly domestic administrative adjustment, but its timing made it a diplomatic countermeasure in response to a new Vietnamese law enacted the same day. Military exercises in disputed areas are clearly demonstrative, but may also be argued to contain a coercive element, depending on their circumstances, location and content. However, it will be seen that most state actions in maritime and territorial disputes fit neatly within one category.

Having distinguished three generic types of assertive state action in maritime disputes, it is now possible to identify variation over time in both the quantity and quality of assertiveness in a state’s behaviour. Assertive state actions, or patterns of action, can intensify, continue, or diminish across a given time period. Intensification occurs where a particular action is either: a.) a new method of advancing the claim, unseen in previous time periods; b.) more frequent than in previous time periods, for example an increase in patrol activity or state-sponsored fishing voyages; or c.) applied over a broader geographic area than in previous time periods. The intensification of assertiveness is the most important
kind of variation for identifying shifts in state behaviour. However, once a given action is identified as a case of assertive change, it is crucial to consider whether, in subsequent time periods, it intensified further, continued or diminished, and to factor this into assessments of the state’s overall level of assertiveness.41

The preceding sections have, in turn, defined assertiveness in maritime disputes as the relative presence or absence of actions that strengthen one state’s position in the dispute to the detriment of another’s, and established a three-way typology of assertive state actions – declarative, demonstrative and coercive. Applying this framework to a time series of 130 cases of change in the PRC’s behaviour in the South China Sea between 1970 and 2015 will enable us to measure the quantitative and qualitative variation in China’s confrontational behaviour across that time period.

**PRC assertiveness, by the numbers**

The events data detailed in Appendix 2 demonstrate four important points often overlooked in current analyses of China’s maritime policy. First, rising assertiveness itself is not a new feature of China’s policy in the South China Sea – in fact, it is better described as a constant. Since 1970 there have been only four years when the PRC’s assertiveness did not intensify in some way; even once we factor in the discontinuation and diminishment of earlier assertive policies, the PRC’s overall level of assertiveness has increased in 29 out of 46 years since 1970. Second, most of China’s new, increased or expanded actions have continued into subsequent years, creating cumulative layers of assertive policies. Not only have many newly instituted patterns of behaviour proven to be a “new normal,” assertive actions at one point in time have often generated feedback loops by facilitating future assertiveness. Thus, changes in behaviour at one point in time may be less a result of the immediate decisions that led to their implementation than of long years of groundwork laid down in the past. Third, within the overall trend of increasing PRC activity, there have been four distinct periods when China’s assertiveness has intensified especially rapidly: 1973-75 1987-89, 1992-95
and from 2007 onwards. The period of this dissertation’s focused investigations (Chapters 4-6) therefore covers the PRC’s fourth major policy shift in the South China Sea since 1970, and by far its most sustained. Fourth, besides this protracted duration, what distinguishes China’s current policy from its past policies is the increased frequency of qualitatively coercive actions, which account for most of the quantitative change in China’s behaviour since 2007. Below, these findings are detailed individually.

*Rising Chinese assertiveness is a constant, not a change*

The first key point that emerges from the events data is that rising assertiveness itself is not a new feature of China’s policy in the South China Sea. Figure 3.2 overleaf depicts the number of cases of intensified PRC assertiveness in each year since 1970. It indicates there have only been four years when China did not engage in some form of increased, expanded or unprecedented assertive action on the South China Sea issue. The most recent was 1990. Looking at the chart by decade, China’s assertiveness intensified in some form in at least 8 out of the 10 years in the 1970s, 9 out of 10 years in the 1980s and 1990s, and every year since 2000. Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea, in short, is better described as a constant than a change. Overall, the 130 cases of intensified assertiveness identified between 1970 and 2015 equate to an average of 2.8 per year. The longstanding nature of the PRC’s claims were noted in the previous chapter, but what these data show is that China’s assertive pursuit of these claims – that is, at the expense of other states – has been a fairly constant feature of the past four decades in the South China Sea.

This observation carries two important implications for the analysis of China’s current policy in the South China Sea. First, if intensifying assertiveness is a constant, rather than a change, then the type of assertive actions becomes crucial to understanding the timing and nature of the recent change in China’s behaviour there. Here, again, Figure 3.2 tells the story: within the overall trend of continuously rising assertiveness, a major qualitative change has occurred in the
type of actions by which China has advanced its position in recent years. The red-coloured bars at the right-hand end of the chart indicate the introduction of regular coercive actions – those that involve the threat or use of punishment to change adversaries’ behaviour – from 2007. The significance of this qualitative shift is discussed separately below. A second implication is that periods of Chinese non-assertiveness are relatively rare, raising a potentially fruitful line of inquiry into the causes of, and conditions for, moderation in China’s policy. Systematic exploration of this question is beyond the scope of this study, but comparison of the events data against the eight key explanatory variables later in this chapter reveals that some factors commonly believed to be causes of confrontational behaviour actually have a stronger relationship with Chinese restraint in the South China Sea.

We now have a broad-brush picture of when and how China’s assertiveness has intensified. But Figure 3.2 does not indicate whether each case of intensified activity continued or diminished in subsequent years. In this sense, it can be thought of as representing the patterns of acceleration of the PRC’s assertiveness, but not its overall velocity. What, then, have these micro-level changes added up to over the longer term? The fold-out chart (Figure 3.3) provides some answers to this question by adding to the picture what is known, or can reasonably be inferred, about the duration of the newly assertive patterns of PRC action observed in each year. Confirming the observation that rising assertiveness is a relatively constant feature of Chinese policy in this area, it shows that even once the
diminishment of earlier assertive policies is factored in, the PRC’s overall quantitative level of assertiveness has increased in 29 of the 46 calendar years since 1970. As detailed below, this reflects a general tendency for assertiveness at one time to facilitate future assertiveness.

The layering effect

The accumulating layers apparent in Figure 3.3 illustrate how many assertive PRC actions in the South China Sea have continued into subsequent years. Of the 130 cases in the events dataset, 50 (38%) are likely to have continued through 2015, and 22 (17%) continued at least into the following year. Only 55 (42%) were one-off incidents or temporary surges in activity. Thus, in well over one-third of cases, the intensification of China’s assertiveness in one year marked a “new normal” that has continued to the present day. Some assertive actions are by nature ongoing and continuous, such as domestic legal and administrative moves and the construction of facilities in disputed areas, which remain in place until abolished or abandoned. But another reason for the layering effect is the tendency of assertiveness to beget further assertiveness.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No. of cases (% total)</th>
<th>Once-off or diminished in next year</th>
<th>Continued, diminished by 2015</th>
<th>Ongoing through 2015</th>
<th>2015 cases</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>55 (42.3%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>22 (16.9%)</td>
<td>50 (38.5%)</td>
<td>3 (2.3%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.2: Estimated duration of cases of intensified PRC assertiveness, 1970-2015.

In maritime disputes, assertive actions taken at one point in time often lay the groundwork for subsequent increases in assertive actions, creating feedback loops. The occupation of islands or reefs, for example, is necessary for the construction of infrastructure there. This, in turn, can support increased fishing activities, energy exploration and administrative control of surrounding waters. Similarly, over wider expanses of disputed maritime space, scientific research – especially cartography, oceanography and meteorology – is often a precondition for future
military operations, resource surveys and patrolling. And an increase in patrols in one year can facilitate further increases in following years, as front-line organizations and crews gain experience and confidence operating in disputed waters previously unfamiliar to them. The Scarborough Shoal standoff in 2012 provided a vivid example of this dynamic. As detailed in Chapter 6, the PRC’s rapid on-water intervention to block the Philippines Navy from arresting Chinese fishermen was only possible because two maritime surveillance vessels happened to be nearby on a “regular rights defense patrol.” This program of patrols, which commenced in the South China Sea in 2007 and increased in frequency each year thereafter (see Chapter 4), directly enabled the PRC’s assertiveness at Scarborough Shoal in 2012.42

This relationship between the layers in Figure 3.3 is vital to understanding the dynamics of policy change in the South China Sea. The causal links between past and present policies make it necessary to consider not just the immediate drivers of change in state behaviour, but also slower-moving processes whose effects may only become observable years after they were set in motion. At the same time, it may also offer some predictive value as a rough guide to likely future developments in a state’s policy. An example of this appears in Figure 3.4 below, which shows the routes followed by the Chinese Academy of Science-led “Comprehensive Survey of the Spratly Islands” scientific missions in the mid-1980s.43 The routes strongly suggest the party-state had, by that time, taken a strong interest in exercising jurisdiction across the entire maritime area within the nine-dash line, more than two decades before the line was attached to official PRC diplomatic correspondence for the first time. In another key example of this process, which in some ways reflects a logic of path dependence, Chapter 4 will show how the PRC’s declarative moves to implement the UNCLOS in late 1990s prompted the initiation of projects aimed at expanding the unilateral administrative presence of PRC maritime law enforcement across the entire disputed area of the South China Sea, which only came to fruition around 2007. The layering effect apparent in the fold-out chart illustrates how the current era’s
assertiveness is not just the result of contemporary policy decisions, but also of long years of groundwork laid down in previous years.

Figure 3.4: Route of 1984-1986 (L) and 1987 (R) Spratly Islands Comprehensive Surveys (CAS, Zonghe Diaocha Baogao).

Assertive surges in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s

As Chapter 2 noted, the main existing explanations for policy change are generally not mutually exclusive. The timing of changes in behaviour is an important way to assess the relative importance of distinct, but compatible, hypothesized explanatory factors in explaining policy outcomes in the “prioritized fashion” Ng-Quinn recommended.44 Looking again at Figure 3.3, within the overall picture of increasing assertiveness in China’s policy, four periods of rapid acceleration are apparent: 1973-1975, 1987-1988, 1992-1994, and from 2007 onwards. These four periods merit preliminary designation as assertive foreign policy changes, in which a state apparatus begins routinely handling similar situations differently.45 As summarized in Table 3.3, the average frequency of intensified assertive actions during each of these periods rose to between 3.0 and 5.1 per year, compared to 2.1 or less during the cycles of relative moderation in between. Outside of these four
periods, the average frequency of intensified assertive actions since 1970 is only around 1.8 per year, a figure that can be thought of as an underlying base rate of change in the PRC level of assertiveness. The actions that comprised the three past periods of intensified assertiveness in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s are described in brief below; the period from 2007 onwards is examined in detail in the remaining chapters of this dissertation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Cases of intensified PRC assertiveness</th>
<th>Number of years</th>
<th>Mean cases per year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1970-1972)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1973-1975</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1976-1986)</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987-1988</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1989-1991)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1995-2006)</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007-2015</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.3: Periods of rapidly intensifying PRC assertiveness (bold) in South China Sea.

In 1973-1975, the PRC’s first major assertive shift after 1970, Beijing used military force to evict South Vietnam from the Paracel Islands, occupied the southwestern half of the archipelago for the first time, and stepped up its military infrastructure and surveys. During this period Beijing also launched a series of comprehensive scientific surveys south of the Paracels (Figure 3.5) – another good illustration of its future intentions – and began pushing its restrictive position on foreign military surveillance activities in the EEZ that continues to contribute to Sino-American frictions today. This also coincided with increased domestic and international publicity campaigns regarding the Paracels, Spratlys and Scarborough Shoal. By 1976, some of these activities had subsided, and no new initiatives are known to have been introduced that year. But by now, as Figure 3.3 indicates, China’s overall level of assertiveness was significantly higher than it had been in 1972, before this first assertive policy shift began.
The curve on the assertiveness chart turns upwards again from 1987, indicating another period of rapid intensification of China’s assertiveness that lasted into the first half of 1989. In early 1988 Beijing used military force against the now-unified Vietnam, establishing its first foothold in the Spratly Islands. The naval skirmish resulted in at least one Vietnamese ship sunk with an estimated 70 sailors killed, and left the PRC in control of six of the seven reefs that it occupies in the area today. This had been preceded in 1987 by the PRC’s first naval combat exercises in the area, and an unprecedentedly large scientific survey expedition (see Figure 3.4). Construction works followed on the newly occupied reefs, particularly on Fiery Cross Reef, where a small artificial island was built. Later in 1988, Hainan was upgraded to provincial status via a legislative act that explicitly listed the disputed territories as part of the new province, prompting further vigorous Vietnamese protests. There were also significant intensifications of China’s own verbal assertiveness, not only in terms of the number of official media claims to sovereignty over the disputed territorial features, but also a broadening of the targets of Beijing’s confrontational rhetoric to include ASEAN countries for the first
time in a decade. Scientific survey work continued to increase into 1989, and new harbours and airstrip projects were initiated in the Paracels. But from mid-1989 onwards, the PRC’s policy became notably restrained.

China resumed its advances in the South China Sea from early 1992, initiating several new lines of activity. The year began with a major inspection trip in January by 24 Hainan officials and PLA officers, who left behind sovereignty markers on seven features in the northern part of the Spratlys. The next month, the PRC promulgated its *Law on the Territorial Sea and Contiguous Zone*, inscribing the claim to the disputed islands in domestic law for the first time, and implicitly authorizing the use of military force to evict intruders around them. In May 1992, Beijing awarded an oil concession to a little-known US energy firm, Crestone, covering 25,000 sq km in the Vanguard Bank (万安滩). An on-water standoff ensued when the exploration operations began two years later, with PLA Navy warships blockading a Vietnamese oil rig in the area.

In 1993 the “comprehensive survey” voyages in the Spratlys were restarted after a two-year hiatus, and Vietnam repeatedly protested unilateral PRC energy surveys in the Gulf of Tonkin. Jiang Zemin made the first visit by a CCP General Secretary to a disputed territory since 1985 – and still the most recent at time of writing in 2016 – when he toured the Paracel Islands in April 1993. There were also upgrades to the six Spratly outposts, creating a new and much larger generation of concrete “reef forts” (礁堡) to replace the spartan “huts-on-stilts” (高脚室) that established Beijing’s foothold there after 1988. China also built a large new concrete sovereignty marker on Scarborough Shoal.

Following a major new Chinese fisheries survey in 1994, both the Philippines and Vietnam reported increased Chinese fishing activities. This wave of PRC assertiveness culminated with the occupation of Mischief Reef and the construction of a fisheries base there. This was the first time the PRC had expanded its presence into the Philippines-controlled eastern part of the Spratlys, and it remains China’s most recent occupation of any disputed feature in the South China Sea. An incident followed in May 1995, in which Chinese vessels blocked a Philippine ship attempting to bring journalists to observe the situation at Mischief
Reef. Following regional and extra-regional criticism of these activities, China’s behaviour once again reverted to its underlying pattern of steady, low-profile advancement, with an average of 2.1 cases of intensified assertive activities each year between 1995 and 2006. But once again, as the fold-out chart shows, it remained much more assertive overall than ever before.

**Breakpoint 2007**

The finding that China’s behaviour changed in 2007 confirms the analysis of several Vietnamese sources, as well as Fravel’s congressional testimony, as noted at the beginning of this chapter. However, much English-language commentary dates China’s assertive shift to between 2009 and 2012, following the Sino-American confrontation over the USNS *Impeccable* and other high-profile incidents at sea. The data assembled here indicate that no subsequent year established a new pattern different from the one that began in 2007. In 2009 and 2010 there were five PRC acts of intensified assertiveness, but this was only average across the 2007-2015 period; in 2011 the number was four, after China’s actions moderated significantly in the second half of the year. The strongest alternative candidate for “breakpoint” status is 2012, when nine cases were observed. This was easily the PRC’s most assertive year since 1970. However, unlike 2007, it did not mark a turning point. Rather than continuing to accelerate after 2012, the average yearly number of intensified assertive actions fell back to 5.0 per year in 2013-2015, the same number recorded on average since 2007. This suggests 2012 is better seen as an extreme case within a broader shift that began in 2007 (see Chapter 6 for further discussion).

If, as the data examined here suggest, the fourth major assertive shift in China’s behaviour in the South China Sea began in 2007, then it is also by far the most protracted since 1970. Whereas the three previous surges continued for two or three years, the current pattern has continued for nine years. If we were to date the PRC’s assertive shift to 2012, this important aspect of the change in China’s behaviour would be obscured. Recognizing the unprecedentedly long duration of
China’s current push has direct implications for understanding its causation. It suggests, first of all, that it has in fact been a foreign policy shift, in accordance with central strategic intentions, rather than the result of overzealous sub-state actors overstepping their mandates, or the personal style of particular leaders. It points instead towards longer-term structural explanations for China’s altered behaviour.\footnote{49}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of assertiveness</th>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Number of cases</th>
<th>Mean cases per year</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tail)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Declarative</td>
<td>1970-2006</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td>0.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2007-2015</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrative</td>
<td>1970-2006</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>1.07</td>
<td>0.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2007-2015</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coercive</td>
<td>1970-2006</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>7.95</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2007-2015</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1970-2006</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>3.90</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2007-2015</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (excl. coercive)</td>
<td>1970-2006</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>1.31</td>
<td>0.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2007-2015</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.4: Independent samples t-test for equality of mean number of intensified assertive actions in pre- and post-2007 periods (equal variances not assumed).

Most importantly, 2007 marks a crucial \textit{qualitative} change in the PRC’s behaviour in the South China Sea, with the introduction of regular coercive actions. Despite making every effort to overcome the present-centric information bias by identifying as many past cases as possible, I identified only 12 cases of PRC assertiveness intensifying through coercive actions between 1970 and 2006 – an average of only 0.3 cases per year.\footnote{50} In contrast, 20 such cases have been observed in the nine years since that time, an average of 2.2 per year. This equates to a sevenfold increase in the most dangerous type of assertive actions from 2007 onwards. An independent samples \textit{t}-test shows the statistical significance of this change.\footnote{51} In fact, if coercive cases are excluded, the difference between the pre- and post-2007 periods is no longer statistically significant (Table 3.4).\footnote{52} Thus, the introduction of qualitatively coercive actions from 2007 onwards accounts for the bulk of the quantitative change in China’s assertive behaviour there. It is also worth noting that of the nine cases observed in 2012, only three were of a coercive
nature – the seizure of at least four Vietnamese fishing boats in the Paracels, the imposition of on-water control around Scarborough Shoal, and informal economic sanctions against the Philippines at the height of that standoff. This further buttresses the idea that, rather than the beginning of a new pattern of behaviour, the high number of assertive actions in 2012 was an outlier within a larger trend of increased, and more coercive, PRC assertiveness since 2007.

As far as the remainder of this study is concerned, the most important implication of these events data is this clear qualitative break with past patterns of PRC behaviour – from non-coercive towards coercive – beginning in 2007. This finding will guide the selection of cases on which to conduct focused analysis of the nationalism-policy relationship in Chapters 4, 5 and 6. It implies that process-tracing instances of qualitatively coercive PRC actions will produce a set of case studies that are typical of the overall change in the state's behaviour during the period under study. From another perspective, coercive actions are also extreme cases of assertiveness, since they tend to be the most provocative to other claimants. To investigate the causes of China's policy shift since 2007, it will make sense to examine coercive cases, where the behavioural change has been greatest, because the value on the possible explanatory variables should also be high and therefore more easily observable. However, before commencing in-depth investigations of contemporary cases, we can use the events data to gauge the likelihood of each of these variables – including popular nationalism – as factors in China's past policy shifts. This will provide a rough indication of how much prior confidence we should have in each as an explanation for the PRC’s post-2007 assertiveness in the South China Sea.

**Implications for existing explanations of policy shifts**

This section compares the value on the explanatory variables outlined in previous chapters against the historical patterns identified in the events dataset. The timing of changes in the state’s behaviour provides more insight into the explanatory strength of some factors than others. There are high-certitude “hoop tests” for the
balance of power, value of disputed possessions, and declining claim-strength as causes of China’s past assertive shifts.\textsuperscript{56} There are also strong tests for the various models of bottom-up popular nationalist influence outlined in Chapter 1.\textsuperscript{57} The events data will tell us less about the possible role of international legal regimes, cultural preferences for probing and guerilla tactics, changes of party leadership, and symbolic political interests more generally. The timing of policy shifts cannot falsify these explanations, and each passed test will only add marginally to confidence that they were part of the causal mix, but they will offer a “straw in the wind” indication.

The results of these basic “pattern matching” exercises, summarized in Tables 3.5 and 3.6, are probabilistic, not deterministic: they are an indication of the likelihood that the variable in question contributed to a given change in China’s overall level of assertiveness. The individual actions that comprise the patterns identified in the dataset obviously do not all have uniform causes. Firmer evidence will be sought in subsequent chapters by tracing individual cases chosen to be as representative as possible of the changes observed since 2007.

\textit{Balance of power}

If positive changes in the regional balance of power were a factor behind a rise in PRC assertiveness, we ought to find international political developments favourable to China ahead of the change in policy. This type of explanation fares well in the long-term picture of the changes in China’s actions over time. The near-constant assertiveness in the PRC’s policy since 1970 is consistent with the idea that as a state’s material power grows, so too will the scope of its interests and its willingness to act to advance them. Although China’s naval strategy shifted away from coastal areas to “offshore defense” in the mid-1980s, its rapid naval modernization program only began in earnest after 1990.\textsuperscript{58} The finding that the most recent year in which no cases of intensified PRC assertiveness were found is 1990 is therefore consistent with the idea that favourable changes in the regional balance of power will lead to greater assertiveness. The data indicate that since the
addition of these new capabilities, the PRC has indeed been less likely to refrain from intensifying or expanding the scope of its activities in the South China Sea dispute.

The weakness of South Vietnam and warming Sino-American relations may well have contributed to China’s decision to move on the southwestern half of the Paracel Islands – the central element of the 1973-75 surge. China had a “window of opportunity” to prevent numerous disputed islands from falling into the hands of Soviet-backed North Vietnam, an adversary more capable of defending them than the moribund Saigon regime. Had a victorious Hanoi been allowed to inherit the South Vietnamese positions in the Paracels, control of the archipelago may have remained divided today. There is also evidence for the idea that Beijing perceived a “window of opportunity” to move against Vietnam in the Spratly Islands in 1987-88, as detailed in Chapter 2. As well, the surge in PRC assertiveness from 1992 to 1994 followed the collapse of the Soviet Union and coincided with the United States military drawdown in East Asia, developments that created the perception of a “power vacuum” among regional officials. These patterns are broadly consistent with the notion that favourable changes in the regional balance of power help explain the timing of the PRC’s assertive behaviour in the past.

The recent assertive shift in China’s behaviour, however, is slightly more difficult to explain in these terms. Unlike in its earlier periods of intensifying PRC assertiveness in the South China Sea, regional geopolitical developments prior to 2007 were not moving in a particularly favourable direction for China. The United States remained preoccupied with Iraq and Afghanistan, but less so than in 2003. And the heightened threat, from Beijing’s perspective, of Taiwanese moves towards formal independence during Chen Shui-bian’s presidency (2000-2008) may have been an incentive for moderation in the South China Sea, as it seemed to be through the 1995 and 1996 missile crises.

The new naval and maritime law enforcement capabilities China added between 2004 and 2006 may have been a necessary condition for the post-2007 shift which, as Chapter 4 shows in detail, involved the use of many new ships as well as
organizational structures. However, unlike in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, the events data do not support the idea that an opportunistic PRC took advantage of favourable international developments to accelerate the advancement of its position in the dispute. The most plausible positive development for China’s regional position around this time was the Global Financial Crisis (GFC), which weakened and distracted the US. But if, as the events data indicate, the key change in China’s behaviour in the South China Sea began in 2007, then the original impetus was unrelated to the GFC, the magnitude of which only became clear through 2008. If Beijing did perceive an opportunity in the apparent weakening of American power at this point, it at most exacerbated or entrenched a change in PRC policy that was already underway. And, as discussed below, the PRC’s position in the dispute was actually weakening in other important respects before 2007.

*Increasing value of disputed possession*

If increasing material value of the disputed possessions contributed to an assertive policy change, we should find, ahead of the shift in state behaviour, rising prices or increasing Chinese dependence on imports of commodities believed to be present in the disputed area. The strategic and economic significance of the South China Sea have increased across the 1970-2015 period, consistent with increasing value of the disputed possessions as an explanation for the long-term pattern of increasing PRC assertiveness. On its own, as noted in the previous chapter, increasing strategic dependence on sea lanes, implicit in the rising trade volumes shown in Figure 3.6, is not a strong explanation for assertive actions. But if we also factor in the mineral resources believed to lie beneath the disputed area, then consistently increasing incentives for China to advance its position there become apparent. As Figure 3.7 indicates, China’s domestic oil consumption began to increase much faster than production from the early 1980s, such that by 1993 it became a net oil importer. Since that time, the PRC’s reliance on imported energy has continued to increase, implying a corresponding increase in the strategic value of the energy reserves believed to lie beneath the disputed area. Longitudinal data
on fish prices and catches from the disputed area are not readily available, but the depletion of coastal fisheries mentioned in the previous chapter may well have heightened the importance of the living resources in the disputed area’s water column to China’s economic growth and food security. Overall, then, the steadily increasing value of the disputed possessions is a plausible factor behind the long-term pattern of increasing PRC assertiveness.

Figure 3.6: PRC trade by US dollar value, 1978-2014 (China Statistical Yearbooks).

The timing of the rapid assertive shifts identified in the events data is also consistent with resources as a motivation. Although PRC trade and energy consumption data for the 1970s are not readily available, the 1973-1975 shift was preceded by the UN ECAFE preliminary surveys identifying sedimentary basins in the Spratlys as likely to hold hydrocarbon reserves. Although a four-year gap exists between the report’s release and China’s assertive surge, given the PRC’s limited
oceangoing capabilities and the political dysfunction of the Cultural Revolution at the end of the 1960s, a link between the two remains plausible. This period also
coincided with the spike in world oil prices after the October 1973 oil embargo announced by OPEC (Figure 3.8). China was self-sufficient in oil production at that time, thanks to the large onshore field at Daqing, so the oil shock may have had nothing to do with China’s policy in the Paracels. But the timing does at least meet the basic expectations of increasingly valuable hydrocarbons as a factor.

Figure 3.9: PRC crude oil imports by volume and value, 1996-2014 (China Statistical Yearbooks).

Figure 3.10: PRC fuel imports by value, 1992-2014 (World Bank).
The value of the disputed resources is also a plausible factor behind China’s assertive shift from 2007 onwards. Following accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001, the PRC’s trade volume exploded (see Figure 3.6), but until 2007 its assertiveness in the South China Sea only intensified at the basic long-term underlying rate. After a sharp rise in 2000, China’s energy imports plateaued until 2003 (Figures 3.9 and 3.10). However, the resumption of their upward trajectory coincided with a spike in the world oil price, such that from 2003 to 2006, the value of China’s energy imports more than trebled.62 A similar pattern is apparent in the value of some of the key nonferrous metals (Figure 3.11), significant reserves of which are present in the South China Sea, according to PRC sources. Thus, the basic material incentives for stepping up attempts to control the South China Sea’s disputed resources do appear to have been increasing prior to 2007. The hypothesis that increasing material value of the disputed possessions contributed to China’s assertive behaviour from 2007 thus passes the “hoop test” presented by the events data.

Figure 3.11: PRC nonferrous metal imports by volume and value, 1994-2015 (China Statistical Yearbooks).
Declining claim strength

If declining claim strength was a factor in an assertive PRC move, we should find developments weakening the PRC’s position in the dispute in the lead-up to periods of heightened assertiveness. The patterns revealed by this study’s events data suggest two notable findings in this regard. Across the 1970-2006 period favourable changes in the regional balance of power are a stronger explanation for the timing of China’s three assertive shifts than weakening claim strength. However, there is more support for the latter as a factor in the PRC’s most recent assertive shift from 2007, if we adopt the modified concept of states’ bargaining positions (claim strength) in maritime disputes outlined earlier in this chapter.

Viewing the PRC’s position as being in decline in the early 1970s implies treating the two disputed archipelagos together as a single dispute, with China’s actions in the Paracels seen as being indirectly aimed at preserving its claim to the Spratlys.63 However, adopting this comprehensive perspective on the disputes raises difficulties with a declining claim strength interpretation. Vietnam and the Philippines’ island occupations and energy exploration in the Spratlys in the early 1970s clearly did weaken the PRC’s position there, but larger trends were strongly favourable to China. First, as noted above, the South Vietnamese regime, which not only controlled the Southwestern part of the Paracels, but also several important islands in the Spratlys, was tottering towards defeat as its American support waned. Second, Sino-American rapprochement from 1972 greatly reduced the likelihood of US intervention in the disputes. Both of these developments effectively improved the PRC’s ability to project military power over the disputed territory – a key element of its bargaining position. The greatest challenge to China’s claim to the Spratlys came in 1975 when Hanoi assumed control of the vanquished Saigon regime’s positions there, bringing many of the key territories under the control of a united, victorious and battle-hardened Vietnamese state with strong superpower backing from the USSR. Yet, rather than escalating further in a preventive effort to meet this challenge, the PRC’s assertiveness in the South China Sea diminished from 1975 onwards.
It is also not clear that China’s position in the South China Sea was rapidly worsening before its assertive shift in 1987-1988. Fravel emphasizes that China’s rivals occupied around a dozen additional Spratly features between 1980 and 1988, but Chinese sources show the majority of these actions occurred in 1988 – after the PRC began moving in. Vietnam and Malaysia occupied three previously vacant reefs in the Spratlys over the two years before China’s policy shifted on the water. Notably, however, none of these features had territorial status. Most of the 15 islands and rocks naturally above the water had been taken by the end of the 1970s, the most recent being Malaysia’s occupation of Swallow Reef in 1983. Given that even today there remain many dozens of unoccupied reefs of this kind, it is hard to see the “loss” of these marginal underwater features as constituting a rapid decline in the PRC’s bargaining position in 1986-1987. Meanwhile, broader regional developments fundamentally strengthened China’s position. As Chen points out, détente between Washington and Moscow reduced the possibility of global superpower conflict, enabling Beijing to concentrate more attention and resources on its periphery, including disputed maritime territorial claims. Sino-Soviet relations were rapidly moving towards normalization and, following Gorbachev’s ascension in 1985, analysts in Beijing observed a succession of signals of reduced Soviet alliance commitment to Vietnam. This greatly decreased the likelihood of Moscow intervening on Hanoi’s behalf against a Chinese move in the Spratlys. In sum, China’s position does not seem to have been in rapid decline in the leadup to its assertive shift in 1987-1988.

China’s intensified assertiveness between 1992 and 1995 also coincided with a strengthening, rather than a weakening, of its position in the South China Sea. On the local level, the PRC had successfully entrenched its foothold in the Spratlys, upgrading its facilities on the six reefs it occupied in 1988, while accruing valuable navigation, construction and logistics experience in the process of maintaining them. More fundamentally, while the end of the Cold War threatened the CCP’s domestic regime security, it also strengthened its regional position. The surge in PRC activity from 1992 onwards followed closely after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and intensified with the US military drawdown in the region. It is probably
not a coincidence that this period culminated in the PRC’s first expansion into the eastern part of the Spratly archipelago, loosely controlled by the Philippines, a US treaty ally.\textsuperscript{67} Chen, who characterizes the PRC’s behaviour during the 1970s and 1980s as opportunistic, nonetheless argues that the PRC’s assertiveness in the 1990s was also driven by unfavourable political trends, specifically the increasing involvement of ASEAN in the dispute, and improving ties between Vietnam and the other Southeast Asian claimants.\textsuperscript{68} However, following ASEAN’s unprecedented 1995 collective statement of “serious concern,” calling for “early resolution of the problems caused by the recent developments in Mischief Reef,” China’s assertiveness subsided.\textsuperscript{69} If this statement, and the subsequent accession of Vietnam to ASEAN in July 1995, were the strongest manifestations of this unfavourable political trend, then they coincided with a diminishment, rather than intensification, of the PRC’s assertiveness.

The circumstances of the post-2007 shift appear to offer the most persuasive evidence for declining claim strength as a factor in PRC maritime assertiveness. From 2004 onwards Vietnam had pressed ahead with new energy development projects with third-country energy companies in the highly productive Nam Con Son Basin.\textsuperscript{70} This was initially mitigated by an agreement signed with the Philippines and Vietnam in 2004-2005 that held out the prospect of PRC access to the potentially rich energy resources of the Reed Bank. But by 2007 the trilateral deal was in trouble, with the Department of Foreign Affairs in Manila obstructing its implementation, and domestic opposition increasing on the basis that it was against the Philippines constitution.\textsuperscript{71} As discussed in Chapter 4, other negative developments included a sharp rise in Vietnamese activities fishing in the Paracel Islands, and increased detentions of PRC fishers in the Spratlys.\textsuperscript{72} Overall, then, the case for a weakening PRC position triggering its assertive shifts in the South China Sea appears strongest in 2007.

This example illustrates the utility of the three-point concept of a state’s bargaining position in a maritime dispute outlined earlier in this chapter. The territorial status quo in the South China Sea had been unchanged since 1999, and the PRC’s naval capabilities were rapidly improving throughout the 2000s, so
under the original formulation {disputed territory occupied + relevant military capabilities} the PRC’s claim strength was only improving in the years leading up to 2007. But using the modified concept designed for maritime disputes {overall administrative presence + relevant military capabilities + legal claim viability} the PRC’s position was quite plausibly weakening when its assertive shift began in 2007. In conclusion, declining claim strength appears a more likely factor in PRC policy change in the South China Sea in the present era than in the past. This may reflect the process of “territorialization” of disputed maritime spaces under the UNCLOS legal regime, examined in Chapter 4, producing patterns of action in the South China Sea dispute that increasingly resemble state behaviour in land-based disputes.

Popular nationalism: legitimacy-based models

If an assertive foreign policy change was driven by a state’s desire to rally nationalist support and divert attention from domestic issues, as per the diversionary nationalism card model, we should find evidence of worsening legitimacy issues before the observed change in the state’s behaviour. These might include economic problems, falling standards of living, anti-government mobilization, social unrest, or a more general loss of popular support for the political status quo. The concept of legitimacy is contested and amorphous, with a particularly intense debate over whether support for the Chinese government based on economic growth constitutes a form of “performance legitimacy.”

Measuring legitimacy is even more contentious than defining it, but in this section I will take economic growth, consumer prices, and popular unrest as accessible rough indicators. By these measures, the diversionary nationalism card explanation is only tenuously plausible as an explanation for the timing of PRC assertive shifts in the past. In fact, times of acute domestic crisis have more often coincided with moderation than intensification of activities in the South China Sea. However, the rise of “mass incidents” in the mid-2000s means the nationalism card
is worthy of closer investigation in subsequent chapters as a plausible factor behind the post-2007 assertive shift.

In the early-to-mid 1970s, as economic growth fluctuated and the turgid political campaigns of the Cultural Revolution dragged on, it could be argued that the basic conditions existed for diversionary foreign policy conflict. However, whatever insecurities the CCP leadership may have felt between 1973 and 1975 surely paled in comparison to those it faced in 1976. That year began with the death of Premier Zhou Enlai, a popular leader regarded as a voice of moderation through the Cultural Revolution’s chaos. This led to a major crisis several weeks later, when massive crowds commemorating Zhou turned into angry demonstrations criticizing radical CCP leaders, particularly Politburo Standing Committee member Jiang Qing. Leading scholars of Chinese politics in this era regard this as “the first challenge to the regime from below” in the PRC’s history. The subsequent death of Mao, the Tangshan earthquake, the coup against the “Gang of Four” and an economic recession added further grave challenges to the party’s authority (Figure 3.12). Far from prompting a diversionary foreign policy confrontation, this series

![Figure 3.12: PRC annual economic growth in percentage points, 1970-2014 (World Bank).](image-url)
of domestic political issues coincided with a lull in China’s assertiveness in the South China Sea.

![Figure 3.13: PRC consumer price inflation rate, 1986-1998 (Tradingeconomics.com).](image)

Similar patterns are apparent in the 1980s and 1990s, legitimacy challenges coinciding with moderation rather than assertiveness on the South China Sea issue. China’s expansion into the Spratly archipelago began after student demonstrations calling for political liberalization over the winter of 1986-1987, and it also coincided with a period of rising inflation (Figure 3.13). Although GDP growth was strong at the time, and the inflation issue only really kicked in through 1988, it could be tenuously argued that the basic conditions for a *nationalism card* legitimacy ploy were in place before the PRC’s Spratly gambit. However, the aftermath of the 1989 Beijing protests, clearly a far more serious legitimacy crisis – in fact, the most serious the CCP has faced since taking power – again coincided with an abrupt end to the PRC’s assertiveness in the South China Sea. Economic growth also slumped to around 4 percent in 1989 and 1990, one of China’s least assertive years in the South China Sea over the 1970-2015 period. The rebound in China’s GDP growth from 1991 preceded another surge in the South China Sea, while the next downward turn, during the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997-1998, also coincided with relatively low levels of PRC maritime assertiveness. Further research may suggest whether a causal connection underpins this correlation between domestic legitimacy problems and foreign policy moderation.75
The CCP’s domestic circumstances around 2007 are mixed, but a diversionary nationalism card scenario is plausible. Although GDP was growing rapidly, there appears to have been a rise in the number of incidents of domestic unrest around this time. Widely cited Ministry of Public Security statistics state that from 1994 to 2004 the number of “mass incidents” increased from 8,700 to around 74,000 (Figure 3.14). Despite definitional inconsistencies and opaque collection methods, researchers inside and outside China nonetheless consider the numbers to reflect an underlying reality of increasing social instability during this period.76 Japanese government statistics based on media sources also show a sharp rise in protests in 2006.77 And an original dataset compiled by overseas-based Chinese researchers found “large-scale mass incidents” increased from 9 in 2005 to 25 in 2006, and 63 in 2007. These figures continued to rise through 2008, before falling back in 2009.78 Thus, even though economic growth was strong during this period, the nationalism card explanation passes the basic test of plausibility as a factor in the PRC’s assertive shift from 2007. This will be subject to more rigorous investigation in the chapters that follow.

For a Frankenstein’s monster of newly empowered Chinese popular nationalism to have impacted the Communist Party-state’s policy in the South China Sea, we should find evidence of rising popular nationalist mobilization before the observed change in state behaviour. One accessible measure is the number of anti-foreign street protests, boycotts and petition movements preceding or coinciding with the policy change. Although there are alternative explanations for these types of popular collective actions, including the state-led channeling process proposed in Chapter 1, such an observation will nonetheless confirm that the main condition existed for such a bottom-up model of nationalist influence to have been in operation. Several other signs may also establish its basic plausibility in the absence of nationalist mobilization, such as state ideological campaigns, media liberalization, and technological developments affecting the public opinion environment. If none of these proxies for rising nationalism matches the timing of the foreign policy change in question, we can probably discount this kind of direct bottom-up nationalist influence.
Figure 3.14: Yearly number of PRC mass incidents in early 2000s. Top: “illegal mass incidents” in China 1994-2004, in tens of thousands (Hu, Hu and Wang, “Yingxiang shehui”). Middle: protest incidents in China 1993-2006, compiled from media reports by the Japan’s Public Security Intelligence Agency, also in tens of thousands (PSIA, ”Focal issues”). Bottom: “large-scale mass incidents” 2003-2009 (Tong and Lei, ”Large-scale mass incidents”).
Given that this model of bottom-up influence on Chinese foreign policy has only been proposed since developments in the 1980s, policy change in the 1970s probably lies beyond its explanatory scope. The PRC's first anti-Japan demonstrations took place in 1985 and, as Weiss shows, these were linked in various ways to the 1986-1987 student demonstrations for political liberalization. There is little indication that the South China Sea issue was on the students' agenda, and to my knowledge no author has linked these events with China's actions in the South China Sea between 1987 and 1989. While a causal connection therefore seems unlikely, this correlation nonetheless allows the Frankenstein's monster of rising nationalism to pass the basic plausibility test as an explanation for China's assertive surge in the late 1980s.

The Frankenstein's monster model became much more prominent in the 1990s and early 2000s as overseas analysts became concerned about possible unintended consequences of the CCP's patriotic education campaign, media commercialization, and the potential for the internet to bring about popular empowerment. However, none of these developments offers a credible explanation for the patterns of China's assertiveness in the South China Sea during this period. If rising nationalist sentiments resulting from the party's patriotic education initiatives influenced China's maritime policy, we ought to find evidence of increasingly confrontational stances from the mid-1990s onwards when, according to leading scholars, this campaign took effect. Likewise, if media commercialization's fuelling of such sentiments has been important, then we should see assertiveness rising from the mid-1990s, when a series of best-selling nationalist polemics signaled the emergence of this trend in Chinese commercial publishing. Or, if the internet enabled popular nationalism to pressure the leadership's policy on contentious maritime disputes, we should observe assertive change taking hold in the early 2000s, when online technologies were rolled out on a mass scale. The observed pattern in the South China Sea is more or less the opposite of these expectations: China's assertiveness receded from 1995 onwards, remained relatively low through the economic downturn in the second half of the decade, and did not increase again until seven years into the 2000s. If popular nationalism
did rise in the 1990s and early 2000s, it evidently was not a significant factor in China’s policy in the South China Sea during that time.

The Frankenstein’s monster of bottom-up popular nationalism does, however, pass the basic plausibility test as a candidate cause of the changes in China’s behaviour from 2007 onwards. Data compiled by Weiss show anti-foreign mobilizations increasing substantially in China between 2003 and 2005. Although the number of cases was somewhat lower in 2006, it remained high, with at least five known instances of anti-foreign protests, petitions or direct action initiatives each year until 2009 (Figure 3.15). Although the targets were mainly Western countries and Japan, it is at least conceivable that CCP authorities may have felt pressure to appease the anti-foreign sentiments behind such actions through increased assertiveness on other territorial issues, of which the South China Sea is one – especially given the relative weakness of China’s rival claimants there. This leaves
the bottom-up influence of nationalist mobilization as a plausible driver of the PRC’s increasingly assertive behaviour in the South China Sea after 2007.

As Chapter 5 will detail, popular nationalism specifically targeted at the South China Sea issue became much more intense and pervasive between 2009 and 2012. According to the logic of the *Frankenstein’s monster* model, this may have contributed to China’s assertiveness from around 2009 onwards – that is, it may have exacerbated an already existing trend towards coercive behaviour over the issue by PRC authorities. The successful hosting of the Beijing Olympics and the US financial crisis are also commonly cited as triggers for a more general “rise” in Chinese nationalism that could have affected PRC policy from 2008-2009 onwards. In sum, there was, at least arguably, a basic match between the timing of China’s post-2007 assertive policy change in the South China Sea, and various signs of rising nationalism. The question thus turns to whether any such rise in popular nationalism actually exerted a bottom-up influence on policy, or reflected a party-state policy of strategic channeling, or was merely coincidental. Answers will be offered in the following chapters using reconstructions of key events and analysis of domestic media and online discourse on the issue.

*Popular nationalism: intra-state contention models*

As discussed in Chapter 1, more specified models of bottom-up nationalist influence on foreign policy hold that the combination of elite contention and nationalist public opinion can facilitate bottom-up influence. Fewsmith and Rosen argued that, particularly at times of heightened international tensions, alignment between contending popular nationalist opinion and political factions or policy interest groups can sway elite decisionmaking towards more confrontational foreign policy actions. For this *policy contest* model of bottom-up influence to be a plausible explanation for observed maritime policy changes, we should see elevated assertiveness coinciding with periods of relatively high elite political and policy contestation, such as the CCP’s five-yearly leadership transitions, or the acute legitimacy crises such as those discussed above in the section on the
nationalism card. We should, in addition, find signs of debate over the issue in domestic public discourse. Confidence in this explanation will be strengthened if participants in these debates implicitly or explicitly invoke public opinion.

Reilly observes that elite divisions make the state less likely to suppress nationalist mobilization, which can in turn affect foreign policy outcomes. Once allowed to swell, a wave of mobilization can influence policy via a range of mechanisms: constraining compromise as leaders seek to avoid criticism from the nationalist public amidst elevated popular agitation and scrutiny; bolstering the position of hardliners in internal political contests or policy debates; or spurring confrontational or non-cooperative actions. For the wave of mobilization model to be a plausible explanation for China’s policy in the South China Sea, we should also observe hardline shifts coinciding with spikes in popular nationalist activity (an expectation shared with the Frankenstein’s monster model), against a backdrop of elevated intra-state contention. Where this is observed, the possible bottom-up influence of such mobilizations will warrant especially close consideration.

Scholars of recent Chinese political history have debated the nature and precise composition of contending CCP political factions during the 1970s, but the idea that intense intra-elite contradictions existed is a point of agreement. However, in the absence of any obvious public policy contention or bottom-up nationalist upswell during this period, the assertive shift in 1973-75 is beyond the explanatory scope of both the intra-state contention models. When China’s South China Sea policy shifted in the 1980s, the conditions for their operation were at least plausibly present. Reilly found evidence that the 1985 anti-Japan student movement received backing from conservative political rivals of then-CCP General Secretary Hu Yaobang. Following Hu’s ousting in 1987, his replacement Zhao Ziyang worked closely with PLA Navy commander Liu Huaqing on the Spratly operation that began shortly afterwards. Given what is known about Hu, Zhao, and the alignments between Chinese elite politics and the student movements of the time, it is unlikely that these bottom-up mobilizations actually were a factor behind the decision to push into the Spratlys. However, based on this chronology, it is at least plausible. We also know that the PLA invoked public opinion in its
lobbying efforts around the same time, satisfying the basic conditions for the operation of the policy contest model outlined byFewsmith and Rosen.\textsuperscript{90} The same dynamic may also have featured in the PRC’s assertive shift in the 1990s. Before Deng’s “Southern Tour” in early 1992, elite tensions were rising and, according to Allen Whiting, the PLA maintained a “powerful political claim to policy” in public debates.\textsuperscript{91} However, the 1992-1995 assertive shift is beyond the explanatory scope of Reilly’s wave of mobilization model, as popular nationalist mobilization levels were low through the 1990s.

In the case of the PRC policy shift in the South China Sea from 2007 onwards, both intra-state contention models are plausible. We have noted already the elevated number of popular nationalist mobilizations between 2003 and 2008, and also that the party faced challenges from rising domestic unrest around this time. The CCP held its 17th Congress in October 2007, at which four of the nine top leadership positions changed hands. Although it is difficult to know precisely when periods of leadership contention begin and end, it is likely that competition for positions in the upcoming administration would have begun at least a few months before the transition, around the time when the data indicate the assertive policy change began. Public debate over South China Sea policy was increasingly apparent from 2009 (Chapter 5), suggesting the policy contest model’s plausibility, at least from that time forward. And nationalist mobilization targeting the South China Sea issue peaked in 2011 and 2012, ahead of the tumultuous 18th CCP Congress that marked the transition to Xi Jinping’s leadership – an observation consistent with the wave of mobilization model of popular nationalism influencing China’s abnormally intense assertiveness at that time. Having established these basic correlations, evaluating the whether a causal connection exists will depend on the evidence uncovered in the case studies examined in detail in the following chapters.

\textit{Other factors}

Each of the factors discussed above generates fairly strong expectations regarding the timing of policy changes, making it possible to falsify them in historical cases.
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<tr>
<td>Nationalism card</td>
<td>Rise in legitimacy issues precedes assertive actions. Certitude: high (legitimacy issues are the condition that initiates this mechanism).</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>No: major legitimacy crisis in 1976, with death of Zhou Enlai, Tiananmen Incident, death of Mao, Tangshan earthquake, and economic recession. This coincided with a lull in China's assertiveness at sea.</td>
<td>Unlikely: 1986-1987 saw students' pro-liberalization protests, but domestic inflation increased mainly after the Sputnik push. Assertiveness clearly declined after 1989 crisis and economic slowdown.</td>
<td>No: economic growth was increasing strongly as assertive shift began, and legitimacy issues were much less severe than in 1989</td>
<td>Possible: rise of &quot;mass incidents,&quot; though economic growth very strong, and 2008 Beijing Olympics delivered likely legitimacy boost.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frankenstein's monster</td>
<td>Increased nationalist mobilization, ideology, media sensationalism, or technological empowerment, precedes assertive policy. Certitude: high (key link in the mechanism).</td>
<td>Unlikely: constant assertiveness precedes anti-foreign collective actions. Internet has facilitated bottom-up nationalist mobilization, but upward trend in assertiveness only begins 10 years later.</td>
<td>No: no known bottom-up upswell in 1973. &quot;Criticize Lin, Criticize Confucius&quot; was major campaign.</td>
<td>Possible: anti-Japan mobilizations in 1985 were related with 1986-1987 pro-liberalization protests. However, none were known to be related to South China Sea issue.</td>
<td>No: assertiveness declined after patriotic education campaign took hold in mid-1990s, and China Can Say No nationalist publishing craze; anti-Japan mobilizations over Diaoyu Islands were attempted in 1990 and 1996 – both periods of moderation.</td>
<td>Possible: anti-foreign mobilizations increased from 2003, and massive demonstrations erupted in early 2005. These, however, were mostly targeted at Japan. Nationalism on South China Sea issue most likely to have contributed from 2011 onwards.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy contest</td>
<td>Wave of mobilization</td>
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<tr>
<td>Correlation: possible. The confluence of elite contestation and public policy pressure was arguably present when PRC South China Sea policy shifted in the 1980s and 1990s. Elite uncertainty was high in 2007 and 2012, and debates emerged on the South China Sea issue from around 2009, so another plausible, though still not clear-cut, correlation exists between the timing of assertive policy and the expectations of the &quot;policy contest&quot; model.</td>
<td>Correlation: possible. Waves of mobilization during periods of elite tensions have indeed coincided with assertive policy shifts in the South China Sea in the past. The match between policy assertiveness and waves of mobilization is strongest during 2011 and 2012, relatively close to the 18th CCP Congress.</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elite contention and public policy debate precedes assertive actions. Certitude: high (if elite contention and policy debate not apparent, public opinion unlikely to have influenced in foreign policy decisions).</td>
<td>Elite contention and popular mobilization precede assertive actions. Certitude: high (if elite contention and popular nationalist mobilization not apparent, then unlikely to have been a factor in internal debates).</td>
<td></td>
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<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
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<tr>
<td>Possible: top-level disagreement over Hu Yaobang roughly coincided with PLAN public lobbying. No sign, however, that Hu or any other leaders advocated softer policy in South China Sea.</td>
<td>Possible: Hu Yaobang ousting in 1987 linked to anti-Japan demos in 1985 and 1986-1987 pro-liberalization protests. However, not related to South China Sea issue.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Possible: PLA lobbying observed by Whiting may have drawn support from popular nationalism generated by early patriotic education efforts.</td>
<td>No: popular nationalist mobilizations low through this period.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Possible: CCP Congress held in 2007 and 2012 made elevated elite contention likely around those times. No obvious sign of public opinion on South China Sea being invoked in such contests, but policy debates were observable in media from 2009 onwards.</td>
<td>Yes: nationalist mobilizations relatively frequent through 17th and 18th CCP Congress periods. Waves of nationalism on the South China Sea in particular in 2011 and 2012.</td>
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</table>

Table 3.5: Results of pattern matching tests on historical events data vs. expectations of bottom-up models of nationalist influence.
using the events data. For the other explanations – international legal regimes, sub-state actors, strategic culture, individual leaders, and elevated political-symbolic value – the events data provide only weak indications as to their possible role. Nonetheless, the directions of these “straws-in-the-wind” are worth considering in brief.

**International legal regime:** Increased assertive behaviour around key milestones in the UNCLOS regime’s development would be consistent with the hypothesis that this was a factor, but it is only a weak indication. Given the UNCLOS regime’s progressive development – from negotiations in the 1970s, to the agreement in 1982, and the subsequent rapid progress towards the 60 domestic ratifications that triggered its effectiveness in 1994 – most periodizations could be seen as consistent with this explanation. Additionally, as the next chapter shows, there is often a major lag between international legal developments, their manifestation in domestic law and, their eventual enforcement in disputed areas. This makes the explanation difficult to falsify using the events data time series. China’s actions in 1973-1975 and 1992-1995 correlate closest with the major developments in the legal regime.92 The post-2007 period of assertiveness did begin after the PRC’s declaration of non-acceptance of UNCLOS boundary dispute resolution mechanisms in 2006, and ahead of the important May 2009 deadline for continental shelf data. But if the international regime of UNCLOS has been a significant cause of China’s assertive actions, this will need to be established through detailed tracing of important individual cases, a task taken up in the following chapters.

**Sub-state bureaucratic actors:** As noted above, the protracted duration of China’s most recent policy shift strongly suggests it has been in basic accord with the central leadership’s intentions, and not the result of uncontrollable, overzealous sub-state actors. However, the historical events data tell us little else about the possible role of the military, sub-state bureaucracies and other vested interest groups in shaping the central leadership’s intentions. As noted, respected analysts such as Garver and Whiting have argued sub-state actors’ public lobbying efforts contributed to China’s assertive shifts in the 1980s and 1990s. Such publicity may,
in turn, increase decisionmakers’ domestic political interest in acceding to such demands, lest they be viewed as weak or insufficiently patriotic. But lobbying may also occur in secret, and if front-line agencies have taken assertive actions beyond their remit, drawing attention to this would potentially call the leadership’s authority into question. This means the timing of assertive shifts cannot rule in or out sub-state actors as a cause of increased assertive behaviour. Once again, stronger indications as to the validity of this kind of explanation will require analysis of the progression, documentation and discussion of particular incidents.

**Strategic culture:** The long-term pattern of sustained, low-intensity PRC assertiveness appears quite consistent with Mao’s injunction to harass and exhaust the enemy. But if a preference for probing and guerilla warfare tactics explains any changes in China’s behaviour at particular times, we should find patterns of advance and retreat according to the level of resistance from China’s adversaries. A strong test of this hypothesis is therefore only available where China’s actions encountered strong resistance; in such cases a probing explanation would predict strategic retreat. The PRC’s assertive push in the 1970s encountered little resistance, so its timing cannot tell us whether the Mao-era leadership’s decision was motivated by a desire to test adversaries’ resolve, or pre-existing confidence in the outcome. The 1987-1988 push into the Spratly Islands was inconsistent with the probing explanation: it escalated into a naval skirmish due to strong resistance from Vietnam, and even after this resistance became clear the PRC showed no sign of retreating. It is possible to argue China’s behaviour in the 1990s followed a pattern of advance and retreat, with the PRC’s assertiveness subsiding after ASEAN’s unprecedented collective statement of “serious concern” over the occupation of Mischief Reef. The finding that the period from 2007 onwards has been the most sustained period of PRC assertiveness since 1970 contradicts the idea that the assertive shift as a whole resulted from a desire to test its adversaries’ resolve: resistance from regional countries has been evident all along, yet the assertive actions have continued. On the other hand, close tracing may show important individual cases to be consistent with a probing explanation. The case study of the *Impeccable* incident in Chapter 5 finds evidence to this effect.
Individual leaders: Comparing the timing of an assertive shift with that of an individual CCP leader's ascendancy offers only vague indications of whether his influence was a cause of the assertive shift.⁹⁴ In the early 1970s Chairman Mao remained in firm control, with no decisive leadership change ahead of the assertive shift, save for the return of Deng Xiaoping – who was intimately involved with the Paracels operation, but on Mao’s instructions. In 1987 Zhao Ziyang took over as CCP General Secretary and was, according to the then-commander of the PLA Navy, intimately involved in the plan to establish a foothold in the Spratlys.⁹⁵ But his predecessor Hu Yaobang was not exactly soft on the issue, having personally visited the Paracels in December 1985 and vowed he would "not permit anyone to seize even one inch of our great country's land."⁹⁶ In any case it was Deng Xiaoping, who had been the "paramount leader" since 1979, who authorized the Spratly operation.⁹⁷ In the 1990s, the role of individual leaders becomes even less clear. Jiang Zemin became General Secretary in 1989, but Deng reasserted his influence in 1992. Jiang's subsequent ascendancy did coincide with a period of moderation in the South China Sea, but Deng was infirm for some time before his death in 1997.⁹⁸ When the present period of assertive Chinese policy began in 2007, the transition from Jiang to Hu Jintao had been formally complete for more than two years. Hu's authority received a boost that year, as his signature “Scientific Outlook on Development” was written into the Party’s constitution. Thus, it is possible that the assertive shift in the South China Sea reflected Hu's policy preferences, as distinct from Jiang's. Of this, little can be said with certainty, but it does call into question the idea suggested in some commentary that China’s foreign policy assertiveness resulted from a dovish Hu's lack of authority.

Symbolic political interests: If heightened symbolic political stakes are a factor behind a change in PRC maritime policy we should find increases in assertive state actions coinciding with known periods of elevated intra-state contention or competition. However, an absence of such an observation will certainly not eliminate this factor, since CCP factional and policy struggles generally occur behind closed doors, without the involvement of popular nationalism or public opinion. As noted above, in 1976 and 1989 very high elite political tensions in
Table 3.6: Pattern matching tests on historical events data vs. expectations of eight explanatory factors for PRC policy shifts. Shading indicates degrees of correspondence between observed timing of assertive shifts and that expected by hypotheses that the explanatory variable is question was a factor.
Beijing actually coincided with a marked decreased Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea. In 1987, Hu Yaobang’s recent demotion had probably eased leadership tensions somewhat, given his involvement in bitter factional feuds dating back several years. China’s next assertive surge, beginning in 1992, coincided with Deng’s “Southern Tour,” which is also believed to have quelled political and policy struggles over China’s development path. This should have reduced the pressures and incentives for leaders to engage in nationalist posturing to protect or advance their positions. In 2007, as already noted, the 17th CCP Congress threw open many top leadership positions, which may have given officials reason to adopt hardline foreign policy stances. At the same time, however, open divisions at the apex of CCP politics were not obvious. Instead, analysts describe a sclerotic system of rule by consensus at the Politburo Standing Committee level. This delicate arrangement may have disintegrated in the months ahead of the 18th CCP Congress, when the spectacular political meltdown of Politburo member Bo Xilai triggered months of indecision over his fate. This raises the prospect that heightened political interests, with or without a popular nationalist factor, may help explain China’s assertiveness in 2012 (Chapter 6).

**Conclusion**

This chapter began by noting the widely varying opinions among analysts regarding the timing of any recent changes in China’s policy in the South China Sea, and the associated need for a rigorous framework to gauge quantitative and qualitative change in states’ maritime policies. To this end, I set up a three-way typology of assertiveness – declarative, demonstrative and coercive – as constituted by assertive actions, meaning moves that strengthen one state’s position to the detriment of its rival(s). Applied to a continuous time series of events data in order to systematically measure the timing and quality of changes in the PRC’s behaviour in the South China Sea between 1970 and 2015, this framework has produced four useful descriptive findings.
First, the PRC’s assertiveness has intensified almost every year since 1970, and every year since 1990. Assertive actions are thus not a new feature of China’s policy in the South China Sea – in fact, they would be better described as a constant. This indicates that, true to its own rhetorical claims, the PRC’s intention to advance (“defend”) its claims there at the expense of other states has been longstanding and practically continuous. Second, most of China’s new actions have continued into subsequent years, creating a layering effect under which diverse lines of assertive policy have accumulated. These layers have often been causally linked, with assertive actions at one point in time feeding back into future assertiveness. Third, within this overall trend of increasing Chinese activity, there have been four distinct periods when Beijing’s assertiveness has intensified particularly rapidly. The period under study in this thesis covers China’s fourth assertive surge in the South China Sea since 1970, and by far the most sustained. This protracted duration implies the more assertive pattern observed since 2007 has been largely in accordance with central intentions, and not the result of overzealous sub-state actors. Fourth, besides its duration, what distinguishes Beijing’s current policy from the past is the introduction of much more frequent coercive actions, which account for almost all the quantitative change in China’s level of assertive activity since 2007. This indicates that most important difference between past and present lies in the methods by which the PRC has pursued its claims – a finding that will guide the selection of case studies for close causal analysis in the following three chapters.

The data also offered an opportunity to compare the timing of changes in China’s level of assertiveness with the expectations of different external and internal explanations, including popular nationalism. Structural explanations for China’s policy shift emerge strongest from this basic pattern matching exercise, which only indicates correlation, not causation, between these variables and assertive PRC policy shifts. There appears to be a long-term positive relationship between assertive Chinese actions and favourable changes in the balance of power, as well as with increasing value of the disputed possessions as measured in the volume and value of Chinese consumption of relevant resources. There is little support for
declining claim strength as an explanation for China’s assertive shifts in the past, but much stronger evidence for this as a cause of China’s post-2007 shift. China’s past shifts appear to have been driven more by opportunism than insecurity, but as the next chapter will argue, the current assertive policy began very much as a response to the weakening of China’s position in the dispute as the maritime spaces became “territorialized” in the UNCLOS era.

The data show all of the four bottom-up models of popular nationalist influence introduced in Chapter 1 to be plausible explanations for China’s current policy, though a role for public opinion in earlier periods of assertiveness appears quite unlikely. The diversionary nationalism card scenario can be ruled out fairly decisively as a factor in China’s past behaviour; in fact, acute domestic challenges have tended to coincide with moderation in Chinese policy rather than assertiveness. But it is still a plausible driver of the PRC’s latest assertive shift, as domestic unrest was arguably on the rise in China in 2007. There is similarly little support for the Frankenstein’s monster of rising popular nationalism driving China’s previous policy shifts, but the apparent growth in nationalist mobilizations as internet access was rolled out in China through the mid-2000s leaves this as a plausible driver of the post-2007 changes. However, the South China Sea issue was not among the main targets of nationalist ire during this period, so skepticism will be warranted. The basic conditions for the more specified “intra-state contention” models’ operation are also met as the current period of intensified assertiveness began in 2007, with relatively frequent nationalist mobilizations coinciding with elite contention in the leadup to the CCP’s 17th and 18th Congresses in late 2007 and 2012. In sum, the correlation between CCP legitimacy issues, rising nationalism and China’s assertive shift in the South China Sea from 2007 suggests this is a fairly likely case on which to find popular nationalist influence on PRC foreign policy. Close examination of individual cases in the following chapters will offer a better idea of whether this correlation is a result of public opinion as a factor in policy change, the state’s strategic use of popular nationalism, or mere coincidence.
Chapter 4

China’s assertive shift, 2007-2008: power, insecurity and the Law of the Sea

This chapter examines the causes of change in the PRC’s behaviour in the South China Sea in 2007-2008 when, as the previous chapter showed, the current prolonged period of increasing assertiveness began. Tracing four important cases representative of the shift in China's policy demonstrates that it had little or no connection with popular nationalism. Rather, the new and more coercive patterns of action resulted from the interaction between the party-state's increased material power, rising resource insecurity, and an often-overlooked third factor: new challenges and opportunities presented by the implementation of the UNCLOS regime. In none of these four key cases did the ruling party make a serious effort to inform China’s citizens of the stronger measures it was taking against rival claimants. In fact, most of its new assertiveness took place entirely in secret, an observation that effectively rules out bottom-up popular influence. Equally, neither did the state attempt to generate public shows of nationalist support for its tougher stance, as we would expect if strategic channeling was a feature of the nationalism-foreign policy relationship. Nationalist public opinion, in short, had no significant role in the changes in China’s policy in the South China Sea at this time.

To lay the groundwork for this explanation of China’s policy change, the chapter begins with a brief discussion on the role of international law in world politics, particularly the “territorialization” of maritime space. Noting the dearth of existing theoretical literature linking international law to confrontational state behaviour, I propose three distinct causal mechanisms linking UNCLOS with the increase in China’s assertiveness in the South China Sea that began in 2007. The new maritime legal regime (1) hardened claimant states’ positions and spurred the acquisition of capabilities for their coercive enforcement; (2) created new incentives for
assertive actions to advance or maintain claims under the legal regime; and (3) severely weakened, without fully extinguishing, valuable extra-legal claims, leading to last-ditch attempts to preserve their fading viability through coercion.

The chapter then explores the PRC’s increasingly ambivalent relationship with UNCLOS since it came into effect in 1994, focusing in turn on the translation of China’s maritime rights claims into PRC domestic law, the construction of new capabilities to enforce these laws in disputed maritime areas, and the party-state’s growing perception of UNCLOS as a source of threats to its “maritime rights and interests” (海洋权益). The section concludes by showing that a succession of setbacks to PRC policy between 2005 and 2007 generated among Chinese policymakers the perception of a rapid weakening in China’s position in the South China Sea, particularly in relation to the area’s hydrocarbon resources. This sets the scene for the four case studies that follow. Several important theoretical and normative implications flow from the arguments advanced here, but since these are not directly germane to the research question addressed in this dissertation, they are outlined in Appendix 3.

The territorialization of maritime space

The idea of a positive relationship between international law and maritime assertiveness has so far not been widely recognized, much less systematically studied. Although English-language media reporting on the Philippines’ UNCLOS arbitration case raised the prospect of the tribunal’s decision potentially resulting in elevated tensions in the South China Sea, international relations scholarship has seldom discussed international law as a possible cause of confrontational state behaviour.¹ Realist theory has generally been dismissive of the significance of law in shaping state behaviour, regarding it primarily as an extension of state power. Liberal perspectives tend to explain institutions like UNCLOS in terms of their rational functions, rendering the anarchic international environment more predictable and reducing the costs of cooperation with other states.² Following the latter line of reasoning, one recent analysis found the primary effect of UNCLOS
has been “prevention of new maritime conflicts,” because it “brings states' maritime practices into greater alignment.” As this chapter will show, the formalized international legal regime for the world’s oceans has had effects on China’s behaviour in the South China Sea that are quite different to those that proponents of international institutions typically expect. UNCLOS’s relationship to China’s policy in the South China Sea fits more neatly into the constructivist view of international law as a constitutive as well as constraining influence on state behaviour. While international law may have reduced confrontational state actions across important issue areas like trade, communication, environmental protection, human rights, and security, the South China Sea case suggests it has also authorized, enabled, and catalyzed the PRC’s maritime assertiveness.

The roots of UNCLOS’s influence on state behaviour in the South China Sea lie in the “territorialization” of the world’s maritime spaces that only began relatively recently. Throughout the 20th century, international law gradually chipped away at state authority over the earth’s landmasses, but precisely the opposite occurred at sea. In Bernard Oxman’s memorable terms, the “territorial temptation” of states to seek maximum discretion for themselves “has thrust seaward with a speed and geographic scope that would be the envy of the most ambitious conquerors in human history.” Oxman traces the displacement of the once-dominant principle of *mare liberum* to the US’s assertion of sovereign rights on its “continental shelf” in 1945, ostensibly to facilitate investment in offshore hydrocarbon exploitation. Far from objecting to this unprecedented and unilateral expansion of state jurisdiction at sea, other major maritime powers quickly emulated it.

The UNCLOS concluded in 1982 is the defining expression of the territorialization of the world’s oceans. That year, at Montego Bay, Jamaica, 107 state governments assigned themselves and each other sovereign authority over the resources of both the water column and the seabed out to 200nm (370km), and on the continental shelf out to 350nm (650km), thereby subjecting nearly 50 per cent of the world’s maritime space to claims of state jurisdiction. Not surprisingly, most other governments quickly joined the regime, and today it has 157 state parties. Oxman shows how these new sovereign maritime rights were quickly understood in
“quasi-territorial terms,” and have been subject to regular attempts at further expansion since that time. However, while he briefly examines the question of the Convention’s sustainability, Oxman leaves aside the possibility of state-state confrontation within this new system – that is, over the competing territorialized legal claims themselves. Other legal experts have noted the potential for the UNCLOS to be an unhelpful factor in the South China Sea, but the reasons why this might be so have remained largely unexplored. Writing in 2006, Wendy Duong noted that the Convention was “ill-equipped to handle the complexity” of the disputes there. However, Duong’s focus was on the inadequacy of the Convention’s dispute resolution mechanisms, rather than the processes by which the tensions there had arisen.

Area specialists have made passing mention of the UNCLOS as a possible factor influencing China’s assertive behaviour in the South China Sea in recent years. Jian Zhang argues China’s increased assertiveness in the South China Sea has been partly driven by “an increasing recognition of the importance and legitimacy of international law of the sea such as UNCLOS, and the more serious consideration of seeking a future diplomatic and even legal solution to the dispute.” PRC legal scholars Bing Bing Jia and Zhiguo Gao write that Beijing’s policy in the dispute has been “informed by developments in the law of the sea, including its own ratification of UNCLOS.” A US Navy-affiliated think tank report refers to the “new layer of issues in China’s maritime boundary disputes” that followed China’s accession to the treaty. This has also been the case in the East China Sea, according to Sheila Smith, where the Law of the Sea has hardened the claims of Japan and China to the oil and gas resources in the area. Stein Tonnessson has noted that the UNCLOS-mandated EEZ expanded the area within which states such as China sought to curtail foreign military surveillance. To my knowledge, however, no study has yet examined the relationship between UNCLOS and specific cases of confrontational state behaviour, or specified and tested the causal mechanisms by which this may occur.

In explaining the change in China’s behaviour that began in 2007, this chapter demonstrates three kinds of causal link between the UNCLOS and China’s
increased assertiveness. First, the “global constitution for the world’s oceans” led directly to the formalization of China’s claims over disputed maritime spaces within PRC domestic law. This created a domestic legal mandate for assertive actions there, and prompted the development of the new on-water capabilities that have enabled them. Second, specific features of the UNCLOS regime created incentives for all sides of the South China Sea dispute to engage in assertive actions to advance their claims under the legal regime. It also confirmed, by omission, a more general perception that assertive actions are integral to maintaining disputed maritime rights claims.17 Third, the establishment of the formal legal regime greatly weakened, without completely extinguishing, state claims to areas beyond what it mandated. The delegitimization of what China considered to be its longstanding claims in resource-rich maritime areas around this edges of the nine-dash line increased Beijing’s sensitivity to adverse developments there. Following a period of rapidly increasing resource prices, the unraveling of a major joint development scheme, and new deals between Vietnam and its foreign partners over the Nam Con Son Basin, China resorted to coercion in an attempt to “maintain the dispute,” in large part against the challenge posed by the legal regime.

This chapter will not argue the international legal institution of UNCLOS is the only cause of the PRC’s assertive policy in the South China Sea. On the contrary, it will show that that increasing material capabilities, rising resource values, and other new challenges to China’s position in key areas were also major factors behind the assertive shift. However, as detailed below, PRC maritime law enforcement agency materials and government advisory papers, along with US State Department cables, and statements by officials, indicate that intertwined with these well known factors, the Law of the Sea regime has been a crucial, and so far generally unrecognized driver of the assertive change in China’s behaviour. The following section expands on the three causal pathways described above through an examination of the PRC’s relationship with the Convention, formulating specific hypotheses that will be tested against case study evidence drawn from the above-mentioned sources, supplemented by interviews with Chinese government-
affiliated researchers and diplomatic personnel from the PRC, Vietnam, Philippines and United States.

"Opportunities and challenges:" the PRC and UNCLOS

Since the UNCLOS came into effect in 1994, official PRC discussions of the Convention’s significance have revolved around the unprecedented “opportunities and challenges” (机遇与挑战) to the advancement of China’s “maritime rights and interests” (海洋权益) in the context of the new international legal regime. These two pieces of standard language encapsulate the party-state’s ambivalent relationship with international law in general, and the UNCLOS in particular. First, the emphasis of “opportunities and challenges” reflects the party’s recognition of the international legal regime as a variable that can work either to its advantage or to its disadvantage. As shown below, since the 1990s, official PRC statements on the matter indicate that the challenges have been growing relative to the opportunities. Second, the term “maritime rights and interests” indicates that Beijing understands the notional distinction between the two, but treats them as identical for policymaking purposes.18 Within PRC policy discourse, assertive actions in disputed area of the South China Sea are understood as the defense (维护) of the state’s “maritime rights and interests.”19

On the surface, these formulations accord closely with realist views of international law, which would deny it has any significant limiting effect on the behaviour of powerful states. However, such an interpretation would be partial in the case of the South China Sea. First of all, many of China’s specific “maritime rights and interests” were actually created by international law. Although China’s official statements and legislation make clear that the party-state claims are not limited to those authorized by the Law of the Sea, the treaty forms the foundation for the bulk of China’s claims to “maritime rights and interests” both in its disputed periphery and beyond.20 China’s recognition of its basic dependence on the legal regime is apparent in its response to the arbitration initiated by the Philippines
under UNCLOS Article 287 in early 2013. Even as it refused to participate, condemning the proceedings in the highest of dudgeon, Beijing was always careful to avoid impugning the authority of the Convention itself, arguing instead that the case was an abuse of UNCLOS process. 21

Regardless of whether the letter of international law is a meaningful constraint on its actions, China clearly regards it as a vital tool for advancing its interests at sea. In the words of two PLA researchers, in maritime disputes over maritime rights "whoever grasps the use of international law gains the initiative." 22 The PRC’s belief in the instrumental use of international law is longstanding, such that the party-state today is haunted by its past exploitation of the UNCLOS for political purposes. During the decade-long negotiation process leading up to the treaty’s conclusion (1973-1982) China was a strong advocate for a 200nm EEZ against other, less expansive proposals, viewing this as favourable to third-world countries’ interests against great powers. 23 At that time of intense existential security threats, especially from the Soviet Union, any initiative that could help build opposition to the activities of extra-regional navies in East Asia stood to increase China’s security. This carried a significant price, however. The 1982 UNCLOS and its 200nm EEZ mandate strongly legitimized coastal-based claims of Malaysia, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Brunei over vast maritime spaces that the PRC was also attempting to claim as its own. As Jie Chen wrote, from the perspective of material interests, "given that the Chinese-claimed area in the South China Sea extends to the doorstep of every coastal state in the area, China should have been the last country to support such a struggle [for a 200nm EEZ]." 24 China’s policy in the South China Sea has been complicated by this legacy; the PRC today has had little choice but to try to take advantage of the rules it helped put in place as best it can. In the short term at least, as Isaac Kardon points out, China faces the challenge of advancing and defending its claims in the context of lex lata, or the law as it is now. 25
China's assertive shift: 2007-2008

New laws, new enforcement

The constitutive role of international law in shaping state behaviour is nowhere more apparent than in the domestic legal instruments that have given specific form to China’s “maritime rights and interests” in the South China Sea.\(^{26}\) As noted in Chapter 2, China’s nine-dash line map pre-dates the UNCLOS regime by 35 years, but only as a claim to the island territories inside the line.\(^{27}\) The PRC’s claims to maritime rights within the line are very much a product of the UNCLOS era. By the mid-1980s, the line had acquired a geographical significance in relation to maritime space, and the PRC was taking a strong interest in the resources around its outer margins, as vividly illustrated in Figure 3.4 in the previous chapter. Although the line’s precise meaning has never been officially clarified, recent official statements have strongly hinted that it includes sovereignty over the disputed territories, plus the EEZ and continental shelf that the Convention assigned to “islands” under Article 121.\(^{28}\) Even as the ambiguity regarding the line’s meaning has persisted, a burgeoning body of domestic law has been enacted to, in Kardon’s words, “proces[s] the various new rights and interests created by China’s accession to UNCLOS.” These domestic legal and administrative acts have not only claimed authority from UNCLOS, they were direct responses to the arrival of the international legal regime.

The PRC’s key maritime laws are themselves examples of assertive foreign policy actions triggered by an international legal regime. First, the 1992 Law on the Territorial Sea and Contiguous Zone (“1992 Territorial Sea Law”), enacted in preparation for the coming into effect of UNCLOS, elevated the legal status of China’s disputed territorial claims, and gave authority to the Chinese government to use “necessary measures” against “non-innocent passage” by foreign vessels through the territorial seas around all of the disputed islands, many of which were (and still are) controlled by other states.\(^{29}\) Second, in June 1996, one month after ratifying UNCLOS, the PRC issued its Rules on Foreign Marine Scientific Research (“1996 MSR Rules”), with the explicit aim of “safeguarding the State’s security and its maritime rights and interests” in all “waters under China’s jurisdiction.”\(^{30}\) This State Council document declared explicitly, and with unprecedented authority, the
PRC’s long-held position opposing military reconnaissance in its claimed EEZ and beyond. These rules were soon cited as the authority for new assertive actions against foreign vessels in disputed waters.\(^{31}\) Third, in June 1998 the PRC’s *Law on the Exclusive Economic Zone and Continental Shelf* (“1998 EEZ Law”) enshrined China’s claims to the maritime rights assigned by UNCLOS in national law for the first time – while also reserving unspecified “historic rights” (历史性权利). The associated hardening of the PRC’s position in is suggested in the designation of foreign activities in the disputed area of the South China Sea as “illegal” in its agencies’ yearbooks from this time forward.\(^{32}\)

In China’s maritime policymaking system, laws are viewed as a prerequisite for extending control over maritime spaces in which the state’s rights are held to exist.\(^{33}\) But since UNCLOS itself has no enforcement mechanism, the PRC and its rivals in the South China Sea have, unsurprisingly, taken that aspect of the legal process into their own hands. The greatest on-water significance of China’s UNCLOS-inspired maritime laws has been the creation and equipping of the maritime law enforcement (MLE) agencies that have been at the forefront of China’s assertive policy shift. In June 1998, the same month as the NPC enacted the 1998 EEZ Law, the State Council issued new rules making the State Oceanic Administration (SOA) responsible for “upholding maritime rights and interests in accordance with the law.”\(^{34}\) In January 1999, the SOA established China Marine Surveillance (CMS) as an “integrated central-regional administrative law enforcement force” tasked with patrolling the PRC’s claimed jurisdictional waters. The SOA had operated a Marine Environment Surveillance Fleet since 1983, but the 1999 reorganization created three new national-level air and sea squadrons whose purpose was explicitly political. SOA Director Zhang Dengyi stated in a 1999 speech that the new force was established “to increase the force of maritime law enforcement and strengthen comprehensive maritime management.”\(^{35}\) CMS, the SOA’s in-house newspaper surmised, was designed as a “special police force” for maintaining and protecting China’s maritime rights and interests, and implementing UNCLOS.\(^{36}\)
The year 2000 was, according to the SOA’s China Ocean Yearbook, “the year of the full launching of the new force’s work.” The CMS fleet’s initial focus appears to have been on capacity building and demonstrating China’s opposition to foreign military surveillance in the EEZ. In 2000, the SOA authorized CMS to take “necessary measures” against foreign marine research activities in China’s claimed maritime areas, primarily the shadowing of US military reconnaissance vessels.

The actions were carried out with caution, "strictly following orders and with a high degree of political responsibility and consideration of the overall situation." By the end of the decade, according to a US diplomat, this type of “shadowing” operation was routine, and as shown below, the agency was beginning to engage in more coercive enforcement actions. In the March 2009 Impeccable incident off Hainan, examined in detail in the following chapter, CMS vessels oversaw an operation that physically forced a US spy ship to cease its military surveillance operations. Significantly, however, the new policy of on-water interceptions from 2002 was not targeted exclusively at the US or its allies: government publications also detail similar actions against two Russian ships in May 2002, and against warships from three different countries in 2004. Rather than being a simple function of Sino-American relations, then, the agency’s behaviour marked a general shift towards a more assertive stance on the issue in the UNCLOS era.

A crucial move that would enable future increases in on-water assertiveness was the construction of ocean-going patrol vessels that could stay at sea for the prolonged periods required to maintain a presence across the vast expanses of China’s claimed waters. To this end, in 1999 the State Council allocated ¥1.6 billion to equip CMS with 13 large new long-range patrol boats and five aircraft. The two-stage project was personally approved by Premier Zhu Rongji and Vice-Premier Wen Jiabao. The first stage included four ships in the 1000-ton class, plus one 1500-ton and one 3000-ton vessel, along with two aircraft. The project was evidently a complex one, involving exhaustive research before procurement began, and it may have encountered some delays as the first ship was only delivered in late 2004. The force also needed time to develop the organizational and logistical capacities, and operational experience, to make effective use of its new equipment.
After testing the waters closer to home in the East China Sea, by the end of 2006 CMS proclaimed its readiness to more boldly assert China’s claims across the larger and much more distant expanses of the South China Sea. Stage two of the same shipbuilding project, planned and approved in 1999, commenced in 2009, delivering a further seven cutters by 2011. A third, even bigger law enforcement vessel construction project followed, this one aimed at equipping provincial CMS detachments with large ships to participate in maritime rights defense.

Another important element of China’s response to the UNCLOS era was the establishment of a new national-level organ for fisheries law enforcement. The Fisheries Law Enforcement Command (中国渔政指挥中心) was established specifically to “adapt to the implementation of the new international maritime regime” by coordinating fisheries law enforcement actions, particularly in the newly generated EEZ. In August 1998, almost immediately after the enactment of the 1998 EEZ Law, the State Planning Commission authorized funding for 14 mid-to-large sized fisheries law enforcement ships. Perhaps reflecting the Fisheries Administration’s greater existing level of experience in foreign-related law enforcement work, and its superior administrative rank compared with the newly formed CMS force, the FLEC’s new 1000-ton ships began to be delivered by 1999.

If China’s construction of these large oceangoing civilian maritime law enforcement fleets had been a simple function of its increased economic and military power, or increasing dependence on imported resources, then it should have begun years or even decades earlier than it did. Instead, the initiation of both of these shipbuilding projects closely matched the timing of the international legal regime’s adoption within China’s policymaking system, and both were directly geared towards equipping the new agencies tasked with its enforcement. The above observations point to two hypothetical causal links between the UNCLOS and specific cases of assertive behaviour in the South China Sea.

The first is an “authorizing” hypothesis, namely that accession to UNCLOS has prompted domestic laws that provide authority for more assertive enforcement actions in disputed maritime areas. This is testable in China’s case through...
examination of state agencies’ accounts of the actions that comprise the policy shift. If this hypothesis is valid, agency accounts should refer to laws made in response to the international regime as the basis for their assertive actions. Where such a linkage with UNCLOS-inspired legal instruments is observed, this will only provide weak confirmation, as there is little reason for agencies not to draw on internationally-linked legal authority where it is available. Still, for an agency to choose to cite UNCLOS-inspired legislation indicates that, at a minimum, it helped authorize the action in question by providing a convenient and accessible domestic and international legal justification.

A second, related hypothesis is that accession to UNCLOS caused China to develop law enforcement capabilities that enabled increased assertiveness in disputed maritime areas (the “enabling” hypothesis). The key expectation here is that frontline assets involved in assertive actions should have been created after, and in response to, China’s accession to the UNCLOS regime – such as those outlined above. The more integral these specific capabilities were to the action in question, the more confidence we should have in this “enabling” hypothesis. Even when not directly involved, new assets created in response to the legal regime could still enable assertive actions indirectly, by freeing up the units that were involved from other duties. Two other mechanisms by which the international legal regime may have contributed to assertive state actions at sea are discussed in turn below.

New opportunities

When the PRC ratified the UNCLOS in 1996, maritime policy makers maintained that the opportunities associated with the regime’s emergence outweighed the challenges. One of the clearest early statements of the party-state’s response to the UNCLOS era is found in a little-studied SOA document released immediately prior to the PRC’s ratification of the Convention, titled China’s Maritime Agenda for the 21st Century.52 The document identified the Convention first and foremost with an expansion in the scope of China’s maritime rights and interests: “UNCLOS has brought opportunities for the development and exploitation of the oceans over a
wider area.” At the same time as expanding the scope of China’s maritime interests on paper, the new legal regime had also granted international legitimacy to real-world action to assert them. The UNCLOS, according to the *Agenda*, had “established a formal international legal basis for comprehensive management of the oceans, defense of maritime rights, and protection of maritime environment and resources.” Specifically, it had assigned China “approximately 3 million square kilometres of waters” in which to claim and exercise jurisdiction – an area that, consistent with Oxman’s observations, has assumed an increasingly territorial quality ever since. In fact, the 1996 *Agenda* document presciently noted that waters within 200nm of shore were “gradually becoming territorialized” (逐步国土化), a trend that the PRC appears to have viewed in generally positive terms at that time. So sanguine were the *Agenda*’s authors that they even described UNCLOS as “beneficial to breaking maritime hegemonism” – a glowing accolade within the CCP’s Marxist-Leninist-Maoist ideological system.

China’s first White Paper on maritime affairs, released in May 1998, retained this generally positive outlook on the new opportunities afforded by the ascendant legal regime, describing “safeguarding the principles of international maritime law as defined in the UNCLOS” as the “common mission of all mankind.” However, it also foreshadowed a progressively hardening approach to enforcement in disputed areas. First among the basic policies and principles outlined in this authoritative document was “safeguarding the new international marine order and the state’s marine rights and interests.” After asserting the specific maritime rights assigned by the Convention, and vowing to resolve overlapping claims through “consultations on the basis of international laws and the principle of fairness,” the White Paper went on to state China’s sovereignty over “all archipelagoes and islands” listed in the 1992 *Territorial Sea Law* – that is, both disputed and non-disputed maritime territories. The rolling together of ideas of upholding the new international maritime order and defending China’s disputed territorial claims hinted at an early understanding that intensified zero-sum competition was set to ensue within the new international legal framework. This belief would only
China's assertive shift: 2007-2008

strengthen in the years that followed. But would assertive real-world actions be necessary to prosecute a legal struggle?

By the mid-to-late 2000s, the PRC's maritime policymakers perceived assertive actions, especially unilateral demonstrations of administrative presence, to be a necessary condition for advancing claims under the new international maritime regime. CMS Party Secretary Sun Shuxian made a clear statement of this belief in a 2008 speech marking the 10th anniversary of the enforcement fleet’s founding. Sun claimed that there are two legal principles regarding state authority in disputed waters, the first being “effective administration” (有效管理), the second “actual control” (实际控制). Without either of these, Sun argued, there was little point even claiming the area in question, so it was crucial that CMS “embody present jurisdiction” (体现存在管辖) in the disputed areas.59 This line of thinking is evident in China's determination to steadily increase its regular patrols in the South China Sea (examined in detail below), which are understood as “embodying jurisdiction.”60 Coercive actions, too, are referred to in internal materials as having the effect of “displaying presence and embodying jurisdiction.”61 Rightly or wrongly, then, the relevant PRC agencies appear to believe increased presence in disputed areas constitutes state administration of such maritime spaces, and that this strengthens its claims within the UNCLOS framework. One reason for this is the absence in the Convention of a clear refutation of such an idea, which is, after all, consistent with international legal principles regarding territorial acquisition.62 Article 77 of the Convention did state that continental shelf rights “do not depend on occupation, effective or notional.” But no equivalent provision was included in the section on the EEZ (Articles 55-75). By this omission, the UNCLOS encouraged the belief that, in areas with overlapping EEZ claims, unilateral acts of administration could bolster a state’s legal claims.

Other specific content of UNCLOS created direct incentives for states to take assertive actions to advance their legal claims. In addition to the new 200nm EEZ, UNCLOS assigned states exclusive rights to the resources on or beneath the seabed – including hydrocarbon and mineral deposits – on their “outer continental shelf”
up to 350nm from their territorial sea baselines. Articles 76 and 77 set out specific geological criteria that define a continental shelf, and established the CLCS to assess states’ claims beyond 200nm on this basis. The Convention set a deadline of 10 years after ratification, later extended to May 13, 2009, for states to submit geological data to substantiate outer continental shelf claims. Yet, elsewhere in the Convention, Article 246 assigned exclusive jurisdiction over marine scientific research activities, including geological surveys, to coastal states. Thus, where prospective outer continental shelf areas overlapped with other EEZ or continental shelf claims, as they do in the South China Sea, the UNCLOS effectively required states to conduct marine scientific research in disputed waters, simply to establish a legal claim. In the East China Sea, China’s desire to substantiate its continental shelf extension led to expanded topographic surveys. Japan, which also claims jurisdiction over waters east of the median line between the two countries’ coasts, responded with its own surveys in the disputed area aimed at countering China’s claim. In the South China Sea, as shown below, this process triggered coercive PRC actions aimed at preventing Vietnam from strengthening its claims under the UNCLOS regime.

To test this “legal strength” hypothesis, namely that China has taken assertive actions to advance or maintain its legal claims to disputed maritime areas under the UNCLOS, we can examine the timing and nature of the assertive action in question. Most straightforwardly, where assertive actions coincide with key milestones in the regime’s development, as Chapter 3 noted they have done in the past, then this type of causal connection is at least plausible. If the action relates directly to processes intrinsic to the legal regime’s development, such as CLCS submissions, then our confidence in the validity of this “legal strength” hypothesis should increase significantly for the case in question. Even where there is no such obvious connection, if official statements and internal accounts of the relevant events link the assertive actions with legally significant concepts such as “embodying present jurisdiction,” then the hypothesis will remain plausible. However, these terms may apply to a wide range of on-water activities in disputed areas, so this prediction is not particularly unique, meaning that even if legal claim strength was likely to have
been part of the state’s motivation for taking the assertive actions in question, other factors may have been more important.

**Increasing challenges**

The passage of the *1998 EEZ Law* complicated China’s relationship to the Convention. In contrast to the 1998 White Paper, which had mentioned only the maritime entitlements explicitly assigned by the UNCLOS, Article 14 of the *EEZ Law* reserved China’s right to unspecified “historical rights” as well. The importance of this reservation was apparent in a January 1999 speech by then-Minister of Land and Resources Zhou Yongkang:

“. . . according to UNCLOS and our country’s claims (我国的主张), we possess (拥有) around 3 million sq km of waters under administration. Of course, there is a significant area that is in dispute, which is to say, there is a long way to go and much difficult work to be done to genuinely roll out our maritime undertakings over 3 million sq km of blue territory.”

The first sentence demonstrates that, as of 1999, from the perspective of a very senior PRC official, the state’s “maritime rights and interests” were not identical with those permitted by UNCLOS. The second sentence shows further that CCP authorities fully intended to expand China’s maritime undertakings over the entire, still undefined, expanse of “blue territory.” A new and highly consequential aspect of China’s relationship with the Convention was emerging: in addition to the challenge of advancing its rights within the new global legal framework, the PRC now had a simultaneous struggle for its interests against UNCLOS.

In 2001, on the fifth anniversary of China’s ratification of the Convention, SOA Deputy Director Sun Zhihui delivered a programmatic speech in which he observed that since UNCLOS came into effect the “international struggle over maritime rights,” had intensified due to countries around the world enacting legislation, drawing up maritime strategies, and strengthening the their maritime rights defense and management programs. Still, at this point, positive
affirmations continued to invoke earlier, less ambiguous relationships with the Convention. SOA Director Wang Shuguang, for example, stated in 2001 that “peace-loving countries will definitely use the UNCLOS as a weapon to defeat maritime power politics.”67 But by 2003, internal advisory reports were already warning decisionmakers in Beijing that the PRC’s rivals in the South China Sea were “using UNCLOS” as a basis for enforcement actions to curtail Chinese activities in disputed areas, particularly fishing in the Spratlys.68 By the tenth anniversary of the PRC’s ratification, the assessment of its anti-hegemonic significance was notably absent from party and government statements. A joint MFA-SOA forum commemorating the occasion observed that the “challenges and opportunities” of the new legal regime were leading all countries to “continuously strengthen on-water law enforcement forces and elevate administrative control (管控) capabilities in claimed waters.”69

A key milestone in China’s evolving relationship with the UNCLOS was the party-state’s official declaration in August 2006 rejecting the Convention’s dispute resolution procedures for overlapping maritime boundaries.70 The declaration was intended to preclude the possibility of the PRC’s rivals seeking international legal rulings against PRC activities in disputed areas. The belief that the declaration would have this preclusive effect was strong, such that the Philippines’ resort to arbitration in 2013 reportedly took many PRC maritime policy officials and scholars completely by surprise.71 Some Vietnamese observers regard the 2006 declaration’s timing as a deliberate move in preparation for the subsequent increase in assertive actions in the South China Sea, particularly areas subject to PRC claim beyond what would hypothetically be permissible under the median line/equitable adjustment principle frequently used by international courts in maritime boundary demarcation.72 Chinese government researchers say China’s immediate concern in 2006 was more likely the East China Sea maritime boundary dispute with Japan.73 Whatever the immediate motivation for the declaration, as will be shown below, the PRC’s rejection of compulsory dispute resolution closely preceded a rapid intensification of its assertiveness, particularly in areas around
the edges of the nine-dash line, where China’s claim under the UNCLOS regime was weakest.

By this time, in contrast to Beijing’s optimistic assessments of 1996 and 2001, the challenges posed by UNCLOS regime were now threatening to outweigh the opportunities. Yet the party-state still perceived significant mitigating factors in the form of major cooperative initiatives that stood to help China access important energy reserves through joint development, and consolidate its position in the Spratly area. First, the trilateral Joint Maritime Seismic Undertaking (JMSU) signed in 2004 with the Philippines, and in 2005 with Vietnam, held out the long-awaited possibility of access to the oil and gas presumed to exist in abundance around the Spratly Islands (see Chapter 2). Expert opinion lauded the deal as a “historic breakthrough” and “important advance” for the longstanding policy advocating joint development in disputed areas beyond China’s unilateral control, which, as one internal report noted, had previously received mostly negative responses from the other disputant countries. Second, the implementation in 2004 of the Sino-Vietnamese agreement over the Gulf of Tonkin maritime boundary (the first of its kind for the PRC) was assessed as a successful example of “two countries adapting to the new maritime legal system.” The third positive development for Beijing was the November 2002 Declaration of Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) signed with ASEAN. China seems to have believed this would result in its rivals restraining their assertive activities in the Spratly area. Although it was not binding in an international legal sense, a state think tank assessed, in an secret report, that “due to the promises of all sides, violating the Declaration will carry relatively high political costs and create serious consequences, so it no doubt has a relatively high political binding force on South China Sea regional countries.”

The stalling and eventual unraveling of the JMSU in 2007-2008, and the willingness of Vietnam and its third-country partners to push ahead with offshore energy projects in waters in which Vietnam’s claims were strongly supported under the UNCLOS regime, revealed all of the above three assessments as optimistic. Beijing’s “breakthroughs” were replaced with a sense of rapid worsening of its position in
### Table 4.1: Observable Implications of UNCLOS Assertiveness Hypotheses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hypotheses</th>
<th>Low - Little Evidence</th>
<th>Medium - Fair Evidence</th>
<th>High - Strong Evidence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Legal</strong></td>
<td>Possession of legal right to claim/possession of legal right to claim/possession of legal right to claim</td>
<td>Low - Limited support for claim/possession of legal right to claim</td>
<td>Medium - Strong support for claim/possession of legal right to claim/possession of legal right to claim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Viability</strong></td>
<td>China has taken assertive action in disputed maritime area</td>
<td>Medium - Limited actions in disputed maritime area</td>
<td>High - Strong assertive action in disputed maritime area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Strategy</strong></td>
<td>China has taken assertive action in disputed maritime area</td>
<td>Low - Limited assertive action in disputed maritime area</td>
<td>Medium - Strong assertive action in disputed maritime area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Authorizing and Enabling</strong></td>
<td>Medium - Limited domestic laws supporting asserting claim</td>
<td>Low - Limited domestic laws supporting asserting claim</td>
<td>Medium - Strong domestic laws supporting asserting claim</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Legend:**
- **Legal** = Legal strength
- **Viability** = Claim viability
- **Strategy** = Action strategy
- **Authorizing and Enabling** = Authorizing and enabling
the dispute – particularly regarding the areas at the margins of the nine-dash line, where the weakness of any legal claim under UNCLOS had greatly undermined its leverage. At the same time, China’s economic and military capabilities were rapidly strengthening. This combination of increasing national power and declining claim strength was, as shown below in the case studies, a catalyst for the coercive change in China’s approach that began in 2007.

The fourth, “viability” hypothesis, then, is that China has taken assertive actions to preserve the viability of extra-legal claims weakened by UNCLOS. If the new legal regime’s weakening of the state’s position is part of the explanation for a given action or series of actions, we should find them occurring in geographical locations outside the area that could plausibly be claimed in accordance with the legal regime. The greater the concentration of new assertive actions in these areas, relative to other areas where the legal basis for the state’s claim is firmer, the more this hypothesis will potentially explain about the overall policy shift. However, mere geographical observations will not constitute strong evidence of a causal link. A more unique indication that the legal threat posed by the international regime catalyzed the state’s assertive actions may be sought in government policy assessments. If such sources characterize assertive actions as protecting the basic viability of certain claims, then this will increase the likelihood that the geographic location was not a coincidence, but resulted from the state’s heightened sensitivity to adverse developments in those areas due to the weakening of the state’s position under the legal regime.

Tracing China’s policy shift: four representative cases

The timing of the shift in the PRC’s behaviour in the South China Sea from 2007 onwards was, as shown in Chapter 3, basically consistent with a range of other explanations more commonly invoked in relation to assertive changes in China’s maritime policy. Chinese relative military and economic power increased rapidly in the mid-2000s, while the value of the PRC’s energy imports trebled between 2004 and 2006, suggesting the changing regional power balance and increased
importance of the disputed resources may have contributed to the PRC’s policy shift in the South China Sea. Popular discontent and anti-foreign mobilization were on the rise, and elite politics were unsettled, satisfying the basic conditions for both “nationalist legitimacy” and “intra-state contention” models of bottom-up popular nationalist influence. However, the pattern-matching tests conducted in Chapter 3 only established a correlation between these conditions and the timing of China’s behavioural change from 2007. To test whether a causal link actually existed, it is necessary to trace the progression of particular instances of new PRC assertiveness, and consider domestic discourse on the issue at the time.

The selection strategy for the following four case studies is simple: they are typical of the change in China’s behaviour that began in 2007. The first three, namely the Triton 626 oil survey confrontation, the campaign of economic coercion against transnational companies involved with offshore oil and gas developments in the South China Sea, and operations to interfere with Vietnam’s continental shelf surveys, were chosen on the basis of the new and coercive quality of China’s actions. The previous chapter showed that this type of action accounts for most of the quantitative change in the PRC’s overall level of assertiveness from 2007 onwards. The fourth case study – the rollout of “regular rights defense patrols” – is representative for a different reason: its frequent repetition throughout the post-2007 period. This program of patrols in China’s claimed maritime areas began in the South China Sea in 2007 and appears to have intensified every year thereafter. In fact, the increasing number of rights defense patrols accounts for 7 of the 35 cases of intensified PRC assertiveness identified between 2007 and 2013, when the latest data are available. Tracing the causes of this line of Chinese conduct on the water, together with the coercive actions mentioned above, will explain both the largest proportion, as well as the most consequential aspects, of the clear change in the PRC’s behaviour in the South China Sea from 2007.

The case studies below draw on PRC maritime agency materials, leaked US State Department cables and English- and Chinese-language press reporting, supplemented by interviews with knowledgeable observers, to reconstruct these key incidents in as much relevant detail as possible. After describing the event and
its significance as a representative case of China’s assertive behavioural change, the focus turns to each event’s specific causes. In keeping with the primary research question of this thesis, I will first test for any bottom-up or strategic channeling links with public opinion, in each case finding decisively in favour of the null hypothesis. Next, I consider evidence for the conventional explanations whose plausibility was suggested by the events data examined in Chapter 3. This confirms that positive power shifts and the spiraling importance of the area's hydrocarbon resources were key reasons for the change in China’s behaviour. But the case studies also demonstrate that intertwined with each of these explanations were strong links with the development of the UNCLOS regime, confirming the operation of the hypothetical mechanisms specified above. In some areas the law of the sea strengthened China’s position and spurred assertive enforcement, while in others it precipitated a vulnerability to adverse developments that prompted China to resort to coercion to “maintain the dispute.” Looking further to alternative explanations, some are difficult to rule out, such as Hu Jintao’s personal policy preferences, and the effects of possible leadership contention. However sub-state agencies and culturally-determined probing tactics are, like domestic public opinion, unlikely to have been significant drivers of the observed change in the PRC’s behaviour.

1. The 2007 Triton 626 incident

In late June and early July 2007, a serious on-water confrontation occurred between Chinese and Vietnamese ships in waters between the disputed Paracel Islands and the Vietnamese coast. PRC accounts of the events begin on June 26 and June 27 when armed Vietnamese ships reportedly blocked a survey ship from China’s state-owned oil company CNPC from conducting a seismic survey looking for signs of oil and gas beneath the seabed. The operation was scheduled to take place in an area referred to as the “626 Work Area,” approximately 47nm west of Triton Island, the most westerly land feature of the Paracels, and the closest to the Vietnamese coast. After turning back the Chinese survey ship, the Vietnamese
vessels positioned themselves at this location, preventing the Chinese survey from proceeding. 81

![Figure 4.1: (L) Approximate location of the June 2007 confrontations, and (R) on-scene footage of deliberate ramming of Vietnamese ship, filmed from CMS ship (CCTV, "Lan jiang weishi").](image)

In response, the SOA sent patrol boats from the CMS East Sea and South Sea regional branches to act as escorts for the survey ship. On June 29 the two cutters arrived in the area, and a standoff ensued that lasted into the following day, with the Vietnamese ships refusing to leave. According to a Chinese state media account, the Vietnamese ships’ presence was preventing the survey ship from lowering its seismic cables, so “the Chinese maritime commander decisively issued the order to ram the other side’s vessels.” This ramming action was performed repeatedly until all the Vietnamese vessels were forced to leave (Figure 4.1). 82 As Scott Bentley writes: “These maneuvers began at the lower end of the spectrum with shouldering, but subsequently escalated to direct bow to bridge ramming.” Such actions, according to Bentley, carried a serious risk of casualties among the crews. 83

It is important to distinguish two separate elements of China’s actions in this incident: the “626 Work Area” hydrocarbon survey, and the ramming of Vietnamese ships sent to interfere with it. The seismic survey action that triggered the confrontation was certainly an assertive action, but only the coercive actions in support of it constituted a clear change in China’s behaviour. The survey itself
continued a pattern of periodic surveys near the edge of the PRC’s area of claimed jurisdiction that had already been apparent for around a decade. The SOA’s yearbook describes the objective of the 2007 operation as being aimed at “realizing our offshore oil exploration strategy” – a policy whose application to the disputed areas of the South China Sea dates back to 1992. In March 1997, the PRC had sent an exploration rig into waters about halfway between Hainan Island and Vietnam’s coast, drawing a diplomatic protest from Vietnam, to which the PRC retorted that the location was within China’s “continental shelf and EEZ.” In November 2004, the same rig, Kantan-03, reappeared in a near-identical location, near the mouth of the Gulf of Tonkin. The 2007 incident took place about 160nm southeast of this spot, arguably constituting a geographical expansion of the scope of the PRC’s offshore oil exploration program. However, the decision to undertake the seismic survey was at most a demonstrative act that continued an existing policy of periodic explorations in that general area. By contrast, the coercive methods of enforcement of China’s claimed right to conduct the survey were almost certainly absent in earlier operations, and thus constituted a qualitative change in China’s behaviour. The focus here, then, is on the CMS operation to ram the Vietnamese ships, rather than the survey activities.

This incident was a milestone for the CMS force, and may have been the first time the newly equipped agency had gone beyond surveillance or shadowing operations to engage in a genuinely coercive enforcement action. The comments of CMS officials interviewed in the CCTV documentary certainly suggest this was the first time the CMS South Sea Regional fleet had been used in this way. The branch’s Deputy Director-General, Chen Huaibei stated that the commanders found ordering the ramming “extremely stressful” because “we normally teach our crews to observe safety and try to avoid collisions.” This time, however, “we were ordering them to actively initiate collisions.” Chen concluded: “as glorious as the objective was, the action itself created a degree of risk to our staff’s safety.” Another suggestion of the significance of the operation is the special awards ceremony for the “South China Sea Special Rights Defense Law Enforcement Operation,” held in Beijing on September 26 to commend participants and hear
reports on the incident. The national-level SOA party committee bestowed shared honours on four of the CMS vessels involved, and gave individual commendations to 95 staff members. SOA Party Secretary Sun Zhihui delivered an “important speech” at the event, further underscoring its national-level significance.88

What was behind the decision to deploy CMS ships in this newly coercive way? Could it have been designed in part to divert domestic discontent, impress nationalist audiences at home, or to ward off internal criticism from hardliners aligned with popular nationalist media and online opinion? Two pieces of available evidence strongly disconfirm any such interpretation. First, the incident took place entirely in secret. Second, Baidu’s search activity data indicates internet users’ attention on the South China Sea issue remained at a constant, low level throughout this period (Figure 4.2). These two pieces of evidence not only effectively rule out a bottom-up relationship between popular nationalism and this instance of PRC policy change, they also preclude any top-down state strategy to mobilize or “channel” public opinion for strategic gain. In a vivid illustration of the changes in the CCP’s management of public opinion detailed in the following chapters, the incident was finally revealed to the Chinese public in a state television documentary in late 2013, more than six years later, with dramatic footage from the scene and candid interviews with personnel involved. This was a strong indication of the state’s newfound willingness to claim the credit for its acts of maritime assertiveness and rally domestic support for its foreign policy. At the time of the incident in mid-2007, however, Beijing was evidently determined to avoid any involvement from the public.

Figure 4.2: Baidu search activity for “South China Sea” {南海}, January-December 2007. The black box indicates the index’s highest daily value for the year, recorded on December 22, when the raising of a Song Dynasty shipwreck named “Nanhai-1” just off the coast of Guangdong received media attention (Baidu Search Index).
This details of this case of new on-water coercion indicate that it resulted from the PRC's increasing economic and material power, spiraling energy dependence, and serious new challenges to its disputed claims. First, and most straightforwardly, the fact that the incident was ostensibly targeted at unilaterally securing oil and gas resources supports the idea that the skyrocketing value of China's oil imports over the preceding years was a factor. Second, the case illustrates the compatibility between favourable changes in the regional balance of power, and unfavourable changes in local claim strength, in explaining altered state behaviour. As noted above, PRC authorities perceived China’s position in the South China Sea to be shifting in an unfavourable direction in 2007, particularly in relation to the area's oil and gas resources, due to the stalling of the JMSU and Vietnam’s raft of new cooperative projects with third-country energy companies. At the same time, China’s strong fiscal position and maritime capabilities enabled the allocation of the significant resources required for the unilateral oil operation, as well as the on-water escort, just as Vietnam’s increasing dependence China’s economy reduced the risk of further escalation from Hanoi. Meanwhile, the PLA Navy’s advanced warships have usually been present “over the horizon” during coercive enforcement actions by Chinese civilian agencies, so it is likely that the PRC's increased naval capabilities since the 1990s were also an enabling condition for this risky coercive law enforcement action.89

The development of the new maritime legal regime interacted closely with all three of these factors. The CMS agency’s account of the 2007 oil survey escort operation characterizes the Chinese ships (and support aircraft) as having “handled a foreign country's rights-infringing behaviour in South China Sea waters according to the law.” It was officially a “special rights defense law enforcement action” – a category of operation that draws legal authority from the 1992 Territorial Sea Law, 1998 EEZ Law, and the 1996 MSR Rules which, as noted above, were all prompted by the arrival of the international maritime legal regime.90 Consistent with the “authorization” hypothesis, then, the domestic laws prompted by UNCLOS provided the basic authority for this coercive enforcement action in a disputed maritime area.
China had only possessed the organizational and on-water capabilities for this kind of operation since the creation of the CMS fleet and subsequent delivery of its long-range patrol boats designed to assert China’s maritime rights in the UNCLOS era. The key decision that precipitated the 2007 confrontation was the SOA’s dispatch of patrol ships from two different regional branches to break the initial standoff. The East Sea branch’s 2000-ton *Haijian-51* and the South Sea region’s 3000-ton *Haijian-83* had both been completed in 2005, and both were products of the CMS shipbuilding project approved in 2000. Another large new CMS ship commissioned that year, the 1000-ton class *Haijian-71*, also took part in the operation, meaning at least 3 of the 6 newly-built cutters from the first stage of the CMS shipbuilding project participated in the Triton 626 operation. These new ships were evidently important because at least one of them was called upon from the CMS East Sea Branch based more than 2,000km away. The South Sea Branch had two new ships of its own, but this was evidently not considered sufficient. This strongly suggests the availability of these new UNCLOS-inspired assets enabled the operation.

Beijing could not have used its naval capabilities for this purpose. According to a well placed researcher, to use warships in this way would have carried an unacceptable risk of escalation to war, and in any case the PLA Navy does not have the relevant functional role (职能) within China’s state system. Thus, if the PLAN’s over-the-horizon deterrent underwrote the operation, CMS’s particular form of maritime law enforcement capability was equally crucial in enabling it – a capability that, as we have seen, was created with the specific intention of enforcing China’s rights under the new international legal regime. The “enabling hypothesis,” that UNCLOS prompted China to develop law enforcement capabilities that enabled its increased assertiveness in disputed maritime areas, is therefore also confirmed in this case.

Sub-state agency adventurism is unlikely to have been a factor. First, as the above-mentioned testimony of the CMS regional official Chen Huaibei indicated, the ramming of the Vietnamese ships was neither an initiative of the relevant captain, nor of the regional command. The deputy commander recalled being apprehensive and concerned for the safety of his crew, and there is little reason to disbelieve
such a statement. As a “rights defense law enforcement special operation” with ships from multiple CMS regional fleets, the action was surely coordinated from Beijing. And since the SOA and CNPC are units of equal rank in the party-state system, such coordination would likely have been above both. The CMS fleets were also well prepared, with the three regional fleets having come together in the South China Sea just the previous month for “the largest air-sea patrol exercise since the founding of CMS,” held in May 2007, and the mission was carried out with an elevated “sense of mission and responsibility.”\footnote{92} None of this is suggestive of an sub-state bureaucratic agency pushing against central restraints.

Evidence for other explanations of the PRC policy change is indeterminate. Given there was no known repeat of this type of incident until 2014, a culturally informed “probing” tactic cannot be ruled out, though there is also no strong evidence to confirm this. It is unclear if the incident reflected the personal policy preferences of the ascendant leader Hu Jintao; I have found no sign that the issue was linked to leadership contention ahead of the 17th CCP Congress, though neither of these can be discounted. What is clearer, however, is that the observed change in behaviour did in fact reflect a shift in central policy. As the CMS South Sea Branch’s account of the operation proudly proclaims, the agency's actions “powerfully complemented the state’s diplomatic requirements.”\footnote{93} As to precisely which diplomatic requirements, this was not specified. But they may well have included pressuring Vietnam to accept joint development and abandon its collaborations with third-country companies in developing the disputed area’s resources. This contemporaneous struggle, headed by the MFA, is discussed below.

2. Threatening third-country oil and gas companies

On April 10, 2007 MFA spokesperson Qin Gang, prompted by a state TV reporter, stated that Vietnam's “new moves” in opening up offshore energy exploration bidding and a proposed pipeline involving British Petroleum (BP) were “not conducive to peace.”\footnote{94} The area in question was the Nam Con Son Basin, which lies around 150nm from Vietnam’s southern coast, but partially within China’s nine-
dash line. The PRC had lobbied third-country oil companies over the issue as early as 2000, but from 2006 onwards the PRC stepped up its campaign with a series of official diplomatic protests. In 2007, this verbal assertiveness became much more threatening, and now directly targeted Vietnam’s international partners. After Qin’s news conference, Chinese diplomats delivered warnings of possible economic sanctions to numerous foreign companies working with Vietnam in the South China Sea, including BP, ConocoPhillips, ExxonMobil, Chevron and a Japanese consortium involving Idemitsu, Nippon and Teikoku. In at least one of these instances PRC diplomats reportedly raised the possibility of physical harm to foreign companies’ staff working in the disputed area. China’s handling of this longstanding issue had thus acquired a newly coercive character.

The PRC’s efforts concerned geographical areas where it had once tolerated similar activities. Foreign companies had signed numerous resource exploration deals with Vietnam over the Nam Con Basin area dating back to the 1980s, and had in some cases even started production without prompting equivalent objections from the PRC. Nor were the relevant Chinese agencies unaware of these activities: reports from a government research institution state that between 1992 and 2002 Vietnam signed 33 oil and gas development deals with foreign companies, and that exploitation of offshore resources in the South China Sea intensified in 2002, 2003 and 2004. But China’s new protests from 2006 related to numerous areas around and even beyond the extent of the nine-dash line claim. Thus, while they were prompted by the new agreements between Vietnam and its foreign partners over the disputed area, the PRC’s pattern of responses to such developments had changed. Moreover, since the MFA was the main actor, and the campaign unfolded in various locations over a period of years, it is unlikely to have been the result of over-zealous sub-state actors. We can safely conclude, therefore, that it constituted an intentional foreign policy change.

China’s threats were successful in convincing several companies to abandon their partnerships with Vietnam in key areas. In mid-2007, BP suspended a survey in Block 5-2, a highly promising concession straddling the implied path of the nine-
China’s assertive shift: 2007-2008

Figure 4.3: Vietnamese offshore energy exploration blocks, superimposed with PRC official nine-dash line map (adapted by author from KNOC, "Vietnam acreage map.")
dash line (see Figure 4.3). The following year BP and its partner ConocoPhillips withdrew from the US$2 billion project altogether, with BP reportedly absorbing a $200 million loss as a result. The Japanese consortium also halted its activities in nearby blocks, 5-1b and 5-1c. Chevron suspended operations in Block 122, an area adjacent to the Vietnamese coast further north that is bisected by the nine-dash line, after an MFA political counselor from the Washington consulate read a prepared statement informing the company that continuing with the project would be a “grave violation of China’s sovereignty.” US government cables narrate how a Chevron executive privately admitted the company’s interests on the Chinese mainland had “helped persuade the company to quietly accede to China’s demands and suspend operations in 122.”101 A lower-level lobbying effort through the PRC’s local consulates in the United States was less successful. ExxonMobil executives assessed the warnings they received over Blocks 156-159 to be “routine”, and did not alter their plans for offshore cooperation with Vietnam there.102

How should we understand the causes of China’s new campaign? First of all, any link between popular nationalism and the new elements of China’s behaviour can be ruled out. Qin Gang’s press conference was carried by state news agency CNS, but the report referred only to his announcement of diplomatic “stern representations”—precisely the kind of response that domestic nationalist opinion routinely criticizes as weak and humiliating. Follow-up reporting and media discussion appears to have been scant, making it unlikely that any contending elites were attempting to rally nationalist public opinion to push a stronger stance.103 Reports of the PRC’s subsequent (and successful) economic coercion emerged only through foreign press reporting based on sources within the targeted companies and the leak of US diplomatic cables. In other words, after Qin Gang stated opposition to Vietnam’s “new moves,” Beijing made little or no attempt to focus domestic opinion on the issue, nor to frame its actions as resolute or tough for the citizens who were paying attention.104 Nor is there any sign of a bottom-up groundswell of interest in the issue: the Baidu Index of internet search activity on the term “South China Sea” was low throughout April 2007, averaging around 250, where it remained until late December (see Figure 4.2). In sum, once
again, there was neither strategic channeling nor a bottom-up relationship between popular nationalism and this crucial case of PRC policy change.

The details of this case all point to access to oil and gas resources as Beijing’s key concern. As the previous chapter showed, the monetary and strategic importance of the South China Sea’s resources was rapidly rising, with the value of China’s energy imports having trebled between 2004 and 2006. The high administrative rank of the official approaches over the already-producing Nam Con Son Basin, compared to those over the speculative prospects of the Phu Kanh Basin (Blocks 122-124) further suggests short-term alleviation of China’s growing resource insecurity was a priority. Several new discoveries had also been made in the Nam Con Son Basin in 2006. But a crucial, underappreciated aspect of China’s campaign was that the immediate goal was not unilateral PRC control of the resources, but joint development with Vietnam. This is apparent, first of all, in the targets of the actions – Vietnam’s existing foreign partners. After BP’s withdrawal, according to Bill Hayton, PRC officials even asked the company to facilitate talks between Vietnam and China’s state oil conglomerates regarding joint development of the concessions. Government research reports from this period also repeatedly emphasized the need for actions “to force Vietnam to engage in bilateral joint development.” If Beijing was willing to escalate the conflict in this way for a chance at joint development, this is a strong indication of the importance with which it viewed access to the area’s resources at that time.

China’s increased material power provided it with the leverage necessary to mount such a campaign. If not for its increased economic power, Beijing would have had little reason to use threats against foreign oil companies. US cables show Chevron’s interests in China contributed directly to its decision to terminate its offshore collaboration with Vietnam following China’s forceful objections; the same is likely to have contributed to the other companies’ withdrawals. Seven years earlier, in 2000, approaches by MFA diplomats over the issue had left BP unmoved; but now the company was willing to sacrifice a $200 million investment, as well as untold future revenues, in order to assuage China. Once again, then, increasing material power and rising resource insecurity appear central to the PRC’s intensified
assertiveness in the South China Sea. But China’s coercive diplomacy over the Nam Con Son Basin was also an attempt to compensate for the weakening of its position there under the UNCLOS.

Figure 4.4: Energy developments protested by Beijing, with theoretical median line between Vietnamese coast and Spratly Island shown in white (adapted by author from GIS files provided with Poling, “The South China Sea in focus.”)

A simple, but revealing insight into the sentiment underpinning China’s policies at this time is an internal government advisory report describing the trends for China’s maritime rights claims in the South China Sea as “severe,” and recommending increased presence to “maintain the dispute” (维待争议).109 As Figure 4.4 indicates, part of the Nam Con Son Basin lies inside the nine-dash line, but the entire area is well outside what the PRC could plausibly hope to receive under the “median line/equitability” maritime boundary delimitation principle established by international courts – even if the Spratly Islands were regarded as legitimate islands (as the PRC expected they would be) under UNCLOS Article 121.110 It is not surprising, then, that shortly before commencing its international campaign over these areas, the PRC invoked its right under UNCLOS Article 298 to
refuse any compulsory dispute resolution on boundary issues. Other internal research from this time explicitly emphasizes the need for China to “slow down maritime border delimitation.”\textsuperscript{111} For Beijing, resolution of the dispute in accordance with the UNCLOS was understandably an outcome to be avoided until its position in the “legal struggle” could be strengthened.\textsuperscript{112} Backed by a strong international legal mandate, the new Vietnamese-foreign agreements signed in the lead up to 2007 threatened to remove the PRC’s last hope of gaining access to the area’s increasingly valuable resources.

The contrast between China’s actions in relation to the Nam Con Son Basin blocks and ExxonMobil’s holdings in Blocks 156-159 offers a further illustration of China’s special concern with “maintaining the dispute” in those areas where its claim was weakened by the international legal regime. Blocks 156-159 lie much nearer to the PRC-claimed land territories in the Spratlys than the Vietnamese coast, and well within a hypothetical median line. The PRC’s legal claim to resources in this area was notionally much stronger than its claim to the Nam Con Son Basin. Given the area’s proximity to disputed territory (one block even covers the 12nm territorial seas around Spratly Island), we might expect new moves towards energy development in these areas to be among the most provocative to Beijing. Yet the approaches to ExxonMobil over its involvement in these areas were in fact much milder, being delivered by junior officials from the Houston consulate, and there is no indication that they escalated after the company ignored them.\textsuperscript{113} Instead, the PRC’s most vigorous and threatening lobbying efforts focused on precisely those areas beyond what it could plausibly hope to claim under the international legal regime. This observation supports the “viability” hypothesis: that China’s resort to economic coercion in these areas was related not only to the challenge posed by the “new moves” it accused Vietnam of taking, but also to the weakening of its claim to these areas as UNCLOS came into effect.

Other common explanations such as sub-state bureaucratic politics, strategic probing, leaders’ personal dispositions, and elevated elite political tensions, are either weak or demonstrably invalid in this case. The campaign was well coordinated, and led by high-ranking central officials from the MFA, typically
presumed to be relatively “dovish” influences on policy. We cannot rule out the possibility that the policy shift reflected distinctive ideas of the Hu Jintao administration, but Hu had already been in charge of the party for four years, and the military for nearly three years, by the time the coercive actions began. More importantly, given the material motivations outlined above it is far from clear that another leader would have acted differently. The sustained duration of the campaign, meanwhile, suggested it was neither a probe nor a guerilla warfare tactic. In discussions with American counterparts in the wake of BP’s pullout, a British diplomat optimistically raised the possibility that China's change in behaviour may have been of a temporary and cyclical nature due to contending politicians “posturing” in the lead up to the 17th CCP Congress to be held later that year. However, this was disconfirmed when the campaign continued through 2008 and into 2009, a period during which political tensions ought to have been comparatively low, with leadership positions for the next 3-4 years having been settled.

In summary, rising resource insecurity increased the importance to China of access to the South China Sea’s known resources, while rapid economic development in the early 2000s provided the leverage over large transnational corporations that made economic threats a viable policy. Against this backdrop, when new Vietnamese collaborative projects in the Nam Con Son Basin were announced, manifesting strong external recognition of Hanoi’s claim, they threatened to extinguish China’s last possibility of realizing an increasingly important claim that had been severely weakened by the implementation of the Law of the Sea Convention. In resorting to coercion, China was, in this case, struggling against the emerging international maritime legal regime, attempting to preserve a rapidly weakening claim that it considered to be both strategically vital and longstanding.

3. Disrupting Vietnam’s continental shelf surveys

From the perspective of those involved in China’s policy in the South China Sea, the 2008 Beijing Olympics was a challenge to both maritime rights defense and
regional stability.\textsuperscript{115} The requirements of maintaining a positive international image and friendly regional relations, along with specially assigned Olympics-related tasks such as guarding undersea fibre optic cables, created a temporary reduction in China’s ability to conduct assertive maritime rights defense operations. Once the Olympics had passed, the National Institute of South China Sea Studies recommended, China would need to make up for lost time by “choosing an opportunity” (择机) to “interfere with and block neighbouring countries’ activities in the South China Sea’s disputed waters.”\textsuperscript{116}

Prominent among these neighbouring countries’ activities were Vietnamese government surveys gathering geological data ahead of the May 2009 submission deadline for preliminary scientific data on continental shelf claims beyond 200nm under UNCLOS. Hanoi had been concerned by the vigor of China’s diplomatic objections to these activities since April 2007 – the same time as the campaign against its oil and gas projects began in earnest – and the PRC carried out at least one operation to interfere with the geological surveys at some point that year.\textsuperscript{117} However, China apparently refrained from on-water interventions for several months ahead of the Beijing Olympics.\textsuperscript{118} In September 2008, one month after the Olympics had concluded, CMS launched another “special rights defense law enforcement action,” this time with the explicit aim of disrupting foreign continental shelf surveys in the South China Sea. Another operation followed in November 2008.\textsuperscript{119} Party-state materials confirm Vietnam was the target.\textsuperscript{120}

Precise details on the location of these incidents and their progression are not known, as neither Beijing nor Hanoi have commented on them officially. However, the available information leaves little doubt they were coercive in nature. The CMS operation’s official title was, “Action to Interfere and Block Vietnam’s Outer Continental Shelf Geological Survey.”\textsuperscript{121} The SOA’s yearbook states that the CMS actions “halted” (制止了) the survey operations, strongly suggesting some kind of forcible effect on the other side’s behaviour.\textsuperscript{122} According to a Vietnamese government researcher, in mid-2007 the CMS ship Haijian-51 rammed an escort of the Singaporean survey ship Geo Surveyor.\textsuperscript{123} Additionally, a leaked US diplomatic cable cites a Vietnamese diplomat confirming Chinese ships had “harassed”
Russian and Norwegian vessels contracted by Vietnam to survey the continental shelf in late 2008. The English term “harass” generally covers both shadowing at a distance – not a coercive form of action – as well as more dangerous manoeuvres such as those seen during the *Impeccable* incident detailed in Chapter 5. However, as detailed above, hailing and shadowing had already been part of CMS’s routine responsibilities since the early 2000s, so if the Chinese side’s actions had been limited to this non-confrontational type, they probably would not have constituted a “special operation.” It is reasonable, therefore, to infer that the “interference” against the Vietnamese continental shelf surveys was of a coercive nature.

In this case, once again, bottom-up explanations that would ascribe even a contributory role to domestic popular nationalism fail a simple “hoop test.” To date, more than seven years later, the Chinese party-state has never publicly commented on these incidents, strongly disconfirming both “nationalist legitimacy” and “intra-state contention” models. Nor is there evidence of Chinese or foreign media discussing the incidents. Even the SOA’s own yearbook, which has only very limited public availability and a highly specialized readership, makes only brief mention of the two “special operations,” suggesting a requirement from higher levels to handle them in a low-key manner. The Baidu Search Index, meanwhile, shows no evidence that the actions were preceded by any groundswell of online nationalist pique over the issue, with activity on the “South China Sea” search string remaining low in 2007 and throughout 2008 until late November. All these signs indicate this important example of new on-water assertiveness by the PRC had nothing to do with public opinion.

The causal links between China’s coercive actions and UNCLOS, meanwhile, are clear. It could even be argued that Law of the Sea regime was the single most important cause of this series of newly coercive Chinese actions. Confirming the expectations of the “authorization” hypothesis linking UNCLOS with assertive actions, the relevant Chinese law enforcement agency specified the basis of its “timely handling of various behaviours violating our country’s maritime rights and interests, effectively defending the state’s maritime rights and interests” as the *1998 EEZ Law and 1996 MSR Rules.* While the specific details are not known, in
China’s assertive shift: 2007-2008

at least one instance Haijian-51 (commissioned in November 2005) was identified as ramming Vietnamese ships, as it had done in the Triton 626 energy survey case. This has led some Vietnamese analysts to speculate that the ship may have been specially designed for this type of task – a claim that Chinese government sources deny.\textsuperscript{128} Given the critical importance of CMS’s new advanced long-range patrol ships to the coercive operations in 2007, it seems likely that the actions against Vietnamese continental shelf surveys were also enabled by the UNCLOS-enforcement shipbuilding project that was initiated in 2000 and came to fruition in 2005. If so, this would also support the “enabling” hypothesis.

The operations to disrupt Vietnam’s geological surveys demonstrate the second causal pathway between UNCLOS and increased assertive behaviour: assertive actions that are aimed at strengthening disputed claims under the international legal regime. As suggested in the title of the operation – “Action to Interfere and Block Vietnam’s Outer Continental Shelf Geological Survey” – China’s objective was to forestall Vietnam’s collection of evidence that would strengthen its claims to maritime jurisdiction over the resources in the area under UNCLOS. Despite Beijing’s unwillingness to limit its claims to those mandated by the Convention, the fact that it would conduct coercive operations with the aim of preventing a rival from advancing its legal claims underscores the importance the PRC attaches to maximizing the legal strength of its claims. The subsequent flurry of diplomatic notes issued in response to Malaysia and Vietnam’s submission to the CLCS in 2009 further bears out Beijing’s belief in the significance of international law to its claims in the South China Sea.\textsuperscript{129} The actions against Vietnam’s continental shelf surveys appear, by their nature, to be a good example of a state engaging in maritime assertiveness in an attempt to advance or maintain the legal strength of its claims.

China’s increased naval capabilities may have been a prerequisite for these actions, with PLA warships probably lurking over the horizon to deter Vietnamese retaliation. Yet once again, as in the 2007 energy survey standoff, given the serious escalatory potential of using warships in a physical confrontation, the new civilian law enforcement assets that performed the operation were equally necessary for
such an action. The rising importance of the area’s oil and gas resources may also have been a factor, though this was only indirectly connected with this series of incidents; the immediate objective was to forestall a rival state from bolstering its legal claim and to prevent any possible future argument that the PRC had acquiesced to Vietnamese activities.\footnote{130}

Evidence for other explanatory factors is harder to discern. As in the case of the Triton 626 operation, the central coordination that the operation required renders sub-state actors’ adventurism unlikely. There was, in addition, a clear period of careful, centrally-mandated restraint through the 2008 Olympic period that punctuated them, as reported in US State Department cables.\footnote{131} The relatively short-lived appearance of such actions is arguably consistent with probing or mobile guerilla warfare tactics designed to reveal information about Vietnam’s level of resolve or weak points, and maintain constant pressure, but without knowing how Vietnam responded to the incidents, this is difficult to either substantiate or refute. In the CCP’s political cycle, the campaign of harassment of Vietnam’s geological survey ships spanned both pre- and post-17th Congress periods, and there is no outward sign that the actions in question were politicized in China’s internal struggles, so this seems unlikely to have been a factor, though it cannot be decisively ruled out. The idea that Hu Jintao’s personal beliefs lay behind this new assertive action is also difficult to falsify; all we can say for sure is that they began under Hu’s leadership. But the timing of these incidents matches the international legal regime’s looming deadline far more closely than any pattern of Vietnamese advance and retreat or Chinese leadership change, making the international legal regime a much stronger explanation than culturally-informed probing tactics, leader preferences and the elevation of the South China Sea’s political significance through the domestic political cycle.

4. Regular rights defense patrols

One of the most consistent aspects of China’s assertive maritime policy since 2007 has been increasingly frequent patrols by maritime law enforcement vessels in
disputed areas. The purpose of this program of “regular rights defense patrols” (定期维权巡航), rolled out by CMS in the South China Sea that year, has been to verbally state China’s claims, collect information, and embody China’s jurisdiction. They do not seek to physically challenge other claimants – on the contrary, they deliberately avoid on-water confrontation and display no visible weaponry such as deck guns. As CMS South Sea Branch Rights Defense and Law Enforcement Detachment official Pang Hailong explained, when CMS ships on regular patrol discover foreign boats infringing on China’s claims, “we can't use extreme methods” but instead “use language” to state China’s official position over the radio airwaves. It was precisely because of CMS’s lack of weaponry, according to Pang, that its patrols could “show up more in sensitive areas of water” whilst maintaining the country’s “diplomatic flexibility.” Despite this non-coercive quality, however, “regular rights defense patrols” have contributed greatly to both the quantitative change in the PRC’s behaviour identified in the previous chapter, and to regional perceptions of an assertive shift in Chinese policy. As a prominent scholar at a government-run research institution acknowledged, when big new ships started appearing in the disputed areas with ever-increasing frequency, “of course other countries felt uncomfortable.”

The rollout of regular rights defense patrols was methodical and cautious. The system was first introduced in the East China Sea in June 2006. Once its feasibility had been proven there, CMS extended the scope to cover the Yellow Sea and the northern part of the South China Sea from February 2007. Nine months later this was expanded again to include the southern part of the South China Sea. Thus, by December 2007, the regular patrol system theoretically covered all of “the 3 million square kilometres of waters under China’s administration.” Thereafter, the CMS South Sea Fleet claimed to maintain at least two ships on patrol in the South China Sea at all times. And as Figures 4.5 and 4.7 illustrate, regular rights defense patrols in the South China Sea have increased not only in geographic scope, but also in frequency.
Why did the party-state introduce these new regular patrolling activities in disputed maritime areas at this time? Was popular nationalism a factor? Of the four cases of new Chinese assertiveness examined here, the regular rights defense patrols are the only one to have been publicized to domestic mass audiences before 2013. CCTV news bulletins on July 12, 2008 announced that “from the start of this year CMS began implementing regular rights defense patrols in the South China Sea, patrolling as far south as James Shoal.” The report added that “This symbolizes China’s complete realization of regular rights protection patrols over all waters under China’s administration.”138 As Figure 4.6 suggests, this broadcast prompted the only clear spike in public interest in the South China Sea issue across 2008.139 The idea that a desire to appeal to popular nationalism was part of the motivation behind this assertive policy change therefore passes the basic test of plausibility as an explanation in this case: the public was informed of the assertive action, and the state claimed credit for it. On the other hand, the fact that these announcements did not begin until more than a year after the patrol system was initiated, and the rise in popular attention on the issue followed afterwards on June 13, constitutes solid evidence that the policy itself was not driven by a need to alleviate acute legitimacy issues or placate any groundswells of nationalism. If
either of these processes were involved in the policy's causation, then the state should have sought to relieve the pressure through sustained publicity of the assertive policy either before or soon after implementation. Instead, the state media made a once-off announcement informing the public of the policy after it had already been established for more than a year, so even if the TV segments were an example of nationalist posturing, there was no bottom-up causation of the policy itself. As the following chapters suggest, the CCP’s management of popular sentiments on the issue was only beginning to crystallize.

This component of China’s more-assertive policy was integral to the party-state’s response to the opportunities and challenges it perceived from the new maritime legal regime. The UNCLOS-inspired laws provided the domestic authority for the “regular rights defense patrols,” and the ships built to enforce those laws have been the key to the system’s implementation. A 2007 report from the SOA states that “according to such maritime rules and regulations as the 1992 Territorial Sea Law, 1998 EEZ Law and 1996 MSR Rules, CMS in 2007 implemented relatively strong rights defense patrol law enforcement in all waters.”140 This strongly confirms the “authorization” hypothesis, which expects frontline agencies to cite UNCLOS-derived laws as the basis for assertive actions. New administrative rules issued by the State Council in 2008 explicitly assigned CMS the function of “upholding the state's maritime rights and interests in accordance with the law” by “enacting a system of regular rights protection patrols in waters under our country's administration.”141 But the fact that the patrols were already occurring
by this time shows that these new guidelines were not the basis for this line of new assertiveness. It was the UNCLOS-inspired laws of the 1990s that served this purpose – but the patrols could not happen until the required on-water capabilities arrived.

The shipbuilding projects initiated in 1999 to enforce China’s new UNCLOS-inspired laws were a crucial enabler of the regular rights defense patrol system. As CMS South Sea Branch Director Li Lixin admitted in 2009, even with 11 ships and 3 helicopters the fleet still “could not completely cover the central and southern parts” of the sea. The fact that the CMS South Sea Branch continued to struggle to cover its whole area of responsibility, even two years after the rights defense patrol system’s implementation, points to the importance of the UNCLOS-inspired ship construction in this new layer of Chinese assertiveness. Further confirmation is found in a television news report that identified the particular ships involved in one regular rights defense patrol in April 2012: all four were large new cutters created in the shipbuilding program approved in 2000 by Premier Zhu Rongji and Vice Premier Wen Jiabao. Only with the rollout of even more new patrol ships, along with some refurbished naval vessels, did the regular rights defense patrol system finally expand out to the full extent of the nine-dash line. This confirms the “enabling” hypothesis that capabilities created in response to the Convention’s implementation make new assertive actions possible.

Bolstering China’s legal claim in the area was a direct objective of the new regular rights defense patrol program. As noted above, CMS party secretary Sun Shuxian stated in 2008 that regular patrolling was crucial to “embodying present jurisdiction” and thereby establishing the state’s legal authority over a maritime area under international law in the UNCLOS era. Other state officials concur with this assessment. According to South Sea Branch Deputy Director Chen Huaibei, patrolling in disputed waters and stating the country’s position over the radio “has real significance in legal terms.” This verbal testimony, together with other SOA literature characterizing regular patrols as “embodying jurisdiction,” strongly supports the “legal claims” hypothesis are aimed at advancing China’s claims to disputed areas under the international legal regime. Given that, as we
China’s assertive shift: 2007-2008

have seen, the patrol system was carefully designed to avoid confrontation, this lends further credence to the idea that the purpose was not law enforcement in the conventional sense of coercion against delinquent targets, but rather of establishing legal jurisdiction in the disputed area.

Figure 4.7: Approximate route of a 2012 “regular rights defense patrol,” adapted by author using MFA nine-dash line map and footage shown in CCTV, “Xunhang Nanhai.”
Like in the case of economic coercion against Vietnam's third-country partners discussed above, China's regular rights defense patrols in the South China Sea appear to have been concentrated on those areas where China's claims have been most severely weakened by the advent of UNCLOS. Figure 4.7 shows the path of one regular rights defense patrol, as captured in a state media documentary in 2012. It suggests that the main task of CMS patrols is (or at least was) to assert China's sovereign rights in areas around the margins of the nine-dash line area. The captain of the CMS vessel leading the patrol explicitly described the route as proceeding “along the nine-dash line.” Confirming the map, an official with the CMS South Sea Branch, states that “our patrol area is the whole area within the nine-dash line.” If the route shown in the documentary was typical, then this geographic pattern supports the “claim viability” hypothesis. And according to the official newspaper of the CPPCC, the initiation of regular rights protection patrols in 2006 was a response to “increasingly serious situation of our country's maritime rights.” This suggests that, much like the campaign of economic coercion against foreign oil and gas companies from 2007, the regular rights defense patrols were in some measure intended to compensate for the weakness of China's claims in those areas around the edge of the nine-dash line under the UNCLOS.

The methodical, staged rollout of the regular rights defense patrols disconfirms the idea that this major aspect of China's assertive policy shift resulted from either front-line agency adventurism or tactical probing or guerrilla tactics at sea. Being initiated in 2007, it may have reflected the distinctive ideas of an ascendant Hu Jintao, though in the absence of personal comments on the policy from among the top-level leaders, such a conclusion is only speculative. The opposite explanation may also be true: the implementation of the patrols could have been a concession to hardline elements within the party or its military. Such a conclusion would be equally or more speculative, though, as there is no obvious outward indication of lobbying for such a policy, even in the relevant parts of the annuals of China’s maritime agencies, which may have stood to gain additional status and resources from this policy. In fact, in 2008 the State Council under Wen Jiabao issued
revised guidelines that officially added the task of “implementing the system of regular rights defense patrol law enforcement in waters under China's jurisdiction” to the SOA’s official functions, further formalizing the central party-state’s approval of the policy.151

The regular rights defense patrol system would appear to demonstrate all of the UNCLOS-related hypotheses, showing how the emerging international legal regime was an authority, enabler, inducement, and catalyst for these important new assertive actions. First, the UNCLOS inspired both the PRC legal instruments that provided the basis for its implementation, and its fleet of long-range cutters capable of conducting 10,000km, 40-day patrol voyages. Even if we assume, for argument’s sake, that the pursuit of such capabilities was inevitable, then China’s accession to the UNCLOS at a minimum explains the timing of its implementation and rollout. Second, official accounts show that “regular rights defense patrolling” is based, rightly or wrongly, on a perception that it strengthens China’s claims to those waters in the context of the new international maritime legal regime. Third, the rights defense patrols were, at least in the first few years, concentrated around the margins of the nine-dash line claim, suggesting that compensating for the weakness of China’s legal position in these areas may have formed part of the motivation behind the patrols.

**Conclusion**

It is telling that the incidents that typified the shift in PRC policy in the South China Sea had little to do with sovereignty or control disputed islands, and instead concerned maritime spaces and resources – the very areas on which state competition is regulated by the UNCLOS. By tracing of the causes of specific key actions representative of the change that China’s policy underwent in 2007 and 2008, this chapter has argued that, rather than being driven by a need to pander to domestic audiences, the major changes in the quantity and quality of China’s assertiveness on the issue resulted from the party-state’s growing military and economic capabilities, increasing resource insecurity, and the challenges and
opportunities presented by the implementation of the “global constitution for the world’s oceans.”

In none of these four key cases did the CCP seek to promptly inform China’s citizens of the newly assertive actions it had taken against rival claimants; the only policy to be prominently announced was the regular rights defense patrol program, but this was well over 12 months after it was implemented. Nor was there any sign of a bottom-up groundswell of popular attention on the issue before any of the intensified assertive actions. This disconfirms the bottom-up models of the nationalism-policy relationship as explanations for the shift observed in 2007-2008. Since the public was generally not told about these assertive actions, impressing or appeasing popular nationalism could not have been among the state’s considerations. Nor does public opinion on this issue appear to have been a factor in any political or policy debates leading to the change in behaviour. Equally, however, there is little sign of any concerted state attempt to channel domestic attention towards the issue, as the channeling/risk management model of the nationalism-policy nexus outlined in Chapter 1 would imply. Nationalist public opinion, in short, played no role in China’s policy shift. The next two chapters will detail a complex evolution in the relationship between the two over the years that followed.
Chapter 5

Assertive PRC policy and the rise of Chinese popular nationalism on the South China Sea issue

This chapter analyzes the relationship between domestic Chinese public opinion and PRC maritime policy from 2009 to 2011, when a powerful wave of popular nationalism emerged on the South China Sea issue. Contrary to the expectations of bottom-up models of the relationship between nationalism and foreign policy, it shows that Beijing’s assertive policy, together with greater publicity of it in the state media, was itself a major driver of the rise of nationalist public opinion on the issue. When Beijing abruptly moderated its policy at the height of tensions in mid-2011, online commenters expressed outrage, but attention towards the issue among the broader networked public quickly receded as the prospect of conflict faded. The extent to which the party-state authorities were knowingly in control of these effects is not clear. As Chapter 6 will show, theoretical projects guiding the strategic use of public opinion had been in development for several years, but any attempts to apply them appear to have been unfocused or at least inconsistent through this period.

The chapter begins with a brief overview of the continuities and changes in China’s maritime policy in this period, focusing on the emerging central guideline of “the unity of rights defense and stability maintenance” (维护主权与稳定统一). This formulation implied that maritime rights defense activities could in fact enhance regional stability, thereby resolving the contradiction between the two, and providing a strong theoretical mandate for a range of pragmatic, but assertive actions. The next section examines the rise of South China Sea nationalism between 2009 and 2011 from three angles: citizens’ attitudes, public attention levels, and popular mobilization. It shows how the assertive policy shift was the key cause of the rise in nationalist sentiments on the issue, and yet the party-state
Assertive policy and the rise of nationalism

received little or no nationalist credit for its more coercive approach. This paradox indicates how the internet era may have circumscribed the CCP's ability to frame domestic interpretations of events in the South China Sea, while its influence over the issue’s salience on the public agenda remains decisive.

The second half of the chapter turns to the question of the policy impact of these developments, tracing the two cases most likely to reveal a role for popular nationalism in China's more-assertive actions on the issue. It shows that, like in the 2007-2008 cases already examined, public opinion was not a significant factor in the causation of China's assertive actions in the Impeccable confrontation of March 2009, and the Sino-Vietnamese cable-cutting incidents of May-June 2011. There was also little sign of the state drawing on the power of public opinion in the 2009 Sino-American incident. However, in 2011 circumstantial evidence suggests the party-state was beginning to recognize that spontaneous shows of popular nationalism, properly managed, could bolster its South China Sea policy of “rights defence and stability maintenance” by helping deter retaliation, while also underscoring Beijing's intention to avoid conflict. This would become more apparent in subsequent years, as Chapter 6 will show.

Unifying rights defense and stability maintenance

According to the framework set up in Chapter 3, between 2009 and 2011 China's assertiveness in the South China Sea continued to increase at the new faster pace established in 2007, with fourteen identifiable cases of behavioural change observed over the three years (see Appendix 2). Five of these cases were obviously coercive in nature: the Impeccable incident in which Chinese vessels confronted a United States naval surveillance ship; increased detentions of Vietnamese fishers in the Paracel Islands in 2009; the use of patrol boats to coerce Indonesian authorities into releasing Chinese fishers detained in the disputed area in 2010; harassment of a Philippine survey operation in the Reed Bank in 2011; and operations to cut the seismic cables of Vietnamese ships conducting similar operations later that year.

182
China’s unilateral administrative buildup within the nine-dash line also intensified. The “regular rights defense patrols” examined in the previous chapter increased each year, and oil and gas surveys in the vicinity of Triton Island returned in 2010 after an apparent pause of three years. There was also a notable increase in publicly announced PLA naval exercises in the South China Sea in 2010. This was emblematic of Beijing’s increasing willingness to inform the domestic public about its maritime policies, as also apparent in the party media’s increased verbal assertions over the disputed islands (see Figure A2.1). The official diplomatic position hardened with the attachment of the “nine-dash line” map to a diplomatic note submitted to the United Nations, a move that has probably had consequences for China’s position in the South China Sea beyond those intended at the time. In 2010, some PRC officials began linking the state’s disputed South China Sea claims to the “core interest” formulation previously reserved for Taiwan and Tibet, suggesting a possible willingness to use force. The discussion diminished in 2011, so whether this was in fact a change in policy is unclear, but the officials’ use of the phrase constituted a new form of declarative assertiveness in 2010.

It was during this period that the party centre’s policy for foreign-directed maritime law enforcement activities coalesced around the principle of “the unity of rights defense and stability maintenance.” Like most central guidance, its meaning is elastic, but its usage by officials suggests it can refer to:

(1) Actions that incorporate features designed to minimize the chance regional conflict or instability, such as “regular rights defense patrols” using unarmed civilian ships;

(2) Actions that have a deterrent effect on other claimants’ actions and therefore supposedly reduce the chances of future confrontations, such as the deployment of large new armed Fisheries vessels to escort Chinese fishing boats operating in disputed areas;

(3) Actions that nip in the bud potentially escalatory situations, such as coercive “rescues” of Chinese fishers detained by foreign authorities;

(4) Actions that prevent domestic instability in China by mollifying potentially troublesome constituencies, for example, providing security guarantees
that open up offshore fishing opportunities for fishing communities affected by declining coastal catches.  

A range of examples of official usage of this formulation, referred to below as *weiquan-weiwen*, can be found in Appendix 4. At its core lies a recognition of a dialectical relationship between maritime rights defense and regional stability maintenance, as explained by foreign policy strategist Qu Xing: “Stability maintenance cannot come at the price of harming sovereignty interests, and rights defense cannot make China’s periphery fall into a state of conflict.”  

The *weiquan-weiwen* guideline reflects the dialectical philosophy that underpins CCP policymaking more generally. Based on Mao Zedong’s interpretations of Hegel, Marx, Engels and Lenin, as laid out in his 1937 essay “On Contradiction,” the approach views contradictions as the source of all motion, including social progress and advancement towards political goals. Often overlooked in English-language analysis of PRC policymaking since its adoption of market reforms, the CCP’s theoretical system has actually become increasingly important as the party seeks to rationalize its policymaking to maintain power in the 21st century. Timothy Heath has detailed its crucial role in the CCP’s reinvention as a “governing party” – that is, one seeking to govern more effectively, provide the public goods expected by an increasingly educated, prosperous and complex society, and realize its long-term strategic goals. The reinvigorated ideological system focuses party-state policy on properly handling tensions among the CCP’s goals, which are understood as *contradictions* whose eventual resolution will bring about historical progress.  

In the case of maritime disputes, the emergence of *weiquan-weiwen* as a central guideline reflects the party’s diagnosis of the contradiction between China’s interests in advancing its position in the sovereignty and resource disputes on the one hand, and its need for a stable and peaceful international environment on the other. References to this assessment appear in party materials began to appear shortly after China’s assertiveness began to intensify (Appendix 4). On February
Chapter 5

24, 2008, in a report to a meeting of maritime officials, SOA Party Secretary Sun Zhihui noted:

“In continuing to unfold rights defense patrol law enforcement in our jurisdictional waters, we must both resolutely defend state sovereignty and also maintain regional stability, responding appropriately to maritime rights disputes and all kinds of rights violating activities.”

Sun went on to urge the officials to “actively guide the development of regional maritime affairs in order to serve the defense of rights and stability of the periphery.” Two weeks later, in a March 7 article Sun stressed the importance of “the task of both defending maritime rights and safeguarding stability on the periphery.”

The idea of the unity (相统一) of rights defense and stability maintenance is a crucial element of the policy. It requires policymakers not only to manage the contradiction between weiquan and weiwen, but also to actively seek ways to resolve it. Yearly advisory reports from the party-state's top think tank on the issue illustrate this subtle shift in thinking. The 2007 report noted that “the trends for upholding rights and maintaining stability in the South China Sea are grim,” due in part to the upcoming Olympic Games, which temporarily deprived China of its ability to use coercion to deter rival claimants from advancing their positions. Once this “crucial Olympic period” had passed, China would need to “select opportunities (择机) to interfere with and block other neighbouring countries’ activities in disputed waters.” This recommendation – which evidently was followed, given the reintroduction of coercive measures almost immediately after the Olympics were over (Chapter 4) – nonetheless suggested that, at this point, the report’s expert authors regarded the weiquan-weiwen contradiction as difficult to resolve: rights defense had to be put on hold before the Olympics, and stability may have to be put at risk afterwards to restore the balance. But by late 2009, the same experts now recommended “upholding the unity of rights defense and stability maintenance (emphases added),” suggesting that the focus had turned towards finding ways of advancing both aims simultaneously.
Assertive policy and the rise of nationalism

By early 2011 at the latest, the unity of *weiquan* and *weiwen* had moved from analysis to implementation. In a March speech, SOA Party Secretary Liu Cigui instructed maritime law enforcement to follow “the Party Centre’s basic policy (基本方针) of 'sovereignty is ours, shelve disputes, jointly develop,' and its guidance policy (指导方针) of 'the unity of rights defense and stability maintenance'.” Deng’s “shelving disputes” formulation was the most authoritative guidance from any central leader on the handling of China’s maritime disputes in the reform era, so Secretary Liu’s virtual equation of the two was a strong indication of the new policy's increasing authority. On the surface the two formulations might appear inconsistent, since *weiquan-weiwen* governs assertive actions while "shelving disputes" is ostensibly cooperative. However, they share the same two fundamental purposes: advancing China’s interests in disputed maritime areas at the same time as reducing the chances of conflict.

The central guideline of the “unity of rights defense and stability maintenance” is a policy that is fundamentally both pragmatic and assertive. Being clearly situated within the CCP’s foundational philosophical traditions and an increasingly coherent body of theory to guide policymaking in the twenty-first century, it is closely integrated into the CCP’s pursuit of national long-term goals. Its dialectical style may seem obscure, but in practice it clarifies for Chinese policymakers the key parameters within which they operate, while also encouraging them to devise innovative ways of advancing both goals at the same time. It has provided a strong mandate for more assertive maritime “rights defense” actions, which could now be understood as helping achieve the regional “stability” the party-state needs to continue its economic development, by deterring present or future escalation, while forcing policymakers throughout the party-state to systematically assess and control the associated risks. Its logic of present coercion for future deterrence, as shown in the case studies below, underpinned the coercive on-water operations against rivals’ energy survey operations in the first half of 2011. Those cases would also contain the first signs of how the increased flow of popular nationalist sentiments towards the issue, detailed in the next section, could help serve the same goals.
The rise of South China Sea nationalism

Nationalism is a notoriously difficult concept to pin down. Deployed to describe an enormous variety of social movements, top-down ideologies, elite policy agendas, popular attitudes, mass sentiments, and even consumption patterns, use of the word carries with it a risk of stringing together superficially related phenomena with very different causes and effects under a single label. Chapter 1 therefore specified a working definition of popular nationalism, *public actions and sentiments in favour of more assertive foreign policy*, that narrowed the focus to observable phenomena capable of generating bottom-up pressure on state policy, while also covering mediated manifestations of nationalist sentiment such as opinion survey results, online commentary, and consumption of jingoistic media content. On this basis, the following sections examine the rise of South China Sea nationalism in Mainland China from three angles: citizens’ attitudes identified in survey data; public attention levels, as reflected in demand for information on the topic among internet users; and online and offline mobilizations. As we will see, these three proxy indicators of nationalism overlap in many regards, but they are by no means coterminous, and are for this reason treated separately (see Table 5.1).

The first manifestation of popular nationalism examined below is citizens’ attitudes towards the issue, as manifested in survey answers. A survey organized as part of this project demonstrates that a range of strong beliefs about the South China Sea exist today among the Mainland’s population and, more importantly, are sustained relatively independently of state media cues. Importantly, the survey data also show that many, if not most, urban residents perceive a collective role for the public, *under the state’s leadership*, in the pursuit of the PRC’s claims. The data were collected in 2013, so no strong conclusions can be drawn about the exact prevalence or strength of nationalist attitudes in 2009-2011, but besides demonstrating the basic existence of popular nationalist attitudes among the Chinese public on the South China Sea issue, the data provide insights into demographic tendencies, and the role of different information sources in sustaining nationalist attitudes in the internet era, that are likely to have been similar 2-4 years earlier.
In general, it is reasonable to expect users who pay close attention to a topic, and actively seek out related information, to hold stronger opinions on it than those who don’t. This contention is borne out in the survey’s data on self-reported attention levels (see author’s *Exploring China’s Maritime Consciousness*). However, paying close attention is by no means a prerequisite for strong nationalist attitudes—many respondents who reported paying scant attention to the issue expressed approval of using military force in the South China Sea, even at the risk of war.

Rises in demand for online information on a given topic, as measured by online search activity, presumably results from a combination of (1) users seeking to gain a basic understanding and form their beliefs, and (2) users seeking to further their existing understanding through new information. Baidu’s search activity data do not offer any breakdown of these and other purposes users may have for entering a given search term. A second disconnect is that close followers of an issue may be less likely to search for information on the topic if they have established habitual information gathering routines centred on particular online communities or information sources.

Still, it is reasonable to infer a basic correlation between higher demand for online information on a given topic and stronger nationalist attitudes on that topic. A given development that stimulates public attention could of course prompt dovish sentiments to rise *more* than nationalistic ones. But as long as nationalist beliefs exist among a population on a given issue, the overall strength of nationalist sentiments—such as desire for confrontational state actions—will be higher when attention is higher.

The relationship between public attention and nationalist mobilization is likely to be strongly positively correlated on the upside of a spike in attention levels, but may be negatively correlated on the downside.

Sharp *rises* in public demand for information are likely to match by increased nationalist activity, since a higher number of citizens paying attention to the issue creates a larger pool of potential nationalist “activists.” To the extent that this assumption holds, rising attention levels may be regarded as broadly indicative of some corresponding rise in the levels of nationalist activity. However, the magnitude, specific content, and political significance of any such mobilizations will still need to be established through separate investigation.

By contrast, developments that cause a *decrease* in overall public attention levels could, potentially, simultaneously trigger an *increase* in nationalist mobilization. Evidence of one such divergence between the levels of public attention and nationalist activity can be seen in the second half of 2011, when a period of relative moderation in Beijing’s policy in the South China Sea appears to have caused public attention on the issue to wane, while also provoking outrage among those who felt strongly enough to comment publicly on online platforms.

By and large, citizens with stronger attitudes on a given issue should be more likely to mobilize. However, in some of the most extreme cases, this assumption will not necessarily hold.

In China, the most eye-catching varieties of nationalist mobilization, such as street protests, have evidently involved a range of causes besides the surface-level anti-foreign attitudes. The case of Li Zhiwei personalizes the point: in August 2012, Li was a downtrodden and alienated migrant worker, who had forgotten the words to the national anthem. Yet by September 2012, intensive coverage of the Diaoyu Islands issue combined with pent-up social frustrations to draw him into violent protests in Shenzhen, eventually turning him into one of the country’s most-wanted rioters (see SSC, “How does an average migrant,” October 23, 2012).

Another disjunction between nationalist mobilization and public attitudes was apparent at the more orderly anti-Japan protests in Beijing the same month. There, most attendees appeared to be soaking up the rare spectacle of street protests in the capital than screaming abuse at the Japanese embassy (author observation, Beijing, September 15-17, 2012). The looting seen in 2012 and 2014 anti-foreign riots in both China and Vietnam suggests that criminal opportunism explains some of the most extreme “nationalist” actions. State tolerance, moreover, is necessary for most real-world nationalist mobilizations, and may also be necessary for large-scale outpourings of online vitriol. Thus, nationalist attitudes are just one of many causes of nationalist mobilization, and may not even be the most important.

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**Table 5.1**: Comparison of three measures of popular nationalism used in this thesis
A second, complementary measure of Chinese popular nationalism on the South China Sea is public attention levels, as measured by the Baidu Search Index (BSI). Although search activity data is, by nature, limited to internet users, Baidu’s domination of China’s internet market makes it a useful proxy for assessing the relative levels of interest among a numerically massive and increasingly representative slice of the population at different points in time. Crucially, the BSI has recorded continuous daily measurements of search activity on particular keywords since 2006, enabling identification of the timing of major surges in public demand for information on given topics, and comparison of attention levels more generally across time. The search activity data demonstrate, first of all, a general trend of increasing PRC public attention on the South China Sea issue from early 2009 onwards. Second, they show two periods of especially acute elevation in popular demand for information on the issue, which informs the selection of case studies for closer analysis in the second half of the chapter. Third, comparison of the timing of changes in these search activity levels with patterns of domestic online media reporting of the issue (Appendix 5) indicates that the state's own assertive stance, and increasing willingness to publicize the issue domestically, drove most of the increases in attention levels between 2009 and 2011. Thus, while the survey data suggest the public’s historically-inflected framing of the disputes may be beyond the state’s immediate control, the issue’s salience on the public’s agenda remains largely determined by the state’s own policies. This two-sided finding makes sense given the emotive, yet unobtrusive quality of the issue.20

The third specific indicator of popular nationalism examined here is visible online and offline mobilization, including user-generated commentary on web platforms, and real-world citizens’ actions aimed at asserting China’s claims. These activities increased markedly in the period covered in this chapter, and swelled to a sharp peak in mid-2011. It is crucial to note that, unlike popular nationalist attitudes, which the survey data show to be quite widely shared, popular nationalist actions are often highly unrepresentative of the population at large. By their nature, online platforms tend to give voice to the most extreme opinion – specifically, those held by users who feel strongly enough to take the time and effort to post comments
online. Nor are all extreme viewpoints necessarily sincere, as many platforms allow users to post these internet-era “big character posters” (大字报) with little or no accountability.\footnote{21} The unrepresentativeness of online commentary is compounded in China’s case by its enormous population. With more than 1.3 billion citizens, a petition, boycott, protest march or discussion thread could involve up to 13 million people without representing even a single percent of Mainland China’s population. State interventions also need to be taken into account when considering online mobilization levels. Leaked censorship instructions and, since 2012, deleted social media posts identified through the Weiboscope project, can provide some insight here.\footnote{22} Heavy censorship of comment threads on news websites may also be inferred from very low numbers of comments on highly topical stories, or abnormally low ratios of comments to participants. In these cases, actual levels of commenting activity are likely to be much higher than what is visible.

\textit{Citizens’ attitudes}

Publicly-released polls of PRC citizens on the South China Sea issue have been rare, especially before 2010, and surveys using random sampling have been even rarer.\footnote{23} A survey carried out for this project in April 2013 allows some exploration of the tendencies of different demographic groups, as well as how different sources of information relate to nationalistic views on the South China Sea issue among urban Chinese residents in the internet era. It was, to my knowledge, the first survey of its kind to specifically address the South China Sea issue in detail, using face-to-face interviews with 1,413 randomly sampled adult residents of five Chinese cities. Because it formed part of a commercial research firm’s omnibus questionnaire, each interview covered a range of non-controversial topics before addressing China’s maritime disputes, a format that may have helped reduce respondents’ concerns about speaking openly on such a topic. Respondents were asked about their sources of information on China’s maritime disputes, how much attention they paid, assessment of the government’s performance, views on the
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy options</th>
<th>Diaoyu Islands</th>
<th>S. China Sea</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Make use of popular activism: “Strongly supporting the Baodiao (Protect Diaoyu) activities, and making full use of popular forces such as fisherfolk (大力支持保钓运动，充分利用民间力量（如渔民）)”</td>
<td>83.2 11.1 5.7</td>
<td>82.4 12.2 5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compromise through negotiation: “Reaching compromise through negotiations (通过谈判，达成妥协)”</td>
<td>57.6 35.7 6.7</td>
<td>57.3 34.5 8.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Send in troops: “Directly dispatching troops and not hesitating to fight a war (直接派兵，不惜一战)”</td>
<td>41.7 41.9 16.4</td>
<td>45.6 39.4 15.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be cautious, bide time (taoguang-yanghui): “Speaking and acting cautiously, keeping a low profile, and waiting until the time is right (谨言慎行，韬光养晦，耐心等待合适的时机)”</td>
<td>55.1 33.0 11.9</td>
<td>54.1 34.3 11.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mass displays of dissatisfaction: &quot;Guiding domestic public opinion, encouraging the masses to display dissatisfaction towards the disputant countries (引导国内舆论，鼓励国内民众对争端国表示不满)”</td>
<td>67.7 20.3 12.0</td>
<td>65.6 21.8 12.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic sanctions: &quot;Enacting economic sanctions against relevant countries (对相关国家进行经济制裁)”</td>
<td>71.9 16.8 11.3</td>
<td>71.3 16.4 12.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UN arbitration: &quot;Submitting [the dispute] to United Nations arbitration (提请联合国仲裁)”</td>
<td>62.8 24.6 12.5</td>
<td>61.1 23.4 15.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diplomatic measures: &quot;Diplomatic measures such as canceling official visits, and reducing cooperative projects (取消官方访问，减少合作项目等外交手段)”</td>
<td>65.5 24.0 10.4</td>
<td>66.5 22.4 11.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shelve disputes and pursue joint development: &quot;Shelving disputes and jointly developing resources (搁置争议，共同开发资源)”</td>
<td>30.9 58.6 10.5</td>
<td>30.2 59.0 10.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International publicity: &quot;Strengthening externally-directed propaganda (加强对外宣传)”</td>
<td>84.9 10.6 4.5</td>
<td>83.9 10.3 5.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Question wording: “Regarding the following approaches, do you believe they are suitable for the Chinese government to use in handling the Diaoyu Islands issue? Now I would like you to consider again, do you believe these approaches are suitable for the Chinese government to use in handling the South China Sea disputes with countries like the Philippines and Vietnam (including over Scarborough Shoal and the Spratly Islands)? (以下几种处理办法，您认为是否适合中国政府用来处理钓鱼岛问题？现在请您重新考虑一下，上述几种处理办法，是否适合中国政府用来处理菲律宾、越南等国的南海争端（包括黄岩岛、南沙群岛问题）?”

Table 5.2: Survey respondents’ views on the suitability of 10 policy options for handling the Diaoyu Islands dispute and South China Sea dispute.

The survey results indicate a range of attitudes among the PRC urban population regarding the South China Sea issue, with some nationalistic and others more rational. The suitability of various policy options, confidence in the correctness of China’s claims, and linkages to prominent national narratives of historical humiliation. The results suggest the existence of a number of approaches that fit both descriptions, among the PRC urban population.
comprehensive discussion of this survey's findings, four are of particular relevance to this study.\textsuperscript{24}

First, and most straightforwardly, nationalistic public attitudes do exist on this issue. The survey's respondents were presented with a “menu” of 10 policy options and asked whether they approved or disapproved of each as a method for the Chinese government to handle the Sino-Japanese dispute over the Diaoyu Islands, and then, separately, the South China Sea dispute. As shown in Table 5.2, more than 45% indicated approval of \textit{directly sending in troops, not shirking a war} in the South China Sea.\textsuperscript{25} The result must be interpreted carefully: the question was framed in general terms, so it does not imply this proportion of citizens actually advocates war, but rather that they agree that military force is a suitable option. In fact, Table 5.2 shows military force was actually the second-\textit{least} popular policy option, and if political correctness was a factor, it may have inflated this number somewhat. Nonetheless, even allowing for this, it still shows that a substantial proportion of urban citizens are, in principle, open to the idea of Beijing using force in the dispute, even at the risk of conflict. This result was broadly consistent with a November 2010 telephone poll organized by the \textit{Huanqiu Shibao}, which also found a significant minority – though only a minority – believed military action was an appropriate option for handling maritime territorial disputes.\textsuperscript{26}

It is significant that a higher proportion of respondents expressed approval for the use of force against Southeast Asian countries in the South China Sea (45.6%) than against Japan over the Diaoyu Islands (41.7%).\textsuperscript{27} Historical animosities in China are no doubt far stronger toward Japan than Vietnam or the Philippines, yet this apparently does not translate into higher approval of the use of military force. The result is all the more striking given the survey was conducted in 2013, relatively soon after massive outpourings and ongoing high tensions over the Diaoyu issue, and a period of relative calm in the South China Sea. The result hints at a rational, even calculative, tendency within Chinese nationalist public opinion on maritime issues.\textsuperscript{28} It may, for example, reflect pragmatic recognition of Japan’s considerable military capabilities – in contrast to the “little countries” disputing the PRC’s South China Sea claims – trumping historical grievances. In any case, if “nationalism”
refers to public attitudes favouring the use of military force against foreign adversaries, Chinese public opinion may in this sense be even more “nationalistic” on the South China Sea issue than on Sino-Japanese issues.

Second, the survey indicated that most Chinese citizens perceive a collective, purposive role for the public in bolstering the state’s policy in its maritime disputes. Among the 10 policy options for handling the dispute, there was very high support for idea of making full use of popular forces, which attracted approval from 82.4% of respondents, and guiding domestic public opinion, encouraging the masses to display dissatisfaction towards the disputant country, with 65.6% support (Table 5.2). It is particularly notable that both of these wordings, and the question that framed them, clearly referred to popular activities under state leadership. The result suggests China’s public perceives a role for itself in this area of the country’s foreign policy, and believes in the instrumental usefulness of state-led displays of popular nationalism. This belief, which has been detected in other survey research, suggests that on this issue Chinese nationalists are neither dupes of the state, nor its enemies. If so, then despite the likelihood of wide variation in motivations for nationalist mobilization on this type of issue (discussed in Table 5.1), China’s periodic outpourings of nationalist vitriol on these kinds of issues are probably best understood as mostly willing participation in the pursuit of shared goals.

Third, nationalistic policy preferences about the South China Sea issue appear to result less from state media cues than from a combination of audience predispositions and engagement with online media. As Figures 5.1 and 5.2 illustrate, respondents who obtained information on maritime disputes from traditional mass media, over which the state has more control, tended to be less enthusiastic about sending in troops, and more approving of compromise through negotiation on the South China Sea issue. This is consistent with Daniela Stockmann’s research on the Chinese media’s handling of US-related issues, which found the party-state’s guidance of media outlets generally pushed coverage Sino-American relations in a positive direction. Regression analysis (Table 5.3) indicates that, after controlling for common demographic factors, television and
print media remain key predictors of citizens' policy preferences in the internet era. Compared to online information sources, state media coverage of the South China Sea issue is probably more of a dampener than a driver of nationalistic policy preferences.

Figure 5.1: Use of print media for information on maritime disputes (never/sometimes/often), and approval of “sending in troops” (L) and “compromise through negotiation” (R) in the South China Sea.

Figure 5.2: Use of television for information on maritime disputes (never/sometimes/often), and approval of “sending in troops” (L) and “compromise through negotiation” (R) in the South China Sea.
with three-way information source breakdown.

Table 5: Logistic regression on respondent approval (1) and disapproval (0) of ten government policy measures for the South China Sea.

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Note: Significance levels are based on two-tailed tests. *p<0.1, **p<0.05, ***p<0.01.
On the other hand, China’s more commercialized, sensationalistic, and user-driven online information environment does not uniformly push readers towards nationalist views. While jingoism often dominates new media discourse on the topic, online sources nonetheless sustain a range of attitudes, with Table 5.3 indicating no significant intensifying effect equivalent to the moderating effect of state media. This, in turn, suggests a strong role for audience predispositions in determining the effects of internet content. Not only is online content more varied, like online sources elsewhere, China’s digital media facilitate more self-selection in the news cues to which readers are exposed. Thus, while popular nationalist attitudes may be sustained on the internet, the nationalist online discourse is not necessarily persuading others to harden their stance.

Fourth, while online media provide a platform for hardline criticism of the policy status quo, they may also be helping to build belief in the party-state’s disputed claims. When asked to rate their agreement with declarations of China’s sovereignty over the three disputed island groups on a 10-point scale, most respondents indicated a high degree of confidence in the correctness of the PRC’s claims (Table 5.4). But those who said they obtained information about the disputes via online sources were significantly more likely to express perfect 10/10 certainty regarding all of China’s official claims, compared with users of traditional media (Table 5.5).

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<tr>
<th>Statements</th>
<th>% of responses on 10-point scale</th>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;The Nansha (Spratly) Islands belong to China (南沙群岛所有的岛礁都是中国的),&quot;</td>
<td>≤5</td>
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<td></td>
<td>1.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;Huangyan Island (Scarborough Shoal) belongs to China (黄岩岛是中国的),&quot;</td>
<td>1.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;The Paracel (Xisha) Islands belong to China (西沙群岛是中国的),&quot;</td>
<td>1.5</td>
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<td>&quot;The entire maritime area within the nine-dash line on our maps is China’s territorial waters (我国地图上的南海U形‘九段线’之内的海域都是中国的领海).,&quot;</td>
<td>1.2</td>
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Question wording: “To what degree do you agree with the following statements?下述一些说法,您在多大程度上认同?”

Table 5.4: Respondents’ agreement with China’s claims in the South China Sea.
The greater certainty of internet users in China’s claims may also to some extent reflect the self-selective nature of internet information. Those who read about the disputes online may follow the issue more closely, and therefore feel more certain of their views. Yet, as Figure 5.3 shows, respondents who said they read about the disputes online sometimes were more likely to express 10/10 certainty than those who said they read about the disputes online often. The charts’ U-shaped pattern is consistent with the “exposure-acceptance” model of media effects, which holds that media influence is concentrated on moderately-engaged citizens who are familiar with the issue, without following it closely. Stockmann’s research shows PRC audiences tend to attach more credibility to information carried in media outlets perceived as “nonofficial,” even when it is from state sources. The internet is easily the most nonofficial information source in China’s media landscape. The patterns in Figure 5.3 suggest that, even as online platforms carry nationalist criticism of the government, they may also reinforce belief in its official claims.
**Figure 5.4:** State, national, and personal dignity at stake in the South China Sea disputes.

Finally, even though China's rival claimants in the South China Sea are post-colonial states, and fellow victims of both Western and Japanese imperialism in the past, a solid majority of respondents indicated agreement with the statement that Southeast Asian countries’ occupation of islands in the South China Sea is a continuation of “Century of Shame” (百年国耻) prominent in PRC textbooks on the country’s modern history. Only 13% disagreed. The CCP’s campaigns to foster this kind of historically-inflected world view are well documented, but regardless of the original causes of such views, these data indicate that they now exist among Chinese citizens as cultural artefacts. It also reconfirms Jie Chen’s observation, writing in the 1990s, that a deep sense of injustice over the South China Sea issue was widely held among the population. This is important because, as we will see in the next section, citizens are likely to use these historical narratives to frame the contemporary developments that they read or hear about, whether or not state authorities want this to be so in specific instances.

As noted, the survey data were taken in early 2013, but there are good reasons to believe such findings also applied in the 2009-2011 period. First, the key results
are consistent with earlier survey results, such as the 2010 *Huanqiu* telephone poll, which found young people report paying less attention than other age groups, strong support for negotiations, and only minority support for the idea of military force.40 Second, the evidence of the impact of online media discourse also fits well with established general models of media effects showing audiences’ pre-existing beliefs are a powerful constraint on media effects, even in authoritarian contexts.41 Third, while China’s information environment has been evolving rapidly, the basic four-part structure of official party mouthpieces, marketized state-run mass media, a heavily commercialized online news sector, and user-driven interactive platforms, was well established by the early 2000s.42 Fourth, by 2009, the PRC’s online population had reached 350 million, according to official statistics, so it already constituted a mass online news-reading, information sharing, and content-generating public.43 The relationships between online sources and nationalistic attitudes identified in the 2013 data are, therefore, likely to have been broadly similar in 2009-2011.44

To recap, the survey findings briefly presented in this section show, first of all, that popular nationalism does exist on the South China Sea issue, although the militaristic policy preferences usually associated with “nationalism” still probably only represent the views of a minority. Second, there is widespread support for the instrumental use of popular nationalism in the state’s diplomacy, suggesting a significant purposive element to popular nationalist public expression. Third, reliance on traditional state-run media tends to moderate citizens’ policy preferences, but the more extreme online discourse does not automatically push users towards militant views. Instead, online news consumption sources sustains a range of attitudes, including nationalistic and moderate dispositions. Fourth, online information sources appear to help build certainty among the public regarding the state’s disputed claims. Obviously, a single survey cannot indicate changes in the levels of popular nationalist sentiment around an issue over time. The internet era, however, has delivered a useful proxy for this, examined in the next section.
Assertive policy and the rise of nationalism

Public attention

The Baidu Search Index (BSI) has tracked the volume of search activity on popular keywords each day since June 2006. The BSI for the keyword {南海}, the Chinese term for “South China Sea,” offers a useful indication of the level of general demand for information on the South China Sea issue among the users of Baidu’s search engine which, due to its market dominance, includes the overwhelming majority of internet users in China. Its daily readings can therefore offer insight into the timing of rises in attention among this substantial, important, and growing section of the population. Originally skewed towards higher-income, more-educated, urban and young citizens, the PRC’s networked population has become increasingly representative of the wider population. Internet users encompassed 9.4% of China’s population in mid-2006, 28.9% by the end of 2009, 38.3% by 2011, and 50.3% by December 2015.

The search activity data reveal two key points about the Chinese public’s appetite for information about the South China Sea issue. First, popular attention on the issue began to increase from early 2009, and continued on a generally upward trajectory, seasonal variation notwithstanding, before exploding in mid-2011 to a level not seen before (Figure 5.5). Second, within this overall upward trend, several periods of acutely elevated demand for information are apparent, and most of these followed after reports of assertive actions or rhetoric from the PRC state on the South China Sea issue. This has important implications for understanding the relationship between China’s bottom-up nationalist sentiments and the state’s assertive maritime policy. While the survey data presented above suggest that established popular nationalist attitudes are likely to strongly influence how citizens will interpret the information they encounter, the online search data show that the state’s own foreign policy choices, and publicity thereof, are a key determinant of how much attention the population at large pays. In other words, while the state has ceded a degree control of control over the framing of current developments in domestic discourse, its agenda-setting power remains strong, or even decisive.
After starting 2009 consistently below 400, the average daily BSI value for “South China Sea” rose to around 540 through the month of February 2009. At a glance, this was in response to an external development, namely, the Philippines’ legislature passing a new Baselines Act claiming the disputed maritime territories of Scarborough Shoal and the Spratly Islands. On closer inspection, however, Chinese audiences’ interest in the issue appears to have been stimulated more by Beijing’s reactions, accompanied by vivid new publicity of assertive PRC policies, than the Philippines legislation itself (Figure 5.6). The Philippines lower house’s strident draft version of the act, passed on February 2, pushed the BSI up from 363 to 512 that day. But a bigger rise in search activity was recorded two weeks later, after CCTV’s authoritative 7pm news broadcast, which rarely mentions foreign policy controversies, announced a harshly worded MFA statement against Manila’s “illegal and invalid” legislation. The broadcast’s audience, estimated at more than 100 million citizens, was also informed that Vice Foreign Minister Wang Guangya...
had “urgently summoned the Philippines embassy's charge d’affaires” to lodge a strong diplomatic protest.⁴⁹

With the issue now on the public agenda, China’s commercially-oriented media had increased incentives to cover the issue, just as the state news agencies were beginning to provide more compelling content. As attention continued to rise in subsequent days, widely republished online reports (see Appendix 5) included a photo essay from a Xinhua reporter embedded on a PLAN destroyer conducting drills near the Spratly Islands (February 26), announcement of a new “South China Sea 911” protection scheme for Chinese fishing boats in disputed areas (February 27), and an article in Xinhua’s International Herald Leader on the challenges facing China’s policy (February 27). These stories, together with tough-sounding comments by military-affiliated delegates to the “Two Meetings” (两会) in early March, account for most of the upward movement of the South China Sea BSI during this period. Thus, as Figure 5.6 suggests, Beijing’s own rhetoric, publicity of its positions and policy initiatives, and new attention-grabbing propaganda techniques, probably contributed more to any increase in the public’s attention towards the issue than the external developments.

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**Figure 5.6:** Baidu search activity on South China Sea, February-March, 2009.
A similar pattern attended two further peaks in 2009. First, as detailed in the case study on *Impeccable* incident later in this chapter, the value of the South China Sea search index rose to an unprecedented peak above 2,000 after publicity (both intended and unintended) of the PRC’s own assertive actions. The second peak was in mid-May, following the joint continental shelf submission by Vietnam and Malaysia to the CLCS, covering areas within the nine-dash line. Once again, the timing of the rise in interest levels suggested the public’s interest was stimulated more by the PRC state’s response than the exogenous events themselves: while the two Southeast Asian countries’ submission was made on May 6, the South China Sea BSI did not move until May 8, after state media publicized China’s objections to it.\(^{50}\) The public’s interest in these external legal developments was real, but it hinged on the party-state’s angry response and strong mass media publicity thereof.\(^{51}\) Subsequently, major state-run print media ran a flurry of emotive and dramatic feature stories on the struggles of China’s fisherfolk in the disputed area, China’s historical claims, and the military aspects of the issue (see Figure 5.7). Even as tensions eased somewhat in the second half of 2009, the BSI remained more than twice as high as it had been in the same period in 2008.\(^{52}\)

![Figure 5.7: Prominent PRC print media coverage of South China Sea issue in June 2009.](image)

In 2010 there were three notable surges in Chinese internet users’ demand for information about the South China Sea. After the seasonal dip in attention across the Spring Festival period, the South China Sea BSI hovered around 800-1,000 through the first half of the year.\(^{53}\) The first notable spike in demand for information on the topic occurred in late July during the ASEAN Regional Forum in
Hanoi, when Secretary of State Hillary Clinton became the highest-ranked US official to declare America’s national interest in the South China Sea.\textsuperscript{54} Like in 2009, the MFA’s angry response, and heavy state media coverage, piqued the interest of PRC audiences much more than Clinton’s remarks. This time it took the form of a seven-point rebuttal attributed to Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi, which flooded China’s online information environment on July 25, two days after Clinton’s speech. As illustrated in Figure 5.8, interest levels continued upwards to a peak at the end of July, when state media publicized PLA Navy live-fire exercises in an unspecified “area of the South China Sea,” accompanied by striking imagery.\textsuperscript{55}

\begin{figure}[h]
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\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{chart.png}
\caption{Baidu search activity on South China Sea, July-October 2010. This and subsequent charts show the combined daily average BSI values for three South China Sea terms.}
\end{figure}

A second peak rose from the high plateau that followed, with the index hitting 3,900 on August 15. Based on the mostly commercial online media reporting listed in Appendix 5, this appears to have resulted from a mix of exogenous events, media profit imperatives, and perhaps the military’s institutional interests. Between August 11 and 15 the biggest online news story appears to have been about the US and Vietnam holding joint naval exercises. These reports may have
originated with provincial newspapers’ translations of foreign media reports on August 11-12, before being picked up and widely shared on a range of information platforms, including those of central news agencies. But publicity of assertive Chinese actions and strident rhetoric was also popular on commercial news sites. Another of the most widely republished South China Sea stories across this period was American media: Chinese navy "shadows US aircraft carrier" in South China Sea, published August 11. This headline appears to have been dragged up from the very last line of a translated report canvassing a range of recent developments.56 Questionable as this may be from a journalistic perspective, it illustrates the strong news value Chinese commercial media perceive in any hint of assertive PRC actions in the South China Sea – and by extension the interest editors believe such actions hold for their audiences. Thus, unless state authorities actively intervene with instructions for media not to report them, assertive policy actions are likely to stimulate public attention, whether the state intends this or not.57

Interest in the South China Sea issue probably also spilled over from the controversy over US-Korea joint exercises in the Yellow Sea. PLA propaganda units were running a strong public campaign on the latter issue that sometimes rolled the two maritime issues together. Military publicists such as “hawkish generals” Luo Yuan and Yang Yi were unusually prominent, penning emotive commentaries in the PLA Daily on two consecutive days, and conducting numerous media interviews highlighting both the US-Vietnam drills in the South China Sea and the US-Korea exercises in the Yellow Sea. This evidently made for excellent news material: Luo and Yang’s comments appeared in the top headlines of mainstream commercial online news portal iFeng for the whole weekend, August 14-15, just as online demand for information on the topic peaked.58 What degree of blessing the PLA’s publicity campaign had from the central party leadership is not clear; it is possible the military’s propaganda arms were acting autonomously around this time in an attempt to push US policy in a hardline direction.59 What is clear is that the wave of military publicity helped bring interest in the South China Sea issue to a peak in mid-August 2010. Whether the result of strategic intent, central distraction, or civil-military disunity, the state’s tough stance in response to
external developments were a major stimulant of the public’s appetite for information on the topic.

A third spike in information demand, in late September 2010 showed the special appeal of US involvement in the South China Sea issue. Following reports of a US-ASEAN meeting discussing the issue in New York, the South China Sea search index rebounded back up to around 3,000. Here again the MFA showed its ability to influence the media agenda, issuing a brief, boilerplate statement through Xinhua under the headline, **Chinese side responds to Philippines’ so-called statement that ASEAN will unanimously deal with the SCS issue.** Despite containing no new information or provocative language, it became a top headline on commercial news portals. This was followed up with reports proclaiming the failure of the Philippines and America’s plot. The rise in attention levels may also have been related to the dramatic Sino-Japanese standoff that had raged through most of September after the detention of a Chinese fishing trawler near the disputed Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea. For the remainder of the year, the South China Sea BSI receded to around 1500. This was, however, about 50% higher than it had been during the same period the previous year, suggesting the long-term rise in popular attention levels depicted in Figure 5.5 was continuing.

Domestic attention and international tension were subdued in the early part of 2011, as they had been in previous years, thanks to the typhoon season and the distractions of Chinese New Year. Although the Reed Bank incident raised foreign concerns in early March, it was barely reported within China. State authorities may have ordered media not to sensationalize the issue; the *Huanqiu* website provided only cursory reporting, and did so in such a low-key manner that it generated little or no attention (Figure 5.9). The first significant rise in search activity on the South China Sea is detected in mid-April, after the Philippines deposited a diplomatic note at the UN challenging China’s claims. Consistent with the patterns observed above, no rise in demand for information occurred in response to the Philippines’ move in New York on April 4. But sensationalistic reporting of the government’s response more than two weeks later, presenting it as a major assertive shift in Beijing’s stance, provoked a flurry of interest. An April 21 *Huanqiu* story appeared
across major news platforms under variations of the headline, China, for first time, condemns Philippines for invading Spratlys.\textsuperscript{63} Citing foreign media, the report stated that the MFA’s response to the Philippines’ note had contained an unprecedentedly “hardline” accusation that the Philippines had “invaded” (入侵) Chinese territory in the Spratly Islands. The widespread uptake on other commercial online news sites (see Appendix 5) reconfirms the domestic news appeal of assertive PRC rhetoric, and particularly the idea of hardline shifts in policy.\textsuperscript{64}

![Combined BSI for (南海), (南海问题) & (南海争端), April-May 2011](image)

Figure 5.9: Baidu search activity on South China Sea, March-May 2011.

Just over one month later, popular attention on the South China Sea issue began to increase rapidly. This would culminate in a massive burst in mid-June that made all the peaks discussed above appear as small blips in comparison. As with the Impeccable incident, this episode is traced in detail below. For present purposes, the key point, shown in Figure 5.9, is that this unprecedented wave of public attention swelled up after assertive actions by PRC on-water agencies in the disputed area were publicized – and sensationalized – by commercial and semi-official media such as the Huanqiu Shibao. And, as we will see, when China
Assertive policy and the rise of nationalism

moderated its policy from late July onwards, the dramatic reports dried up, and the wave of popular attention quickly rolled back.

This section has examined the rise in public attention on the South China Sea issue between 2009 and 2011, as indicated in online demand for information on the topic. Rather than swelling in response to victimization at the hands of rival claimants and a lack of appropriate action by the party-state, surges in popular attention generally followed after the domestic media publicized (or sensationalized) the state’s adoption of tough stances. In 2007 and 2008, as Chapter 4 showed, the CCP generally opted to keep its assertive South China Sea operations secret, and made few public comments on the issue. Before long, however, the continuation of this new on-water policy had generated tensions that brought exogenous publicity – for example, in the Impeccable case examined shortly – just as party and military propaganda agencies were launching various new forms of publicity of the state’s positions and policies (see Chapter 6). Not all of these efforts were necessarily centrally coordinated, but they still had major effects on public attention levels in the short term, especially in 2010. In short, the South China Sea dispute’s increased salience on the public’s agenda was largely a function of the assertiveness of the party-state’s policy and its greater willingness to allow publicity of the issue. When public attention is elevated, conditions should be ripe for the emergence of nationalist mobilization, discussed next.

Popular mobilization

Even though increased public attention followed after the CCP’s assertive policy shift in the South China Sea, grassroots commentators on a range of new media platforms typically characterized the PRC as a feckless, passive victim. Greedy “little countries” were trying to bring the US into the dispute, while a US conspiracy manipulated them into opposing China’s reasonable claims, and China’s leaders were unwilling or unable to stop them. In a further irony, Beijing’s own official characterization of events closely mirrored this narrative of passive victimization and endless tolerance of foreign provocations, validating the netizens’ excoriating
criticisms. This section describes the wave of nationalist mobilization that emerged in China on the South China Sea issue in 2011, largely spontaneously, using examples drawn from comment threads attached to media reports on major mainstream news portals, and reports of real-world and online nationalist activism. It shows that the wave of popular nationalist mobilization was underpinned by deep-seated, culturally-inflected understandings of events, and was marked by prominent, withering criticism of the CCP party-state's policy in general, and its diplomatic corps in particular.

In the internet era, the PRC’s population is linked together in unprecedented ways. By the end of 2009 China’s internet users numbered 384 million, or 28.9% of the population, and by 2011 this had grown to 513 million (38.3%). Those among this population who feel a sufficient desire to comment publicly on current events can easily do so on a wide range of prominent platforms that can carry their views to millions of compatriots. Initially, much attention was paid to the rise of the PRC internet’s blogs and BBS discussion forums, which Chinese users took to with extra gusto due to the dearth of other avenues for political expression. Different strains of online opinion and counter-opinion clustered around certain forums, from the general-interest Tianya.cn, to urbane Shanghai-based Kdnet, militaristic Tiexue (“Iron Blood”), neo-Maoist Utopia.net and the empowered-loser diaosi subculture of Diba. Meanwhile, comment threads attached to news stories on mainstream commercial platforms, and the arrival of microblogging in 2009, brought everyday people into contact with others’ directly expressed personal political views. The significance of these online platforms, for present purposes at least, was that they lowered the barriers to participation in public political discourse – including the expression of nationalist views, on issues such as the South China Sea.

The increase in popular nationalist mobilization – public actions taken in favour of a more assertive foreign policy – on the South China Sea issue in mid-2011 was not only enabled by the new opportunities for participation in public political discourse. State control of day-to-day popular nationalist discourse had also been decreasing with the emergence of commercial players with incentives to appeal to nationalist sentiments in the online news, film, TV and video game industries.
The result was an abundance of directly expressed public expressions of desire for war, and opposition to the state's policy on the grounds of its excessive moderation. As a form of public action, nationalist online speech is comparable to the kind of “slacktivism” typified by one-click petitions, in that it requires little real effort and carries minimal risk. If this is true of those who voice extreme sentiments, it is even truer of the many more readers who upvote them into positions of prominence. But online commentary is highly visible, strongly emotional, often moralistic, and in this case was largely spontaneous. Together with the rise in attention levels, heavy commercial media coverage, and some instances of real-world collective action, these events in June and July 2011 constituted a “wave of public mobilization” on the South China Sea issue. Like most of the bursts of attention from the general public described above, the wave was triggered by actions taken by Chinese maritime agencies, followed by rival states’ assertive responses, and the state’s increased willingness to allow publicity of its policies. Yet, for the most part, it does not appear to have been state-led.

First, the wave of nationalism involved a very large volume of prominent public calls for military attacks against the PRC’s rival claimants, particularly Vietnam and the Philippines. As tensions rose in mid-2011 users following the issue in “military fan” (軍迷) forums rejoiced at reports of coercive actions by PRC maritime agencies, and urged the party-state to escalate the confrontation. Shortly after the Binh Minh 02 incident in late May 2011 (detailed in the case study below) reports of Chinese warships firing shots at Vietnamese fishing boats made the front page at the Tiexue BBS forum, prompting an outpouring of jingoism. The comments encapsulated the intertwining of militaristic policy preferences and a sense of cultural and racial superiority over China’s Southeast Asian rivals:

“Come on monkeys [Vietnamese], f---ing hurry up and do something, daddy's hand is itchy.”

“Be cautious about using military means. But once you do, be sure to win.”

“We fired gunshots? I reckon it should be cannons.”

“Hard military power is the only way to subdue these mongrels (杂种).”
“We will surely win, our country’s defence is strong now.”

“We should act when called on, vigorously striking the monkeys. Arise!”

“If only this [the report] is real.”

“The fight is inevitable if the monkeys dare to pick a fight again.”

“Sink them!!!!”

“I say to the Vietnamese monkeys, fire the first shot – this is your territory! – it needs you to protect it – the Vietnamese people need you! – your navy is the best in south Asia – I implore you to fire a shot – problem’s better solved sooner rather than later! – quick, fire the first shot! – don’t make us wait too long!”

“Looks like the state is really going to make some big moves in Southeast Asia.”\(^{71}\)

Corresponding vitriol was seen in frequent allusions to the Philippines as a "Filo-maid" (菲佣) needing to be taught a lesson. The military fans’ excitement continued when reports of Chinese ships staking out unoccupied reefs and preparing unilateral oil explorations surfaced in early June:

“. . . talk is talk and action is action, only this way can we deal with these little countries.”

“As a resident of Huangyan [in Zhejiang Province], I feel ashamed that the Filo-maids are occupying Huangyan Island.’

“This should have been done long ago, ideally we’ll sink Chinese oil wells all over the South China Sea, and then not give the monkeys a single drop.”\(^{72}\)

Of course, the users of this type of military-focused web forum are not representative of PRC online commenters, much less Chinese internet users or the population at large. But in this case, such views were surprisingly widespread. The 4th Media, a private enterprise that grew from the 2008 “Anti-CNN” movement, illustrated this disdainful attitude in a cartoon published on June 10, depicting the Philippines as a crying maid-monkey and Vietnam as an angry peasant-monkey.
Both flap and wail on the shores of the South China Sea, trying to get the attention of the American eagle, under the presiding gaze of a Chinese emperor.

![Cartoon Image](image)

**Figure 5.10:** Popular nationalist cartoon view of the Philippines and Vietnam, June 2011 (Sima Pingbang, “Zhongmei duizhi”).

Mainstream commercial news portal comment threads expressed equally militaristic sentiments. At Sina News, one of China (and the world’s) most visited websites, the South China Sea issue produced four of the ten most-commented stories between June 9 and June 16, 2011. Reacting to a story characterizing the June 9 *Viking II* incident (see case study below) as a Vietnamese harassment of normal Chinese fishing activities, the most-upvoted comment invoked the Sino-Vietnamese War of 1979, calling on China to “make them remember the lesson” the Vietnamese supposedly learned on that occasion. Other top comments on the same thread, which involved more than 48,000 participants, made this link even more explicitly; the next-most popular comment declared that it was time to put China’s famously expanding military spending to real use at last. Other examples of this wave of online warmongering were hard to miss on China’s mainstream news sites. “It’s time to retake the South China Sea islands,” wrote one user on a
The content of the wave of online warmongering shows it was largely spontaneous, rather than state-directed. It was accompanied by a near-constant stream of criticism of the party-state’s policy on the grounds that it was weak, or even traitorous. The standard target of these denouncements was the Foreign Ministry for its practice of issuing verbal protests against objectionable conduct by rival claimants, and for affirming the official policy of “shelving disputes and pursuing joint development.” Many comments openly labelled Chinese foreign policymakers as “traitors.” Wrote one user on a mainstream portal: “Giving in to outside countries is no big deal, as long as it is beneficial to staying in power domestically.”

After a *People’s Daily* article in July argued war was an outdated method for resolving territorial disputes, the top comment on a mainstream commercial news site read: “The Chinese Communist Party must not hand over our country’s islands which we inherited from our ancestors to others.” It is hard to imagine state authorities seeing benefits in encouraging this type of comment.

The nationalist vitriol also intensified when, on July 20, China and ASEAN agreed to new guidelines for the implementation of the 2002 Declaration on Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea. On the same day the agreement was announced, *Huanqiu*’s web portal reported that five Filipino MPs had visited a disputed South China Sea island and raised the Philippines’ flag. The response across the PRC internet’s interactive comment platforms was 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 iFeng. “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. More than 1,600 readers agreed that this was nothing less than “a day of national humiliation.” Other prominent
Assertive policy and the rise of nationalism

public discussions linked the party-state’s non-use of the military in the South China Sea with corruption; another dangerous connection was the comparisons drawn between the country’s alleged victimization by foreign invasion under the CCP and that of the doomed Qing Dynasty, which fell following territorial encroachment in the early 20th century.79 These subversive overtones clearly suggest the outpourings were spontaneous rather than state-directed.

Many of the criticisms of the party-state’s policy were driven by a sense of humiliation based on perceptions of China’s rival claimants in the South China Sea as weak and inferior. While domineering Western and Japanese imperialists loom large in the modern-day popular historical imagination in China, dynastic Vietnam and the various kingdoms and principalities of the Philippine archipelago are commonly imagined as having been firmly subordinate to the Chinese emperor. The July 2011 China-ASEAN agreement over the new DOC guidelines was popularly described as “the latest of China’s Unequal Treaties” – even though the Unequal Treaties were signed with militarily superior colonial empires, not relatively weak Southeast Asian neighbours.80 The inaptitude of this analogy actually explains its appeal, for it encapsulated the widespread idea that China was being “bullied by the feeble powers” (列弱欺负), a modern-day inversion of the standard narrative formulation of China having been “bullied by the great powers” (列强欺负) during the Century of Shame.81 This also helps explain the survey results outlined above, indicating strong perceived linkages between the “century of humiliation” and the status quo in the South China Sea. It also suggests a site of significant overlap between nationalist public speech by the relatively small online commenting population, and widely shared attitudes among the population at large as manifested in the survey results outlined earlier in this chapter.

The 2011 wave of public mobilization also produced real-world collective actions. Although no reports of anti-foreign protests in China were made public, one author with access to internal reporting writes of “scattered small-scale popular protest activities with anti-Vietnam and anti-Philippines speech and action.”82 While large-scale street demonstrations were not permitted in China, some PRC students overseas organized demonstrations outside Vietnamese embassies as a response
to rallies in Hanoi. In an interview with Australian media, the organizer of one such protest in Canberra said one of his purposes was to push China’s party-state to adopt a tougher policy. Both Vietnamese and Chinese hackers made attacks on government websites. At the height of the furore in June 2011, the Vietnamese Foreign Ministry website was crippled by a DDOS attack, and one of its affiliated websites was replaced with a Chinese flag and the message, “the Nansha Islands belong to China, in the past and in the future.” And a petition posted on a Diaoyu Islands activist website demanded the government open the 2011 China-ASEAN Guidelines to public debate, and “punish the traitors” responsible for signing it.

None of these collective actions swelled to a mass scale. One explanation for this would be that, while popular nationalism existed by this point on the South China Sea issue, it was still less powerful than on matters related to Japan and Western countries, which had produced major protests in 1999, 2005, 2008 and 2010. On the other hand, mass demonstrations have never been allowed by the Chinese government on the South China Sea issue. Counterfactually, it is quite plausible that students, activists and other citizens would have taken the chance to demonstrate if given the opportunity. One reason is the popular belief, suggested in the survey results, that mass displays of dissatisfaction towards rival disputants help bolster the country’s position. But nationalist attitudes on foreign policy issues are by no means the only cause of anti-foreign demonstrations. They also
Assertive policy and the rise of nationalism

offer a rarely seen spectacle, a chance to vent general disaffection, an experience of social solidarity, and potentially even opportunities to foment chaos, indulge violent tendencies, and conduct other criminal activity. There is, in short, much more behind an ostensibly nationalist mobilization campaign than just nationalist ideologies and sentiments. As such, it is reasonable to conclude that nationalist mobilizations would have occurred if the government had permitted them.

Summary

This preceding sections have analyzed the rise of Chinese nationalism on the South China Sea issue from three distinct angles. As the survey results show, popular nationalist attitudes exist on the South China Sea issue, and as cultural artefacts they are unlikely to be easily altered in the short term by state media cues or censorship. But such sentiments are only likely to play a political role to the extent that citizens are paying attention to the issue, and Baidu's search activity data indicate that the state’s own assertiveness and publicity towards the issue have been crucial determinants of the level of public interest. Once the public does pay sufficient attention, activated nationalist attitudes can underpin a largely spontaneous “wave of mobilization,” as seen in mid-2011. In the internet era, then, the CCP state has less control than before over domestic interpretations of developments in foreign policy controversies such as the South China Sea, but it retains strong influence over their prominence on the public agenda. In this way, the position of the party-state today resembles Bernard Cohen’s description of the US media in 1963, in that it “may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about.”

We have so far seen little evidence of the state making any concerted attempt to use its agenda setting power for strategic purposes in the South China Sea. The evidence presented above suggests the authorities were “muddling through,” trying to adapt to the new situations in the South China Sea and in the domestic information environment. These new situations included the PRC’s own assertive
maritime policy, regional and extra-regional countries’ responses, a more attentive public, and increasingly user-driven digital media spaces. The wave of popular nationalist vitriol that swelled up in mid-2011 gave the party-state good reason to think carefully about its management of popular nationalism on the topic – a task for which theoretical constructs had been under development for several years, as detailed in Chapter 6. The next section will examine the relationship between popular nationalism and China’s actions at the micro-level in two important cases during the 2009-2011 period.

**Nationalist-driven policy: most likely cases**

Of the 14 cases of intensified PRC assertiveness identified in the events data over the 2009-2011 period, at least five involved the use of coercion, and a further two arguably did so. These seven cases are good candidates for identifying the causes of change in the PRC’s South China Sea policy because, as Chapter 3 showed, coercive actions account for most of the quantitative change in the overall level of PRC assertiveness in the post-2007 period. They also have their own intrinsic importance due to their relatively high escalatory potential. However, unlike the cases examined in Chapter 4, tracing the relationship between popular nationalism and state actions against a backdrop of elevated attention levels and public mobilization will require systematic examination of official statements, domestic media content, public attention levels and mobilization. Space will not allow for this kind of detailed examination of every instance of coercion, so this section will focus on the two cases where nationalist influence is most likely to be found.

The previous section provides a solid basis for identifying most-likely cases of popular nationalism driving altered PRC behaviour in the South China Sea. As Baum and Potter note in their review of several decades of academic literature, even democratic governments accountable to electorates can make foreign policy decisions relatively free from the influence of public opinion when domestic public attention is low. Conversely, when public attention is focused on an issue, leaders are more likely to be constrained by public opinion in their foreign policy actions.
Thus, assertive actions that coincided with higher public attention and mobilization levels should be the most likely cases on which to find nationalist influence on China's behaviour. On this basis, the following sections will trace the March 2009 *Impeccable* incident and the interference operations against Vietnamese energy surveys in May-June 2011. These cases both coincided with unprecedented demand for information on the South China Sea, as well as elevated levels of online mobilization.\(^9^2\) After a descriptive introduction, each case study will consider the evidence for each of the international and domestic explanations for assertive behaviour outlined in Chapter 2, before testing the predictions of different models of the relationship between nationalism and foreign policy laid out in the Chapter 1.

**The *Impeccable* incident, March 2009**

For several days in early March 2009, Chinese fishing boats and government ships repeatedly harassed the *USNS Impeccable*, a high-tech survey ship conducting sonar surveillance for the US Navy in the South China Sea. According to the Pentagon, the *Impeccable* was around 75nm from Hainan Island when the incidents took place. The US and China have long disagreed on whether international law permits such military surveillance activities in another state's EEZ (see Chapter 2), and Chinese ships already routinely shadowed US “spy ships” like the *Impeccable* as they plied the waters off China's coast listening for submarines.\(^9^3\) This time, however, the PRC ships did much more than the usual routine of observing, following at a distance, and registering Beijing's disapproval over the airwaves.

The confrontations began on March 5, according to the Pentagon, when a PLA Navy frigate twice cut across the *Impeccable’s* bow, and a Y-12 surveillance plane swooped past 11 times. On March 7, a PLA Navy surveillance ship hailed the *Impeccable* by radio, ordering it to leave the area or “suffer the consequences.”\(^9^4\) Then on March 8, 2009, two Chinese fishing boats, accompanied by one PLA Navy surveillance vessel, one CMS patrol ship and one Fisheries Administration cutter,
maneuvered closely around the US ship for several hours. The fishing boats targeted the *Impeccable’s* underwater monitoring equipment, cutting back and forth across its stern where a sonar array was trailing, attempting to ensnare it with a long pole. Eventually they forced the *Impeccable* into an emergency stop, prompting its crew to ready an equipment destruction sequence.

The American response was swift and public. The following day, March 9, a Department of Defense statement announced the US version of events in detail, as outlined above, accusing the Chinese vessels of having “violated the requirement under international law to operate with due regard for the rights and safety of other lawful users of the ocean.” Another US military news article repeated the allegations and quoted a Pentagon spokesman describing the Chinese ships’ actions as “dangerous.” Other officials in Washington told reporters the Chinese actions were “aggressive,” and a formal protest was filed with China’s military attaché in Washington. The following day, according to US Navy Captain Raul Pedrozo, the *Impeccable* returned to the area and continued its surveillance activities under escort from a guided missile destroyer.

The incident had a major impact on Western views of China’s foreign policy. For analysts attempting to explain the events, nationalist public opinion in China has endured as one of the likely causes of the PRC’s intensified assertiveness over the US’s naval surveillance activities. Robert Ross characterizes it as one of a number of “blunders” that resulted from "the party’s effort to appease China’s nationalists." Tom Christensen regarded it as typical of the belligerent behaviour attributable to the CCP’s sensitivity to nationalist criticism and an exaggerated sense of power in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. However, as shown below, the Chinese state showed no intention of using the incident to impress the domestic public or forestall nationalist criticism, and other explanations are much stronger. I argue below that the *Impeccable* incident was more likely a strategic probe – perhaps on the initiative of the PLA – aimed at gauging the US’s response following an apparent shift in the Sino-American balance of power.
Assertive policy and the rise of nationalism

Causes

The PRC’s actions were, most straightforwardly, aimed at asserting the party-state’s longstanding policy of opposing military surveillance activities in maritime areas subject to a Chinese EEZ jurisdictional claim. The PRC had previously taken coercive actions to enforce this position in the early 2000s, notably in the EP-3 spyplane incident of 2001. This position, which Beijing has advocated since the 1970s, has been based on clear geostrategic imperatives (see Chapter 2). Chinese personnel on the fishing boats made clear that they wanted to interfere with the Impeccable’s underwater sonar monitoring equipment, which was probably gathering information on China’s submarine fleet. Since 2008, this had included ballistic missile submarines, important to China’s nuclear deterrent, based at Yulin at the southeastern tip of Hainan. As a simple act of opposition to the Impeccable’s surveillance activities in the EEZ, the purpose of Chinese vessels’ actions could hardly have been clearer. However, the longstanding nature of the PRC’s position on the issue means this underlying motivation cannot easily explain the timing of the altered behaviour. Why did the PRC take this kind of action over the issue in early 2009, and not the previous year or earlier, when the new submarine facility is believed to have entered operation?

A strategic probe triggered by changes in the US-China balance of power, and uncertainty over the intentions of a new US administration beset by financial crisis, offers the neatest explanation for the timing of the PRC’s actions. In all, fishing boats harassed US military surveillance ships in China’s claimed EEZs in the South China Sea and Yellow Sea at least five times between March and May 2009. Tellingly, however, no equivalent confrontations have been reported since that time. This shows that, while the operation against the Impeccable served the longstanding geostrategic objectives noted above, it did not constitute a fundamental shift in China’s policy aimed at compelling the US to change its surveillance behavior. It is highly unlikely that China’s leaders would have expected the US to abandon the practice on the basis of a few acts of opposition. The PRC was more likely seeking to gauge the US’s response in the context of severe economic uncertainty in the wake of the GFC. Barack Obama’s assumption
of the US Presidency in January 2009 added to the incentive for Beijing to seek information about US intentions on China’s maritime periphery at this time. Previous PRC practice also suggests the change of administration may have been a factor.\textsuperscript{107} Whether or not this course of action was derived from sources associated with China’s “strategic culture,” such as the writings of Mao or ancient military texts, strategic probing based on a desire for updated information on adversary intentions in rapidly changing times appears a strong explanation for the timing of the incident.

US Defense Secretary Robert Gates understood the incident as a PLA action taken “without the knowledge of the civilian leadership in Beijing.”\textsuperscript{108} This possibility is basically compatible with the explanation advanced above, as a probing action could conceivably have been organized and executed by military leaders. However, there are also reasons to question Gates’ interpretation. One is the involvement of at least two sub-ministerial government agencies – CMS and Fisheries – and coordination across the civil-military institutional divide, which would have been difficult (and politically risky) to conceal from the central party leadership.\textsuperscript{109} Second, by the evening of March 8, when the US made its initial private protest, MFA officials were ready with sufficient information on the incident to mount a detailed rebuttal, suggesting foreign policy officials, or leaders higher up in the civilian system, were cognizant of the actions.\textsuperscript{110} Fisheries officials have cited the incident as an example of “fisheries rights defense working in concert (配合) with diplomatic representations[.]”\textsuperscript{111} Finally, the fact that several more instances of harassment of US surveillance ships took place over the following three months further suggests the policy was not strongly contrary to the central leadership’s wishes.\textsuperscript{112} These observations suggest PLA initiatives or policy preferences, distinct from those of the CCP central leadership, are by no means certain to have been a factor behind the confrontation.

As with many of the incidents discussed in the previous chapter, China’s maritime law enforcement agencies’ actions in the *Impeccable* incident were intimately connected with the state’s response to the UNCLOS regime.\textsuperscript{113} The agencies found legal authority for their actions in UNCLOS-inspired domestic legal instruments,
especially the 1996 MSR Rules, and the spy ship was discovered by CMS ships during one of its new “regular rights defense patrols,” a program that Chapter 4 showed resulted from Chinese intentions and capabilities developed in direct response to the UNCLOS. The incident also demonstrated the feedback loop between new assertive policies introduced at one time – in this case, regular patrols that increased China’s maritime domain awareness – and further assertive actions in subsequent periods. However, the equipment required for the action against the Impeccable would probably have been available to the agencies before the addition of the new UNCLOS-inspired fleet of long-range patrol boats. Thus, while China’s legal argument against the US activities was directly enabled by the Convention, the assertive on-water actions themselves probably were not.

Based on the above, the Impeccable incident appears to have been a strategic probe aimed at gauging the US’s reaction following an apparent shift in the Sino-American balance of power, for the broader purpose of advancing the right to regulate military surveillance that the PRC has claimed under the UNCLOS regime since the 1970s. Other common explanations appear weak in comparison to the interaction of these three factors. There is little reason to believe the South China Sea’s resources were a major motivation. The PRC-US aspect of the South China Sea dispute does not directly concern maritime resources – in fact, resource rights are probably not in dispute in the area in which the incident occurred. There was no obvious decline in China’s bargaining position in relation to these waters, particularly if US diplomatic personnel’s assertions that such operations had been common for several years are credible. The timing also offers little support for the idea that the action resulted from Hu Jintao’s personal policy preferences: similar, if somewhat lower-intensity, actions opposing both US and Russian surveillance operations were also observed in the early 2000s, before Hu took office. There is, therefore, little reason to believe the incident was related to changes in the leadership. Elevated symbolic political value due to intra-state contention is, as usual, difficult to rule out, but the transition from Jiang Zemin to the Hu-Wen administration was probably as complete as it ever would be in 2009; if so, then symbolic political value of the issue would not have been abnormally
high. And there is no obvious evidence of competing factions using the issue for political gain, such as discrepancies in the official comments and media coverage. These are discussed below, as part of a rigorous test of the hypothesis that nationalist public opinion influenced the PRC’s conduct in this case.

Official comments

The PRC’s official version of events provides the first test for bottom-up models of the nationalism-policy relationship. With the Olympics complete, and the GFC threatening mass layoffs in export manufacturing, there were good reasons why the party-state might have resorted to tough foreign policy posturing to bolster its legitimacy among the Chinese public. But did Chinese officials draw attention to China’s assertive actions, consistent with such a ploy? China’s MFA spokesperson Ma Zhaoxu addressed the issue in a regular press conference on March 10 (Beijing time), the first since the US’s allegations were made public.117 In response to a series of questions from reporters, Ma stated, according to the official Chinese-language transcript, “The US claims are seriously contrary to the facts, invert black and white, and are completely unacceptable to China.”118 Ma went on to say that the US side had violated both international law and Chinese law, and that the Chinese government had lodged “solemn representations” as a result. This, together with a separate statement repeating these comments, suggested that the CCP state was more concerned with restating its longstanding position on activities impermissible in its EEZ, and positioning China as a victim of illegal encroachment, than impressing the domestic public with its active resistance to the American threat.119

The official transcripts of the March 10 MFA press conference and March 11 remarks on the issue include no mention of any Chinese actions, despite the spokesman being asked numerous specific questions about them. Ma’s first and only reference to the Chinese ships’ behaviour was on March 12. Asked whether they had been police, navy or civilian vessels, Ma restated that the Impeccable’s activities were illegal, and then added, “it is totally justified and reasonable for
China to take rights defense actions (维权行动) in the sea areas under its jurisdiction in accordance with law.” He then immediately added that China saw “a stable and sound Sino-US relationship” as being in its “fundamental interests.” This fleeting and indirect comment only tenuously supports the notion that a desire to impress public opinion or avoid nationalist criticism was behind China’s assertive actions.

The Defense Ministry’s official response followed the same pattern, painting China as the victim of illegal US encroachment, with only one brief sentence mentioning China’s “normal rights defense activities.” Unusually, numerous serving PLA Navy commanders also publicly commented on the issue. However, these remarks focused on declaring the hypocrisy of the aggressive, hegemonic US, rather than China’s hardline actions in response. As PLAN Deputy Chief of Staff Rear Admiral Zhang Deshun stated, the US had “enacted harm on China’s sovereignty.” Some high-ranking PLA officers even explicitly denied that an incident had occurred at all, let alone one involving Chinese boats bravely defending the sovereignty, rights and honour of the nation. PLAN Deputy Political Commissar Wu Huayang, for example, stated on March 10 that no battle or clash had occurred, and that the incident was “American hype.” In the same report from central news agency CNS, Rear Admiral Zhang Deshun was quoted saying that the US was “turning the facts upside down,” and that China’s fishing boats had merely been “conducting normal fishing activities.” These responses not only made no attempt to claim credit for the Chinese vessels’ assertive conduct, they actively refused it.

The observed official responses, then, do not support the hypothesis that the Impeccable incident was driven by a desire to impress or appease nationalistic public opinion, as the nationalism card and Frankenstein’s monster models would imply. Official comments from military figures were consistent with those from the MFA, suggesting civil-military coordination over the public response, which also makes it unlikely that public opinion was a factor in a policy contest. However, there are numerous reasons why the party-state, or its sub-state actors, may have been reluctant to officially claim the actions taken, such as concern for the stability of US-China relations, or perceptions of international public opinion. Therefore, to
assess the likelihood of bottom-up nationalist influence more fully, it is necessary to consider coverage of the incident in the official and semi-official media channels through which the CCP authorities might have directed domestic attention towards their assertive actions, whilst retaining plausible deniability in official remarks.

*State media*

There was no mention of the *Impeccable* controversy on CCTV’s 7pm Network News bulletin between March 10 and March 30. This is perhaps not surprising, given the high-profile US-China meetings that were held during this period, including one between the new President Obama and PRC Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi on March 13. But nor was there any prominent mention of the incident (or the diplomatic sparring that ensued) on CCTV’s tightly-controlled, but less authoritative 10pm Evening News. This suggests the CCP state had little desire to direct the general public’s attention towards the incident, let alone claim credit for its assertive conduct. The Evening News ran reports on MFA spokesperson comments on six occasions between March 10 and March 30, four of which addressed South China Sea-related issues, yet the *Impeccable* incident appears to have escaped mention.124 Given the strong influence of television in setting China’s domestic news agenda, as well as the tight state control of these key news bulletins, this is a strong indication that the CCP was not attempting to divert public attention towards the issue, whip up anger towards the US threat, or bolster its nationalist credentials among the public via the assertive actions it had taken.

In a study of Chinese media coverage in the aftermath of the *Impeccable* incident, Oriana Mastro observes that domestic reporting attempted to "negate US statements that the action was organized and executed by the Chinese government." Consistent with the official comments reviewed above, domestic media emphasized the hypocrisy of an aggressive US playing the victim.125 A handful of reports mentioned the Chinese *fishing boats* – not government ships – as having “surrounded” (包围) or “besieged” (围堵) the *Impeccable*. Tellingly, however, each time, this was presented as an American accusation carried by the
foreign media, which official media and commentary were constantly refuting as false.\textsuperscript{126} If the CCP was attempting to shape domestic interpretations of the incident, it was clearly more interested in highlighting America’s transgressions than presenting itself as having assertively fought back against them.\textsuperscript{127}

Finally, striking differences between Chinese- and English-language state media coverage, and between internal and external versions of events, confirm how far domestic nationalist legitimacy was from the CCP’s calculations. In the English-language \textit{China Daily} on March 11, PLAN South Sea Fleet Deputy Chief of Staff Rear Admiral Lin Yongqing was quoted as describing the Chinese boats’ harassment of the US ship as “exercising their legal rights.” The same article reported East Sea Fleet Rear Admiral Zhang Huachen defending the actions of the Chinese ships.\textsuperscript{128} However, neither of these comments affirming the Chinese boats’ actions appear to have been reported in Chinese-language media.\textsuperscript{129} A similarly revealing contrast exists between the Fisheries Administration’s private and public versions of the incident. Publicly, the head of the agency’s South Sea Regional Bureau claimed the fishing boats’ actions were “totally spontaneous” and had nothing to do with the government.\textsuperscript{130} But in the \textit{Fisheries Yearbook}, which is not readily accessible to the public, the Bureau states that it “organized Fisheries Administration vessels and fishing vessels to successfully intercept and expel [\textit{Impeccable}] from our country’s EEZ.”\textsuperscript{131} On each count, the party-state was loath to portray itself domestically as having actively confronted the US in the \textit{Impeccable} incident. This makes it highly unlikely that the Chinese ships’ coercive actions were intended to appease or impress nationalistic public opinion.

\textit{Public attention levels}

Rather than rising public sentiments pushing the state into action, publicity of the \textit{Impeccable} incident itself drove public attention towards the South China Sea issue (Figure 5.12).\textsuperscript{132} The BSI rose to a peak of 4,400 on March 17, when state media strongly publicized the dispatch of a newly commissioned paramilitary fisheries patrol ship to the disputed areas as a response to the increasingly tense situation
there, and rumours circulated of a possible evacuation of Chinese citizens from the Philippines.\footnote{133 These reports were not directly related to the \textit{Impeccable} incident, but the incident appears to have greatly increased the public’s appetite for information on the topic around this time. Thus, if there was nationalist public pressure on the PRC government for assertive measures, it was probably much greater after the \textit{Impeccable} incident than before – especially given the state’s framing of China as the victim of US encroachment.}

The \textit{Impeccable} incident was, of course, not merely a South China Sea incident, but also a matter of Sino-American relations. As the 1999 bombing of the PRC’s Belgrade embassy and the 2001 EP-3 spyplane incident showed, Sino-US confrontations are likely to spark public attention and mobilization.\footnote{134 But the PRC showed little sign of concern with nationalist public opinion in the wake of the \textit{Impeccable} incident. It did not serve as a constraint from winding back the on-water harassment: there were four other cases of harassment of US surveillance ships in the Yellow Sea over the following two months, but none approached the severity of the March incident.\footnote{135 Nor did it prevent China from engaging in public...}
cooperation with the US. On the contrary, the PRC made sure a series of high-level diplomatic and military-to-military meetings stressing Sino-American cooperation went ahead as planned.\footnote{228}

From their peak above 4,400, attention levels among internet users fell away quickly, as Figure 5.12 shows. This suggests that not only was the state unconstrained from moderating its conduct toward the US, its clear intent to de-escalate probably sent a powerful moderating signal to domestic audiences. Critics of audience costs theory have argued the costs of backing down in international spats are relatively small, that leaders can finesse their compromises.\footnote{136} The case examined here illustrates one mechanism by which the domestic price of a conciliation may be marked down. At a time of heightened international tension and domestic scrutiny a moderate signal, such as China’s affirmation that Sino-American cooperative initiatives were going ahead after \textit{Impeccable}, may dampen audiences’ expectations for further confrontation, thereby reducing attention levels, which in turn reduces the domestic costs of subsequent cooperative steps.\footnote{137} As will be seen again in the 2011 case study, this is one way a state can manage the risks of domestic discontent or unwanted bottom-up nationalist influence on foreign policy.

A leaked State Department cable from March 25, two weeks after the incident, contains an early PRC reference to popular nationalist sentiments on the South China Sea issue. The cable records an MFA departmental Director-General citing rising online nationalism in China in an appeal to US interlocutors to cut back its offshore surveillance activities.\footnote{139} This suggests PRC diplomats recognized popular nationalism as a potentially effective bargaining chip, or “counterweight” (砝码) for China’s policy on this issue.\footnote{140} But it does not suggest any state-led strategic channeling relationship existed between the two at this point. As we have seen, the \textit{Impeccable} incident only became public at Washington’s initiation, and after that, the Chinese authorities did not direct public attention towards it. Nor did the PRC prominently invoke the sentiments of the Chinese people in its public statements and externally-directed propaganda. There was, in short, still no concerted attempt
to channel the influence of public opinion into the service of China’s policy objectives in the South China Sea at this point.

Summary

This case study has argued the *Impeccable* incident resulted from the PRC’s pursuit of its longstanding stated interest in opposing foreign military surveillance in the EEZ, in the context of an apparent shift in the regional balance of power, and the unknown intentions of a new US administration. China’s official comments and state media from March 2009 strongly suggest the Chinese ships’ behaviour was unrelated to any desire to appear tough or assertive for domestic nationalist audiences. PRC officials barely referred to the Chinese ships’ actions, and some even explicitly denied that they had acted assertively, designating such allegations as American propaganda. The public’s attention was piqued after the US side made the incident public, but interest receded quickly once the state signaled its intention to maintain cooperative relations with the incoming Obama administration. As far as the nationalism-policy relationship is concerned, this evidence leaves the null hypothesis as by far the most likely scenario: there was still no significant relationship between public opinion and the state’s assertiveness. The MFA diplomat’s comments in the leaked cable, however, foreshadowed the potential for this to change, as it suggested a sense of bottom-up pressure, as well as an appreciation of the diplomatic leverage this potentially offered. Stronger signs of this are discernable in the 2011 Sino-Vietnamese incidents examined next.

**Cable-cutting incidents, May-June 2011**

On June 13, 2011, two US Senators introduced a resolution condemning China’s behaviour in the South China Sea, citing in particular “the use of force” by Chinese ships against Southeast Asian countries’ energy exploration ships over the preceding three months.141 Although several other instances of assertive Chinese
Assertive policy and the rise of nationalism

behaviour were alleged to have taken place during this period, many of the facts remain unverified, and reporting inconsistent. This case study traces two Sino-Vietnamese incidents, cited in the US Senate resolution, that were the subject of formal diplomatic protests, and about which there is relatively detailed information. They also coincided with the unprecedented wave of popular nationalism in China over the issue in mid-2011.

On May 26, three CMS patrol ships confronted a PetroVietnam energy exploration vessel, Binh Minh 02, around 120nm from the coast of central Vietnam, and severed its seismic survey cable. In a video of the incident released by the company, the survey ship's crew is heard telling CMS’s Haijian-84 over two-way radio: "You are acting very stupidly and dangerously, stay away from the cable.” According to later comments from the Russian skipper Alexander Belov, as reported in the Vietnamese media, the Chinese ships told the Binh Minh 02 it was violating Chinese sovereignty and demanded it leave the area. The three CMS ships then navigated back and forth across its stern until the seismic cables it was towing were cut. In all, the confrontation lasted about three hours. The Vietnamese government responded with a vigorous protest, demanding compensation and accusing China of violating UNCLOS, the DOC and the consensus of the two countries’ top leaders.

A similarly intense Vietnamese protest followed two weeks later on June 9 after a Chinese fishing boat ensnared the survey cable of the Viking II, another survey ship conducting seismic research for PetroVietnam in waters further south. The Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) alleged the incident was “totally intentional, thoroughly deliberated and planned,” saying the Chinese fishing boat had been equipped with a “specialized cable slashing device.” The Viking II had been operating in a Vietnamese energy concession known as Block 136/03, located in the Vanguard Bank several hundred kilometres south of the site of the May 26 incident. Hanoi’s MOFA spokesperson told a news conference that two boats from the PRC’s fisheries law enforcement fleet, Yuzheng-311 and Yuzheng-303, had been on hand to support the fishing boat, and declared the incident had been intended to “realize” China’s nine-dash line claim.
Influential observers have cited this series of incidents, together with the Reed Bank incident in March, as examples of the strident approach taken by a PRC state trying to pander to and appease the “popular nationalist gallery.”\textsuperscript{147} Once again, however, there are much stronger explanations for the PRC’s assertive actions, particularly, as argued below, China’s increased material capabilities, rising resource insecurity, and the UNCLOS regime. The authorities’ presentation of the issue to the domestic public indicates that impressing nationalist citizens was not among the motivations behind the actions. It will also be seen that the wave of popular nationalism that emerged at this time followed after the PRC’s assertive conduct, not before, raising the possibility of a state-led channeling relationship between the two. It is in this case that we find the first signs – though not conclusive evidence – of the CCP authorities intentionally opening up domestic discourse on the issue for potential strategic gain.

\textit{Causes}

Rising resource stakes, the frontline units involved, and the location of the incidents suggests they resulted from a similar combination of factors as the early instances of China’s new policy in 2007-2008 (Chapter 4). China’s coercive law enforcement actions were direct acts of opposition to Vietnam’s resource survey activities. China’s initial response to the \textit{Binh Minh 02} incident opened, “China opposes Vietnam’s oil and gas exploration activities within the waters under the jurisdiction of China.”\textsuperscript{148} In the official response to the \textit{Viking II} incident, MFA spokesperson Hong Lei twice described Vietnamese energy explorations in the vicinity of the incident as “illegal.” Hong then made a point of proclaiming China’s maritime rights and interests in the specific area where it had taken place: “\textit{It needs to be pointed out} that Vietnam grossly infringed China’s sovereignty as well as maritime rights and interests by exploring oil and gas illegally in the Wan’an Bank waters and chasing away Chinese fishing boats (italics added).”\textsuperscript{149} The emphasis on this specific energy-rich area strongly implied that accessing these resources was likely part of the motivation behind China’s assertive actions.
Rising energy commodity prices and PRC import volumes preceded China’s assertive actions in 2011, consistent with increasing material value of the disputed possessions as a factor in China’s altered behaviour.\textsuperscript{150} Furthermore, these two actions, like the Reed Bank operation three months earlier, all targeted rival claimants’ attempts to develop energy resources in the disputed area in collaboration with third countries.\textsuperscript{151} The actions thus constituted an escalation of China’s now established practice of attempting to deter foreign commercial enterprises from ongoing and future involvement in the disputed area through economic threats (Chapter 4).\textsuperscript{152} As demonstrations of the serious risks involved in engaging in explorations without China’s cooperation, they appear to have been successful in deterring the development of at least some of these resources.\textsuperscript{153} As noted, assertive actions aimed at future deterrence hew closely to the emergent policy guideline of the “unity of rights defense and stability maintenance.” By reducing the chances of Southeast Asian states finding foreign partners for these offshore oil and gas developments, the actions also served the longstanding objective of joint development of resources in maritime areas claimed, but not controlled, by the PRC.\textsuperscript{154}

Most if not all of the PRC maritime law enforcement vessels involved in the incidents were products of CMS and Fisheries shipbuilding projects initiated in 1999 and 2000 to enforce China’s UNCLOS-inspired EEZ law. Emblematically, Haijian-84, one of the main protagonists in the Binh Minh 02 incident, was the thirteenth and final vessel from this project, having only been commissioned earlier in 2011.\textsuperscript{155} The Binh Minh 02 and Viking II incidents, and a similar case of cable-cutting in late 2012, all took place within the nine-dash line, but beyond the area the PRC could have hoped to sustain a claim to under UNCLOS as part of an EEZ generated by sovereignty over the Paracel or Spratly Islands (Figure 5.13). Thus, China’s actions were focused on marginal areas where its claim had been greatly weakened by the convention’s emergence as the globally legitimate basis for maritime resource rights.\textsuperscript{156} Thus, China’s new capabilities developed to enforce its claims in the UNCLOS era, coupled with its desire to “maintain the dispute” in areas where its already-weak claims to increasingly valuable resources
were subject to new challenges, were once again likely to have been key factors behind the events of May-June 2011.

Figure 5.13: Location of PRC coercive actions against foreign energy survey ships, 2011-2012. Compiled using Google Earth, incident coordinates in official materials, and modified KMZ file from Poling, *The South China Sea in Focus*.
Some Vietnamese analysts have interpreted the incidents as a provocation designed to test their country's resolve. As one official described it: "It's like someone puts one foot in your house, if you don't say anything, they will come inside." The fact that they ceased after a sustained and combative Vietnamese reaction is consistent with such a reading: only one similar incident has been reported since that time, in late 2012. This type of explanation is basically compatible with the balance of power and material value of disputed possessions as driving factors. Strategic probing, however, contrasts with the idea suggested above, that the legal weakening of China's claim was an impetus for China's assertive actions. The former involves a state actively seeking updated information to better inform future courses of action, while the latter sees the state preserving its fading present hopes of achieving an existing objective. Although deliberate provocation cannot be discounted as an explanation for the cable-cuttngs, the weight of evidence outlined above seems to supports the more complex explanation of the PRC's coercive acts as responses of a rising power to new challenges affecting weak claims to increasingly valuable resources. As noted, such an interpretation also accords closely with the deterrent logic of the "unity of rights defense and stability maintenance" guideline.

Some sources link the cable-cutting incidents to the CMS and Fisheries organizations' bureaucratic interests in presenting themselves as tough defenders of the nation's sovereign claims. As with the Impeccable incident, however, there are reasons to doubt this was an important cause of the incidents. First, as detailed in the previous chapter, risky and confrontational coercive operations were not part of the CMS force's range of normal responsibilities before its subsumption into the China Coast Guard in 2013, and were instead carried out on an ad hoc basis under orders from the command headquarters on the mainland. This means the operation against the Binh Minh 02 is unlikely to have been the initiative of frontline units and, at a minimum, military authorities would likely have been informed, since the PLAN provides the security guarantee for civilian maritime law enforcement operations. Nor was there much evidence of civil-military disagreement over this aspect of policy, with commentaries in the military's official
newspaper strongly affirming the MFA’s official rhetoric emphasizing China’s peaceful intentions. Second, the MFA’s prompt response further suggests relatively strong coordination of agencies in Beijing. The fact that spokesperson Jiang Yu was able to respond to the Binh Minh 02 incident on a weekend (see below) was also suggestive of high-level attention to the issue. Third, the repetitive occurrence of this kind of incident since March 2011 suggests the actions at least did not strongly contradict the intent of the relevant central party authorities in Beijing. It is possible that the Viking II cable-cutting was indeed an accident – but if so, it was one that occurred during a sustained, state-sponsored harassment operation against Vietnam’s hydrocarbon survey operations in the Vanguard Bank.

Linking these incidents to Chinese elite political developments is a speculative enterprise. Viewed as a continuation of the more coercive patterns of behaviour first observed in 2007, when Hu Jintao’s authority was probably at its peak, China’s actions in 2011 could be seen as a reflection of Hu’s personal policy preferences. Yet, these incidents also followed the rise of Xi Jinping to CMC Vice Chairman in October 2010, which increased his authority within the PLA and effectively confirmed him as Hu’s successor. There are, in any case, no obvious statements from either leader that suggest their views of this area of policy differed, either from each other, or those of other CCP leaders. Better indications as to the possibility of particular leaders’ personalities having an influence on this series of coercive PRC actions may be uncovered in future archival research.

Elevated symbolic political value on the PRC South China Sea claim is likewise a plausible factor, but one as yet unsupported by evidence. Jockeying for leadership positions ahead of the 18th CCP Congress may have been underway by mid-2011. Furthermore, the subsequent imprisonment of Politburo members Bo Xilai and Zhou Yongkang suggests strong divisions or conflicts of interest did exist at the highest levels of decisionmaking. However, there is no outward sign that the South China Sea was an issue over which internal political struggles were fought. There is no record, for example, of either Bo or Zhou commenting publicly on the issue at least since 2005. As detailed below, public criticisms of the policy status quo
Assertive policy and the rise of nationalism

appeared mainly in mass-circulation publications, after the incidents occurred, and were framed on populist rather than ideological or theoretical lines. This suggests that if there is a link between elevated elite political contention and the South China Sea issue at this later stage, it may well have involved popular nationalism, consistent with the intra-state contention-based models of bottom-up influence. This possibility will be considered further below. First, however, we can consider evidence for the more straightforward nationalism card and Frankenstein’s monster models of the nationalism-policy relationship.

Official comments

The Binh Minh 02 incident became public on May 27, and the MFA addressed the issue in an ad hoc statement from spokesperson Jiang Yu in response to foreign media inquiries on May 28 – a Saturday. Neither the statement’s content, nor the circumstances in which it was issued, suggested an attempt to make domestic political mileage from the event.167 Rather than drawing attention towards China’s strong actions – such as by praising the CMS crews for bravely upholding sovereignty or defending maritime rights – Jiang referred only to “normal maritime law enforcement surveillance activities.”168 Regarding the Viking II incident two weeks later, the MFA declared this an accident, while characterizing the Chinese fishing boat as a victim of “illegal chasing” by the Vietnamese side.169 Throughout the month-long period of heightened tensions, the MFA avoided the kinds of terminology that might have implied coercion had been used against foreign targets, such as “rights defense” (维权), “expulsion” (驱赶) or “putting a stop to” (制止) objectionable foreign activities.170 China’s official comments were also followed by clear reaffirmations of Beijing’s desire to resolve the disputes “peacefully through friendly consultations” and, even at the peak of the tensions in mid-June, explicitly “not resorting to force or threat of force.”171 None of these responses is consistent with the proposition that China’s assertive actions had been aimed at satisfying domestic nationalist opinion.
Comments from more senior officials during this period were also inconsistent with interpretations of China’s assertive actions as an attempt to impress domestic nationalists. In the wake of the *Binh Minh 02* incident, Defense Minister General Liang Guanglie told the Shangri-la Dialogue that the situation in the South China Sea was “stable,” and that the channels of dialogue were running smoothly. Later that month, Vice Foreign Minister Cui Tiankai attracted international attention by commenting that “some countries are playing with fire” and that he hoped the US would not be burned. However, this remark was made to a group of foreign reporters ahead of an international meeting, and may not have been intended for domestic consumption. In fact, the following day, CCTV ran a report explicitly questioning the comment’s veracity, describing it as an example of US media “inference and conjecture” (演绎和发挥) for their own unscrupulous purposes. Like in the wake of the *Impeccable* incident two years earlier, CCP officials were apparently more inclined to strike a hardline stance in front of foreign audiences than domestic. The most heavily publicized leadership rhetoric across this period was State Councillor Dai Bingguo’s June 26 remarks following his meeting with Vietnamese special envoy Ho Xuan Son, which reiterated that the two countries would resolve their disputes through negotiations and maintain peace at sea. In sum, Chinese leaders’ domestically-directed remarks made no attempt to take credit for the assertive actions of PRC maritime law enforcement agencies.

The above observations contradict the expectations of the diversionary nationalism card model of a state attempting to bolster its popular legitimacy through external aggression, and the Frankenstein’s monster scenario of a state driven into confrontational behaviour by a fear of rising nationalism. The basic consistency of comments from party, state and military officials also offers no evidence of particular members of a divided elite – or sectors of a fragmented state – seeking to benefit by aligning themselves with domestic nationalist sentiments. However, the latter process may be a proxy struggle carried out through mass media content, to which the next section turns.
The *Binh Minh 02* and *Viking II* incidents were not mentioned at all in CCTV’s major national news bulletins, reconfirming the CCP state was not making any systematic effort to publicize its assertive actions. Only on June 26, when State Councillor Dai met with Vietnam’s special emissary Ho, did the national broadcaster’s key news bulletins make mention of the South China Sea during this period. That evening, tightly scripted reports on the meeting were pushed out across commercial and state-run media platforms, stating that Dai and Ho had agreed that the two countries would be “good friends, good neighbours, good comrades, good partners.” Online and print media coverage of *Binh Minh 02* was led by Xinhua’s report on the MFA spokesperson’s official response. Among more than one hundred online news articles sampled from the Baidu News archive, none carried a prominent headline characterizing the incident as an “expulsion” or “chasing away” (驅逐、驅赶) of the Vietnamese survey vessels (see Appendix 5). Commercial online media coverage of the *Viking II* incident also emphasized the official version of events, presenting it as a case of Vietnamese interference with normal Chinese fishing activities. Once again, then, there is no sign of the leadership seeking to claim popular nationalist credit for its assertive actions.

Most interestingly, the *Huanqiu Shibao*’s editorial line lurched back and forth between sensational and moderate framings of the issue. Its May 30 editorial, carried the headline, *Vietnam’s risky ideas in the South China Sea increase, China’s restraint has limits* and this appears to have greatly stimulated public interest in the issue (Figure 5.14). However, another editorial on June 9, ostensibly reprimanding Vietnam for allowing anti-Chinese protests the previous weekend, also made clear that China would not be following suit: *Anger is not the right way to handle the South China Sea dispute.* Another editorial published on June 21 under the headline, *Use two hands to respond to Vietnam’s provocation*, swung back towards confrontation: “China has to be ready for two plans: negotiate with Vietnam for a peaceful solution, or answer the provocation with political, economic or even military counterstrikes.”
One explanation for this inconsistency would be that competing sub-state interests were battling to influence the paper's editorial line. However, it does not support a bottom-up role for public opinion in this process, as per the “intra-state contention” models. This semi-official media sensationalism took place after the cable-cutting incidents; if public opinion was a factor in internal policy or political struggles contributing to those assertive PRC actions, then this should have been apparent before the incident. But popular attention had been declining through the month of May, with media commercial online media coverage quite innocuous (see Appendix 5). As noted earlier in this chapter, Huanqiu sensationalism was apparent over the issue in April – but far from criticizing the policy status quo or suggesting radical action, it had praised the MFA’s existing position as unprecedentedly hardline.

The strategic channeling and risk management model would explain the Huanqiu’s inconsistency during the tensions as indicative of different stages in the state’s handling of domestic discourse. In this reading, commercial imperatives may have driven the first hawkish editorial in late May. Guidance from propaganda authorities then caused the paper to moderate its tone in early June. Finally, a temporary relaxation of state censorship several days later enabled the paper to once again use the prospect of military confrontation to attract readers, this time in harmony with the state’s immediate political goals. This possibility will be considered in more detail below.

Public attention levels

As noted, some increase in demand for South China Sea-related information among internet users was evident in April, mainly in response to sensationalist reporting of China’s own statements by the Huanqiu Shibao, but the South China Sea BSI was declining again by late May when the first cable cutting incident occurred. There was no immediate rise in demand for information after the incident became public in international media outside China on May 27. But following the MFA’s ad hoc comments on May 28, and wide syndication of the Huanqiu’s threatening “risky
ideas” editorial, the issue suddenly took hold in the public’s imagination. The BSI accelerated to nearly 4,000 on May 31, just short of the level seen after the *Impeccable* incident, and hit a new all-time high above 6,300 on June 4. (The impact of this editorial on existing attention levels at that time is more apparent on the smaller scale of Figure 5.9 above.) It had just started to fall back when the *Viking II* incident took place five days later. After this, an unprecedented surge made all earlier periods of heightened information demand appear as minor blips in comparison. The BSI for the South China Sea search terms hit 27,000 on June 17, and remained above 10,000 through the rest of the month – a level more than double the highest-ever single day reading before this period of tensions began.

![Combined BSI for (南海), (南海问题) & (南海争端), March-Septemper 2011](image)

The massive surge in public interest levels was driven by the sense of an impending showdown in the South China Sea. Heavy coverage of Vietnamese live-fire naval drills – the subject of more than 170 articles published on major commercial news portals between June 10 and 15 – suggested war was a genuine possibility. Reports of anti-Chinese protests in Vietnam, and Hanoi’s announcement of new military draft guidelines, appeared to confirm this
trajectory. China’s actions and semi-official media matched the escalatory trend. The Maritime Safety Administration, not normally known as an implementer of assertive policies, attracted attention by announcing that its largest patrol ship Haixun-31 would shortly sail through the disputed island groups. Excitement hit a new peak after June 14, when the PLA Navy publicized three military drills of its own, including amphibious island-seizing operations, with embedded correspondents projecting dramatic on-scene reporting and imagery to citizens.182 Media “hawks” including Major-General Luo Yuan and Rear Admiral Yin Zhuo further stoked the drama: Luo Yuan says China is the victim in the South China Sea, can’t hold back any longer was a June 15 headline on the People’s Daily-affiliated news portal. Prominent reports of the Philippines’ alleged “demolition” of Chinese sovereignty markers in the Spratly Islands implied that China was being besieged from multiple directions.

Beneath the general public’s surging interest in the issue, a wave of more extreme nationalist mobilization swelled. As pointed out above, it is crucial not to automatically conflate the two, as their causes are often different. In this case, however, both were triggered by the sense of rapid escalation and impending confrontation created by China’s own assertive actions, Vietnam’s escalatory responses, and the semi-official nationalist commentariat’s sensationalism of the implications. One author who watched the progression of these events from inside the state propaganda system observes the strong links between elevated expectations for conflict and the explosion of xenophobic and intolerant nationalist postings on online platforms. According to Liao Lei, after the PLA Navy’s South Sea Fleet conducted a series of live fire exercises around Hainan Island in mid-June, “some netizens linked this with Vietnam’s aggressive posture on the South China Sea issue, believing these exercises to be China ‘preparing for war,’ and statements related to ‘China and Vietnam cannot avoid a war’ filled online forums.”183

Consistent with the idea that signals of moderation reduce public attention levels, the BSI eased rapidly after prominent authoritative publicity of the high-level meeting between Dai Bingguo and Ho Xuan Son lowered the prospect of conflict. After a brief rebound in mid-July after the China-ASEAN DOC Guidelines, and
landing on Pagasa Island by Philippine lawmakers the same day (discussed earlier), attention levels declined steadily through the rest of the year, as the state moderated its policy. At this point, on the downside of the wave of mobilization, the levels of public attention and nationalist mobilization diverged significantly, with the party-state’s milder stance enraging nationalists, but dulling the interest of the wider public.\textsuperscript{184} The key point, however, is that neither was particularly agitated before the cable cutting incidents; rather, they both increased after China’s assertive actions became public.

\textit{Strategic channeling and risk management}

Circumstantial evidence suggests the magnitude of the surge in public attention and nationalist mobilization levels in June 2011 may have been facilitated by the party-state, in order to convince Hanoi to refrain from retaliation and, paradoxically, to contain its own domestic nationalist sentiments. A large-scale data collection project based at Harvard University detected a significant decline in censorship activity across online platforms in the days leading up to the Dai-Ho agreement (see Figure 5.15). The authors interpret this finding as evidence of the state’s prior knowledge that tensions were about to fall, and that therefore the risk of popular collective action was easing, permitting a relaxation of censorship.\textsuperscript{185} However, given that, as shown above, the party-state was being strongly criticized for its alleged weakness on the issue, the prominent announcement of conciliatory measures to repair relations with Vietnam stood to increase, rather than decrease, the risk of dangerous nationalist anti-government protests. A better explanation for the lowered censorship levels might be that the visible outbursts of popular nationalism were a useful backdrop to the negotiations leading up to the Dai-Ho agreement. This could also explain the sudden swing of the \textit{Huanqiu Shibao}’s editorial line back towards confrontation on June 21, as well as the prominent role of dramatic state-run commercial media content and commentary in bringing attention levels to their peak at that time.
Channeling popular sentiments towards the issue by easing restrictions on nationalist speech and semi-official media sensationalism at this time stood to benefit China’s policy of “rights defense and stability maintenance” in three ways. First, the wave of nationalism projected an image of Chinese society as ready to mobilize if events continued to escalate, thereby discouraging further retaliation by Vietnam against the cable-cuttings. Second, it framed Beijing as staring down nationalist pressure and absorbing legitimacy costs for the sake of bilateral ties, thereby increasing the credibility of its official statements of commitment to stability in the region.\textsuperscript{186} Third, opening up Chinese popular discourse may have been designed to prod Hanoi into clamping down on the anti-China protests that had occurred weekly since the \textit{Binh Minh 02} incident, by hinting at the prospect of anti-Vietnam counter-mobilizations on the Chinese side. The content of the June 26 Sino-Vietnamese agreement between Dai and Ho supports this interpretation, as it explicitly affirmed both sides’ agreement to “strengthen correct guidance of public opinion, avoiding words and actions that would harm the friendship and mutual trust of the two peoples.”\textsuperscript{187} If the PRC had already been acting more or less wholly in accordance with these terms, Vietnam would have had less incentive to change
its own domestic handling of the issue. In this interpretation, then, CCP authorities – though not necessarily the top leaders – sought to channel the power of popular nationalism into deterring Vietnam from retaliation, demonstrating the seriousness of China's leaders' intention to avoid further escalation, and pushing Vietnam towards the June 26 agreement to "correctly guide public opinion" away from anti-Chinese sentiments and actions.

The evidence for strategic channeling is by no means conclusive. Although Vietnamese diplomats say their PRC interlocutors routinely refer to pressure from public opinion, there is no strong evidence of Chinese officials doing so in public Hanoi-directed communications during this period.\textsuperscript{188} The decrease in censorship levels may have been a coincidence, or motivated by purely domestic concerns. However, strategic channeling remains a stronger explanation for the observed combination of semi-official media sensationalism and low censorship levels, than the main alternatives of a "safety valve" or intra-elite divisions. The former is difficult to rule out, yet, as noted above, if preventing street protests or other instability was the party's concern, it is difficult to see how lowering censorship levels just before a heavily publicized conciliatory agreement would lessen this danger. In the latter scenario, instead of being aimed at advancing China’s political objectives with Vietnam, tolerance for the wave of nationalist outrage resulted from leadership divisions, or from hawkish policy advocates sponsoring public criticism of the moderate direction of PRC policy in the South China Sea.\textsuperscript{189} If so, these efforts failed completely. The PRC's policy in the dispute was much more moderate in the second half of 2011, with no known assertive actions, and even high-profile cooperative agreements signed with ASEAN, Vietnam and the Philippines. If the easing of censorship was a political ploy to undermine the targets of online vitriol, then it obviously had no effect on policy outcomes. Some domestic media articles questioned or even criticized this more moderate stance through the second half of 2011 – but far from being a cause of assertive actions, this nationalist dissonance was a response to their discontinuation.\textsuperscript{190}

Finally, it is important to note that the channeling model does not imply a consensus among China's leaders as to the wisdom of releasing popular
nationalism for this type of purpose. There could plausibly have been a schism between those who perceived popular nationalism and public opinion to be helping China’s foreign policy, and others who considered such a policy unwise. Officials within the propaganda and ideology system, for example, may have a bureaucratic interest in maximizing the role of media and public opinion in foreign policy. However, if any top leaders had reservations about the release of popular nationalism at this sensitive time, they evidently did not oppose it strongly.\textsuperscript{191} And as the next chapter will show, sophisticated new incarnations of long-established ideas about the strategic importance of popular mobilization and public opinion in international conflicts were maturing, and increasingly being applied to this kind of issue.\textsuperscript{192}

\textit{Summary}

PRC maritime law enforcement’s coercive cable-cutting operations were enabled by China’s increased material capabilities, and triggered by serious new challenges to its prospects of access to the area’s increasingly valuable resources in the UNCLOS era. Rather than being a response to popular demands for a tougher policy, the PRC’s assertive on-water actions, combined with Vietnam’s vehement response, and semi-official media sensationalism, actually caused a wave of popular attention on the issue on a scale not seen before. It was not a play for nationalist legitimacy, as officials and state media made no attempt to present China’s assertive actions as such to the domestic public. Instead, the party-state positioned China as the victim. There is some evidence that the wave of nationalism may have been permitted by PRC authorities hoping to channel popular passions into deterring further Vietnamese escalation, demonstrating the leadership’s willingness to absorb domestic “audience costs” for the sake of lowered tensions, and creating incentives for Vietnam to suppress its own anti-China protests. As the risk of war gave way to a series of agreements between China and its Southeast Asian rivals, disappointed nationalists lashed out online, but the general public’s attention levels trailed off as the tensions eased.
Conclusion

This chapter began by summarizing the continuities and changes in the PRC’s policy in the South China Sea between 2009 and 2011, showing that the trend of increased assertive activities, particularly qualitatively coercive actions, established in 2007-2008, continued through this period. Next, it outlined the emergence of the key guidance policy of the “unity of rights defense and stability maintenance.” In particular, this created a mandate for assertive actions that could be justified as contributing to regional stability by deterring rival states from advancing their positions in the disputed area. Three subsequent sections detailed the rise of Chinese popular nationalism on the South China Sea issue over this period using distinct but overlapping measures: citizens’ attitudes, public attention levels, and popular mobilization. This showed how the state’s ability to frame domestic interpretations of events in the South China Sea has been weakened in the internet era, but its influence on the issue’s salience on the public agenda remains decisive. It also guided the identification of the two most likely cases on which to find a relationship between Chinese popular nationalism and this area of PRC foreign policy. Tracing the progression of the Impeccable incident of 2009 and the Sino-Vietnamese cable-cutting confrontations of 2011 in relation to the state’s official comments, state media coverage, and attention levels among internet users, demonstrated that neither was an attempt to impress or appease nationalist public opinion, despite conditions favouring such bottom-up influence. In both cases, spikes in popular attention on the issue came after China’s assertive policy actions, not before. This also suggested how, in the internet era, assertive policy tends to be a cause of popular nationalism on an issue – whether the state intends to use it strategically or not.

The 2009-2011 period demonstrated that the party-state could no longer engage in confrontational activities and expect to handle the consequences in secret, as it had in 2007-2008. Running an assertive policy would require active participation in public discourse and careful management of domestic public sentiments. This much was clear, regardless of whether the CCP wanted to use nationalist public opinion to bolster its assertive policy, or simply prevent it from causing domestic
or international difficulties. However, elevated public attention and nationalist mobilization levels still did not preclude moderation. In fact, the conciliatory measures China took to lower the level of international tensions in the wake of the *Impeccable* incident in 2009, and in the second half of 2011, also reduced the level of attention among the public at large, even as they provoked outrage from online commenters. How sustainable this would be over the medium term, and whether restraint could continue through a period of leadership contention, was open to question.

One key difference between the two cases stands out. While the 2009 case shows no sign of any attempt to leverage the power of nationalist public opinion in the service of international goals, in 2011 there were signs that the party-state was beginning to recognize the useful role popular nationalism could play in the simultaneous pursuit of “rights defense and stability maintenance” in the South China Sea.
Chapter 6

Grassroots deterrence: popular nationalism as a foreign policy “weapon”

This chapter details how genuine popular nationalist sentiments became integrated with China’s assertive maritime policy. As Chapter 5 showed, the rise of popular nationalism on the South China Sea issue was largely a function of the state’s own assertive policy and associated increased publicity of the issue. But while elements of the party-state have long considered public attention indispensable to the pursuit of disputed maritime claims, the extent to which central authorities were consciously in control of these corollary effects in the 2009-2011 period is unclear. From 2012 onwards, as this chapter shows, the state’s management of domestic nationalist discourse on the issue became much more coherent, turning a domestic risk factor into a force of deterrence that served the policy guideline of the “unity of rights defense and stability maintenance.”

After reviewing the continuities and changes in the PRC’s behaviour in the South China Sea since 2012, the chapter outlines the development of CCP theoretical constructions that conceptualize public attention, attitudes, and actions as a resource or weapon in maritime disputes. The long-running project to raise the public’s maritime consciousness, particularly in the South China Sea, received unprecedented impetus from the top of the party-state from 2007 onwards. But more sophisticated notions of public opinion warfare and public diplomacy, developed and implemented under Hu Jintao, recognized that popular sentiments on contentious foreign policy issues can be an asset or a liability in different circumstances. Both stress the importance of attenuating public discourse in accordance with the state’s immediate objectives, and active management of the risks of doing so.
The third section examines the implementation of these concepts in the CCP’s routine guidance of domestic public opinion and its projection to foreign audiences. Based on the images of Chinese public opinion presented in PRC officials’ comments, it outlines a concept of “grassroots deterrence” to explain the strategic purpose of state-led popular nationalism in the South China Sea. It proposes that the public’s role is not limited to supporting potential war efforts, or providing a “hands-tying” mechanism to establish resolve, but can also help deter retaliation against China’s assertive activities by foregrounding a genuine risk of irrational escalation. The networked authoritarian state’s partially-visible, partially-opaque public opinion risk management capabilities give it an information advantage regarding those risks, while also clarifying both elements of the signal’s complex of threat and reassurance. This creates strong incentives for caution on the part of China’s adversaries as they respond to its assertive actions.

The crisis over Scarborough Shoal in April-May 2012 provided an opportunity and a motivation for the CCP to draw on nationalist participation, while also testing the state’s ability to manage the attendant risks. Reconstructing this crucial case shows that the wave of popular sentiment during the crisis emerged through a state-led process of strategic public opinion channeling. This wave arose not in response to the original on-water incident in April, but to an escalation of official rhetoric and state media coverage, four weeks later. The war buzz delivered a vague, but unmistakable, threat of escalation that helped persuade Manila not to oppose the new status quo of PRC control of the disputed shoal and, paradoxically, to dampen down anti-China nationalism in the Philippines. Once the Aquino administration moderated its public statements, curtailed domestic anti-China activity, and reopened diplomatic channels, Beijing abruptly reversed the volume and tone of domestic media coverage and the wave of nationalism quickly subsided. In this way, the domestic public helped achieve the PRC’s goal of maintaining regional stability in the context of its assertive maritime rights defense efforts. The chapter concludes by outlining the continued development of the party-state’s capabilities for shaping domestic popular discourse on the South China Sea issue, from Scarborough Shoal onwards through late 2016.
Continuity and change since 2012

Based on the events data assembled in Appendix 2, China’s increasing assertiveness and use of coercion in the South China Sea continued through 2015. The policy of seizing Vietnamese fishing boats and personnel in the Paracels briefly returned in early 2012, though it appears to have subsequently been downgraded to harassment, confiscation of catches and damaging of equipment rather than capture and detention. There were two notable coercive aspects of the PRC’s actions in the Scarborough Shoal standoff that began in April 2012: the use of informal economic sanctions, and the imposition of China’s control of the disputed shoal. The forceful “rescue” of Chinese fishing boats detained in Indonesia’s claimed EEZ, previously seen in 2010, sparked another incident in mid-2013. In December 2013, while shadowing China’s aircraft carrier, the USS Cowpens was forced by PLA Navy ships into a stop, an action Washington labeled “irresponsible.” US officials took a similar view of several close-range aerial encounters over the South China Sea the following year. In early 2014, PRC maritime law enforcement used high-pressure water cannons and helicopters to drive Filipino fishing boats away from Scarborough Shoal, and Chinese patrol ships turned back a resupply mission for the Philippines’ military outpost aboard a crumbling hulk grounded on Second Thomas Shoal (仁爱礁). In the HYSY-981 oil rig crisis in May-June 2014, on-water coercion enabled new Chinese drilling activities near the Paracel Islands. In 2015 numerous coercive actions against Vietnamese boats in the Spratly Islands were reported, and Malaysian fishers were “chased” at Luconia Shoals, an area where Chinese maritime agencies had not previously maintained a presence. In total, between 2012 and 2015 there were ten cases of altered PRC behaviour involving coercion, while and one or two others, described below, were arguably coercive in nature. Thus, China’s actions in this period carried forward the key feature distinguishing its assertive South China Sea policy since 2007.

China’s expanded unilateral administrative actions also continued across the 2012-2015 period, with eight cases of demonstrative assertiveness. The “regular rights defense patrol” program continued to increase in frequency and geographic scope. CMS and FLEC ships maintained a near-constant patrol presence around
Scarborough Shoal from April 2012, and at Second Thomas Shoal from April 2013. In the far southern part of the disputed area, reports of China strengthening its administrative presence began with two encounters with Malaysian survey vessels between August 2012 and January 2013. This was followed by a heavily publicized sovereignty ceremony held at James Shoal on the decks of a PLA Navy ship in March 2013, repeated in January of the following year. From August 2013 the newly formed China Coast Guard began patrolling the Luconia Shoals, close to important Malaysian oil and gas installations, and in 2014 this new activity was stepped up to establish a constant presence there. There was also a notable increase in PLA Navy exercises in the South China Sea in 2013 – arguably a coercive form of assertiveness if interpreted as an implied threat to use force in the dispute. Most significantly, 2014 also saw the commencement of China’s massive land reclamation projects in the Spratly Islands, which raised widespread international attention as they came to fruition through 2015. Afterwards, PLA radio operators on the new artificial islands began challenging US, Philippines and Australian aircraft flying in the area, informing them that they were approaching a Chinese “military alert zone,” the implications of which have not been explained.

Legal and administrative changes constituted important declarative acts of assertive behavioural change. The establishment of Sansha City, a prefectural-level administrative unit, elevated the rank of the local government responsible for the disputed territories in July 2012. Later that year, Hainan Province introduced legislation mandating the existing practice of security forces boarding, inspect, detain, expel foreign boats in waters “under its administration,” which includes the entire disputed area. And around the same time numerous countries protested new Chinese passports that included a feint image of the nine-dash line map in the background of visa pages. The official party mouthpiece was also significantly more vocal in asserting PRC sovereignty over the disputed maritime territories in 2012 and 2014, though it temporarily fell back in 2013.

Was 2012 a turning point for China’s policy in the South China Sea? This question was raised in Chapter 3, when it was noted that the 9 cases of assertive PRC behavioural change observed that year was the highest number since 1970.
However, unlike the introduction of coercive measures from 2007, which became a new normal in China’s policy, the overall number of all types of PRC assertive actions fell back from 2013 onwards. With this in view, 2012 appears to have been more of an extreme case within the broader policy shift that began several years earlier. It is noteworthy that 4 of the 9 cases of assertiveness in 2012 were declarative actions such as legislative and administrative moves like the establishment of Sansha City and Hainan’s “board and search” rules. Meanwhile, 3 of the 9 cases were coercive in nature – only one above the average number seen between 2007 and 2011, and this difference was attributable to the Scarborough Shoal standoff. Overall, there was only a modest increase in coercive actions post-2012, as Table 6.1 shows. The most that can be said of 2012 as a turning point is that it marked a temporary intensification of the policy shift initiated in 2007.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of assertiveness</th>
<th>Periods</th>
<th>Cases of assertiveness</th>
<th>Mean cases per year</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tail)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Declarative</td>
<td>2007-2011</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>0.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2012-2015</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrative</td>
<td>2007-2011</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>1.36</td>
<td>0.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2012-2015</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coercive</td>
<td>2007-2011</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>0.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2012-2015</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2007-2011</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>1.34</td>
<td>0.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2012-2015</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6.1: Independent samples t-test for equality of mean number of assertive actions in 2007-2011 and 2012-2015 periods (equal variances not assumed).

In terms of official policy guidance, the established guideline of seeking “the unity of rights defense and stability maintenance” appears to have undergone a further elevation in status and authority under Xi Jinping’s leadership. In July 2013, Xi chaired a Politburo meeting on the topic of maritime rights defense. At the meeting Xi called for “coordinated planning of the two overall situations (两个大局) of rights defense and stability maintenance.” On one hand, Xi’s phrasing invoked a signature foreign affairs directive of Hu Jintao, thereby forging a clear continuity with the policy pursued under his predecessor. On the other hand, by describing rights defense and stability maintenance as the “two overall situations” Xi seemed
to imply an upgrading of the “rights defense and stability maintenance” maritime policy guideline to a status Hu had attached to the domestic and international situations as a whole (统筹国内外两个大局). If this implication was intended, however, it was subtle. Another clear continuity between the Hu and Xi eras is evident in the development of theoretical constructs that guide the use of domestic public opinion as a resource (or “weapon”) in maritime disputes such as the South China Sea. These are examined in the following sections.

Building maritime consciousness

Among CCP officials and strategists, the idea that the elevation of “maritime consciousness” (海洋意识) among the entire Chinese population is necessary for success in the South China Sea dates back at least as far as the 1980s. In an early outline of the concept that has remained influential, Yang Zhicheng defined it as:

"a collective term for a state or nation's understanding of the oceans belonging to it and to the world, and the degree of overall resource development and exploitation of the oceans, across a given period of time."³

Many proponents have defined maritime consciousness by negative contrast with the mid-to-late Ming and Qing dynasties, whose rulers’ disregard of the oceans is seen to have led directly to China's humiliation at the hands of the "sea barbarians” of Europe.⁴ Accordingly, early statements on the topic emphasized the need for attention on maritime matters among key groups such as party leaders, cadres and soldiers. However, the target soon included China's overwhelmingly land-oriented general population. The mass-audience aspect of the “maritime consciousness” campaign is directly relevant to the relationship between popular nationalism and policy in maritime disputes.

The project to raise maritime consciousness among the civilian masses began primarily as a project of the military, with the aim of guaranteeing support for its southward expansion in the South China Sea in the 1980s.⁵ On February 3, 1988, as the PLA moved to establish its first outposts in the Spratly Islands, making
hostilities with Vietnam likely, the Navy Command Department called for “maritime consciousness propaganda and education towards the entire population.” Military-affiliated authors subsequently attempted to push maritime consciousness into the emerging “patriotic education” program in the early 1990s, though their efforts do not appear to have been successful. However, the push for maritime consciousness for the masses gained new impetus after China’s accession to the UNCLOS regime in 1996.

As the UNCLOS era turned the focus of the PRC maritime policy away from island territories and towards maritime spaces, the scope of involvement in the campaign to raise maritime consciousness expanded outward from the military to the party and government. On May 14, 1996, the day before China ratified the Convention, the People’s Daily launched a maritime consciousness campaign aimed not merely at defending China’s claims to disputed islands, but also to jurisdiction over vast sea areas that it referred to as “blue-coloured territory.” In 1998, immediately after China’s EEZ Law expanded and hardened China’s maritime rights claims, the party organized a “Maritime Propaganda Day Convention.” There, NPC Standing Committee Vice President Wang Guangying, made a speech on the theme of “loving our blue-coloured territory,” in which he explained:

“This "blue-coloured territory" formulation ([提法]) has major significance. This is because our country not only has 9.6 million square kilometres of land territory, but also nearly 3 million square kilometres of waters under our administration. This expanse of precious ‘blue-coloured territory’ is, [like land territory], an important space for the survival and development of our nation.”

No area of ocean space was more amenable to the process of “territorialization” in the public consciousness than the South China Sea. The nine-dash line, originally published by the KMT government in 1948 to depict a claim to scattered islands and reefs, readily became a visual representation of a claim to several million square kilometres of “maritime territory.”
Wang Guangying’s speech laid out a key assumption behind the push to raise maritime consciousness among the whole population in the UNCLOS era: “The competition in maritime affairs is also a competition of countries and nations’ maritime consciousness.” Within this paradigm, more public attention on a given maritime claim equates to a competitive advantage, not only increasing the productive population available to exploit the resources, but also raising the level of national will to realize and defend disputed claims. On this basis, Wang outlined specific actions for the party-state going forward: “Now, using mass media, professional, middle and primary school education, we must universalize maritime territorial knowledge among society . . .” 9 In 2001, on the fifth anniversary of China’s ratification of the UNCLOS, separate speeches by the SOA Director and Deputy Director both reaffirmed the need for mass maritime consciousness in order to seize the opportunities and meet the challenges of the UNCLOS era. 10

Since then, the project to raise popular maritime consciousness has been repeatedly affirmed at the party-state’s highest levels. In 2002 the NPC passed a new Surveying and Mapping Law requiring all levels of government to tighten control over every stage of map production – from drafting to public display – and to step up publicity and education to raise citizens’ awareness of the territory and its importance. 11 These new rules drove successive waves of crackdowns resulting in the confiscation of millions of “problem maps,” including those missing the nine-dash line marking the South China Sea claim. 12 In 2004 Vice Premier Zeng Peiyan personally instructed the SOA to “strengthen the whole people’s maritime consciousness, and establish ourselves in the ancestral land’s blue territory.” 13 In a 2006 economic planning meeting, General Secretary Hu Jintao called for “strengthening maritime consciousness while properly doing land-based planning.” 14 This call was taken up in the State Council’s 2008 Planning Outline for the Development of National Maritime Activities, laying out detailed plans for building China into a “maritime power” (海洋强国) over the 2007-2012 period and beyond. 15

Not surprisingly, these top-level instructions stimulated China’s maritime agencies’ propaganda activities. In 2005, soon after Zeng’s visit, the SOA launched
a series of high-profile events marking the 600th anniversary of early Ming Dynasty Admiral Zheng He’s voyages to the Indian Ocean – the apex of Chinese maritime aspiration and global preeminence. In March 2008, SOA Party Secretary Sun Zhihui pointed out:

"Elevating the whole nation's maritime consciousness has major significance. . . China faces enormous challenges in adapting to the fast-developing new circumstances in international and domestic maritime affairs, and in developing maritime activities quickly, and well, within the important period of strategic opportunity [forecast to last until at least 2020]. We must address this mission from many angles, and elevating the whole nation’s maritime consciousness and enriching maritime culture has become an urgent task.”

Later the same year – ten years on from Wang Guangying’s original call on the Maritime Propaganda Day Convention – the SOA held its first annual Maritime Propaganda Day. The date was set at July 18, the date Zheng He set sail on his first voyage to the Indian Ocean.

The number of research articles on “maritime consciousness” shows a correlation with the political relevance of the topic. Figure 6.1, showing the yearly number of articles in the CNKI, China’s major database of periodicals, indicates that the PRC’s ratification of UNCLOS in 1996 preceded a spike in research on maritime consciousness. After falling back to around 4-5 articles per year – still much higher than in the early 1990s – Chinese periodicals’ interest in the maritime consciousness rose again in 2005, with the celebrations of the anniversary of Zheng He’s voyage. It has trended steeply upwards since 2007, when China introduced its more assertive policy in the South China Sea, with the exception of 2008, when the Beijing Olympics temporarily restrained China’s South China Sea activities. Perhaps reflecting a backlog from the Olympic period, the number of relevant articles shot up to an unprecedented 16 in 2009. Since 2012, the yearly number of CNKI articles has oscillated between 20 and 35.
Analytic discussion of the concept of maritime consciousness has reached new heights from 2012 onwards. Addressing the imperative of achieving the “unity of rights defense and stability maintenance” in the South China Sea, state security expert Li Qinggong argued China had “a very long road to travel to achieve the genuine popularization, high-levelization and elitification of maritime consciousness” necessary for a complete maritime strategy.20 Yin Zhuo, director of the PLA Navy’s expert committee on informatization, expressed a similar view as recently as 2016.21 The increasing emphasis placed on maritime consciousness helps explain the greater publicity of the state’s actions in the South China Sea from 2009, and the party-state’s more sanguine attitude towards media coverage of the issue. In fact, some observers have argued popular maritime consciousness was a key to China’s success in advancing its positions in the Scarborough Shoal standoff and the Sino-Japanese crisis over the Diaoyu Islands in 2012. Reflecting on these cases in a Xinhua commentary in late 2012, PLA commentator Chen Hu
argued public attention and support were "the foundations of a country's maritime rights." The case study later in this chapter will provide some support for this view.

To recap, the concept of maritime consciousness holds that popular resolve to uphold the nation’s maritime claims is vital to defending them, and that popular maritime knowledge is crucial to ensuring participation in offshore economic activity. After beginning as largely a concern of the navy, efforts to build mass maritime consciousness expanded after the PRC’s accession to UNCLOS, becoming a project of the party and government, as mandated through top-level leadership directives and legislation. Maritime agencies and party academics have researched the concept with increasing vigor, especially since China adopted its assertive policy in the South China Sea in the mid-to-late 2000s. In many ways, the underlying ideas of the maritime consciousness project resemble a Maoist campaign model of revolutionary governance, mobilizing the population to defend the “blue territory,” and inspiring ever-greater enthusiasm for production in the marine economy. However, in the era of informatized (信息化) conflict and a networked Chinese public, the party has developed much more sophisticated and flexible concepts for regulating public participation in international disputes.

**Public opinion warfare**

The CCP has a distinguished tradition of shaping and mobilizing domestic and international public opinion to serve its political objectives. "Relying on the power of the people to achieve victory" forms part of the party-state’s “basic experience" across several decades of political work in conflict situations. Besides newspapers and radio, the party's traditional means for shaping and mobilizing domestic public opinion included pamphlets, loudspeakers, and the chanting of slogans. Mao also used interviews with foreign media, notably with American journalist Edgar Snow, to break the KMT information blockade and reach audiences both in China and overseas, helping disintegrate Chiang Kai-shek’s regime and attract outside support. In the reform era, Deng Xiaoping and other
leaders have likewise used local and foreign mass media, together with domestic mobilizations, to serve domestic and international goals. Two developments in the 1990s altered Beijing's perceptions of the nature of warfare, convincing Chinese strategists to focus on the prospect of informatized, partial conflict. The key effect of the explosive development of technology, according to an influential 1999 treatise, was that the lines between war and peace were increasingly blurred. Warfare was no longer simply the use of armed force, but of “all means, including armed force or non-armed force, military and non-military, and lethal and non-lethal means to compel the enemy to accept one's interests.” Equally crucial was the judgment that China needed to prepare for partial, regional war, as opposed to the total war of World War II, or the existential threat of global superpower conflict that had dominated planning during the Cold War. As a PLA political work textbook observes, during a partial war “the overall situation is peace,” making it harder to guarantee the public support vital to the realization of the state's objectives. The South China Sea, with its constant tensions, regional strategic importance, economically interdependent adversaries, fluid status quo, and increasing media salience, is in many ways an archetype of informatized, partial, regional conflict.

In response to the new circumstances, typified by the US's successful deployment of media and information techniques in conflicts such as the Gulf War and Kosovo, PRC leaders and military strategists urgently sought to update China's political warfare doctrines. In 2003, under Jiang Zemin's leadership, the PLA was given extensive new Political Work Regulations that assigned the military's General Political Department (GPD) the task of conducting “public opinion warfare, psychological warfare and legal warfare” (舆论战、心理战、法律战). This reflected the party-state's assessment that these three interdependent, ostensibly non-military "battlegrounds" are crucial in information-age conflicts. The concept appears to have been set forth at a relatively early stage of development, so following its inclusion in the Regulations, a body of theoretical research work began to flesh out the specific content of these “Three Warfares.”
A key milestone in the development of the current concept of public opinion warfare was the Guideline on Public Opinion Warfare (舆论战纲要), a text issued jointly by the PLA’s four headquarters in August 2005. Although it remains unavailable outside the military, PLA authors cite a common definition:

"The Guideline holds that: PLA public opinion warfare is combat actions that take public opinion as a weapon and, in accordance with the CMC's strategic intentions and combat tasks, comprehensively apply all kinds of media techniques and information sources to stimulate our side's fighting spirit, influence the enemy's judgment of the situation, weaken the enemy's fighting will, and create a favourable public opinion environment for seizing the political initiative and military victory."³²

From this definition it is clear that public opinion warfare includes domestic aspects, such as making sure the Chinese media and public are on the party-state’s side in any conflict, and international aspects such as shaping adversary perceptions and seeking to persuade foreigners to support, or at least not oppose, China’s interests.

The application of public opinion warfare to maritime disputes like the South China Sea is a significant advancement on the earlier and ongoing project to build maritime consciousness. The task of raising domestic popular support for China’s claims to disputed ocean space overlaps with the task of elevating popular maritime consciousness. But public opinion warfare goes further by calling for the active use of that support as a “weapon” in those struggles. It posits that the Chinese public has a role to play in weakening the adversary's will to oppose Beijing, as will be seen in the 2012 Scarborough Shoal case, as well as in attempting to win the support of neutral and friendly countries, as in the wake of the UNCLOS arbitration case in 2016.³³ As explained below, this basic premise is shared with public opinion warfare's civilian counterpart, “public diplomacy” (公共外交) with CCP characteristics.
Domestic audiences, not foreign, are the direct target of most public opinion warfare work. As noted above, the very impetus behind the concept was the belief that China’s enemies, notably the United States, had already mastered such techniques. The first priority, then, is preventing foreign public opinion warfare “attacks” from sapping the Chinese people’s will to fight for the CCP’s objectives. Only when this basic security is achieved can the domestic public become a weapon in the international struggle. The 2005 Guideline and other key texts therefore list “control of public opinion information” as a key specific task of public opinion warfare.\(^3^4\) It also implies that the instrumental use of public opinion on sensitive security issues depends on the ability to manage the real risks it can generate. This is particularly so in the PRC’s contentious maritime disputes, such as the South China Sea.

Chinese analysts identify two key risks that must be managed in public opinion warfare on contentious foreign policy issues. First, nationalist sentiments can pose a threat to domestic stability. Security officials cite the 2005 anti-Japan protests as “a problem affecting our country’s stability” that hostile foreign forces seeking to foment chaos within the PRC’s borders could have exploited. Even the 2008 demonstrations against Western media reporting and interference with the Olympic torch relay were at risk of being hijacked by the same “anti-China forces” they were directed against.\(^3^5\) As we will see, authorities have sought to manage this risk on the South China Sea issue by allowing patriotic mobilizations on the internet and social media rather than in the form of mass gatherings, while adopting a range of online public information management techniques.

The second threat is to the party-state’s foreign policy. As Hua Jian and Yu Qi of the PLA’s Nanjing Political Academy write, public opinion warfare must guard against “the irrational result of foreign policy being kidnapped by public opinion or public sentiments.” During periods of heightened tensions, the stimulation of the public’s sentiments by “hardline information” therefore must be correctly timed so that it complements “hardline actions.”\(^3^6\) Maintaining diplomatic flexibility is a key objective. Gao Jiquan, international group leader in the PLA Daily’s Current Affairs Department, explains that public opinion warfare
“must, on the one hand, concentrate firepower to get results, but on the other hand it must adjust the firepower at the appropriate time in order to avoid going to far. Public opinion warfare relates to the overall situation of diplomacy at the national level. The diplomatic front can be subtle at times, and some foreign policies require calm observation to see how the other side responds, and decide on the next move.”

In contentious maritime disputes, PLA National Defense Technology researchers Xiao Xunlong and Li Shouqi argue, the answer lies in careful “attenuation” (調控) of domestic discourse as the situation unfolds. The Scarborough Shoal case examined below, in which the Chinese media abruptly moderated its tone as soon as the Philippines indicated it was willing to return to diplomatic negotiations, has been held up as a model of careful attenuation of the public mood to leverage the power of popular nationalism without allowing bottom-up influence on foreign policy.

Public diplomacy with CCP characteristics

The basic premise of public opinion warfare – domestic public opinion as a weapon in informatized conflict – sits neatly within broader CCP concepts for understanding the nature of a state’s foreign policy resources. Most prominent among these is “comprehensive national power” (CNP). As PLA National Defense University scholars Liu Zhifu and Zhao Hewei write in the party’s top theoretical journal, “the international public opinion struggle is an important front in the competition for comprehensive national power.” Zhang Xuegang argues that while maritime disputes like the South China Sea may appear on the surface to be about fisheries, energy development and law enforcement, they are actually a general contest of CNP, of which public opinion is an important component part.

The idea of public opinion as a foreign policy resource that forms part of a nation-state’s CNP underpins Beijing’s concept of “public diplomacy,” which is significantly broader than the English-language term. While Western
Grassroots deterrence
governments generally use the term to refer to government programs directed at foreign publics, for the CCP it also encompasses the state’s interactions with the domestic Chinese public on matters of foreign affairs. In 2009, Hu Jintao launched a major campaign to strengthen the theory and practice of public diplomacy. “As China’s CNP has increased,” stated a 2010 report on the CCTV’s national Evening News, “public diplomacy has become an important part of China’s diplomatic work in addition to official diplomacy.” Over the next two years the MFA rolled out a range of measures to strengthen its engagement with both domestic and foreign audiences, from extra press conferences and media interviews, to special events like public open days, academic symposia, and the enhancement of online platforms. Most importantly for this study’s purposes, it also "optimized routine and crisis-response public diplomacy mechanisms, and strengthened information dissemination and public opinion guidance.”

The strong domestic focus of CCP public diplomacy reflects how the concept takes China’s society, including the public at large, to be a key agent of communications targeting foreign governments and publics. In a programmatic 2011 Seeking Truth article, then-Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi argued that indirectness is a key feature of public diplomacy: the state’s role is to “organize and promote” activities carried out by media, NGOs, educational and research institutions and the general public. This idea, in the words of another former Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing, is that “diplomacy is related to every person.” PRC experts writing on the topic have also approached Chinese public as a “social resource” for the country’s diplomacy, including on contentious issues like maritime disputes. CCP thinking about public diplomacy appears to expect that strong public support for the government’s policy will help win external support, as evidenced in the response to the 2016 South China Sea arbitration case. But as Zhang Shiming notes, the rise of nationalist opinion and sentiments in China’s society provide Chinese policymakers with both “opportunities” and “motivations” for foreign policy actions. The task of CCP public diplomacy, then, is to keep the initiative and make sure the population’s increasing engagement with international issues serves China’s foreign policy.
Chapter 6

The CCP public diplomacy concept draws attention to the same domestic and international risks that public opinion warfare does. Maintaining domestic stability is one key goal: as Yang Jiechi wrote, PRC public diplomacy must "pay attention to the big picture, and maintain a stable domestic situation." At the same time, it must also "lead the domestic public to fully understand the international situation as well as Chinese diplomacy."\(^{52}\) Like foreign policy practitioners elsewhere, PRC diplomats and international relations scholars tend to be less enamoured of the idea of popular involvement foreign policy than others in the ideological apparatus and military.\(^{53}\) But from the dialectical perspective that underpins CCP policymaking, as Zhang Tuosheng points out, the challenges posed by nationalist sentiments are also opportunities.\(^{54}\) Like the "unity of rights defense and stability maintenance" in the maritime sphere more generally, the state’s task in public diplomacy work is find ways of turning potential negative elements into positive ones. The approach mandated by the CCP public diplomacy concept mirrors that of public opinion warfare: the nationalist sentiments of the population are a potentially useful tool, but only on the premise that the risks to domestic stability and diplomatic flexibility are properly managed.

The 2008 wave of popular nationalism over western media coverage of Tibet, and interference with the Beijing Olympic Torch relay, has been identified as an exemplary case of successful public diplomacy and public opinion warfare.\(^{55}\) Zheng Baowei and Fan Yaping credit Chinese public opinion with helping extract a groveling apology from the French government, and corrections from major Western media. The authors also argue that the mobilization of public opinion helped to deter further “distorted reports,” which the hostile Western media “did not dare” to publish after the Chinese public’s reaction.\(^{56}\) As an official from the State Office of Stability Maintenance told a 2008 media training session, the patriotic outbursts had demonstrated “the use of popular forces to complement diplomatic work.” However, the official also noted that the potential remained that hostile anti-regime forces could exploit such mobilizations.\(^{57}\) Notably, Zheng and Fan identify the source of the “great victory” won by Chinese public opinion in 2008 not as the mass street demonstrations against French retailer Carrefour, but
rather the outpouring of online outrage. In the Scarborough Shoal case discussed below, and perhaps also in the 2011 Sino-Vietnamese tensions examined in Chapter 5, propaganda authorities channeled public attention towards the issue, but the state controlled the risks by keeping mobilizations online.

External propaganda, at home and abroad

The concepts outlined above set out basic principles for the CCP's management of public opinion on foreign policy and security issues, and its instrumental use in contentious, informatized disputes like the South China Sea. During non-crisis situations, implementation has (probably) not been coordinated by any one agency. Rather, they provide theoretical principles to inform the practices of various party, government and military operators involved with public opinion guidance on foreign policy matters. Because they involve domestic mass audiences, the bulk of these activities must pass through the CCP’s sprawling propaganda and ideological work system, led by the Central Propaganda Department (CPD), which issues daily instructions to both traditional and online media on how to present (or elide) the news of the day. Online public opinion guidance is particularly important due to the prominence of non-state commercial news portals operated by publicly listed technology companies, as well as social media, in the delivery of online news in China. At least five party-state agencies are involved in the guidance of online opinion through both positive propaganda directives and negative censorship instructions. As noted in Chapter 1, on contentious foreign policy issues, this guidance usually dampens the media’s agitation of nationalist sentiments; authorities understand that in the absence of such orders, commercial news platforms have a natural tendency to sensationalize issues like the South China Sea for commercial reasons.

Propaganda directed at foreign audiences, known as “external propaganda” (对外宣传 or 外宣) is nominally overseen by the State Council Information Office (SCIO). On foreign policy matters, especially territorial and maritime disputes, China’s external propaganda operators have two important images to project. The
first is of a uniquely peaceful and cooperative rising great power, perhaps historically aggrieved but by no means threatening. Like the bulk of the PRC’s official diplomatic messaging, the CCP’s traditional English-language external propaganda organs such as Xinhua, China Daily, CCTV International and online platforms like People’s Daily Online have generally sought to project China’s rise as one of ever-increasing win-win cooperation for all foreign countries. However, China cannot project this image unambiguously – especially in relation to disputes like the South China Sea. If the world were to accept the peaceful, unthreatening image entirely, there would be little cause for restraint on the part of other disputants. PRC external propaganda therefore must also project another, contradictory image, one of burgeoning military power, steely resolve, and willingness to fight for claims that are clearly inimical to the interests of other states, including China’s immediate neighbours and the US.

Crucially, while these two images may be equally important, they are by no means equally salient in the party-state's propaganda. In most circumstances, the emphasis is heavily skewed towards the peaceful development image. This reflects the CCP’s authoritative judgement of its external circumstances, which holds that peace and development are the main trends in global politics, and that China itself is situated in a “period of strategic opportunity” to develop its economy and society with a low probability of conflict. The asymmetry between the two key images – heavy on peace, light on war – reflects the strategic judgement that security threats exist, but within an overall main trend towards peace, and that challenges exist but they are outweighed by opportunities. In such circumstances, projecting the two images equally would unnecessarily raise fears about the PRC’s intentions, thereby undermining the mostly benign external environment that allows the CCP to focus on economic development. This presents a dilemma: how to minimize damage to the primary image of peaceful intent when accentuation of the secondary war-ready image is required?

The key to managing this contradiction lies in ambiguous signalling that calibrates the relative salience of the two images according to the circumstances. As Robert Jervis points out, ambiguity allows states to protect images of themselves that
would be contradicted by the particular signal they wish to send at the time.\textsuperscript{65} To be effective, ambiguous signals must be plausibly deniable, but still clear enough to “attract sufficient attention to be studied by the receiver and interpreted as the sending actor intended.”\textsuperscript{66} States have sought to achieve this balance by sending messages using “quasi-disavowable channels” that are credible, yet not completely reliable, such as third-party intermediaries, media leaks, or officials stating their “personal views.”\textsuperscript{67} Two relatively recent additions to China’s external propaganda toolbox, the PLA’s “hawkish faction” of media commentators and the *Huanqiu Shibao* (*Global Times*) group of publications, are ideally suited to this task, as their bellicose pronouncements share the hybrid quality of being *unofficial, yet unmistakably officially-connected*. When they foreground the PRC’s secondary image of uncompromising resolve and war-readiness, the contrast with the primary image of peace and cooperation not only grabs foreign attention, it has a powerful effect on domestic PRC discourse, especially online. Indeed, these sources’ role in *domestic* public opinion guidance is even more important than their external image projection, for they provide CCP propaganda authorities with a means of regulating the flow of popular nationalist agitation towards an issue. This, in turn, allows public opinion itself to become another, even more powerful “quasi-disavowable channel” for delivering threats of escalation that are plausibly deniable, yet undeniably plausible.

*The PLA “hawkish faction”*

The task of carrying out public opinion warfare has provided an ideological mandate for the PLA’s increased participation in civilian domestic discourse on security issues since the early 2000s. As a highly secretive organization, the PLA was not particularly well positioned to play a strong role in shaping and regulating public opinion. The military had possessed propaganda and publishing organs for many decades, but these were mainly designed for the indoctrination of soldiers, and had only limited authority to interact with the general public in China, let alone foreign publics. They were, moreover, institutionally separated from regular
civilian mass media and publishing. Effective public opinion warfare thus required two important adjustments. One was to authorize (and require) the PLA to engage in much greater “military external propaganda,” that is, propaganda directed at audiences outside the military, both domestic and foreign. The second was to permit more coordination between the PLA and civilian actors in the propaganda system.

From 2006, a “series of important directives” from Hu Jintao ordered a major increase in the PLA’s external propaganda activities. According to PLA scholars, Hu’s directives laid out three fundamental issues for these efforts to address: “how to shape our military’s image, how to properly use the weapon of public opinion, and how to strengthen our military’s soft power.” In response, the GPD established a new External Propaganda Bureau, which was given the responsibility of overseeing the increased media appearances and international contacts of military personnel. In 2008, a Whole-Military External Propaganda Leading Small Group was established with membership from the four general departments, seven military regions, and the four services, forming a “command headquarters” for external propaganda activities. Press conferences hosted by the Ministry of Defense were introduced on an ad hoc basis from 2008, and regularized from 2011. The PLA also set up military affairs departments, channels and columns at key propaganda organs including the People’s Daily, Xinhua and CCTV – a major advancement towards the civil-military integration required for public opinion warfare. Another was the creation, from 2009, of a talent pool of more than 50 “whole-military external propaganda experts” authorized to appear in the domestic and foreign media. Since that time, these public faces of the military have adopted all kinds of new techniques to appeal to the domestic public, from blogging and microblogging to interactive online chats, and even guest appearances on glitzy youth-oriented entertainment programs. Wanning Sun coined the term “indoctrainment” to describe this approach to ideological work. Above all, it reflects Hu Jintao’s public opinion channeling concept, in which the state leverages commercial and online media to actively draw public sentiments in useful directions.
Grassroots deterrence

In relation to the South China Sea issue, the increased prominence of military affiliated media commentators has been one of the most visible outcomes of the PLA's external propaganda push. Bellicose rhetoric from PLA external propaganda experts such as Major-General Luo Yuan and Air Force Senior Colonel Dai Xu has often stirred speculation of civil-military schisms due to apparent contradictions with the official positions of the state. Importantly, however, few if any of these PLA hawks are “generals” in the sense of commanding (or ever having done) substantial numbers of troops; their backgrounds are usually in academia, intelligence and propaganda. Comments by past and present operational commanders, by contrast, have rarely diverged from the official line. Despite their apparent outspokenness, military external propaganda is still an activity subject to military and party discipline. And ideological reliability is surely a key criterion for military figures’ trusted access to party’s mass propaganda system. The PLA media hawks speak as individual expert commentators with military affiliation and rank, so any given instance of belligerence may be simply a personal opinion. Yet every instance is openly and unmistakably officially connected.

Hardline or even radical-sounding comments by PLA figures, especially those that diverge from the more staid official line, help project the military’s image of fighting spirit, and draw public attention towards foreign policy issues. By broaching the possibility of military conflict they stimulate “imperilment consciousness” (忧患意识), or a sense of vigilance, that forms a cornerstone of CCP ideology. They also raising a vague, plausibly deniable threat of escalatory military influence on China’s behaviour. Major-General Luo, one of the PLA’s most prominent external propaganda experts, has explained the synergy between his own “hawk” persona and that of the MFA’s “doves” using a Chinese opera analogy:

“some sing the white mask (villain role), and others sing the red mask (honest minister). It can even be a mixture of truth and deceit, real and fake, transparent when transparency is called for, secret when transparency is not called for, all with the core strategic interests of the state as the highest consideration.”

270
The strategic advantages of role differentiation are well known, but that does not mean “bad cops” and “radical flanks” are *always* helpful to their moderate counterparts. Thus, military propagandists must adjust their rhetoric in accordance with their understanding (or their superiors’) of the requirements of the domestic and international situations. Not surprisingly, there have been disagreements among party-state thinkers over what those requirements are at particular times. Ultimately, however, the CCP leadership retains the ability to rein in the tone and prominence of PLA external propaganda activities when required.

Figure 6.2: PLA media "hawks" in English-language media, 2006-2013. Number of articles mentioning PLA external propaganda experts Dai Xu, Zhang Zhaozhong, Luo Yuan, Yin Zhuo, Han Xudong, and Peng Guangqian in Factiva database (*China Daily* and *Xinhua* stories excluded).

Figure 6.2 illustrates the rapid rise in the foreign media presence of PLA external propaganda experts since the new external propaganda push was rolled out. If the international media presence of these “hawkish generals” has contributed to foreign publics’ impressions of China’s willingness to fight for its claims in the South China Sea, or reduced foreign decisionmakers’ certainty about China’s desire to avoid conflict, then the chart may be seen as an illustration of their success.
Grassroots deterrence

Huanqiu Shibao (and the Global Times)

The Huanqiu Shibao and its affiliated publications have an analogous role on the civilian side, leading domestic nationalist opinion and framing international discussion of China’s foreign policy with colourful, often jingoistic editorials and commentaries. The group comprises three distinct components:

1. Huanqiu Shibao, a for-profit Chinese-language tabloid subsidiary of the People’s Daily,
2. Huanqiu Wang, an influential Chinese-language online foreign affairs news portal, and

As a market-oriented, international news-focused tabloid, the Chinese-language Huanqiu Shibao has commercial imperatives to focus on, or even sensationalize, issues like the South China Sea, though the common idea that it “reflects public opinion” must be carefully qualified. Its editorials are overseen by its long-time editor-in-chief Hu Xijin, a dynamic pro-CCP ideologue who believes he is helping China’s diplomacy by projecting “a real image [of China], instead of a shiny, model image.” Hu makes no secret of his ideological commitment to the party, close contacts with the MFA and security apparatus, and observance of propaganda guidance, but nonetheless stresses that his newspaper must appeal to audience demand. Being a subsidiary unit of the party mouthpiece, central propaganda authorities can moderate and even reverse the Huanqiu’s strident tone editorial when required. The sudden reversals in its editorials line at the height of the Sino-Vietnamese tensions in mid-2011 (Chapter 5), and in the Scarborough Shoal case examined below, are just two of many examples of likely influence from above. In the words of one staff member, its views define “one end (usually) of the small range of permitted public opinions on a topic.”

The Chinese-language online news platform, Huanqiu Wang (Global Times Online), has an influential and highly trusted position in China’s online international news industry. The printed newspaper’s national circulation of 2.4 million is smaller
than some metropolitan dailies, but the online portal’s daily visitor numbers are at least 5-7 times higher at around 15 million. Even more importantly, its reports are widely syndicated on other major news sites. Most commercial news websites in China are prohibited from producing news content, let alone reporting on foreign policy matters. But Huanqiu Wang enjoys the privilege of introducing foreign news, including translated foreign media reports, into Mainland China’s online news environment. According to staff interviews, its reporting is normally decided by editorial personnel, who apply general principles of news value while taking into account the daily guidance and instructions received from propaganda authorities. With its network of more than 200 correspondents around the world – many shared with the People’s Daily and its online platform – Huanqiu Wang is often the first to report international developments, and its content is ubiquitous on the PRC’s major commercial news sites. Together with the two central news agencies Xinhua and CNS, Huanqiu Wang has provided the bulk of the international news on the Chinese internet in recent years. This makes it, like the paper’s editorials, an important gate through which the state can regulate the flow of domestic public sentiments towards controversial issues at a given time.

The Global Times, launched in 2009, is not an English-language version of the Huanqiu Shibao. It shares the Huanqiu’s editor-in-chief, tabloid vibe, and some (though by no means all) of its editorials, but it does not share its market orientation. Instead, the state provides most or even all of its income. Another important difference is that the English-language Global Times’ primary focus is on China news rather than world news, and because of its foreign audience, it covers topics that are forbidden in the Chinese-language media. Rather than appealing to audience demand, it is a product of Hu Jintao’s “big external propaganda” (大外宣) push that also saw Xinhua, CCTV and other media ramp up their presence in English- and other foreign-language markets. In this regard, it has met with remarkable success, as indicated by the huge increase in foreign media citations since the English-language paper’s debut in 2009 (Figure 6.3). The fact that in 2013 it added an American print edition – presumably also state-funded – suggests
the CCP external propaganda authorities are satisfied with the Global Times’ work in shaping China’s international image.\textsuperscript{100}

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The main commonality between the Chinese and English “versions” is their ambiguous identity as channels for the ruling party’s signals. Because its pronouncements are regulated, rather than simply controlled, any given instance of belligerence may be a result of commercial sensationalism, yet being a People’s Daily subsidiary, every instance is openly and unmistakeably officially connected. Like the rhetoric of the PLA’s media hawks, Huanqiu Shibao editorials have frequently framed domestic and international interpretations of China’s policies. That the group continues to operate a system of rewards for citations in foreign media strongly implies the authorities’ approval of its messages featuring on international observers’ agendas.\textsuperscript{101} Chairman Xi Jinping’s visit to the People’s Daily group in early 2016 even hinted at an appreciation for this work among the top leadership. Carefully edited, high-rotation state television footage showed Xi pointing to the Huanqiu Shibao and saying, “I also get that paper.”\textsuperscript{102}
“Grassroots deterrence”

We have seen that Chinese party-state concepts developed since the early 2000s have conceptualized public opinion as a weapon and a resource for the state’s foreign and security policies, provided the risks inherent can be managed. But if so, what kind of “weapon” is public opinion in a dispute like the South China Sea? What can China’s diplomacy do with such a “resource”? Two strategic functions are well established in the theory and practice of diplomacy. First, domestic social support is generally regarded as a key condition for victory in a conflict. As detailed above, getting citizens to understand the state’s foreign policy, and to support a war effort should conflict occur, are basic objectives of CCP public diplomacy and public opinion warfare. A second familiar idea is that public opinion can become a useful “hands-tying” constraint from unwanted compromise, or set “forbidden zones” that ease foreign pressure for concessions, in line with Schelling’s theory of strategic commitment and Putnam’s two-level game model of international bargaining. PRC officials have long emphasized the constraints they face from public opinion in on-record discussions and negotiations dating back to the 1990s. On the issue of Taiwan independence, the strength of PRC citizens’ sentiments has probably helped establish the PRC’s “red line,” that is, the perception that if Taiwan were to declare independence, Beijing would have to fight or else face a fatal loss of domestic legitimacy.

On the South China Sea issue, state-led popular nationalism generates a different kind of “grassroots deterrence.” Rather than being based on hands-tying, or establishing a red line of resolve to fight in a specific scenario, channeling and risk management of nationalist sentiment deters opposition by raising a remote but plausible chance of uncontrollable escalation across an unspecified set of circumstances. PRC officials have long suggested the potentially escalatory influence of the public on its policy towards the US and Japan. The well-travelled story of the MFA receiving packages of calcium pills (钙片) from citizens typifies Chinese diplomacy’s promotion of the idea not only of its own subjection to nationalist discipline, but also the possibility of a domestically-driven hardening of PRC policy. Many English-language analysts who warn of the irrational influence of
Grassroots deterrence

...rising nationalism on Chinese foreign policy cite interviews with officials as the source of this idea. Until recently, however, these discussions do not appear to have often involved the South China Sea.

Since around 2009, PRC officials have increasingly presented nationalist public opinion as both a driver of Beijing’s increased assertiveness in the South China Sea, and of potentially irrational escalation, perhaps even to military conflict (see Appendix 6). In March 2009, an MFA departmental Director-General urged the US to cut back its maritime surveillance activities in the wake of the Impeccable incident because they were “creating pressure from Internet users and others for the PRC government to respond.” In June 2011, against the backdrop of highly agitated public opinion detailed in Chapter 5, Vice Foreign Minister Cui Tiankai told a group of foreign reporters that some countries were “playing with fire” in the South China Sea, before adding that “the Chinese public is following very closely whether the United States will adopt a just and objective position.” In a May 2013 interview with Foreign Affairs, Cui characterized China’s assertive maritime actions from 2011 onwards as a direct result of public opinion, stating “we had to respond because these issues concern China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, and there is strong public sentiment on these issues.” Senior officials Fu Ying and Wu Shicun attribute China’s “countermeasures” in the Scarborough Shoal incident to “print and digital media in China, triggering off an outcry among the Chinese general public.”

These and many other officials’ remarks have drawn upon, and reinforced, a narrative of Chinese public opinion’s escalatory influence that has been promoted more explicitly in PRC external propaganda. In particular, PLA media hawks and the Global Times have frequently emphasized the risk of domestically-driven escalation if China’s assertive maritime activities are interfered with. A famous 2011 Global Times editorial warned other countries in the South China Sea to beware the “higher risk of serious clashes” as “public sentiment will influence China’s future foreign policy.” In a line that has continued to be quoted by media and academics around the world, it declared: “If these countries don’t want to change their ways with China, they will need to prepare for the sounds of...
Editorials since that time have repeatedly linked popular nationalism to the risk of uncontrolled escalation in China’s maritime disputes. In May 2016, following US complaints of an “unsafe” interception of one of its spy planes over the South China Sea, the tabloid declared that while a mid-air collision had been successfully contained in the past:

“The Chinese public will no longer accept a similar result to the 2001 accident. . . The rise of public sentiment will impose enormous pressures on the Chinese government.”

If an incident were to occur, the paper warned, “simmering distrust between China and the US will probably explode.” Like the paper’s own belligerent editorials, and the PLA pundits’ own hawkish posturing, this “bad cop” image of an irrationally nationalistic Chinese public gives the PRC’s foreign adversaries good reason to act with restraint, creating breathing space for China’s “good cop” officials.

This is not to suggest everyone within the PRC party-state system agrees that the benefits of channeling nationalist sentiment towards foreign policy issues outweigh the damage to China’s primary peaceful image, or are worth the domestic risks. Former MFA official Wu Jianmin, for example, repeatedly and passionately criticized the Global Times and its “narrow-minded nationalism” for harming China’s peaceful image and putting undue pressure on PRC diplomats. Nor do China’s propaganda authorities, which are also responsible for domestic ideological stability and China’s image of peaceful intent, necessarily agree on whether guiding nationalist sentiments upward and outward is a net benefit in specific instances. Following the US “freedom of navigation” patrol near a Chinese-held disputed reef in the South China Sea in October 2015, the Global Times, amidst a series of remarkably subdued editorials, called on China’s decisionmakers to “believe more in the rationality and wisdom of the masses, and use the extreme elements to put pressure on America.” While the advice may have gone unheeded on that occasion, there is plenty of evidence suggesting that this is precisely what the PRC officials have done, both in other specific cases, and over the long term.
Grassroots deterrence

According to diplomats from the Philippines, Vietnam and the US interviewed between 2012 and 2014, Chinese officials routinely alluded to rising nationalist pressure in exchanges on the issue, even opening meetings with such observations. Some or all of these statements may reflect genuine beliefs; being expressed through diplomatic and propaganda channels, it is hard to know with certainty. The point is that the image of nationalist public opinion as an escalatory influence on CCP policy in the South China Sea is one that the ruling party has been increasingly keen to project to foreign audiences. Its effectiveness as a deterrent does not depend on deception, but on the uncertainty it may generate regarding the probability of, and thresholds for, mutually undesirable escalation.

PLA researchers have recognized the deterrent function of nationalist public opinion within China's maritime policy guideline of “rights defense and stability maintenance.” As noted above, PRC public opinion warfare holds domestic public opinion to be a genuine source of risk to China's domestic and international situations. Because these risks are real, we can understand the channeling of popular sentiments towards a foreign policy controversy, especially during a crisis, as form of brinkmanship that Schelling identified with a “threat that leaves something to chance,” pressuring the adversary by subjecting both sides to an increased chance of unwanted, irrational conflict. Yet the PRC’s “public opinion warfare” concept, like its approach to deterrence more generally, seeks to minimize risks to domestic stability and diplomatic flexibility. From a rationalist perspective, this should reduce the signal's effectiveness correspondingly. Why would Chinese popular nationalism influence the behaviour of adversaries if the state is working to minimize the risks, and maintain its own flexibility? Would this not, as Weiss's bargaining-based theory of authoritarian signaling suggests, simply reassure the adversary that the PRC is not serious about escalating?

Prospect theory suggests one reason why the deterrent effect of threats delivered by state-led popular nationalism might not diminish despite the state's minimization of the risks. A core insight of prospect theory is that humans are psychologically more inclined to take risks to prevent losses than to make identical
gains. When a state has made recent gains relative to its adversary – as China often has in the South China Sea – raising the prospect of uncontrolled, potentially disastrous escalation foregrounds an even-worse reference point to reframe the adversary's situation. As long as the threat is sufficiently salient to attract attention, and still plausible enough, despite the state’s risk management measures, to not be dismissed out of hand, then prospect theory would expect the likelihood of the adversary engaging in risky retaliation to diminish. Being loud, hostile, and emotional on an attention-grabbing mass scale, popular nationalism is well suited to this.

The partly visible, partly opaque nature of the networked authoritarian state's capabilities for managing public opinion offer two further reasons why state-led popular nationalism could deliver deterrence “on the cheap.” First, opaque risk management measures may allow the state to mitigate the risks of nationalist-driven escalation to a greater extent than adversaries appreciate. With much of their work being conducted behind closed doors, the CCP's security and propaganda authorities have superior intelligence on developments within China’s borders, and understand their own capabilities for managing public opinion better than outside observers do. This does not imply Beijing possesses anything like a perfect knowledge of the risks posed by Chinese nationalism, nor that it stays in total control of surges of public sentiment, just that it has a better grasp than its adversaries. Of course, if foreign observers overestimate Beijing’s secret risk management capabilities, then deterrence signals will likely fail. But at a minimum, raising an attention-grabbing grassroots threat on its “home turf” affords the state an informational advantage regarding the true level of risk, should the adversary decide to ignore the threat.

Second, rather than weakening a popular nationalist threat signal, the visible aspects of the state’s risk management help calibrate and clarify its content in ways that should make deterrence more likely. Deterrence not only requires a plausible threat, it also depends on credible reassurance that compliance will ease that threat. Absent any obvious sign of state management, a wave of jingoism could leave the adversary unsure as to whether it was a signal at all. If they concluded
that the calls for war were fundamentally spontaneous or beyond the state’s control, they would have little reason to believe that mere restraint on their own behalf would ease the situation. Just as importantly, openly managing the intensity of nationalist discourse clarifies that the state’s policy preferences are less hawkish than the nationalists’: that the buzz is not simply mobilization for a war that has already been decided upon. Visible risk management thus underscores the hybrid official/popular nature of a state-led popular nationalist phenomenon – almost under control but not quite – thereby projecting a calibrated combination of threat and reassurance potentially capable of generating “grassroots deterrence.”

Over the medium and long term, the PRC’s state-led popular nationalism creates reason for caution among China’s adversaries as they decide how to respond to its advances in the disputed area. In crisis situations, as the following case study will show, by channeling nationalist sentiments towards an issue while actively and openly managing the risks of doing so, Beijing has drawn on willing public participation in order to deter opposition to its advances, and achieve its goals of simultaneous “rights defense and stability maintenance.”

The Scarborough Shoal crisis

The tense standoff between the Philippines and China over Scarborough Shoal in April-May 2012 brought together many of the conditions favouring bottom-up popular nationalist influence on PRC policy in the South China Sea. It was easily the toughest test of the CCP’s ability to maintain control of popular nationalism on the South China Sea issue since the internet era began. First, it started with a fast-breaking event initiated by the Philippines, giving Beijing limited time to prepare its information management strategies. Second, it directly involved the personal wellbeing and interests of Chinese citizens, making it an emotive, personalized issue around which popular sentiments are naturally apt to coalesce, independently of state intentions. Third, public attention and mobilization levels rose to unprecedented heights, with greatly elevated public demand for information, intense online commenting activity, and various kinds of nationalist
mobilization. In addition to hacking attacks, and a citizens’ petition movement, the small-scale street protests outside the Philippines embassy in May 2012 were probably the PRC’s first against a Southeast Asian claimant country. Fourth, the incident coincided with a double dose of elite tensions, with the Bo Xilai scandal still unresolved and the 18th Party Congress looming. In short, if the party was going to lose control of popular nationalism on the South China Sea issue, existing models of bottom-up nationalist influence on policy suggest this would be the most likely case.

Two key limitations restrict the inferential leverage the Scarborough Shoal case can generate. First, unlike the 2007-2008 cases examined in Chapter 4, Scarborough Shoal cannot be considered representative of the more general changes in China’s policy during the period under study. Based on the events data, a full explanation of China’s behaviour between 2012 and 2016 would require tracing the causes of, among other cases, the PRC’s assertive actions around Second Thomas Shoal from 2013, confrontations with Indonesia around the Natuna Islands, the HYSY-981 oil rig confrontation with Vietnam in 2014, and the massive island building project in the Spratly Islands that commenced in 2014. Space constraints only permit close tracing of one. Given no bottom-up nationalist has been identified in the cases examined so far, the most feasible method by which to examine nationalist public opinion’s influence on policy during this period, and the CCP’s ability to manage and make use of it, is to make a focused study of a case in which conditions are most favourable to bottom-up influence. All else equal, popular nationalism is less likely to have had an independent effect on other cases of assertive policy change in the South China Sea around this time.

The second limitation is that the strong display of popular nationalism during the Scarborough Shoal standoff, and the observed positive outcome for China, also make it a relatively likely case for the strategic channeling/risk management model proposed in Chapter 1. In crisis situations the state may have more to gain from drawing the power of popular nationalism issue towards the issue. During more normal times, the state’s approach is likely to be more reactive, or even laissez-faire, especially where domestic priorities dominate the
leadership’s political agenda. Thus, further research will be required to ascertain the degree of strategic channeling and risk management that may occur during more normal times. In short, the Scarborough Shoal case helps illuminate the role that the public can play in China’s foreign policy at particular moments of heightened tensions, but it does not mean that popular nationalism has this role all the time. The Conclusion that follows this chapter will pick up some broader questions about the conditions under which the state will or will not invite popular nationalist participation in the service of its foreign policy goals.

Events

On the morning of April 10, 2012, the Philippines’ naval ship BRP *Gregorio del Pilar* arrived at Scarborough Shoal, an isolated atoll around 125nm off the northern coast of Luzon, to investigate a group of Chinese fishing boats spotted two days earlier by an aerial patrol. After anchoring outside the entrance to the sprawling shallow lagoon, the warship dispatched armed soldiers on dinghies to investigate. This “Visit, Board, Search and Seizure” operation against the eight fishing vessels found large quantities of endangered giant clams and corals, as shown in pictures released by the Philippines military. After collecting this photographic evidence, the Philippine soldiers returned to the ship, apparently with the intention of detaining and processing the crews the following day. However, late in the afternoon, two CMS patrol boats arrived and took up positions between the *Gregorio del Pilar* and the fishing boats, physically preventing their arrest. Thus began a two-month standoff at sea that ended when the Philippines withdrew its ships ahead of a typhoon, leaving China in control of the disputed atoll. Thereafter, Manila refrained from sending its ships back to Scarborough Shoal, while their Chinese counterparts maintained a constant presence. China emerged with effective control over the shoal.

Two aspects of China’s behaviour in the Scarborough crisis manifested assertive changes in PRC behaviour in the South China Sea. First was the decision to intervene to physically oppose the arrest of the fishing crews, creating the standoff.
A string of comparable cases of Philippine authorities detaining PRC fisherfolk at the atoll occurred between 1997 and 2006, but Beijing had never attempted to impose punishment beyond diplomatic protests in response. The decision to send patrol boats to prevent the arrests was therefore a clear assertive change in China’s behaviour, forming what will be referred to in this case study as the April standoff. The second change was China’s successful imposition of administrative control over Scarborough Shoal. According to official Philippine records, PRC law enforcement ships began using coercive tactics from April 28 onwards. By May 2, the number of PRC law enforcement ships and fishing boats was increasing, and by May 7 China was denying access to Filipino fishing craft. This was accompanied by escalating rhetoric and informal economic sanctions, with PRC authorities “quarantining” hundreds of tons of bananas from the Philippines and suspending tourism booked through state-run travel agencies, which have a near-monopoly of the outbound tourism market. The period in which this series of coercive economic and on-water moves were implemented is referred to below as the May escalation. The ongoing enforcement of the policies established at this time has involved numerous subsequent coercive actions, including the use of water cannons against Philippine vessels approaching the shoal (see Appendix 2).

The incident has been seen as a major turning point in China’s policy in the South China Sea. However, as explained above, and also in Chapter 3, such an assumption risks overlooking the more fundamental changes in China’s behaviour that began in 2007. In this regard, one particularly crucial detail is that, based on Philippine records, China’s responses to this type of situation at Scarborough Shoal had not been tested since 2006. This raises the possibility that China might have reacted in a similar way if such an incident had occurred in earlier years. In other words, Beijing’s willingness to use coercion to contend with Manila for control of the shoal may have existed earlier, but without being tested and revealed.

In light of the highly visible wave of nationalist expression that coincided with these events, many commentators have reasonably concluded that popular nationalism was a key cause of China’s assertiveness at Scarborough Shoal. However, given the basic consistency of China’s actions with patterns that began in
Grassroots deterrence

2007, with no relationship to public opinion, the claim that popular nationalism was a key driver of the change in China’s behaviour needs rigorous investigation. While China’s leaders surely gave consideration to the public’s response, the strength of a number of explanatory factors outlined below – power shifts, fisheries resources, the UNCLOS, sub-state “policy entrepreneurship,” elevated symbolic interests, and even perhaps the rise of Xi Jinping – suggests that any impact of public opinion on Beijing’s behaviour was marginal, not decisive. There is, meanwhile, solid evidence that the state deliberately and strategically channeled popular sentiments towards the issue in order to help deter opposition the new status quo at the shoal, thereby integrating the participation of nationalist public opinion into a model example of the “unity of rights defense and stability maintenance.”

Causes

The Scarborough Shoal standoff resulted from a complex confluence of circumstances. First of all, PRC fisheries authorities had been “actively guiding” China’s fishing fleet to head to the atoll since at least 2008. The fishing boats at the shoal in April 2012, at least two of which were skippered by squad leaders from the Tanmen Maritime Militia (海上民兵), had traveled there with the aid of state subsidies. But the trigger for the confrontation was the Philippines military’s decision to dispatch its largest naval vessel to investigate the Chinese fishing activities first spotted by an airborne patrol on April 8. This response, in turn, was made possible by the US’s provision of the vessel, a refurbished coastguard cutter, which had been commissioned into the Philippines Navy in December 2011. The next key link in the causal chain was the emergency distress call system that had recently been installed on the PRC fishing boats. This enabled the crews to instantaneously alert authorities in Hainan of situation using the Beidou satellite navigation system that had, like Manila’s new naval flagship, entered service in December 2011. The Philippines naval personnel’s decision to return to the Gregorio del Pilar then created a narrow time window within
which PRC maritime law enforcement could arrive to prevent the arrests. Finally, the ability of Haijian-75 and Haijian-84 to accomplish this task was a direct result of their being in the area on a “regular rights defense patrol” at the time.\textsuperscript{146} This program of regular patrolling, introduced in 2007, had been strengthened in the Scarborough Shoal area in 2009 and 2011.\textsuperscript{147}

Beneath this array of proximate causes, China’s increased material capabilities – economic, military, and technological – were a major factor behind the alteration in its behaviour since 2006. The intervening years had seen a major shift in the balance of overall national power towards China through a serious economic crisis in the United States, the Philippines’ treaty ally, while high-speed growth continued in the PRC. This could only have increased Beijing’s confidence in its ability to successfully prevent the arrest of the fishing personnel in the April standoff, and to safely enforce exclusive control at the shoal in the May escalation. It is notable in this regard that Beijing began increasing its on-water presence almost immediately after the US-Philippines Foreign and Defense Ministers’ (2+2) meeting on April 30, at which Washington declined to take a position on the administrative control of Scarborough Shoal or declare that it was covered under the two countries’ defense treaty.\textsuperscript{148} The role of the newly operational Beidou satellite system, with its unique SMS text message transmission function, showed how improved technological capabilities augment a state’s ability to administer disputed maritime spaces. And the use of economic punishment against the Philippines was made more appealing and effective by the favourable change in the overall balance of power.\textsuperscript{149} With the growth of these general and specific capabilities, it is not surprising that the relevant CCP policymakers’ attitude towards the issue had changed since 2006. Indeed, a range of evidence suggests the PRC’s interest in the shoal had been increasing since 2007.\textsuperscript{150}

China’s specific law enforcement capabilities developed for the UNCLOS era directly enabled the change in its behaviour. The large, fast patrol boats that arrived at short notice to rescue the fishing crews were both recent additions to the CMS fleet. Commissioned in 2010, Haijian-75 was the first cutter from the second stage of the shipbuilding project approved by the State Council back in
The other, *Haijian-84*, was the second vessel completed in the same project, and had entered service in 2011. These long-planned capabilities, built specifically to meet the challenges and opportunities of the UNCLOS era, were vital to the “regular rights defense patrol” program, under which these patrol ships were located relatively close to the scene of the incident in April. And with Sino-Japanese tensions rising in the East China Sea, far to the north, the new high-endurance maritime law enforcement ships were surely crucial to the subsequent lockdown of the shoal from May onwards, which required their constant presence.\(^{152}\)

The conspicuous involvement of fishing activities in precipitating these events suggests the isolated atoll’s aquatic resources may have been another motivation for the PRC’s actions in 2012. Declining coastal fish stocks created incentives for additional production in disputed waters, and this surely contributed to the state-directed increase in far-seas fishing, including at Scarborough Shoal, from 2008.\(^{153}\) Fishing activities do appear to have increased after the standoff, with Philippine aerial patrols reporting “hundreds” of Chinese boats at the shoal after the PRC took control.\(^{154}\) However, this was not necessarily a primary objective of China’s decisions to initiate the standoff and take control of the shoal. Given the CCP’s long-held belief in the value of fishing activities to intelligence gathering and “embodifying presence,” any resource exploitation motivation was probably intertwined with the strategic imperatives of controlling a strategically important sea area, and establishing a legal justification for doing so. In fact, according to Chinese fishermen, voyages to Scarborough Shoal are unprofitable without state subsidies.\(^{155}\) This suggests that while the increased material value of the disputed possession may have contributed to the changes in China’s policy, control of the valuable fisheries may have been more of a by-product than an input into the PRC’s actions.\(^{156}\)

Bureaucratic “policy entrepreneurship” is also a plausible explanation in the formation of the *April standoff*, but not the *May escalation*. Equipped with a powerful new fleet of long-range patrol boats, and now with several years of precious experience operating them in international confrontations, but facing the
prospect of a merger among PRC maritime law enforcement fleets, the SOA was trying to raise its profile around the time of the incident. Shortly after China emerged victorious from the standoff, SOA party secretary Liu Cigui was understandably keen to claim credit, telling Phoenix TV:

”On one hand we rushed to the scene, and on the other hand we made reports according to protocol. . . We very quickly did some research, and decided very quickly to do a special operation. Without this kind of rapid decisionmaking, the chance may have been missed.”

Thus, while the incident was not the result of adventurism by frontline units, it is possible that the decision to divert the CMS ships to initiate the April standoff was a unilateral act by Liu and his SOA colleagues aimed at narrow institutional or personal gain. Liu, who was passed up for promotion at the 2012 CCP Congress, eventually become Governor (and Deputy Party Secretary) of Hainan province in 2015, evidence of his ambition. On the other hand, given the situation involved a capable military warship on the Philippines side, it is somewhat unlikely he would have done so without authorization from the PLA Navy, the ultimate security guarantor for his civilian law enforcement agency’s operations.

Although blocking the arrest of the fishing crews boosted the SOA’s profile in line with its bureaucratic interests at the time, the effect on China’s actions may have been immaterial. There is no sign that any other PRC foreign policy actor wanted the issue handled differently. The MFA’s public response, discussed in detail later, immediately laid down an official public narrative about the CMS operation. This implied either cooperation between the Foreign Ministry and maritime law enforcement over the operation, or coordination above the ministerial level. Indeed, it is quite possible the decision to form the April standoff may have taken at the highest level of leadership. In the May escalation phase, high-level coordination of China’s actions was readily apparent. Taking control of the disputed shoal, while applying economic pressure to the Philippines, required cooperation among diverse actors ranging from the PLA, MFA, and SOA, to the Fisheries Administration, Customs Administration, and state-run tourism
Grassroots deterrence

enterprises. This probably would have required involvement from central leaders; if not, then it implied a strong consensus across this diverse array of sub-state agencies regarding the assertive approach taken. Thus, sub-state actors' narrow bureaucratic interests could plausibly have played a role in creating the April standoff, but not the May escalation.

Heightened symbolic political interests may have been a factor without any involvement from public opinion. The events coincided with serious leadership turmoil, as well as competition for positions decided at the 18th CCP Congress later in the year. Politburo member Bo Xilai had been placed under detention in mid-March, and was officially suspended from the Politburo on April 10 pending an investigation into “serious disciplinary violations.”161 The precise circumstances surrounding his downfall remain shrouded in secrecy, but Bo appears to have been positioning himself for a seat on the next Politburo Standing Committee, with the support of some powerful figures including security czar Zhou Yongkang. There is little doubt that other members of the top leadership, including Premier Wen Jiabao, opposed Bo's rise.162 This heightened political insecurity and the upcoming party congress may have made CCP policymakers disinclined to allow the Scarborough Shoal issue to be resolved on unfavourable or even neutral terms, either for fear of coming under political attack, or due to the political opportunities that could be grasped by striking a hardline stance at this time.

The likelihood of elite contention as a driver of China’s actions depends on who made the relevant decisions. While it is not certain who authorized the initiation of the standoff in April, political prospects could have been a consideration for Liu Cigui, the PLA Navy’s commanders, or the CMC leaders, if they were the decisionmakers who gave the green light.163 The same considerations could have contributed to the subsequent escalation in May, which, as noted, probably reflected either the will of the top leadership or a broad consensus. However, there are three reasons why the role of elevated symbolic value as a driver of China’s actions cannot be assumed. First, China’s interest in the Scarborough area had been growing since at least 2007, so the earlier willingness to handle Philippine interference with PRC operations diplomatically may have been absent from that
time onward. Second, there were no outward signs that the issue featured in leadership tensions or struggles.\(^{164}\) Third, Hu Jintao, as the outgoing leader, had less to gain or lose politically at this point than his colleagues. Thus, if Hu approved China’s actions at Scarborough Shoal, this probably had little to do with the elevated political-symbolic significance of the disputed possession at this time.\(^{165}\)

Still, it is clear that the conditions were in place for the operation of “elite contention” models of popular nationalist influence on foreign policy, which will be tested in the next section.

Declining claim strength and the tendencies associated with Chinese strategic culture are unlikely to have been important. It is difficult to characterize the Scarborough Shoal incident as a case of China attempting to save a rapidly weakening claim. The Philippines’ action against the fishing boats was certainly a challenge to China’s position, especially given the political nature of the fishing activities. However, as we have seen, China’s ability to project naval power over the area and its overall administrative presence had both significantly improved in the years before the standoff. The PRC’s assertiveness in the Scarborough Shoal incident was not a probe, as Beijing stood firm when its actions encountered resistance. Other aspects of what might be regarded as strategic culture, such as the Maoist concept of “people’s war at sea” using fisherfolk as frontline combatants, or Sun Zi’s “winning without fighting” maxim, were arguably evident. But while these may explain some elements of the methods used, they cannot explain China’s altered behaviour compared with the past.

Finally, there is some tenuous evidence suggesting Xi Jinping may have been involved in handling China’s response to the Scarborough Shoal crisis, although the opacity of CCP decisionmaking means makes this difficult to rule in or out. According to Chinese officials interviewed by Linda Jakobson, Xi was put in charge of a new top-level maritime policy coordination body some time in “mid-2012,” and multiple sources indicate that he oversaw the PRC’s response to the crisis over the Diaoyu (Senkaku) Islands later that year.\(^{166}\) In 2013, Xi also chose to associate himself prominently with the Maritime Militia company at the centre of the Scarborough Shoal confrontations, suggesting a possible personal claim on the
Grassroots deterrence

On the other hand, Beijing's assertive on-water actions in the 2012 incident were quite consistent with the direction PRC maritime policy had taken under Hu from 2007 onwards – both in terms of increased interest in Scarborough Shoal and the use of coercion in South China Sea more generally. So even if Xi was in charge, another leader would not necessarily have handled it differently. Moreover, if Xi did coordinate the operation, it was one that relied heavily on capabilities developed under Jiang and Hu, including patrol vessels, politicized fishing fleets, and the Beidou satellite system. Arguably the most notable difference with the past, as shown below, was the deliberate involvement of popular nationalist opinion to buttress China’s policy – although even this arguably carried forward the approach previously seen at the height of tensions in mid-2011.

Official comments

April standoff: The voice of the party-state was ever-present throughout the Scarborough Shoal standoff. The Foreign Ministry’s official transcripts show that the MFA spokespersons commented on the issue in 29 consecutive press conferences from April 11 to May 28, and in four separate ad hoc statements. Spokesperson Liu Weimin addressed the situation in the MFA’s April 11 news conference, the first since the standoff began. The briefing opened with a question from a state media reporter about whether China had made diplomatic representations over “so-called law enforcement” by the Philippines at Scarborough Shoal. Liu stated that China had indeed issued “stern representations” over the so-called law enforcement, and designated it a violation of China’s sovereignty. Having answered the question, he added: “China’s relevant departments have already dispatched government vessels to Huangyan Island waters, and the Chinese fisherfolk and fishing boats are safe.” Over the following week, Liu repeatedly alluded to the dispatch of government ships to the area to protect Chinese fishing, and demanded the Philippines withdraw its ships. The rapid initial response detailing China’s on-water actions, the seemingly pre-arranged question raising the issue, and the seriousness of the demand that the
Philippines withdraw from the area, suggested coordination between the MFA, maritime law enforcement, and propaganda units over the issue. It also showed the party-state’s intention to publicize its assertive actions to the domestic public, consistent with the “nationalist legitimacy” models of bottom-up influence on policy.

After the initial series of tough statements, the tone and content of China’s official comments moderated as diplomatic negotiations proceeded. From April 19 onwards, the MFA stopped explicitly demanding the Philippines withdraw its ships, declared the situation to be “easing,” emphasized a diplomatic resolution, and focused on rebutting the Philippines’ attempts to define the standoff as an international problem. The PLA also made its first public comments, scrupulously dispelling any hint that it might be pushing to take action of its own volition. Defense Minister and CMC member General Liang Guanglie stated on April 24: “At present we have the diplomatic departments and relevant maritime departments dealing with this issue, and I believe they will do a good job.” Ministry of Defense spokesperson Geng Yansheng, repeated this sentiment in the PLA’s monthly press conference on April 26, and affirmed that the Chinese Navy would “closely cooperate with departments such as Fisheries and CMS to jointly safeguard the state’s maritime rights and interests.” PLA Navy Deputy Chief of Staff Li Shihong affirmed on April 30 that the navy would act only on the basis of the CMC’s instructions. In short, while they informed the public of the assertive actions the state was taking, party and military officials, singing from the same sheet, kept their rhetoric restrained through the remainder of April.

May escalation: Early in May, while Beijing’s ships moved to lock down control of the shoal, its official comments continued to emphasize its desire for the restoration of diplomatic negotiations over the standoff, which had been suspended by the Philippine side since around April 27. Over the first few days of May, the rising number of Chinese patrol and fishing boats attracted heavy coverage in the Philippine press, but the MFA declined to confirm this when asked. On May 7, as Filipino activist groups called for protests outside Chinese embassies around the world, the PRC’s official rhetoric dramatically hardened.
Vice Foreign Minister Fu Ying delivered a stern warning to the Philippines' diplomats in Beijing. A summary of the meeting posted on the MFA website read, in Chinese:

“Fu Ying said, the Huangyan Island incident has been going nearly a month, and should have been quelled long ago. I [sic] summoned you twice last month and demanded the Philippines side calm down and not take further actions to enlarge or complicate the issue. However, the Philippine side has obviously not realized the serious mistakes it is making, and on the contrary has redoubled its constant efforts to magnify the issue, not only continuing to send government ships to the Huangyan Island lagoon, but also continuously making wrong remarks, misleading the domestic and international publics, and inciting popular sentiments, severely harming the atmosphere of bilateral relations. We cannot be optimistic about the situation.”

Most ominously, the MFA account cited Fu as saying China “has made every kind of preparation to respond to further enlargement of the situation by the Philippines.” Over the following days, with tensions at a peak, the MFA repeated Fu’s language of “serious mistakes,” reiterating the accusation that the Philippines government was inciting anti-China protests, and warning of “strong reactions and concerns among Chinese people at home and abroad.”

In contrast to its reticence in early May, Beijing’s official comments now affirmed the hardline measures it was taking. On May 10, the MFA implicitly endorsed the cancellation of Chinese outbound tourism, effectively informing the public of the informal economic sanctions. The Customs Administration, meanwhile, declared it was strengthening inspections on Philippine fruit imports – a development that had been reported in the Philippine media more than a week earlier. On May 23, after reports emerged of large numbers of Chinese fishing vessels at the shoal, the MFA spokesperson explained: “The Philippines recently made provocative moves in Huangyan waters, and China has, in a targeted manner, strengthened administrative control measures (管控措施).” This once again showed the
party-state's intention to make its assertive actions known to the public. Perhaps sensing the end of the standoff was imminent, the MFA on May 24 reinstated its demand that the Philippines withdraw its ships from the lagoon, which it had not made since April 18. The military's spokesman echoed this in the MOD press conference on May 31.

As the crisis drew to a close, China's official comments proclaimed the success of its resolute stance. Three days after Philippines ship left on June 3, the MFA made what amounted to victory declaration:

"Since April 10, when the Philippine warships harassed Chinese fishermen, causing the Huangyan Island incident, China has made solemn representations with the Philippine side and sent government vessels to the area to conduct surveillance and administration, making the Philippine side withdraw most of its ships except for one Philippine government vessel that remained in the lagoon. China has been committed to solving the situation through diplomatic consultations and has worked hard on the Philippine side, and the remaining vessel finally left the lagoon on June 3.

... "At present, Chinese fishing boats are operating normally in the lagoon, free from disturbance, and Chinese government vessels are continuing their management and service of the Chinese fishing boats and fisherfolk in the waters of Huangyan Island. Meanwhile, China is continuing its communication with the Philippine side on how to properly handle the Huangyan Island incident and improve bilateral relations."

In contrast with the pre-2012 cases, then, Beijing's public comments on Scarborough Shoal did inform the public of the state's assertive actions. All the bottom-up models of the nationalism-policy relationship therefore pass the first hoop test. Still, both the Foreign Ministry and the PLA consistently emphasized that Beijing's objective was a diplomatic solution. At the height of public outrage, on May 10, the MFA announced that diplomatic talks had been reopened, and the
Grassroots deterrence

MOD issued a statement the following day explicitly denying rumours that several PLA units had “entered a state of war preparedness.” Further investigation of the domestic discourse will be necessary to discern whether the wave of popular nationalism was a cause of Beijing’s assertive policy shift, or an effect.

State media

April standoff: In the initial phase of the standoff, PRC state media treatment of the issue mirrored the MFA’s daily remarks. Coverage began in the late morning of April 11, when three state-run media outlets posted reports, citing foreign media and information from China’s embassy in Manila, that Chinese and Philippines ships were in a standoff at Scarborough Shoal. At this stage, the CMS ships had already been at the lagoon for around 18 hours, contradicting Fu Ying and Wu Shicun’s claim that the PRC had sent its ships to intervene due to public outrage generated by media coverage of the photographs of the incident. MFA spokesman Liu Weimin’s remarks that afternoon’s regular press conference, defining the Philippines’ actions as a violation of China’s sovereignty and confirming the operation to protect the fishermen, prompted a flurry of state media reporting. The news was announced on CCTV’s national 10pm Evening News bulletin, which is produced by the same highly trusted office as the authoritative 7pm broadcast. The public treatment of the issue at this point was evidently not just the preference of the propaganda apparatus, as it involved information from the Manila embassy and the MFA and SOA in Beijing. The CCTV 10pm news subsequently broadcast stories on the standoff on 4 out of 8 nights between April 11 and 18, a strong sign of the party centre’s intention to have domestic audiences following developments. Meanwhile, at least three Huanqiu Shibao editorials raised the prospect of military conflict over the issue.

China’s diplomacy over Scarborough Shoal appeared to shift to a holding pattern ahead of the Philippines-US 2+2 meeting on April 30, which promised vital insights into Washington’s position. Still, authorities did not order the media to downplay the issue. In fact, there appears to have been a lack of guidance and information.
control around this time, with central state media outlets carrying misleading reports that resulted in highly unfavourable coverage of the party-state’s policy online. On April 23, for example, central state news wires reported information supplied by the Manila embassy stating that *Yuzheng-310* – the Fisheries flagship that had arrived on the scene with major media fanfare four days earlier – had “left Huangyan Island,” along with CMS’s *Haijian-84*, leaving only one Chinese government vessel there. Embassy spokesperson Zhang Hua was quoted saying this was a demonstration of China’s willingness to negotiate diplomatically.\textsuperscript{187} This story was repudiated the following day – both ships remained within 12nm of the shoal – but not before commercial online news sites had presented it as a backdown in the face of Philippine aggression.\textsuperscript{188} The most likely explanation for this combination of misleading official information, loose state media reporting, and unchecked sensationalist impulses is that the authorities in Beijing were preoccupied with internal matters, perhaps related to Bo Xilai. After this short period of relative chaos, state media reporting tightened up, with relatively low-key remarks from MFA and MOD press conferences dominating mass media and online coverage for the next 10 days (see Appendix 5). There were also no *Huanqiu* editorials or *People’s Daily* commentaries on the subject between April 26 and May 7. At that point, however, a much bigger state media frenzy erupted.

**May escalation:** A detailed account of Vice Foreign Minister Fu Ying’s warnings about the Philippines’ “serious mistakes” and China’s “preparations” for further escalation was posted on the MFA website on May 8, triggering an intense burst of state media interest. A CNS report announced that the PRC’s Manila embassy had issued an “urgent notice” warning PRC citizens in the Philippines to stay indoors, only go out in groups and steer clear of “large-scale anti-Chinese protests.” CCTV broadcast the same news shortly afterwards, with the host concluding a live update by telling Manila correspondent Wang Lulu gravely, “stay safe.”\textsuperscript{189} A headline in the following day’s *People’s Daily* read, *Philippine side's actions can only reduce 'likelihood of peaceful solution of the incident’*, one of four Scarborough-related pieces on page 3 of the party mouthpiece. The *Huanqiu Shibao’s* editorial made the same point, with characteristic bombast: *Peace will be
Grassroots deterrence

A miracle if provocation lasts.\textsuperscript{190} CCTV’s 10pm news told the Chinese public that the events had provoked their “intense reaction and attention,” and in the current affairs program that followed, military commentator Yin Zhuo declared that China had the right to respond in kind to “violent actions” already taken by Manila.\textsuperscript{191}

The media wave peaked the following day, May 10, with Scarborough Shoal dominating the front pages across the country (Figure 6.4). Another threatening Huanqiu editorial was backed by an official military newspaper editorial headlined, Do not even think of taking one inch of Chinese territory.\textsuperscript{192}

After the MFA announced, on the afternoon of May 10, that the Philippines had reopened talks with the PRC embassy in Manila, a succession of state media articles downplayed the likelihood and desirability of conflict over the issue. This was typified by the abrupt reversal of the Huanqiu's editorial line on May 11. Just a day after declaring the PLA Navy would “decide the Philippines' punishment,” the tabloid now told readers the dispute did not merit their attention:

“...”The final solution lies in diplomacy and maritime law enforcement. Soon, public attention will shift to other hot issues. This is normal. We do not need to follow each radical statement uttered by Philippine officials.”\textsuperscript{193}

News reports that day emphasized the “scattered” and “small-scale” nature of the street protests in Manila, in contrast to the touted anti-Chinese violence.\textsuperscript{194} A May 12 commentary in the PLA mouthpiece argued hostile foreign forces were hoping China would “lose its rationality and go to war because of anger.”\textsuperscript{195} This coincided with a steep decline in the number of Chinese online media articles on the issue, as detected by the People’s Daily Online Public Opinion Monitoring Office.\textsuperscript{196}

With the exception of the brief period around April 23-24, the volume and pitch of mainstream media coverage closely and consistently tracked the state’s official comments. While the incident was made public on the same day Bo Xilai was suspended from the Politburo, state media made no attempt to direct public attention away from the domestic scandal, which remained conspicuously higher on the PRC news agenda than Scarborough Shoal. This disconfirms the idea that
Figure 6.4: PRC print media coverage of Scarborough Shoal, May 10-11, 2012. From top-left: Trampling over China’s bottom line, Philippines miscalculates, Weifang Evening News, May 10, p.1; Four focal points on the Huangyan Island, China Youth Daily, May 10 p.1; Six pieces of ironclad evidence that Huangyan Island belongs to China PLA Daily, May 10 p.3; Huangyan Island, Yellow Emperor Island China Newsweek, May 11 cover.
forming the April standoff was a diversionary nationalism card ploy.\textsuperscript{197} Such an explanation cannot be ruled out so easily in the May escalation, but the very brief duration of the media wave – less than 72 hours – seems inconsistent with a diversionary motivation. The fact that the media did not strongly promote the MFA’s claim of victory in early June also weakens the Frankenstein’s monster interpretation. If fear of nationalist criticism had been a significant driver of the assertive policy, we should have expected a concerted effort to promote its successes. Available measurements of public attention levels, discussed below, will offer a better idea of the likelihood of this explanation.

The period of chaotic media treatment in mid-to-late April is consistent with the possibility of bottom-up influence on foreign policy in conjunction with intra-party divisions, as per the “elite contention” models. The belligerence of the Huanqiu’s editorials, and the prominent activity of Major-General Luo Yuan (see Appendix 5), could be interpreted as signs of sub-state elements attempting to pressure the decisionmakers into tougher action, in line with the policy contention model.\textsuperscript{198} But the otherwise close correlation between state media coverage and the MFA’s tone, especially the sudden, consistent switch to a moderating line after Manila returned to the negotiating table on May 10, does not provide much support for the idea of serious elite divisions over the handling of the issue at that point. This observation is more suggestive of a state adopting an assertive policy, and then using the media to channel popular sentiments towards the issue to help secure it. As the following section shows, Baidu’s online search activity data on this wave of popular nationalism also support such an interpretation.

Public attention levels

April standoff: As already noted, the PRC’s on-water response was implemented at least 18 hours before the Chinese public found out about the incident, so it was not a response to public demand for action. If popular nationalism had an effect on the PRC’s actions in forming the standoff, it must have been mediated by the relevant decisionmakers’ anticipation of how citizens would respond when they found out.
Assessing the level of scrutiny on the party-state's South China Sea policy in early April 2012 depends on the reference point chosen. Compared to the last time a similar incident occurred at the shoal in 2006, scrutiny of the party-state’s response was bound to be higher (see Figure 6.5). In the early part of 2012, renewed discussion of Philippine South China Sea oil concessions, China’s detention of Vietnamese fishing crews in the Paracels, and the CCP’s launch of a multi-departmental project to elevate “map consciousness” regarding the South China Sea had attracted media coverage. But the main driver of public attention ahead of the Scarborough Shoal issue was a largely forgotten announcement by Hanoi – not Manila – that Russian state gas firm Gazprom was taking stakes in two offshore energy concessions in the disputed area.

Two further observations undermine a bottom-up *Frankenstein’s monster* explanation of the PRC’s decision to engage in the standoff at Scarborough Shoal. First, although demand for information on the South China Sea issue was on the rise over a long-term timeframe, it had been declining since the PRC adopted its more moderate policy from mid-2011. The level of bottom-up scrutiny was probably lower than in the second half of 2011, when China had handled at least one comparable fisheries incident in the Spratly Islands through diplomacy rather than force.
than on-water confrontation, despite heavy media reporting and online nationalist criticism. Second, Beijing’s similarly low-key handling of the arrest of a Chinese fishing crew in the Spratlys in May 2014, and their subsequent conviction in a Philippine court on poaching charges, demonstrated that non-confrontational responses to this type of incident remained possible for Beijing, even in the era of South China Sea nationalism, with similar levels of public attention to April 2012 (see Figure 6.5). Lower leadership tensions in 2014, and the “hardline” persona Xi Jinping had cultivated by that time, may have lowered the domestic costs of such an approach compared to 2012. But it demonstrated that the rise of internet-enabled popular nationalism on the South China Sea issue is not sufficient to prevent low-key handling of PRC-Philippines South China Sea fishing incidents. This strongly suggests that fear of the *Frankenstein’s monster* of nationalist public opinion did not force the CCP into the standoff.

If public opinion did play a role at this stage, it was probably related to elite politics at the time. Alignments between intra-elite political or policy groupings and the ongoing buzz of nationalist criticism could have contributed to China’s decision to engage the Philippines in the *April standoff*, in line with the *policy contention* model. The SOA’s publicity campaign, and the hawkish rhetoric of PLA propagandist Luo Yuan in early 2012, might be taken as hints of this. There is, however, no evidence that any intra-elite groups actually favoured a more moderate response than the one Beijing pursued, and the MFA’s rapid and detailed response suggested either top-level coordination or consensus on the matter. As such, a role for public opinion in deciding the policy outcome in April is plausible, but unlikely. Interestingly, although there was no *wave of nationalism* when the state decided to send in patrol boats in April, the two “elite contention” models could nonetheless dovetail together. The CCP’s defiance of online nationalism from the height of the mid-2011 wave of mobilizations may have had a cumulative political effect that rendered a moderate response untenable in the context of elevated elite tensions the following year. Again, though, given the strength of the various other rationales for Beijing’s approach described above, it is far from clear that the relevant decisionmakers would have handled the issue differently in the
absence of the political tensions and online nationalist vitriol. More importantly, as Beijing looked to resolve the standoff on its terms while avoiding the use of military force, nationalist public opinion became a valuable resource.

**Figure 6.6: Baidu search activity on “Huangyan Island” (Scarborough Shoal), April-June 2012**

**May escalation:** The daily value of the Baidu Search Index for “Huangyan Island” {黄岩岛} offers a focused indication of the online public’s interest in Scarborough Shoal throughout the crisis. As Figure 6.6 indicates, the alleged “withdrawal” of *Yuzheng-310* in late April did stimulate demand for information on the topic, several days before China launched its economic sanctions and lockdown of the shoal. But if a fear of nationalist criticism or instability had led the party-state into this escalation, these new measures should have been solidly publicized in order to ease the nationalist legitimacy threat. Instead, systematic headline searches of the Baidu News archive find just two online reports in the first week of May making prominent mention of Beijing’s new moves, both based on translations from Philippines media (see Appendix 5). Meanwhile, as the MFA repeatedly called for “peaceful consultations,” demand for information on the dispute was already dropping away. These observations are not consistent with China’s coercive actions as a play for nationalist legitimacy – either to rally citizens around the flag
Grassroots deterrence

and divert popular attention away from domestic problems, or to appease nationalist critics. Nor does it suggest a spontaneous buildup of popular pressure over the government’s lack of apparent action. On the contrary, it is quite clear that the wave of nationalism emerged when the state hardened its public stance, and opened up its information faucets to allow popular sentiments to flow towards the issue.

The public response to Vice Foreign Minister Fu Ying’s warnings, and the associated intensification of state media coverage, was many orders of magnitude larger than to the news of the incident itself or the apocryphal “withdrawal.” On May 9 and 10, as the MFA and central media repeatedly told audiences of their “intense reaction and attention” to the issue, the Huangyan Island BSI jumped to around 160,000, quadruple the highest value it had reached at the height of the agitation in April. This expansion of the attentive public brought with it a major broadening of public participation in online discourse. Scarborough Shoal became the leading topic on Sina Weibo, a largely user-driven platform where foreign affairs issues were typically much less prominent than on news portals and BBS forums. The hashtag #ChineseWarshipsApproachPhilippinesTerritory# brought the Scarborough issue to the top of the Weibo trending topics list – assuredly subject to close monitoring from censors – for about 24 hours between May 9 and 10.205 With this expanded participation, nationalist expression spread beyond its usual domain of online forums and comment platforms, finding voice in mass petitions, hacking attacks, consumer boycotts, and even attempts at street protests.206 In Beijing, small groups chanted slogans outside the Philippines embassy in what were probably the PRC’s first real-world demonstrations against a Southeast Asian country over the South China Sea issue.207

Repeating the pattern seen in mid-2011, the apparent hardening of the state’s position signaled to many normally inattentive citizens that military conflict could be imminent.208 Another similarity was the apparent relaxation of censorship at the height of the tensions. Some efforts to curtail extreme public expression had been apparent from around April 27 to May 7, but war talk subsequently seems to have been quite permissible.209 And again, as in 2011, when the state media
abruptly cut the volume of coverage and switched to a moderating tone, the wave quickly receded. This once again demonstrated the CCP’s ability to use moderate rhetoric to guide public agitation (and scrutiny) downwards, as well as its continued willingness to defy nationalist demands for war. The salience of the issue across a wide array of state media over several days, and the consistency with the MFA’s statements, strongly suggests the media surge was not a campaign by sub-state foreign policy actors or feuding factions seeking to enlist public opinion, per the policy contention model. And the fact that the wave of mobilization burst forth a week or more after Beijing’s policy shifted, not before, disconfirms bottom-up influence on the state’s policy via that mechanism.

The data presented here suggest that the wave of popular nationalism arose through a process of state-led channeling of popular nationalist sentiments toward the issue, especially between May 8 and May 10. The rise and fall of public attention levels, jingoistic online buzz, and mobilization over Scarborough Shoal in May 2012 closely tracked the tone of official information, the volume of state media coverage, and the posturing of state-connected opinion leaders. The wave swelled in response to a shift in state rhetoric that invited the public to participate in a show of national outrage, and it swiftly receded when the state signaled that standing down was now in the nation’s interests. It was not a spontaneous response to external developments – but that does not mean it was insincere. It
Grassroots deterrence

was constituted by millions of self-directed actions by networked, nationalist citizens who genuinely wanted China to prevail over the Philippines, and in many cases probably believed their shows of patriotic fervour could help realize this.\textsuperscript{210} The next section argues such a belief would, in fact, be justified. The CCP’s opening of these floodgates of public sentiment, combined with careful and in some ways innovative management of the risks of doing so, helped to deter potential challenges to China’s assertive “rights defense,” thereby simultaneously securing regional “stability maintenance.”

\textit{Strategic channeling and risk management}

As the wave of popular nationalism swelled, two arms of the party-state responsible for external communications repeatedly drew attention to the escalatory pressure from China’s citizens. While Beijing’s diplomats have often emphasized this in their interactions with Philippine counterparts behind closed doors, now MFA spokesperson Hong Lei publicly repeated the message that the Philippines had “triggered strong reaction and concerns from the Chinese people” verbatim in successive press conferences on May 9 and 10.\textsuperscript{211} External propaganda content elaborated on the theme. Xinhua’s English service ran a full article on the public’s reaction and its implications under the headline, \textit{China outraged by Philippines’ provocation}. Citing a commentary in the \textit{People’s Daily Overseas Edition}, the article pointed out: “China is completely free to tackle the Huangyan Island incident in a different way.”\textsuperscript{212} In its May 9 editorial, \textit{Peace will be a miracle if provocation lasts}, the \textit{Global Times} warned that, given the Chinese public’s hardline policy preferences, the international community “should not be completely surprised” if it “escalates into a military clash.”\textsuperscript{213} Major-General Luo Yuan’s busy schedule continued: \textit{Maj-Gen Luo China won’t ‘abandon’ war option} was his second bellicose article to be translated and carried on the main English-language news portal affiliated with the SCIO (CCP Central External Propaganda Office).\textsuperscript{214} As Hua and Yu write, the hardline commentaries “gave audiences, especially foreign audiences, ambiguous transmission of information, implying
many readings,” and thereby “enriched and expanded the Chinese side’s position and the expression of public will.” What, then, were China’s goals during this period, and how could public opinion help achieve them?

The PRC’s key aim in the May 8-10 period was preventing further escalation as it locked down control around the shoal. On April 27, the Philippines DFA announced the suspension of diplomatic talks with the PRC’s Manila embassy, accusing it of failing to relay accurate information to Beijing. PRC maritime law enforcement began to harass Philippine ships from April 28 onwards, and began building up its own ship numbers from May 2 at the latest. On May 7, Philippine officials said China’s large law enforcement vessels were using floodlights to drive Filipino fishing boats from the lagoon, and fishermen reported being stalked by PRC law enforcement personnel on rubber boats carrying rifles. The same day, China issued an urgent warning to PRC citizens in the Philippines to stay inside due to expected anti-China demonstrations. Beijing was especially concerned with the prospect of mass protests planned for May 11 in Manila and elsewhere, which may have suggested that the Philippine was preparing to resist China’s advances. As a Beijing-based public opinion monitoring office report noted, the looming protests “reduced the probability of peaceful resolution of the incident.” In its May 8-10 press conferences, the MFA emphasized four key points:

1.) The Philippines was inciting anti-Chinese public sentiments;
2.) China was prepared for further escalation;
3.) The Chinese public was becoming agitated; and
4.) Manila was making “serious mistakes” and ought to return to diplomacy.

China’s goal, then, was to convince the Philippines to dampen down domestic sentiments and return to the diplomatic negotiating table, leaving the CMS and Fisheries units to implement control of the shoal.

One way for the PRC to try to secure its advancements on the water would have been to send gunboats into the area, or directly threaten to use force if the Philippines attempted to oppose the new Chinese activities. However, this could have significantly worsened an already tense situation on the water, undermining
the stability Beijing ultimately sought, while also harming China’s peaceful international image. Explicit verbal threats would also have put the party-state’s credibility on the line, reducing its flexibility of action. Economic sanctions were one way to pursue simultaneous “rights defense and stability maintenance,” with the informal embargo on Philippine banana imports creating domestic pressure on the Aquino government to stand down. But ramping up these unofficial sanctions would have carried further costs both to China’s economy and to its reputation as a reliable trading partner. Channeling domestic nationalist energies towards the issue was an economical way to sharpen Manila’s perception of the risk of uncontrolled and potentially disastrous escalation, and thereby deter opposition to its newly assertive policies “on the cheap.”

The wave of popular nationalism does appear to have helped Beijing achieve “the unity of rights defense and stability maintenance” at Scarborough Shoal.\textsuperscript{225} It is beyond the scope of this study to identify the sources of influence on the Philippines’ decisionmaking, but a clear conciliatory shift in Manila’s policy did occur at the height of the PRC’s nationalist fervour, delivering the CCP’s key demands. First, the Philippines restored diplomatic dialogue with China’s Manila embassy on May 10, after two weeks of estrangement. Beijing, as noted, had consistently urged the reopening of negotiations – quite understandably, given the major power imbalances between the two, and the effective control China now exercised at the shoal. Second, the Aquino administration took steps to dampen domestic nationalist activities in the Philippines. The May 11 demonstrations in Manila were much smaller than expected, and protesters who tried to burn the PRC flag were detained. One week later, Aquino intervened to prevent an activist group led by a former marines captain from traveling to the area.\textsuperscript{226} Third, and most importantly, the Philippines did not attempt to oppose the new status quo of PRC control of the disputed atoll. The idea that these were the desired effects is strongly supported by the fact that, as shown above, as soon as Manila’s position began to soften, Beijing immediately began to wind down the wave of nationalism.

Remarks from Philippine leaders both before and after the standoff suggested the popular nationalist factor did shape Manila’s perceptions of the issue. In an
interview several months later, discussing Beijing’s decision to maintain its permanent presence at Scarborough Shoal, Foreign Secretary del Rosario said, “I can see the constituency of China becoming more assertive and the leadership will not be able to ignore that environment.” The extent to which this image of was derived from the events of May 2012 or from other observation is unknown, but it suggested Chinese public opinion had helped convince one of the Manila’s more hardline foreign policy decisionmakers to accept the inevitability of the new status quo. Aquino appears to have had an acute awareness of the popular nationalist factor before the standoff began. In a 2011 media interview, he declined to answer a question on the South China Sea issue, on the basis that “we will be driven by our respective publics not to talk to each other.” Given this evident attention to the domestic nationalist factor, more than a year before the Scarborough episode, it would inevitably have featured in his considerations in the Scarborough situation.

The wave of popular nationalism, especially the discussions of potential military action, framed the Chinese party-state’s policy of locking down the shoal as relatively moderate. As the tensions began to ease, the MFA seemed to make a point of addressing questions about militaristic netizens, which underscored the clear contrast between the policy being implemented and what the PRC’s policy might be if it were to cave in to public demands. In the context of the recent wave of warmongering, this “good cop” image of the PRC government was hard to deny, and it appears to have had effects on perceptions abroad. Domestic critics of Aquino’s assertive approach to the South China Sea issue argued it was insufficiently sensitive to the rise of Chinese popular nationalism and hawkish elements in the PLA. The nationalist outpourings and calls for war from “retired and serving military officers” became a prominent part of the wider discussion of China’s policy in the dispute. During the standoff, Aquino had directly addressed Luo Yuan’s April 26 article calling for military action at Scarborough, which had appeared in translation on the SCIO’s portal. While he pointedly called Luo’s bluff, it nonetheless demonstrated that Beijing’s external propaganda was reaching the highest level of adversary decisionmaking. And even if such messages themselves could be dismissed, the wave of popular nationalism they helped bring
forth framed Beijing’s current assertive maritime policy against a much more radical and aggressive reference point. As Jonathan Mercer points out: “Thinking hard does not help one escape from framing effects any more than it allows one to escape from an optical illusion.”

Beijing’s strategic channeling of popular nationalism depended on careful management of the risks involved. Most fundamentally, this meant keeping the expression of nationalist sentiments online. As Figure 6.7 above shows, CCTV’s announcements of the Chinese people’s “intense reaction and attention” were accompanied by imagery of a citizen using a computer to browse information on the topic, exemplifying the correct mode of participation. Although a smattering of zealots staged demonstrations outside the Philippines embassy in Beijing on May 11, each group’s protest was tolerated for a short time, then calmly disallowed by police, and kept out of the media. Censorship of extreme sentiments on social media and other online platforms, detected from around April 27 onwards, and increasing from May 11 as the wave of nationalism was wound down, offered another means of minimizing this risk (Figure 6.8).

Figure 6.8: Censorship of Weibo posts containing "Huangyan Island" or "Philippines" April-May 2012. The X-axis is the date that deletion was detected (Weiboscope).
Carefully attenuated diplomatic language was another means of managing mass sentiments. According to Hua and Yu, familiar diplomatic phrases like "the Chinese side urges," "should abide by," and "solemn representations" allowed the state to project the image of China as a great power “dealing with many issues, of which the Huangyan Island standoff was just one.” The powerful effect of subtle elevations in MFA language, apparent in the surge of public attention following Fu Ying's “all preparations” remarks, also illustrated how low-key diplomatic rhetoric can serve to regulate public opinion. The Defense Ministry's May 11 announcement refuting rumours of war mobilizations, meanwhile, suggested the state understood how the sense of impending conflict is a major driver of popular agitation, as it had been in the mid-2011 wave of nationalist mobilization. Dispelling this prospect helped to rapidly lower the level of public attention and the temperature of public discourse.

Figure 6.9: CCTV News broadcast of interview with fisherman, maritime militia leader and Scarborough Shoal protagonist Xu Detan, May 16, 2012.
Grassroots deterrence

Positive information releases also helped to manage the risks of popular agitation. One prominent feature of the CCP’s information management was the near-constant stream of stories based on personal interviews with fishermen who were direct participants in the events. Not surprisingly, they tended to emphasize gratitude to the government for their deliverance from Filipino persecution. Perhaps more importantly, they delivered good news in a compelling, human interest-rich form to help satisfy domestic audiences’ interest in the drama. New publicity of established policies strengthened the image of the party-state taking a hardline stance, without actually requiring a substantive change in policy. One example was the new media emphasis on the long-running financial subsidies for voyages to Scarborough Shoal, under which boats were triumphantly bringing back “holds full of fish” (Figure 6.9). And tough talk from state-connected, but non-official figures in the media added a “dash of dominance” to the discourse that not only helped attract foreign attention, but also “satisfied the masses’ expectations for the government’s words and actions.”

Information releases also helped manage the risks on the down side of the public’s attention curve. Once the wave of popular nationalism had served its purpose, publicizing the measures the Philippines had taken to curb anti-China protests helped to lower agitation among the Chinese population. This was typified by the prominent reporting of the arrest of a lone protester in Manila for burning the Chinese flag on May 11. State media also argued that to use military force would be to fall into an American trap designed to halt China’s development, and delegitimized war talk as being stirred up by anti-China forces whose true intent was to push China into conflict and chaos. Beijing has used this conspiracy theory to regulate and discipline the margins of nationalist public opinion in periods of heightened tension in maritime disputes. Thanks to these effective risk management techniques, write Hua and Yu, “there were no major waves or polarization, and attenuation measures and methods (调控方式方法) made a fairly large innovative contribution.” The close match between the timing of the rise and fall of the wave of mobilization and the achievement of Beijing’s limited goals, the efforts of PRC diplomacy and external propaganda to direct foreign attention
towards the popular sentiments, and the apparent awareness of the risks and
rewards of doing so in state-connected analyses: such observations make strategic
channeling and risk management a much stronger explanation for the nationalism-
policy relationship in this case than non-strategic alternatives such as a “safety
valve” function, state incapacity, or simple coincidence.246

Summary

Before the standoff began, the PRC’s policy for handling fisheries incidents at
Scarborough Shoal had not been tested since 2006. China’s actions were directly
enabled by the improvement in its material capabilities since that time, including
both economic might, technological infrastructure, and maritime law enforcement
capabilities designed to meet the UNCLOS era. Furthermore, the shoal’s aquatic
resources had increased in value due to the declining coastal fish stocks. The
decision to confront the Philippines and form the April standoff may have involved
an element of policy entrepreneurship from ambitious SOA party chief Liu Cigui
(with support from the Navy), or it may have reflected Xi Jinping’s personal
leadership style but, crucially, there is no evidence that any relevant policy players
thought it should have been handled differently. The strength of these
explanations leaves limited room for bottom-up popular nationalist influence.
Given the elevated elite tensions at the time, public opinion might have tipped the
balance in favour of confrontation, though only on the assumption that influential
policy actors were deterred from advocating a non-confrontational response to the
situation – an assumption for which there is no evidence.

In May escalation phase China ramped up its vessel numbers at the shoal, began
locking down administrative control by denying access to Philippines ships, and
imposed curbs on Philippine fruit exports and tourism. Nearly a week later,
heightened MFA rhetoric and saturation media coverage prompted a major surge
in attention across Chinese society, from which flowed an outpouring of nationalist
expression. The uncertainty this generated regarding the probability and threshold
for serious escalation gave the Philippines incentives to accede to the new status
Grassroots deterrence

quo and return to the negotiating table. Once the Philippines reopened diplomatic contact with the PRC’s embassy and discouraged anti-China action among Filipinos, Beijing immediately began to moderate the flow of popular sentiments toward the issue. The PRC’s foreign policy objectives, were thus the main determinant of the volume of Chinese popular nationalist discourse on the issue. If the tensions in mid-2011 had contained signs of the party-state’s willingness to bring public opinion into its policy, Scarborough Shoal more clearly marked the new role of the networked “masses” in the South China Sea dispute – not as a driver of irrational assertiveness but as a weapon and a resource in the pursuit of simultaneous “rights defense and stability maintenance.”

2007-2016 in review

Reviewing the findings of the last four chapters suggests a “strategic channeling and risk management” relationship has emerged between Chinese popular nationalism and PRC foreign policy on the South China Sea over the 2007-2016 period. Chapter 3 showed that the PRC’s increased assertiveness and more coercive methods began around 2007 and have continued since with only brief periods of moderation. Chapter 4 demonstrated that this key policy shift was unrelated to popular nationalism, and resulted instead from China’s growing material power, resource insecurity, and the new challenges and opportunities of the UNCLOS era. Chapter 5 showed that the growth of popular nationalism on this issue in recent years only began after the party adopted its new policy, and that it was mostly attributable to the increase in China’s own assertive actions (though they were rarely recognized as such) and greater state media publicity of the issue.

Jessica Chen Weiss and James Reilly have both argued that the party state’s tolerance for nationalist street protests against the US and Japan in the early 2000s was, at least in some cases, related to Beijing’s diplomatic goals at the time. On the South China Sea issue some state agencies have long sought to elevate the population’s “maritime consciousness,” but there is little evidence of any attempt to enlist help from popular nationalism in specific instances before 2011. The first
clear signs of such tactics appeared at the height of the tensions between China and Vietnam that year, when semi-official media sensationalism and possibly a relaxation of online censorship facilitated an upswell in popular jingoism as Beijing and Hanoi negotiated to lower tensions. In the 2012 Scarborough Shoal standoff with the Philippines, we have seen strong evidence of the party-state leading nationalist expression to a crescendo, and drawing outside audiences’ attention to it, while actively mitigating the risks to domestic and international stability.

The advancements in Beijing’s “public opinion channeling” techniques on this issue reflect the CCP’s increasingly rationalized governing approach, which began under Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, and has continued to advance in the Xi Jinping era.247 The trend is also manifest in the PRC theoretical and scholarly research on the role of public opinion in foreign policy which, as Maria Repnikova has observed, demonstrates

“the increasing adaptability of the Chinese party-state in dealing with popular nationalism. The policy of yulun yindao [public opinion channeling], an innovation of the Hu-Wen administration, remains prevalent under Xi, as authorities are fortifying their efforts to engage and co-opt the public, while simultaneously actively censoring the media and public discussions on foreign issues. . . The approach to censorship itself has been significantly adjusted in recent years. Rather than blocking out information on sensitive matters, the aim has been to adjust its framing and to use it in the government’s favor.”248

This approach is typified by the internet search “white list” system developed in the Hu years, wherein internet search engines can be ordered to display results on a given sensitive topic, but limit them to a range of trusted websites.249 It allows an appearance of diversity – and perhaps a nominal degree of actual variation in coverage – while preventing the spread of unwanted information at times of heightened risk. This accords with the principle of “combining control and release” (放管结合) that the CCP leadership has promoted among its cadres in recent years. The formulation urges officials to “control what should be controlled, and release
what should be released,” rather than exercising control by default, without regard to the broader objectives of the state.

A cautious, strategic opening of the information supply is evident on the South China Sea issue over the period under study. From 2007 to 2009 authorities kept developments in the disputed area largely secret – including China’s own assertive actions. Thereafter, we find authorities allowing greater state media coverage, and significant online nationalist expression on the issue, including criticism of government policy, while still preventing real-world nationalist protest movements that could lead to domestic instability. Controlled information releases have helped the CCP minimize the impetus for real-world demonstrations of patriotic fervour. On-scene coverage and even live broadcasts from disputed areas by central propaganda outlets (also on display during the 2012 Diaoyu Islands confrontation) have compellingly answered citizens’ increased demand for information. Human interest stories featuring participants in dramatic events have engaged desires for a sense of connection with such events. Greater leeway for institutionally integrated but non-authoritative nationalist voices has diversified China’s mass media discourse, while also creating new levers with which to attenuate the volume and intensity of online sentiments on the issue. In turn, party and military propaganda operators have adopted new forms of “indoctrainment,” integrating their personas into popular and youth culture. And the mass rollout of official and state-connected social media accounts have elevated the party’s ability to shape online discourse without simply blocking it.

As we have seen, the Hu administration began to publicize some of its many new assertive actions in the South China Sea from 2009 onwards, yet domestic opinion persistently perceived it as soft (软弱) and passive (被动) on the issue. Since 2012, consistent releases of information, including the revelation of longstanding but previously unpublicized policies, have helped build the Xi administration’s “hardline” reputation among domestic audiences. Dramatic footage of the 2007 Sino-Vietnamese oil rig incident, for example, was finally presented to the Chinese public in a high-profile CCTV documentary in 2013. Another documentary in the same series aired footage of Fisheries Law Enforcement’s coercive tactics against
Indonesia dating back to 2010, as well as on the top-secret 1994 mission to occupy Mischief Reef.\textsuperscript{253}

The large-scale land reclamation activities at the PRC’s Spratly outposts began in late 2013 in near-total secrecy. By mid-2014 aerial and satellite photography of submerged reefs being converted into new islands was already capturing widespread attention outside China, but CCP authorities still did not actively publicize this to domestic audiences. CCTV’s flagship news bulletin finally mentioned the project in June 2015, around 18 months after its commencement, once the project was basically complete.\textsuperscript{254} This suggested that under Xi the party retained the Hu-era general aversion to unnecessary public involvement in South China Sea policy, but also possessed greater confidence to claim the credit once major initiatives were implemented and secured.

Events in the South China Sea since 2012 have further demonstrated the party’s improved ability to reactively manage the risks of popular nationalist discourse on the topic. In May 2014, anti-Chinese riots in Vietnam over PRC offshore oil drilling near the Paracel Islands resulted in the deaths of four Chinese citizens and severe damage to businesses. Compared with the Philippines’ unsuccessful detention of fishing crews at Scarborough Shoal in 2012, the harm to Chinese citizens was far worse, yet the popular reaction in China was much smaller (see Figure 5.5). Using a combination of traditional mass media control, social media censorship, and calibrated guidance of online media, Beijing allowed vital fast-breaking information to reach selected audiences who were already aware of the events, while preventing the news from spreading among the wider population for nearly 48 hours. Rather than simply ordering online news providers to delete all information on the topic, authorities required them to keep the issue off the “two front pages” (双首页), general and news, relegating the story to low-traffic subsections. This was effective in shaping the circulation of information on the issue, while avoiding the panic that a total blackout might have created. Once the situation in Vietnam was stabilized, the CCP propounded a version of events that obscured the linkage between the anti-China riots and China’s assertive actions at
Grassroots deterrence

sea, while forestalling anger among the Chinese population by framing the violence as “anti-foreign,” and emphasizing Vietnam's contrition. In a similar way, the US “freedom of navigation” (FON) patrols within 12nm of the artificial islands from October 2015 presented an elevated risk of real-world anti-foreign mobilizations. In this case the party actively channeled public attention towards the topic, sparking widespread online discussion. But rather than mobilizing patriotic rage for a showdown, the state's semi-official nationalist commentariat confidently assured audiences that the patrols posed no threat, and turned the focus to the newly expanded Spratly outposts, presenting their continued occupation and development as defiantly thwarting the purpose of the US patrols. In this way the party seems to have turned the US's patrols into an opportunity to bolster its legitimacy without in any way altering its policy in the area.

The PRC's response to the July 2016 verdict in the arbitration brought by the Philippines under the UNCLOS was, to the time of writing, the most recent example of public opinion warfare on the South China Sea under Xi. Authorities launched a high-voltage propaganda campaign against the case, channeling domestic sentiments into a wave of indignant opposition among the Chinese public and PRC citizens around the world. Once again, however, the CCP kept domestic mobilization online, portraying attempts at organizing anti-American street demonstrations as an anti-China conspiracy. After the unfavourable result was announced, state media heavily publicized striking images and video of advanced PLA bomber aircraft patrolling the skies above Scarborough Shoal and the Spratly Islands. Although the air patrols had taken place some months prior, they created the impression of a tough military response to the “anti-China farce” played out in the Hague.

At the same time, the CCP has carefully avoided raising expectations for more radical policies in the wake of the ruling. In September 2016, for example, Xinhua's English-language service reported China and Russia would hold joint live-fire military exercises in the South China Sea, including amphibious island invasion
drills. Chinese-language reports, by contrast, described it as taking place in “waters east of Zhanjiang” – scrupulously avoiding the term “South China Sea” despite its obvious domestic propaganda value. These examples demonstrate the ongoing refinement of the party’s understanding of the risks posed by popular nationalist public opinion in the internet era, and of its techniques for managing them. This has enabled the ongoing integration of popular nationalist sentiments with the state’s pragmatic, but assertive, policy goals in the South China Sea.

**Conclusion**

This Chapter has detailed the integration of popular nationalist participation into the CCP’s pursuit of the “unity of rights defense and stability maintenance” in the South China Sea. It introduced the ruling party’s theoretical concepts governing and mandating the use of public opinion as a “weapon” and a “resource” for its foreign policy, premised on the ability to manage the attendant risks. Next, it examined the implementation of these concepts, first in the everyday guidance of domestic public opinion and its projection to foreign audiences, and then in the particular circumstances of the crisis over Scarborough Shoal in April-May 2012. Finally, it outlined the continued development of the party-state’s intellectual and technical capabilities for shaping domestic popular discourse on the South China Sea issue up to the present.

Based on the image of popular nationalism projected in Chinese diplomacy and foreign-directed propaganda, the chapter outlined a concept of “grassroots deterrence” to explain the strategic function and purpose of state-led popular nationalism in this case. By channeling public sentiments towards an issue, while managing the risks, China’s networked authoritarian state can outsource to willing nationalist citizens the task of delivering an undeniably plausible, yet plausibly deniable, threat of irrational escalation that gives its opponents strong incentives for caution and, in the context of an assertive policy, acquiescence. Because the risk is real, it delivers a “threat that leaves something to chance.” But because the source of the risk – domestic mass sentiments – is amenable to risk management
techniques that are partly visible, and partly opaque, it gives the channeling state an informational advantage over its adversaries regarding the probability of escalation. There is no need for the state to hide its involvement in channeling and risk-managing popular nationalism; in fact, some awareness of this on the part of the adversary is essential to its strategic effect. Rather than relying on either deception or credible commitment ("hands-tying"), it is the hybrid popular/official quality of state-led popular nationalism, combining threat with reassurance, and mass passions and rational state pragmatism, on an attention-grabbing scale and emotional intensity, that produces the “grassroots deterrence” in evidence in the Scarborough Shoal case.

The concluding chapter that follows will summarize the dissertation’s findings, before briefly opening up to broader questions concerning the conditions under which the party-state will or will not seek to channel popular nationalist influence towards its foreign policy goals, and raising some possible future extensions of this research.
Chapter 7

Conclusion

The preceding chapters have detailed the emergence of state-led popular nationalism as a component in China’s assertive, pragmatic policy of “the unity of rights defense and stability maintenance” in the South China Sea. This conclusion begins by comparing the study’s findings with the expectations of the four key hypotheses on the nationalism-policy relationship proposed in Chapter 1. Popular nationalism and PRC policy were unrelated when China’s behaviour shifted in 2007, and moved through a period of largely unfocused, non-strategic state stimulation between 2009 and 2011, to a relationship characterized by state-led strategic channeling and risk management of genuine popular nationalist sentiments by 2012. Next, it reviews the contributions of the dissertation to research on the South China Sea issue, PRC foreign policy, Chinese public opinion, and authoritarian strategic communications. Lastly, it reflects on the possible broader relevance of channeling and risk management as an analytic framework for other cases, and sketches some possible future extensions of this project.

Summary of findings

The strategic channeling and risk management model of the relationship between popular nationalism and PRC foreign policy, laid out in Chapter 1, comprises four hypotheses tested here in the case of the South China Sea between 2007 and 2016.

H1: “assertive policy $\rightarrow$ popular nationalism”

The model’s first hypothesis holds that assertive foreign policy on a given issue is a key determinant of rising nationalism on that issue. For this hypothesis to be correct, we should see rises in popular nationalism after the state’s policy shifts on
the issue, not before. We have seen in Chapter 4 that the major change in the PRC’s behaviour in the South China Sea occurred against a backdrop of low public attention on the issue and, furthermore, that the early cases of assertive conduct were carried out in secret. When China’s state media began to publicize more of the state’s assertive actions from 2009 onwards, public attention to the issue began to rise, as shown in Chapter 5. As international tensions grew, often as a result of assertive PRC actions, this fed back into the level of popular focus, before swelling to a peak in mid-2011.

The second implication of this causality hypothesis was that short-term spikes in popular attention or nationalist mobilization follow after confrontational state rhetoric and actions. While external events can stimulate public interest levels, Chapter 5 showed the effect was usually mediated by tough posturing by the state in response. Attention and nationalist mobilization rose to a crescendo in mid-2011 after several coercive PRC actions in the disputed area fueled speculation about potential military conflict. In Chapter 6 we saw that the wave of nationalist expression during the 2012 Scarborough Shoal standoff emerged not in response to the unforeseen events initiated by the Philippines on the water in April, but to the escalation of CCP official rhetoric and central media coverage in May – after China’s on-water policy had hardened, accompanied by informal economic sanctions.

These observations confirm that the state’s policies have been the main cause of increased popular nationalism on the South China Sea issue in recent years (H1). This is not surprising, given the remoteness of the disputed possessions, and the unobtrusive nature of events there. It does not imply that Chinese popular nationalism on the South China Sea is insincere, or can simply be switched on or off by the state at will; after all, the issue has been deeply rooted in PRC citizens’ minds at least since the 1970s, when China fought its first naval battle over the issue. Moreover, the extent to which state authorities were consciously in control of these effects in the pre-2011 period is unclear. The point is that taking an assertive stance tends to stimulate public attention and embolden nationalist activity, whether the government intends it or not. How the state responds to this is related to the second hypothesis.
H2: “strategic channeling”

The second hypothesis is that the state understands popular nationalism as a strategic resource and intentionally directs it towards the issue to serve foreign policy goals. The three observable implications of this hypothesis are increasingly present across the period under study, especially since 2012. First, a growing array of policy documents and state-connected strategic writings have stressed the importance and usefulness of nationalist public opinion to China’s assertive maritime policy. As noted in Chapter 6, leveraging the political power of mass mobilization has long been central to the CCPs methods of governance, but since the early 2000s intense discussion has focused on how to use these methods in partial, informatized conflicts that, like the South China Sea, blur the boundaries between diplomacy and war. Since 2007, on the basis of top-level guidance, CCP strategists have increased research on building maritime consciousness among the population, developed more sophisticated concepts of public opinion warfare and public diplomacy that stress the situational contingency of the public’s role in security and foreign policy, and applied these to China’s maritime disputes.

Second increased consistency between the MFA’s diplomatic messaging and central media coverage and commentary also supports the “strategic channeling” hypothesis. It suggests that strategic intent, rather than intra-state divisions, increasingly govern the state’s relations with popular nationalism. On several occasions between 2009 and 2011, inflammatory media content from the military and ideological apparatus may have drawn public attention towards the South China Sea issue independently of the requirements of the party-state’s diplomacy at the time. By contrast, during the 2012 Scarborough Shoal crisis, the 2014 HYSY-981 incident, the responses to US FON patrols, and the UNCLOS arbitration case, the volume and tone of media coverage closely tracked the changes in official rhetoric.

Third, PRC diplomacy and foreign-directed propaganda have increasingly projected the image of nationalist public opinion as a factor in China’s policy in the South China Sea to foreign audiences. Chinese officiala have consistently promoted
this view in relation to their Taiwan, US and Japan policy over many years, but only relatively recently on the South China Sea issue. Since 2009, senior PRC officials have repeatedly referred to public opinion to explain the PRC’s assertive actions, demonstrating that the narrative of rising nationalist influence on the South China Sea issue, particularly as an escalatory risk factor, is one that is considered fit for foreign consumption.

**H3: “no constraint from moderation”**

The third hypothesis was that while popular nationalism may prevent the state from *compromising* on an issue such as the South China Sea, it does not constrain the state from *moderating* its policy. The strongest evidence in favour of this hypothesis is the period of moderation in China’s policy from June 2011 onwards, which began amidst an unprecedented wave of popular nationalist mobilization on the issue. In fact, as Chapter 5 showed, while this period of moderation enraged nationalist online commenters, it also reduced attention on the issue among the wider public.

The Scarborough Shoal standoff ended the 2011-2012 period of moderation, but as detailed in Chapter 6, it is unlikely that the state would have reacted differently in the absence of popular nationalism. The increase in China’s overall material capabilities since 2006, the last time a similar incident occurred, together with the expansion of the high-endurance CMS fleet designed to meet the challenges and opportunities of the UNCLOS era, and several other factors unrelated to public opinion are sufficient to explain China’s reaction. Furthermore, similar incidents in the Spratly Islands – much better known in China than Scarborough Shoal at the time – were handled in a moderate fashion in 2011 and 2014 under equal or greater public scrutiny.

The support for this non-constraint hypothesis is subject to the caveat that the party’s ability to *sustain* a moderate policy in the South China Sea over a period of years has not been proven since its assertive turn began in 2007. It is possible that
the rise of internet-era popular nationalism since that time has rendered moderation unsustainable over the medium or long term. However, the dearth of evidence of opposition to the assertive policy among CCP leaders or policy groupings – for example, media articles, or testimony from insiders, or arguments by policy analysts – indicates that the post-2007 approach has been the subject of broad consensus in the relevant parts of the party-state.¹ A new period of moderation seems to have begun from around, or just before, the July 2016 arbitration ruling – another moment of heightened public attention and nationalist mobilization – reconfirming the hypothesis that elevated popular nationalism is not a constraint from restraint on the water. This has also set up another opportunity to gauge Beijing’s ability to maintain a moderate policy in the South China Sea.

*H4: “risk management → strategic channeling”*

The fourth hypothesis is that the state’s capacity to manage the risks of nationalist sentiments can improve even in the internet era, and that this increases its incentives to engage in strategic channeling. As shown in Chapter 6, party-state thinkers broadly agree that the strategic utility of popular nationalism depends on the state’s ability to manage the attendant risks to domestic stability and foreign policy. This suggests that if we observe the adoption of sophisticated and effective new technical capabilities and innovative propaganda techniques, we should also see the state become more willing to channel domestic nationalist sentiments towards its foreign policy objectives.

As detailed in Chapters 5 and 6, a range of subtle and innovative techniques have helped the party address the challenges of South China Sea nationalism in a networked public opinion environment, in which Chinese citizens can share information and opinions with each other directly. Controlled openness about assertive policies, previously treated as operational secrets, have helped to burnish the state’s “hardline” image, particularly since 2012. Compelling imagery of long-past but previously unrevealed confrontations has answered citizens’ desire to see
Conclusion

stronger action, without requiring any alteration of the state's policy. Delayed release of information on hardline policies has also minimized the risk of generating unintended agitation by raising the prospect of conflict. The party-state's positive propaganda on the South China Sea issue has become much more colourful and convincing, and now routinely features on-scene or even live broadcasting, audience interaction, and the integration of propaganda with entertainment. Meanwhile, the development of public opinion monitoring systems have helped the party to better understand the flow of internet information, and the development of trends in internet discourse. CCP foreign policy censorship is no longer simply a matter of imposing blanket bans on sensitive topics. Calibrated censorship instructions to internet companies have curbed the spread of information when necessary, while still allowing it to reach those who require or already know about it.

Consistent with the hypothesis's second expectation, as the CCP’s public opinion guidance capabilities have improved, it has become more willing to channel popular nationalism towards the issue. Whereas before 2009, the issue was discussed relatively rarely in the state’s mass media, since that time it has been a regular feature on China's public agenda. On the one hand, the official party media have been more vocal on the issue since 2012 (see Figure A2.1). On the other hand, propaganda authorities have allowed trusted state-run marketized media such as the Huanqiu's web platform, to provide a steady stream of content that sustains a visible and audible baseline of online buzz about the issue on commercial news platforms and social media. Although crises and other periods of heightened tensions were frequent from 2009 onwards, there were no clear examples of concerted channeling of public sentiments towards the issue during such periods until mid-2011. Since that time, there have been at least four notable instances of hardline official rhetoric accompanied by heavy central media emphasis drawing major public attention towards the issue: the Sino-Vietnamese tensions following the cable-cutting incidents in June 2011, the Scarborough Shoal standoff in 2012, the US freedom of navigation patrols in October 2015, and the UNCLOS-mandated arbitral tribunal's decision in the Philippines v. China case in mid-2016. As one MFA
diplomat surmised in a casual conversation in 2014, the use of public opinion in international policy was once a Western tactic, but “we Chinese are learning.”

Summary

The preceding chapters have detailed the emergence of state-led popular participation in China’s policy on the South China Sea issue over the period under study. Popular nationalism on this issue rose after the party adopted its assertive policy there, not before (H1), due to the increase in newsworthy events, and to state efforts to draw attention towards the dispute. These efforts were based on the belief, especially in the PRC’s military and civilian propaganda communities, but also diplomats and foreign policy strategists, that this was strategically advantageous (H2), as mandated by authoritative theoretical constructs. Its external orientation is borne out by increasing references to public opinion as a driver of Beijing’s assertive policy in the South China Sea in diplomatic communications and external propaganda (Appendix 6). The rise of Chinese popular nationalism on the South China Sea issue has not precluded periods of moderation of the PRC’s policy there (H3), as shown by the fact that the most restrained periods of PRC policy in the time under study began amidst major waves of popular nationalism in June 2011 and July 2016. Even in the Scarborough Shoal dispute – the most likely case of nationalist influence on policy – the increase in China’s material capabilities and strategic interest in the area since 2006, the last time its policy was tested there, is sufficient to explain the change in Beijing’s conduct. Finally, CCP authorities’ increasing willingness to channel nationalist sentiments toward the South China Sea issue correlates with its enhanced capabilities for managing public opinion risks (H4). Chinese popular nationalism and the PRC’s policy in the South China Sea began the 2007-2015 period with no discernible relationship, but over that period, through processes of strategic channeling and risk management, they were integrated into the CCP party-state’s pursuit of “the unity of rights defense and stability maintenance.”
Conclusion

Contributions of the study

This study has conducted a close investigation of two crucial issues in early twenty-first century East Asian politics: (1) the relationship between popular nationalism and Chinese policy in the South China Sea, and (2) the sources of PRC behaviour there. Because popular nationalism is only one of many plausible drivers of PRC conduct, identifying and explaining the role of other internal and external factors affecting PRC maritime policy was an unavoidable corollary task in answering the central research question. In doing so, the study has contributed an original typology of state behaviour in maritime disputes (Chapter 3), and shown how an international legal regime, the UNCLOS, has unexpectedly become an important driver of confrontational state policy change (Chapter 4). The strength of this and other structural explanations for Chinese policy change left little room for domestic popular nationalism as a significant causal factor. And indeed, using a simple but rigorous methodology, the basic absence of bottom-up nationalist influence was confirmed. As Western liberal democracies reel from a surge of vicious, willfully ignorant nationalism facilitated by new and unaccountable technologies of political information delivery, it is cold comfort to observe that the PRC’s firewalled, state-managed, sovereign internet has not, so far, enabled jingoistic mass sentiments to hijack CCP foreign policy in this crucial area.

Two specific findings have contributed to research on the relationship between Chinese nationalism and PRC foreign policy. First, while correlations between popular nationalist outpourings and hardline foreign policy shifts have sometimes been seen as a sign of likely bottom-up influence on state policy, this study has shown that the causal arrow more often points the other way. Carefully tracing the sequence of state actions, domestic media coverage, and indicators of nationalist activity on the South China Sea issue has shown that, in the internet era, assertive state policies tend to cause increases in popular nationalist sentiments on the issue in question, whether the state intends this or not. Second, while previous studies have concentrated on the role of relatively high-risk manifestations of popular nationalism like street protests, this study has broadened the focus to consider how more banal popular nationalist practices relate to foreign policy in the
internet era. A detailed study of the Scarborough Shoal crisis showed how a wave of mostly online popular nationalist discourse helped the party-state deter retaliation against its assertive policies in disputed waters, without running the extra risk of large-scale street protests.

By showing that the strategic role of popular nationalism is not limited to “costly” (higher-risk) signals, this thesis has contributed a nuanced perspective to current debates over authoritarian foreign policy signaling. Rationalist “audience cost” models expect a state’s management of domestic discourse to hinder its effectiveness as a signal: the lower the risk incurred, the lower the signal’s credibility, and therefore the lower its chances of influencing the adversary’s behaviour. A threat delivered via openly risk-managed popular nationalism should be dismissed as “cheap talk.” But as we have seen, China's guidance of nationalist public opinion on this issue has tended to be aimed not at “hands-tying” to establish credible resolve, but at the calibration of ambiguous, suggestive threat signals. While rationalist models suppose trade-offs between signaling effectiveness and diplomatic flexibility, the PRC’s concepts of “public opinion warfare” and “public diplomacy” make clear that it holds both to be simultaneously achievable. By combining the basic rationalist insight identifying risk as a source of influence, with the loss-aversion identified by prospect theory, and the power of the hybrid quality of state-led popular nationalism to simultaneously communicate contradictory but equally important strategic messages (threat/reassurance, irrationality/pragmatism), the concept of “grassroots deterrence” has offered an innovative explanation of why this belief may be justified.

Potential extensions

This thesis was designed to answer a narrow research question on a single important case. The model of the nationalism-policy relationship applied and tested here does not purport to be a general theory of public opinion’s relationship with authoritarian foreign policy, nor of international strategic signaling. However, as outlined below, the interrelated processes of strategic channeling and risk
Conclusion

management may be a useful framework for further research attempting to understand the conditions under which internet-age nationalist public opinion becomes integrated with authoritarian foreign policy; the goals it is intended serve; and its actual effects on international perceptions.

The case of the Diaoyu Islands presents an opportunity to demonstrate how the channeling and risk management framework can integrate bottom-up models of nationalist influence on PRC maritime policy. Scholars have debated the causes of China’s escalatory responses to Japanese actions over the issue in 2010 and 2012, but some kind of bottom-up influence on the state’s actions seems likely. At the same time, the two waves of nationalism over the Diaoyu Islands in August and September 2012 share many of the patterns observed in the preceding chapters. Like in the periods of heightened South China Sea nationalism in 2011 and 2012, there is evidence of a significant relaxation of censorship on social media during the first peak in anti-Japan mobilization on the weekend of August 18-19. At that point, the PRC was seeking to persuade the Japanese government not to proceed with its planned purchase of five of the islands from a debt-stricken private owner, and attempted to do so by drawing popular sentiments towards the issue. But this apparent attempt at grassroots deterrence failed, leaving the state to respond to public humiliation by an adversary towards whom historical grievances are especially strong, amidst heightened public scrutiny, and severe internal tensions in the party.

After Tokyo went ahead with the purchase., the PRC declared territorial sea baselines around the disputed islands, and launched a program of regular patrols in the newly generated 12nm zone using CMS and Fisheries ships. This overturned 40 years of Japanese on-water control of the waters around the islands, realizing a situation of overlapping control. Before this fundamental policy shift was implemented, central PRC propaganda organs led several days of highly emotive saturation coverage of the issue. The Chinese government ships began the new patrols on September 14 against a backdrop of large-scale anti-Japan demonstrations that continued until September 19, when they were abruptly halted. This wave of openly state-led popular nationalist mobilization gave Japan
strong incentives not to interfere with the new PRC on-water presence. This time, it appears, “grassroots deterrence” worked, helping achieve the “unity of rights defense and stability maintenance” in the East China Sea. In short, this may be a case in which popular nationalism was a driver of an assertive policy shift, which it subsequently helped to secure.

Applying the channeling/risk management framework to cases involving a range of different issues and adversaries, where rapid bursts of official rhetoric and state media coverage have been observed, may help shed light on the variety of purposes state-led popular nationalism can serve in authoritarian foreign policy, besides the “grassroots deterrence” function this thesis has drawn attention to. Neutralizing or winning over third-parties is a stated task of the PLA’s concept of public opinion warfare, and this seemed to be one of Beijing’s objectives as it channeled popular nationalist sentiments towards the Philippines v. China arbitration decision in 2016. The first major peak in South China Sea nationalism in mid-2011 suggested how drawing public opinion towards an issue, but defying its more extreme demands, can help a state to clarify an intention to de-escalate but not compromise – another hybrid signal complex. Another purpose of China’s strategic channeling of popular nationalist sentiments appears to have been persuading the adversary to dampen its own domestic nationalist sentiments. This odd logic, suggested in the mid-2011 Sino-Vietnamese case and readily apparent during the Scarborough Shoal standoff, deserves further investigation.

Another way to investigate the conditions for, and purposes of, popular nationalism’s international role will be to examine surprising “non-events” of channeling. In the Sino-Vietnamese confrontation near the Paracel Islands in May-June 2014, the PRC worked actively to avoid involving popular nationalism in its assertive maritime policy. The episode began when China moved its giant offshore drilling platform HYSY-981 into an area around 20nm south of Triton Island – a similar, though slightly less provocative, location to the 2007 rig incident examined in Chapter 4. Vietnam immediately launched a truculent campaign to oppose the operation both on the water and in domestic and international media. This was typified by its dispatch of fishing militia and patrol boats accompanied by
Conclusion

domestic and foreign journalists, to confront the PRC ships guarding the rig. Several weeks of on-water clashes ensued, including numerous rammings by both sides’ vessels, and the sinking of one Vietnamese fishing boat.\textsuperscript{13}

Why did China elect not to use popular nationalism to warn Vietnam against interfering with its operation, or to appeal for international support? Part of the answer is probably that Beijing failed to anticipate the intensity and swiftness of Hanoi’s escalatory countermeasures.\textsuperscript{14} As a result, the clashes had already begun before Chinese public opinion might have been mobilized to deter them.\textsuperscript{15} But China’s assiduously low-key approach to the operation, eschewing the strong domestic propaganda value (and diversionary opportunities) it offered, suggested Beijing’s policymakers may have anticipated the fierce response of Vietnamese \textit{citizens}, while still optimistically expecting the Vietnamese \textit{government} would cooperate in handling the issue behind closed doors.\textsuperscript{16} The subsequent wave of anti-China protests across Vietnam, some of which devolved into violent riots and looting, confirmed the fervour of the Vietnamese public’s sentiments towards the issue.\textsuperscript{17} Even after four Chinese citizens were killed in the violence, rather than joining the public opinion battle, the CCP continued to work hard to minimize the reaction within its own borders. Speculatively, China may have recognized that Vietnam had a form of “escalation dominance” in the public opinion struggle.\textsuperscript{18}

Vietnam’s mobilization of domestic sentiments against China in 2014, and on several other occasions since 2007, suggests channeling popular nationalism towards foreign policy controversies may be an asymmetric tactic of the weak.\textsuperscript{19} The PRC’s use of public opinion against Japan has also been viewed in this light. Applying “politics of scale” analysis to the 2012 Diaoyu crisis, geographers He Xiaojing, Liu Yungang and Ge Qiujing argue Beijing used state media to “upscale” the scope of involvement in the dispute against the stronger Japan-US alliance.\textsuperscript{20} The state-led wave of nationalism during the Scarborough Shoal standoff could also be seen to fit this pattern, if the adversary was the US-Philippines alliance, rather than just the Philippines. If people power is indeed a way for an state to compensate for asymmetric disadvantage in a crises, then its deployment by the PRC may decline over time if its relative material capabilities continue to increase.
The identity of the adversary could also influence whether an authoritarian state with the ability to strategically channel and risk-manage the power of popular nationalism will choose to do so. Directing or releasing popular anger towards an ideologically and institutionally similar opponent – as Vietnam seems to have done in its disputes with China – involves considerable extra risk, since criticisms and vitriol aimed at the other side can more readily be turned back toward the home state. Unsurprisingly, anti-regime activists have been prominent in Vietnamese protests against China.21 At the same time, however, as fellow networked Leninist party-states, Vietnam and China probably possess a greater awareness of each other’s capabilities and approaches for guiding and managing domestic public opinion than most other dyads. This might reduce the information gap between the two sides regarding the true level of domestic escalatory risk during times of nationalist agitation. The effect could cut both ways. On one hand, it might increase the incentive to run greater risks to overcome the other side’s skepticism. On the other hand, it could also increase the likelihood that a carefully managed hybrid signal delivered via state-led popular nationalism will be decoded correctly, rather than misunderstood.

The latter possibility points to what I anticipate may be the most useful extension of this research: understanding how popular nationalisms are perceived and misperceived by observers of different national, cultural and institutional backgrounds. This thesis has argued that state-led popular nationalism offers a relatively cheap way for a networked authoritarian state to send calibrated deterrence signals, but public opinion is easily misread, even in domestic contexts. The Noda administration’s misunderstanding of anti-Japanese protests in China, especially concerning their relationship with leadership tensions in the ruling party, may have contributed to the Diaoyu crisis in 2012.22 And while the dialectical outlooks of Chinese and Vietnamese officials might lead both to attribute popular movements to the intentions of their opponent, the Philippines was probably surprised to find that its tolerance for freedom of speech and assembly during the Scarborough Shoal standoff would be interpreted this way in Beijing.23 Within each country, there may be patterns of analytical variation across
different policy communities, from decisionmakers to diplomats, military and intelligence, and academia, think tanks and lobbyists. I hope to investigate these tendencies using structured interviews and crisis simulation experiments involving analysts, former officials and (more ambitiously) policymakers from around the region.
Appendix 1

Data sources

Events data

The set of “events data” recording Chinese assertive actions since 1970 was compiled using internal-circulation PRC chronologies of the disputes, Chinese-language reports on state-run scientific expeditions, yearbooks of PRC government maritime agencies, English- and Chinese-language media reports, and other sources encountered in the course of the research project. The data is surely incomplete, since many state actions are likely to have taken place in secret. My approach was to consult historical sources from different contending sides of the dispute, and I have paid special attention to uncovering events from the period before the dispute became subject to widespread English-language media and scholarly attention. These data can be found in Appendix 2, which also outlines the methodology used to compile them.

Party-state materials

My understanding of the ideas behind Chinese maritime policy and public opinion guidance is based primarily on publicly available policy documents, speeches and statements by officials, authoritative media, advisory reports from state research institutions, and agency newspapers such as the China Ocean News (中国海洋报) and Military Journalist (军事记者). The yearbooks of maritime agencies are particularly useful as a guide to how China’s frontline actors understood their actions in disputed areas, both individually where specific incidents are discussed, and collectively over the course of a given year. Chinese-language articles by party theoreticians, international affairs scholars and strategic studies experts provide windows into current thinking and analysis in relevant parts of China’s intellectual community. Public comments and writings by party and military publicity/propaganda experts also contain insights into the nature and aims of their work as it pertains to the PRC's maritime disputes and China’s domestic and foreign affairs more generally.

Data sources

Survey data

The original data on Chinese public opinion on maritime disputes was gathered by Beijing HorizonKey’s Research Consultancy as part of a self-sponsored omnibus survey. Analysis of these data has been supplemented by public opinion data collected from other sources including the Global Times’ Global Poll Center (环球舆情调查中心), the Pew Global Attitudes Project, Asian Barometer, and World Values Survey.

Observations

Analysis of the rise of popular nationalism in Chapters 5 and 6 is also underpinned by a range of quasi-ethnographic data gathered from hundreds of hours spent examining and translating online commentary on Mainland websites and social media. Some of these were published on a blog, South Sea Conversations (http://southseaconversations.wordpress.com), while the remainder are stored by the online archiving service Pinboard. The study also draws on internal public opinion monitoring reports produced by party-affiliated research institutions.

Public attention levels

There are two main sources of data on public attention levels on the South China Sea issue. The Baidu Search Index (BSI), a database of continuous daily measurements of internet search activity on given keywords from July 2006 onwards, provides insight into the timing of movements in public attention levels on the South China Sea issue. The growth in China’s internet population is factored into the Index, so the numbers are comparable across time. In contrast to online forum and microblog content, which is highly skewed towards a small minority of active users, the BSI measures an activity almost all internet users perform daily to obtain the information they want or need. With Baidu controlling 60-80% of China’s internet search market, and more than 90% of its users located in Mainland China, use of its search engine provides a good indication of overall interest levels towards a given issue among the PRC’s internet users. China’s 600-million-strong internet population, meanwhile, is skewed against rural and older citizens, but it is otherwise fairly representative of the population at large. This

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2 Details of the randomization strategy, survey methodology and sample demographics can be found in the author’s report, Exploring China’s Maritime Consciousness, 13-17.
3 Huanqiu Yuqing, Zhongguo Minyi Diaocha, 290-307.
4 Interview #15/05 with Baidu employee, via email, November 2015.
5 Baidu was the first-choice search engine for 77.2% of PRC internet users in 2009, and its overall penetration was 92.9%. Fu, “China search engine market report 2009.” Baidu’s market share in the PRC was 63.1% as of November 2013. “China search engine market share November 2013,” China Internet Watch, December 16, 2013, http://www.chinainternetwatch.com/5218/china-search-engine-market-share-november-2013/(accessed March 13, 2014).
makes the BSI a useful indicator of the timing of changes in the general demand for information towards a given issue in China.  

Other sources of data on public attention and nationalist activity levels include the weekly and monthly rankings of most-read and most-commented stories on commercial news portal websites, and basic statistics available on Sina Weibo, China’s most popular microblogging platform. These sources provide no more than a rough guide to the country’s news agenda, since they are only as representative as the respective platform’s user base, and may be subject to political interference from state authorities. However, used in conjunction with Baidu News Search, a service similar to Google News that aggregates headlines and summary content from hundreds of online outlets (see Appendix 5), these sources provide a useful retrospective indication of the online news agenda at given points in time.

**Commercial media coverage**

In addition to systematic searches of Baidu News Search detailed in Appendix 5, I tracked and traced Chinese commercial media treatment of the South China Sea and other issues by capturing regular screenshots of five major PRC-based news portals owned and operated by publicly listed corporations. State-run Xinhua, Renmin Wang, and Huanqiu Wang were also collected for comparison. Between July 2012 to December 2013, from May 2014 to July 2014, and from February 2016 onwards, an automated screen capture program took regular snapshots of five commercial websites and one state-run website. In total more than 25,000 screenshots have been taken. Usefully, the popular commercial news portal iFeng offers twice-daily captures of its news page for every day back to 2006 (iFeng is operated by Beijing-based, New York-listed Phoenix New Media, and affiliated with Hong Kong satellite broadcaster Phoenix TV). Sina News provides archived daily and weekly lists of most-read and most-commented stories on its popular news

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6 According to Chinese government statistics from CNNIC, this covered 45.8% of China's overall population, up from 28.9% in 2009, the time of this thesis’s earliest case study. Key features of China’s internet population, based on CNNIC's December 2009 and June 2013 reports, and US Census Bureau demographic information include the following (figures in brackets are those from the December 2009 report):

- Skewed against older people, but by 2013 no longer in favour of young people: 7.2% (6.4%) of China’s internet users are aged 50 and above, compared to 27.3% of the general population, while 24.5% (32.9%) are aged 19 or below, compared to 23.7% of the general population, indicating the youth bias has largely disappeared.
- Skewed towards urban residents: 72.1% (72.2%) urban compared to approximately 53% of the general population.
- Slightly skewed towards men: 55.6% of internet users were male, compared to 51.5% of the general population. This gap was actually less pronounced in December 2009, when only 54.2% of the internet population were male.

7 iFeng snapshots. The snapshots have been taken twice daily at 1000 and 2200 hours, from 2006 to present. Available at http://news.ifeng.com/snapshots/201012/31/10.html. This URL corresponds to the snapshot for December 31, 2010, at 1000 hours – modify as required for other dates.
Data sources

portal." These data provide a basis for analysis of commercial media responses to the issues of interest during the given time period.

Official comments

Analysis of the state’s management of domestic discourse on foreign policy issues is grounded in three main sources: official comments, online archives of state-run media, and censorship behaviour. Leaders’ remarks reported by state news agencies or party media are the most important and authoritative source of insight, since they are intensively vetted before being made public. Leaders’ comments on foreign affairs controversies are relatively scarce, and therefore tend to be widely reported by both official and commercial media. This makes them a valuable source of insight into the leadership’s management of domestic discourse on the subject. The party-state’s official responses to day-to-day foreign policy events are stated at Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and Ministry of Defense (MOD) press conferences, and these usually attract widespread reporting when they touch on contentious issues like the South China Sea. The agenda at these press conferences is to some extent determined by the journalists who ask the questions, but local media sometimes work in cooperation with both the MFA and propaganda authorities in the raising of questions. In any case, the official transcripts made available on the MFA and MOD websites are carefully vetted. When the PRC government wishes to make a stronger point on the issue, the MFA spokesperson’s remarks will be presented as a separate “spokesperson statement” (发言人表态). According to Paul Godwin and Alice Miller, these carry a higher level of authority than comments contained in the MFA press conference transcripts.

Central state media

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Analysis of the state’s management of domestic discourse on foreign policy issues is grounded in three main sources: official comments, online archives of state-run media, and censorship behaviour. Leaders’ remarks reported by state news agencies or party media are the most important and authoritative source of insight, since they are intensively vetted before being made public. Leaders’ comments on foreign affairs controversies are relatively scarce, and therefore tend to be widely reported by both official and commercial media. This makes them a valuable source of insight into the leadership’s management of domestic discourse on the subject. The party-state’s official responses to day-to-day foreign policy events are stated at Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and Ministry of Defense (MOD) press conferences, and these usually attract widespread reporting when they touch on contentious issues like the South China Sea. The agenda at these press conferences is to some extent determined by the journalists who ask the questions, but local media sometimes work in cooperation with both the MFA and propaganda authorities in the raising of questions. In any case, the official transcripts made available on the MFA and MOD websites are carefully vetted. When the PRC government wishes to make a stronger point on the issue, the MFA spokesperson’s remarks will be presented as a separate “spokesperson statement” (发言人表态). According to Paul Godwin and Alice Miller, these carry a higher level of authority than comments contained in the MFA press conference transcripts.

Central state media

10 See Godwin and Miller, China’s Forbearance, 31-32. Interview #13/06 with knowledgeable PRC news worker, Beijing, October 2013.
11 The MFA spokespersons are officials with the rank of departmental Director-General and Deputy Director-General (正司局级), respectively one or two steps below Vice-Ministerial rank. The Director-General as of 2014 was Qin Gang, with Hong Lei and Hua Chunying were among the five Deputy Directors-General. “Press and Media Service,” MFA, undated, at http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xwfw/ (accessed March 10, 2014). The previous MFA spokesperson and Press Department Director-General Ma Zhaoxi moved from that position to become Assistant Foreign Minister, a position equivalent in rank to Vice Foreign Minister. Ma’s page on the MFA website was available as of March 10, 2014 at: http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_cnv/wjb_602314/zygy_602330/mzx_602404/
12 Godwin and Miller, China’s Forbearance, 32.
Transcripts of key official television news programs, such as CCTV’s Network News, and Evening News are a particularly valuable source of insight into the party-state’s management of domestic popular opinion, because they are both tightly scripted and authoritative, yet also designed for a mass audience, often being viewed by 100 million or more citizens. The relative scarcity of reports on contentious foreign affairs issues in these official broadcasts further enhances the importance of those reports that do appear. The content of state “mouthpieces” such as the People’s Daily and Liberation Army Daily also provide insight into the leadership’s preferred framings of developments. The People’s Daily is the official organ of the CCP Central Committee, and its editorials and commentator articles can be understood as expressing the “correct reading” of the Beijing’s views and policies. These authoritative articles only rarely address foreign policy issues, but the People’s Daily routinely publishes “quasi-authoritative” international affairs commentaries under bylines that imply high-level backing. The People’s Daily is not a mass medium in the sense of being widely read by ordinary people, but its political significance gives it major influence throughout all sectors of the Chinese media. Like government press releases in other countries, notable People’s Daily articles on international issues often themselves become the subject of reporting and interpretation in commercially-oriented media, as well as other state news outlets. China’s two central news agencies, Xinhua and CNS, along with the Huanqiu Shibao and People’s Daily Online, are important non-authoritative central media through which the CCP state can influence domestic discourse on international affairs. Individual articles and commentaries from these sources carry little weight, but on important national-level issues like the South China Sea, repeated editorial lines during periods of elevated tensions, and patterns of coverage sustained over prolonged periods, likely require tolerance at high levels of the propaganda system.

Censorship data

Data on CCP censorship behaviour comes from two main sources. Chinese journalists frequently leak guidance directives from propaganda agencies, which are in turn published on overseas Chinese websites. These orders range from not

13 Chang and Ren, “Television news as political ritual.”
14 This was the phrasing of officials from a central state media public opinion monitoring unit. Interview #13/11, Beijing, November 2013.
16 As noted in Chapter 1, three useful sources are “Zhenlibu (Ministry of Truth),” China Digital Times, at http://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/category/真理部指令/?view=all (accessed December 7, 2016); “Internet instructions,” China Copyright and Media, at https://chinacopyrightandmedia.wordpress.com/category/internet-instructions/ (accessed
“hyping 炒作” a particular issue, closing off user comment sections, using only official agency copy, or keeping an issue out of the headlines, through to complete censorship. Another source of censorship behaviour is the WeiboScope dataset of deleted microblog posts, collected automatically from a large sample of influential users via a system set up by Hong Kong University researchers. The dataset is not designed to be comprehensive, and nor do its deleted posts necessarily reflect state orders. Rather, what it indicates is the kinds of information that in-house censors at commercial internet firms anticipate authorities would want suppressed. Similar observations can be made on commercial news portal sites, where comments on contentious news stories may be switched off or limited to unrealistically tiny numbers of participants. Indeed, the latter situation offers an indication of the range of views that are considered risk-free from the company’s perspective, and thus, by extension, politically acceptable to propaganda authorities.

**Interviews**

Finally, more than 75 semi-structured interviews were conducted in Beijing, Shanghai, Haikou and elsewhere in China during three fieldwork journeys in 2012 and 2013, and 2016, and in Canberra, Sydney, Washington, Manila and Perth in 2014 and 2015. Interviewees included diplomatic officials from China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Japan, US, Australia, UK and other countries, as well as PRC state media journalists, propaganda practitioners, commercial news portal executives, university scholars, and experts and officials at state-affiliated research institutions.
Appendix 2

South China Sea events data set

Data on the PRC’s actions across time were compiled from a range of English- and Chinese-language materials, as well as a smaller number of Vietnamese-language sources accessed through Google Translate. Data collection took place through two ongoing processes.

1. Master timeline:

The first process was the generation of a master timeline file (not restricted to the post-1970 era) into which I entered as much information as possible about historical developments in the dispute, as encountered in the course of researching the issue. The sources for this base of raw information on the dispute included existing academic literature and policy analysis, open-source reports by foreign government departments, archived press reporting accessed from the Factiva database, and news on contemporary events acquired casually through Western and Chinese media, usually online. The content of the master timeline was not limited to PRC policy actions, but included any plausibly relevant information on developments in the dispute: reported actions of all claimant states and third countries, notable statements by officials, bilateral meetings and agreements, important domestic political events, and exogenous international developments. The aim in this process was to cast the net as widely as possible, leaving analysis and verification to the refinement stage outlined below.

The timeline has been continuously added to, filled in, corrected and updated throughout the five-year duration of this project, as more and better information on came to hand. A major step in this process was the systematic study of several important PRC sources, including the publicly available yearbooks of maritime agencies, a set of annual government research reports on the South China Sea issue covering the period 2002-2009 and internal-circulation chronologies of major events there up to 1996 (see Appendix 1). Besides identifying numerous unreported PRC actions, this process clarified the timing and nature (and in some cases existence) of many reported events, while adding valuable information on how the dispute’s progression appeared from within China’s party-state system. The master timeline therefore serves as a reference resource on the context of China’s actions in the South China Sea. It also provides the basis for a more refined set of data with which to identify the timing and nature of the recent changes in China’s behaviour.
Events data

2. Assertive events data.

The second process was to refine content from the master timeline, using the three-way typology of assertiveness, to creating a continuous year-by-year set of events data that captures the variation in China's assertiveness between 1970 and 2015. This produced 130 instances of PRC assertive actions in the dispute that intensified in comparison with the previous year. As per the scheme detailed in Chapter 3, three criteria determined whether a given action constituted an intensification of the PRC's assertiveness: qualitative novelty, increased frequency or expanded geographic scope. Using the previous calendar year as reference point served this project's requirement for fairly precise indications of the timing of policy change. The limitations of this method will be discussed shortly.

Most cases of intensified assertive activity were identified from the master timeline, but three other sources of supplementary data also contributed:

1.) Search results from of the People's Daily database offered a proxy for the PRC's level of verbal assertiveness in each year (Figure A2.1);
2.) A chronological list of known PLA Navy exercises in the South China Sea since 2006, identified through both the master timeline and systematic searches of Baidu News; and
3.) Frequency of civilian maritime patrols in the South China Sea as quoted in a 2013 CCTV documentary.

Although it was, predictably, not possible to verify the details of every case with complete certainty, each was carefully considered with regard to the source of the information and by cross-checking sources where available. Cases of doubtful veracity were set aside pending possible future confirmation.

![Yearly number of People’s Daily articles mentioning SCS islands and sovereignty](image)

Figure A2.1: Yearly number of People’s Daily articles mentioning South China Sea islands and sovereignty, 1948-2015. Cases of intensified declarative assertiveness were recorded where the number of articles increased by 33% over the previous year, to a minimum of 5 articles, as indicated by the red bars. From People’s Daily database, search string [沙群岛 主权].
The background to each candidate case of intensified assertiveness required careful consideration. Various aspects of the "status quo" in disputed maritime areas change constantly, such as numbers of ships, patterns of navigation, personnel and equipment.\(^1\) Where a significantly new situation arises, the question of whether a particular state action constitutes an assertive change in behaviour hinges on a counterfactual judgment as to how the state would have responded if the same circumstances had arisen in the past.\(^2\) For instance, although PRC on-water enforcement actions against foreign fishing increased in 2007, this could not automatically be considered a case of intensified PRC assertiveness. The number of Vietnamese fishers operating in the Paracel Islands had increased sharply, and if this had occurred in previous years it is likely PRC enforcement would also have quantitatively increased. The case’s eventual inclusion in the dataset was on the qualitative basis that China’s enforcement methods shifted from the previous practice of harassment and warnings, towards confiscation of property and detention of Vietnamese personnel.

The next step was to consider the likely duration of each action, or pattern of action, in order to identify whether it continued, intensified further or diminished in subsequent years. In most instances, an absence of evidence of equivalent actions in the following year was taken as a diminishment of that particular aspect of China’s assertiveness. There were exceptions, particularly where long periods separated the available data points. For example, Chinese, Vietnamese and Philippine sources reported an increase in PRC fishing activities in disputed parts of the South China Sea in 1994, and the China Fisheries Yearbook records a 26% rise in PRC state-sanctioned fishing trips to the Spratly Islands in 2001, but the intensity of China’s fishing activities in the intervening years was unknown. In this case an assumption was made that Chinese fishing continued at approximately the same level across that time period – a more cautious conclusion than to assume either further increases or diminishment. PRC fishing was therefore regarded as having intensified in 1994, and continued over the following seven years, before intensifying again in 2001.

\(\text{Limitations}\)

As with any attempt to reduce complex social processes to simple numbers, it is crucial to bear in mind what is excluded under this methodology. First, and most obviously, it only accounts for the non-cooperative aspects of China’s behaviour. The assertiveness framework used here captures moderation in the sense of fewer, or qualitatively less escalatory, assertive actions. However, it does not account for actively conciliatory actions such as agreements over resource exploitation or

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\(^1\) As explored in author’s, “The South China Sea: defining the ‘status quo’.”

\(^2\) Johnston, “How new and how assertive,” 27-28. Johnston cites the PRC’s actions in the 2010 Diaoyu Islands incident as a plausible but indeterminate example of a more-assertive policy, based on a counterfactual scenario analogous to the 2010 situation occurring in an earlier period. Johnston considers it possible that China would have responded similarly in the past if Japan had used domestic legal processes to try a Chinese national detained in the disputed islands’ territorial waters.
management, joint patrols, and other confidence-building measures (CBMs). This exclusion was necessary first of all because actively conciliatory measures cannot be assumed to offset or mitigate assertive actions.\(^3\) Future innovations may find appropriate ways to simultaneously account for both non-cooperative and cooperative dispute behaviour, but the methodology used here accords with the purpose the data set serves within this dissertation, namely, identifying the timing of assertive changes in state behaviour. The exclusion of actively conciliatory actions from the events data does not mean they are excluded from consideration in this study. In one sense, a key cause of all assertive actions is a lack of compromise, cooperation and CBMs sufficient to allow the state to pursue its interests without non-cooperative actions. As detailed in Chapter 4, the breakdown of one such initiative, the JMSU, forms part of the explanation for China’s increased assertiveness after that time.

Second, the events data set is of course limited to those actions that are observable and documented in the sources consulted. The strategy to address this was to cast the data-gathering net as widely as possible, both by consulting a wide range of sources in different languages, and by including all possibly relevant developments, both confirmed and unconfirmed, in the master timeline from which the events data were drawn. Another related limitation inherent in relying on events data is that there may be a lag between important political decisions that set in motion a policy change, and the observable manifestations of this. Thus, the positivist approach embodied in these data needs to be complemented by close analysis of speech and text, in order to take account of how the actors involved understood their actions, and also to identify more remote but nonetheless fundamental causes of policy change.

Third, the data on China’s assertiveness do not account for other states’ assertive actions, which are discussed separately in the process of explaining the observed changes in PRC behaviour. External developments, for example, relate particularly closely to the declining claim strength explanation outlined in Chapter 2. As noted above, external developments were included in the master timeline. Although beyond the scope of this thesis, in future I hope to draw create matching events

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\(^3\) Given the importance of worst-case planning in state security policies, the perception of security threats resulting from increased assertiveness is likely to far outweigh the material benefits of any simultaneous conciliatory actions. If so, it is not appropriate to implicitly equate the two by offsetting assertiveness against conciliatory actions in the same dataset. This is not to dismiss the significance of conciliatory measures, but it suggests they may be best considered separately. Assertiveness in maritime territorial disputes could plausibly be mitigated by conciliatory and cooperative actions if they credibly suggest some limitation on assertive actions in the future. Resource-sharing arrangements, such as joint development of energy resources and cooperative fisheries management, may help to ease rivals’ concerns about missing out on disputed resources altogether. Joint patrols allow two countries to simultaneously manifest administrative presence in a disputed area without undermining each other’s claims, as does cooperation over non-traditional security challenges affecting the area. CBMs and crisis management mechanisms such as hotlines and on-water protocols, if implemented effectively, can increase the security of all states’ positions by rendering their rivals’ actions more predictable, thereby decreasing the likelihood that an unplanned encounter will result in a sudden severe negative shift in their relative bargaining position. And multilateral documents pledging policy restraint, such as the 2003 ASEAN-China DOC, can also mitigate assertiveness, to the extent that they generate belief in the likelihood of future assertive actions diminishing or at least not intensifying. However, further research will be necessary to establish how, and indeed if, the two should to be balanced against each other.
data on the assertive actions of Malaysia, Brunei, the Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia and Taiwan, plus non-claimant powers that operate in the area such as the U.S., Australia, Japan and India.4

Fourth, measuring behavioural change by comparing state actions in one calendar year with the one that preceded it was a pragmatic decision. Other units of comparison could generate different findings about when, or even whether, change has occurred. The specific actions taken in the Impeccable incident, for example, were probably unprecedented, but the incident can also be understood as a continuation of the policy that produced the EP-3 incident in a similar area in 2001. Similarly, the unilateral resource survey activities China carried out in 2014 are not known to have occurred in 2013, but similar activities were observed in similar geographical areas in 2010 and 2007. Although this could be characterized this as a single case of change (no explorations before 2007, explorations every 3-4 years afterwards), by the year-on-year method this constitutes three separate cases of intensification (and subsequent diminishment) of assertive activity. Besides allowing for the identification of the timing of behavioural change down to a one-year range, using calendar years also seemed a less arbitrary choice than wider units of time.

Finally, the assertiveness framework implicitly gives equal weight to actions of varying significance. For example, the method of handling Vietnamese fishers in the Paracels became more coercive in 2009 and 2011 with the increased detentions of personnel and seizure of boats, but its intensity remained far below that seen in the January 2005 Sino-Vietnamese fisheries incident in the Gulf of Tonkin, in which nine Vietnamese personnel were killed, or the fatal 2007 incident in the Paracels. South China Sea sovereignty declarations in the party's official press increased substantially 2009 and 2011, but the party media had been equally vociferous in 1999 and 2004, and much more vocal in 1988 and 1995. Of course, China's overall policy has remained far less forceful than it had been in 1974, 1988, and 1995 when it occupied islands and reefs and even used military force, so using those periods as a reference point, could have produced the opposite conclusion: that China's policy today is much less assertive than at those times. The massive land reclamation works since late 2013 are also not weighted for their significance, except insofar as they enable further assertive actions in the future. The three-way typology used here is a compromise between the need for practical and systematic measurements of change, and the need to account for the significance of different kinds of actions.

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4 Yung and McNulty's database of actions, if eventually released publicly, could offer a starting point for such a project, as it includes actions by all South China Sea claimants actions since 1995. See Yung and McNulty, "China's tailored coercion"; and Yung and McNulty, "Empirical analysis."
Background: selected assertive PRC actions in South China Sea in 1949-1969

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year Range</th>
<th>Event Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1950-1956</td>
<td>Qionghai fishers operate in Spratlys (Zhang, NSQDDSJ, 3). But according to another source the PRC prohibited its citizens from fishing in Spratlys from 1954 onwards (Guo Jinfu, “Nansha yuye ziyuan,” 298).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950-1956</td>
<td>Guangdong Hainan Administrative Region allegedly erects weather stations, conducts surveys, extracts phosphorous and “manages fishing” in Paracels. (Zhang, NSQDDSJ, 3).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951, August</td>
<td>Zhou Enlai publicly asserts sovereignty over four South China Sea “island groups” (Samuels, Contest, 78-9).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1956</td>
<td>PRC occupies Amphritrite Group in north-eastern Paracels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1956-1959</td>
<td>PRC mines more than 100,000 tons of phosphates in Paracels. By 1961 the supply was exhausted (Lei, NSZGSZH, 133).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1958</td>
<td>PRC Territorial Sea Declaration asserts territorial sovereignty and seas around the four South China Sea “island groups” (but not Diaoyu Islands).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1959</td>
<td>Office for Zhongsha, Xisha and Nansha Affairs established.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1959</td>
<td>first PLAN patrol of Paracels (Fravel, Strong Borders, 275n25).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>construction of radio masts &amp; observation tower at Woody Island. (Fravel, Strong Borders, 275).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>PLAN conducts sixteen patrols to protect Chinese fishers in the Paracels. (Fravel, Strong Borders, 275).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1958-1971</td>
<td>China issues 497 protests and warnings over US surveillance above the Paracels (Fravel, Strong Borders, 275n32).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cases of intensified assertive actions</td>
<td>Cases of diminished assertive actions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>1972</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>1979</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>1980</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table A2.1: Cases of intensified assertive actions in the 1970s.
### 1980s

#### 1980

1. **February**: The Vietnamese state radio quotes a FM spokesman saying China is building an airstrip on an island.
   
2. **October**: Reed Bank (UA) 1989, February 5: Construction begins on harbours on Duncan, Woody, East October (C accelerated, and that an artificial island groups under its sovereignty conducted surveys of 600,000 sq km of the SCS (Zhang NSQDDSJ 1987, April: PLAN chief admiral Liu Huaqing orders PLAN's chemical, biological, gravitational, water depth, southern Spratly Islands, including exercises at James Shoal (Zhang NSQDDSJ 1987, April: PLAN's chemical, biological, gravitational, water depth, southern Spratly Islands, including exercises at James Shoal).

#### 1981

1. **October**: From May 16 to June 6 PLAN conducted patrols of the Spratlys, from Northwest Cay to James Shoal (Zhang NSQDDSJ 1987, April: PLAN chief admiral Liu Huaqing orders PLAN's chemical, biological, gravitational, water depth, southern Spratly Islands, including exercises at James Shoal).

#### 1982

1. **A2.2**: Vietnam Radio in a special broadcast says China is establishing an aerodrome on one of the hotly disputed islands.

#### 1983

1. **March 1**: The Hainan and the Paracels, thereby forcing international airlines to negotiate with name for SCS activities. Between April and July the PLAN conducted a comprehensive survey of the Spratlys, from Northwest Cay to James Shoal (Zhang NSQDDSJ 1987, April: PLAN chief admiral Liu Huaqing orders PLAN's chemical, biological, gravitational, water depth, southern Spratly Islands, including exercises at James Shoal).

#### 1984

1. **November**: Critics of Philippines by name marks first time since 1970s, the Philippines have probably continued to traffic HK route (Zhang NSQDDSJ 1987, April: PLAN chief admiral Liu Huaqing orders PLAN's chemical, biological, gravitational, water depth, southern Spratly Islands, including exercises at James Shoal).

#### 1985

1. **October**: The PRC had criticized an ASEAN country by name, but it is probably that from October, airlines would have to avoid a "danger zone" to conduct "patrol surveillance" for the first time, the PLAN's chemical, biological, gravitational, water depth, southern Spratly Islands, including exercises at James Shoal (Zhang NSQDDSJ 1987, April: PLAN chief admiral Liu Huaqing orders PLAN's chemical, biological, gravitational, water depth, southern Spratly Islands, including exercises at James Shoal).

#### 1986

1. **April**: The PLAN chief admiral Liu Huaqing orders PLAN's chemical, biological, gravitational, water depth, southern Spratly Islands, including exercises at James Shoal (Zhang NSQDDSJ 1987, April: PLAN chief admiral Liu Huaqing orders PLAN's chemical, biological, gravitational, water depth, southern Spratly Islands, including exercises at James Shoal).

#### 1987

1. **November**: The PLAN chief admiral Liu Huaqing orders PLAN's chemical, biological, gravitational, water depth, southern Spratly Islands, including exercises at James Shoal (Zhang NSQDDSJ 1987, April: PLAN chief admiral Liu Huaqing orders PLAN's chemical, biological, gravitational, water depth, southern Spratly Islands, including exercises at James Shoal).

#### 1988

1. **August 3**: Offensive and defensive actions by name marks first time since 1970s, the Philippines have probably continued to traffic HK route (Zhang NSQDDSJ 1987, April: PLAN chief admiral Liu Huaqing orders PLAN's chemical, biological, gravitational, water depth, southern Spratly Islands, including exercises at James Shoal).

### Notes

- **PRC**: People’s Republic of China.
- **VN**: Vietnam.
- **PLA**: People’s Liberation Army of China.
- **SOA**: State Oceanic Administration of China.
- **CAS**: China Aerospace Science and Technology Corporation.
- **NSQDDSJ**: People’s Daily, an official newspaper of the PRC.

### Table 2.2: Cases of militarized assertive actions in the 1980s

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Case of militarized assertive actions</th>
<th>Case of diminished assertive actions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>Vietnam Radio in a special broadcast says China is establishing an aerodrome on one of the hotly disputed islands.</td>
<td>PRC had criticized an ASEAN country by name, but it is probably that from October, airlines would have to avoid a &quot;danger zone&quot; to conduct &quot;patrol surveillance&quot; for the first time, the PLAN's chemical, biological, gravitational, water depth, southern Spratly Islands, including exercises at James Shoal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>From May 16 to June 6 PLAN conducted patrols of the Spratlys, from Northwest Cay to James Shoal.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>The PRC had criticized an ASEAN country by name, but it is probably that from October, airlines would have to avoid a &quot;danger zone&quot; to conduct &quot;patrol surveillance&quot; for the first time, the PLAN's chemical, biological, gravitational, water depth, southern Spratly Islands, including exercises at James Shoal.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983</td>
<td>Critics of Philippines by name marks first time since 1970s, the Philippines have probably continued to traffic HK route (Zhang NSQDDSJ 1987, April: PLAN chief admiral Liu Huaqing orders PLAN's chemical, biological, gravitational, water depth, southern Spratly Islands, including exercises at James Shoal).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>The PRC had criticized an ASEAN country by name, but it is probably that from October, airlines would have to avoid a &quot;danger zone&quot; to conduct &quot;patrol surveillance&quot; for the first time, the PLAN's chemical, biological, gravitational, water depth, southern Spratly Islands, including exercises at James Shoal.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>The PRC had criticized an ASEAN country by name, but it is probably that from October, airlines would have to avoid a &quot;danger zone&quot; to conduct &quot;patrol surveillance&quot; for the first time, the PLAN's chemical, biological, gravitational, water depth, southern Spratly Islands, including exercises at James Shoal.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>The PRC had criticized an ASEAN country by name, but it is probably that from October, airlines would have to avoid a &quot;danger zone&quot; to conduct &quot;patrol surveillance&quot; for the first time, the PLAN's chemical, biological, gravitational, water depth, southern Spratly Islands, including exercises at James Shoal.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>The PRC had criticized an ASEAN country by name, but it is probably that from October, airlines would have to avoid a &quot;danger zone&quot; to conduct &quot;patrol surveillance&quot; for the first time, the PLAN's chemical, biological, gravitational, water depth, southern Spratly Islands, including exercises at James Shoal.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>Offensive and defensive actions by name marks first time since 1970s, the Philippines have probably continued to traffic HK route (Zhang NSQDDSJ 1987, April: PLAN chief admiral Liu Huaqing orders PLAN's chemical, biological, gravitational, water depth, southern Spratly Islands, including exercises at James Shoal).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Declarative** (D) and **Demonstrative** (UA) columns indicate different types of assertive actions taken by the PRC during the 1980s.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Cases of unclassified assertive actions</th>
<th>Cases of classified assertive actions</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table A2.3: Cases of HPC assertiveness in the 1980s.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Case of intensified assertive actions</th>
<th>Case of diminished assertive actions</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>First Roman cable #07BEIJING2670</td>
<td>Expulsions of Vietnamese fishing boats</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Lobbying of foreign oil companies</td>
<td>Spike in war games not related to disputed island</td>
<td>Arroyo&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>First mention of enforcement of SCS fishing ban against Vietnamese</td>
<td>No repeat of EP representation to foreign companies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>First case of enforcement of SCS fishing ban</td>
<td>Expulsions dropped to 102 in 2009, due to deterrent effect of new policy (NISCSS, &quot;2003 NHDQXSPGBG&quot;)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Spike in war games</td>
<td>Probably fewer threats in 2004</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Expulsions of Vietnamese fishing boats increased by 30 across the previous 4 years from 2005 to 2008 (Fravel, &quot;China's 33 for the year, according to Vietnamese sources, having numbered less than 30 in the previous 4 years&quot;)</td>
<td>Expulsions of Vietnamese fishing boats increased by 30 across the previous 4 years from 2005 to 2008 (Fravel, &quot;China's 33 for the year, according to Vietnamese sources, having numbered less than 30 in the previous 4 years&quot;)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Lobbying of foreign oil companies</td>
<td>Spike in war games</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Lobbying of foreign oil companies</td>
<td>Spike in war games</td>
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<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Spike in war games</td>
<td>Spike in war games</td>
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<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>First Roman cable #07BEIJING2670</td>
<td>Expulsions of Vietnamese fishing boats</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table A2.4: Events data on PRC assertiveness in the 2000s

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**Note:** This table provides a summary of key events related to China's assertiveness in the South China Sea and its enforcement of territorial claims and maritime rights. The table includes instances of strengthened and diminished assertive actions, along with relevant notes and references. The data is illustrative and may require further context for a comprehensive understanding.
**Table A2.5: Events data on PRC assertiveness in the 2010s.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Events</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>2010</td>
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<td>2011</td>
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<td>2012</td>
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<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>2014</td>
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<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>2015</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Legend:**
- **A2.5**: Undetermined
- **2010**: Cases of intensified assertive actions
- **2011**: Cases of diminished assertive actions
- **Notes**: Description of the event

**Note:** This table provides a summary of events related to PRC assertiveness in the 2010s, with a focus on the intensity and nature of such actions. The data includes various occurrences and dates, reflecting the evolving nature of territorial disputes and the PRC's strategic approach to territorial claims.

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**Commentary:**

1. **2010**: The PRC government's increased presence at Second Thomas Shoal is highlighted, indicating strengthened assertive actions.

2. **2011**: The presence of PLA patrols increases dramatically, with CMS boats approaching Malaysian survey vessels in Reed Bank, emphasizing territorial claims.

3. **2012**: Seizure and detention of at least 4 Vietnamese fishing boats in May, reflecting a series of assertive actions.

4. **2013**: Informal economic sanctions on Philippines over island sovereignty claims in May, underscoring territorial disputes.

5. **2014**: Continued assertive actions and sensory provocations, with frequent aerial passes in the South China Sea, indicating a strategic posture.

6. **2015**: The PRC's assertive actions continue, with a focus on maritime claims and territorial disputes, reflecting a consistent approach to assertive behavior.

**Notes:**

- **A2.5**: Undetermined
- **2010**: Cases of intensified assertive actions
- **2011**: Cases of diminished assertive actions
- **Notes**: Description of the event

**Note:** This table provides a summary of events related to PRC assertiveness in the 2010s, with a focus on the intensity and nature of such actions. The data includes various occurrences and dates, reflecting the evolving nature of territorial disputes and the PRC's strategic approach to territorial claims.
Appendix 3

Implications of UNCLOS as a cause of maritime assertiveness

Given the presence of well-understood factors like China’s rising material power and resource insecurity in explaining the cases of new assertiveness in this dissertation, it might be asked whether the UNCLOS really mattered as a driver of China’s policy change. Perhaps the argument advanced here is an example of the meaningless causality E. H. Carr denounced in his parable of the pedestrian run over by an car driven by an intoxicated driver, on an accident-prone road, while walking to buy cigarettes: one could legitimately point to his smoking habit as a proximate cause of his death, but it was an irrelevant proximate cause. Counterfactually, if the UNCLOS III negotiations had collapsed before the treaty was signed, the situation in maritime East Asia might well be largely the same today. Expansive unilateral EEZs might organically have become accepted state practice, prompting China to follow much the same path of legal codification and, once its economic and military capabilities were sufficient, on-water enforcement of those claims. Yet, regardless of how marginal we consider the Convention’s contribution to be, the links established between the UNCLOS and China’s specific newly assertive practices still carry some important theoretical and normative implications. The moral of Carr’s story was not to deny that the unfortunate pedestrian’s desire for cigarettes led to his death. Rather, Carr’s point was that the identification of historical casualty ought to have use value for dealing with present problems. And while a ban on smoking would not help prevent pedestrians being run down by drunken drivers, examining the relationship between the UNCLOS and assertive state behaviour at sea may help scholars, policymakers and citizens better understand contemporary interstate confrontation.

The most obvious implication of these findings is the failure of the Law of the Sea to work as intended in the South China Sea, one of the world’s most important bodies of water. Even if we assume, for argument’s sake, that the changing regional power balance and China’s growing resource insecurity alone are sufficient to explain most of the observed changes in the PRC’s policy, we are nonetheless left with the question of why the Law of the Sea has not restrained confrontational state behaviour in the South China Sea, and has instead reinforced it. Proponents of UNCLOS and the pacifying effects of formal international law might argue that China’s selective and narrowly self-interested approach to international law is the true cause of the incidents, and not the legal regime itself. Even then, however, the PRC would in this regard be far from unique among the contemporary world’s

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states, especially great powers. While some observers and activists emphasize the importance of maintaining moral pressure aimed at shaming states that engage in “bad behaviour” that contraves accepted readings of current international law, it is at least equally productive to investigate the logic underpinning their adherence or non-adherence to the rules in specific instances, as this may help identify ways to maximize observance, and minimize unintended effects, as the body of international law and its importance in world politics grows.

If UNCLOS enabled – or, in those cases that may be overdetermined, at least reinforced – China’s intensified assertiveness in the South China Sea, then why might this be so? The three causal mechanisms that Chapter 4 attempted to demonstrate, mediating UNCLOS’s contribution to assertive state policy change, may point the way towards some of the deeper reasons for these unintended effects.

Perils of formalization? The first mechanism specified that the Chinese party-state’s accession to UNCLOS hardened its disputed claims by elevating their domestic legal status and spurring the development of new capabilities for their enforcement. More importantly, if UNCLOS prompted and legitimized the creation of new laws and enforcement systems to assert China’s disputed maritime claims, it probably did the same for the PRC’s rivals, too. The Preamble to the UNCLOS states a belief that “codification and progressive development of the law of the sea achieved in this Convention will contribute to the strengthening of peace, security, cooperation and friendly relations among all nations.” The processes outlined here suggests greater caution is warranted in the formalization of international laws that govern disputed state claims without providing rules regarding their enforcement, particularly where such claims are likely to assume the “territorial” qualities of exclusivity and paramount state authority. Moreover, since international law is by definition public, the codification of states’ rights may also increase the involvement of uncompromising, pro-confrontation domestic constituencies on some or all sides of a dispute. On such issues, the benefits of increased clarity and certainty (and rent) evidently need to be carefully balanced against the costs of reduced flexibility.

Design flaws? The second mechanism Chapter 4 proposed linking UNCLOS with increased conflict in the South China Sea is the encouragement of assertive actions aimed at bolstering legal claim strength. This appears to have resulted from the

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2 Australia is a prominent example of a non-great power that has been willing to ignore what externally are widely perceived international legal obligations. Numerous UN Human Rights Commissioners have lamented Canberra’s disdain for international human rights law in its treatment of maritime asylum seekers. But its approach to the Law of the Sea also bears some uncomfortable similarities to that of China. In 2016, for example, news emerged that Foreign Minister Julie Bishop was, on the advice of an unnamed “competent authority,” preventing a key witness from traveling to The Hague to testify in a case at the Permanent Court of Arbitration brought by Timor Leste seeking annulment of the 2006 Timor Sea Treaty. The witness claimed to have overseen an Australian operation to install listening devices in the Timorese cabinet room during the negotiations, under the cover of an aid project. Indeed, one might argue this apparent witness obstruction showed a greater disdain for international legal process than China’s refusal to participate in the Philippines-initiated arbitration over the South China Sea.
Convention's assignment of exclusive authority over marine scientific research activities on one hand, while on the other hand requiring state parties to engage in this class of activity in disputed areas in order to substantiate overlapping claims. The root cause of this problem seems to be an absence of sufficiently specific language affirming the legality of activities undertaken for the purpose of submissions under the Convention. If UNCLOS had, for example, assigned the CLCS the minor additional function of receiving and publicizing the registration of such activities, this might have avoided the unfavourable outcomes on the water in the South China Sea in 2007 and 2008. Alternatively, given the Convention's expressed intention to promote cooperation among state parties, a provision may have been made in Article 76 or Annex II requiring the gathering of geological data for the CLCS Outer Continental Shelf adjudication process to be carried out collaboratively between contending parties, or by a neutral operator acting without prejudice to the claims of any party. Finally, China's perception that competing EEZ claims are, or may be, subject to a prescriptive use-it-or-lose-it principle, has driven its efforts to exercise unilateral jurisdiction in disputed areas of the South China Sea. Article 77 of the Convention made explicit that continental shelf rights "do not depend on occupation, effective or notional." Had a similar provision been included in the section on the EEZ (Articles 55-75), this may well have eased the anxiousness of states with overlapping EEZ claims to maximize their unilateral administrative activities in those disputed areas. At a minimum, in China's case it would have prevented maritime agency officials from making such arguments in favour of greater demonstrative assertiveness.

Declining claim strength? As argued in Chapter 4, the weakening, but not extinguishment, of significant parts of China's (self-perceived) longstanding claims in the South China Sea under the new international legal regime left the PRC especially sensitive to adverse changes in its ability to advance those claims. As Chapter 5 showed, this pattern of intensified Chinese assertiveness around the margins of the nine-dash line area, where its legal claim is weakest, continued in subsequent years. The timing of China's assertive maritime behaviour therefore may be hewing increasingly closely to the expectations of Fravel's theory of state escalation in territorial disputes. This theory emphasizes "declining claim strength" as a key variable explaining the timing of states' decisions to escalate to conflict (see Chapter 2). Being built from the China case, the theory easily accounts for the PRC's decisions to use military force in its land-based disputes. However, Chapter 3 found it to fare less well in explaining Beijing's previous assertive shifts in the South China Sea from the 1970s to the 1990s, where Beijing did show an opportunistic tendency. The "territorialization" of maritime space under the UNCLOS regime, a development in which the PRC's only began to participate in earnest from the late 1990s, offers an explanation for this curious tendency of China towards coercive responses to adverse developments in areas where its claim appears weakest under international law. This intersection of the legal aspect of maritime claims and the rationalist logic of state behaviour in territorial

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3 One way to do this might have been to mention the CLCS in Article 247 on "Marine scientific research projects undertaken by or under the auspices of international organizations."

4 Fravel, "Power shifts."
sovereignty disputes is far from academic. Practically, it implies that if codification of sovereign international legal rights is to have a pacifying or at least neutral effect on existing conflicts, it is essential that the treaties produced explicitly extinguish other potential competing sources of rights. If not, as the cases above suggest, the new legal document will only increase the likelihood of states resorting to coercion to preserve the last possibility of realizing of their extra-legal – or, as the PRC views them, pre-legal – claims to sovereign rights.

Beware territorialization. Above all, the findings outlined here urge renewed caution from citizens, activists and civil society organizations before acquiescing to the expansion of state authority over currently un-territorialized spaces – such as outer space and cyber space. This is by no means an argument against multilateral institutions, and it does not validate the position of those in Washington D.C. who oppose the US subjecting itself to any form of supranational authority, including UNCLOS. Instead, the argument outlined in Chapter 4 implies that civil society groups participating in the creation of new global regimes ought to fight harder than they did during the UNCLOS III negotiations to oppose the view that problems of the global commons can only be resolved through expansions in territorial states’ authority. They should bear in mind Oxman’s observation of the difficulties of overcoming “states’ resistance to restraints on the discretion that accompanies territorial sovereignty and the power of emotional appeals to territorial sovereignty by those who would resist international restraints.”

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5 Oxman, “Territorial temptation,” 844-845.
Appendix 4

PRC officials’ comments on “rights defense and stability maintenance,” 2008-2012

The CCP’s key policy formulation governing maritime disputes, weiquan-weiwen xiangtongyi (维权维稳相统一) presents a number of choices for the translator. The rendering used here, “the unity of rights defense and stability maintenance,” attempts to balance faithfulness to the concept’s connotations in its original context with accurate reflection of its substantive content from an international perspective. The variation in possible translations mainly revolves around the verb wei (维), which can be equivalent to maintain, safeguard, protect, and defend. In specific instances of PRC maritime activity any of these may be more accurate than the others. But because the concept is a general one covering all such actions simultaneously, it is necessary to deploy a single, consistent translation.

*Weiquan*, in the context of policy in maritime disputes, is a contraction of haiyang quanyi weihu (海洋权益维护), which literally means “maintenance/safeguarding of maritime rights and interests.”¹ Rendering *weiquan* as “rights defense” is, first of all, consistent with the use of this shorthand in other contexts – most prominently, China’s *weiquan* lawyers, or legal activists who struggle for the realization of civil and human rights in the PRC against a status quo of frequent encroachment by state authorities.² But it also comes closer to the term’s original meaning than the alternatives – protection, safeguarding, and maintenance, for the following reasons.

*Protection* has implications of passivity that the *weiquan-weiwen* concept specifically seeks to avoid. The CCP policymakers who have produced the discourse of *weiquan* have always been acutely aware that China’s current claims to maritime rights and interests have never, at least in the history of the PRC, been

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¹ See SOA, ZGHYNJ 2008, 127; SOA, ZGHYNJ 2009, 151. The Office of the Leading Small Group for Maritime Rights and Interests Work (海洋权益工作领导小组办公室), is believed to have been established in the second half of 2012. See Peng Mei, Shi Xiaohan and Xing Dan, “Zhongguo Haijingju liangxiang (China Coast Guard unveiled),” Renmin Wenzhai (People’s Digest), September 2013, at http://paper.people.com.cn/rmwz/html/2013-09/01/content_1307445.htm (accessed October 20, 2016). Chinese dictionaries define the term *weihu* (维护) as a compound of *weichi* (维护), meaning maintain, and *baohu* (保护), protect.

a state of full realization that could simply be protected. Thus, maritime *weiquan*
has probably always implied an active struggle, not simple *protection* of assets
already in China’s possession.³

The same shortcoming is inherent, to a slightly lesser degree, in *safeguarding*,
generally the preferred translation in PRC external propaganda. The English
meaning of “safeguard” connotes pre-arranged processes that anticipate and
forestall undesirable outcomes (e.g. institutional safeguards). Although this term
accurately describes certain PRC maritime initiatives, such as crisis-response
procedures, and the regular patrol system designed to monitor and detect
activities by rival claimants, it largely misses the flexible, situational ethos behind
maritime *weiquan*, particularly in the context of its “unity” with *weiwen*, or stability
maintenance. Although its implications of careful pre-planning mean it captures
more about PRC maritime *weiquan* than rights *protection* would, *safeguarding*
nonetheless also creates a strong implication that the rights have already been
realized, thus eliding the crucial element of active struggle for as-yet unrealized
goals.

The other alternative English term, *maintenance*, is more effective in imparting the
dynamic implications of *weiquan*. The CMS regular patrolling program could
perhaps be described as rights *maintenance*, since it is to a significant degree
aimed at preventing any implied abandonment of China’s claims. Yet, on the other
hand, the patrols’ geographic scope has expended over time, and they have also
been aimed squarely at manifesting, and verbally asserting, China’s jurisdiction in
what Beijing acknowledges are disputed maritime spaces. In the South China Sea
beyond the Paracel Islands, the current state of affairs is far from Beijing’s ideal
end-state; thus, *weiquan* for the most part implies much more than simple
maintenance. “Assertion” or “proclamation” would be more accurate for these
aspects of what the policy concept implies.

*Maritime rights defense* comes closest to capturing the intent of China’s maritime
*weiquan* operations as an active struggle to defend unrealized (or encroached-
upon) claims, while also acknowledging that, viewed from within the party-state,
all assertive acts are regarded as inherently defensive (see Chapter 2).⁴ Using *defense* for *wei* also puts back a little of the *realpolitik* that is lost by translating *quan* directly as “rights,” when it in fact is a contraction of “rights and interests” (*权 益*).

³ While CCP policymakers may subscribe to an historical view of fully realized “maritime rights” in
the past, but written CCP maritime policy sources, all the way up to Ministry-level official speeches,
have always shown strong awareness that large parts of the “3 million square kilometres of blue-
coloured territory” over which the PRC claims maritime rights today are in dispute. See then-
Minister of Land and Resources Zhou Yongkang’s January 1999 speech printed in SOA, ZGHYNJ
⁴ Because *weiquan* does involve a maintenance aspect, “defence” is arguably a slightly hard
rendering of *wei*. Although dictionaries do offer “defend” as one meaning of *wei hu* (维护), there are
several clearer expressions of *defend*: *hanwei* (捍卫), *fangyu* (防御), *baowei* (保卫), and *fanghu* (防 护).
Translating *weiwen* as *stability maintenance* also follows established practice where the term is used in other contexts, such as social stability maintenance. Stability *protection* or *safeguarding* would again obscure the concept’s dynamic connotations: *weiwen* does not imply standing guard to protect an extant object, and pre-designed *safeguards* designed to ensure a given “instability” does not arise are only part of the PRC’s approach. The central idea of working constantly to keep a fluid situation from moving in unwanted directions is best captured by *stability maintenance*.

Some scholars have argued that the idea of “unifying” *weiquan* and *weiwen* by achieving regional stability (at least in part) *through* rights defense only emerged around mid-2012. However, the idea that the contradiction between the two can and must be resolved through deterrence is evident well before this. It is discernable both in the official statements listed below, which date back to 2008. The logic of deterrence through exemplification is by no means a new discovery: it underpins one of China’s well-known idioms “killing the chicken to scare the monkey” (杀鸡儆猴).

The deterrent logic is apparent is in a range of policies the PRC pursued in the South China Sea from 2007 to 2011. For example, after an increase in Vietnamese fishing activities in the Paracel Islands in 2007-2008, the South Sea Regional Fisheries Administration strengthened its patrols, and began using coercive measures against the Vietnamese boats, notably seizures of vessels and detentions of personnel, in an attempt to deter future confrontations. Similarly, according the Fisheries Administration, strengthened patrolling, and particularly the arrival of the heavily armed ex-navy ship *Yuzheng-311* in March 2009, had a major “deterrent effect” on foreign fishing. The same logic also underpinned the coercive on-water operations against rivals’ energy survey operations in the first half of 2011, as outlined in Chapter 5, as well as the “rescues” of fisherfolk detained by foreign countries – of which the Scarborough Shoal incident in 2012 by no means the first example.

The following collection of translated quotes from PRC official sources and party-state personnel provides an idea of how the “unity of rights defense and stability maintenance” rose in prominence as a strategic guideline, and the contexts in which it was used.

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Internal report on South China Sea situation, published 2008:

“With the changes in the Taiwan Strait situation, and the coming of the crucial Olympic period, the South China Sea issue will directly affect the overall situation of stability on China’s periphery and our strategic setup in the South East Asian region, and the trends for defending rights and maintaining stability in the South China Sea are grim.”

…China Marine Surveillance’s special operations to disrupt Vietnam’s outer continental shelf geological survey and protect the Sinopec research ship in the 2007 Triton 626 incident “defended our maritime rights, and also maintained stability in the South China Sea.”


SOA Party Secretary Sun Zhihui, February 24, 2008:

“In continuing to unfold rights defense patrol law enforcement in our jurisdictional waters, we must both resolutely defend state sovereignty and also maintain regional stability, responding appropriately to maritime rights disputes and all kinds of rights violating activities. Continue to strongly advance major-country and neighbouring country maritime diplomatic strategies, establish robust cooperative mechanisms, and with the image of a responsible great power, actively guide the development of regional maritime affairs in order to serve the defence of rights and stability of the periphery.”

SOA, ZGHYNJ 2009, 14.

SOA Party Secretary Sun Zhihui, March 7, 2008:

"China is a large country with both land sea. It not only has 9.6 million sq km of land territory, it also has 18,000 km of continental coastline, 14,000 km of island coastline, 6,500 islands larger than 500 sq m, and 3 million sq km of claimed waters under jurisdiction. But China has long valued the land over the sea, and had relatively weak maritime awareness. For the Chinese nation to be revived we must take the oceans seriously and use them to enrich and empower the country. Looking with global vision, as our country’s participation in economic globalization and regional economic integration continues to deepen, the oceans are increasingly related to our strategic interests, linked to our economic heartbeat, and affect our security and social stability. We must not only properly manage, exploit and defend 3 million sq km of claimed jurisdictional waters, even more so we must
head for the open oceans, pay attention to the two poles, and proactively participate in rights defense activities in the maritime commons that account for more than half the earth's surface. Internationally, the task of both defending maritime rights and safeguarding stability on the periphery is extremely complex and important. At home, the rush towards maritime development continues apace, with maritime-related enterprises, departments, units and individuals multiplying, marine area use conflicts and contradictions ever-more prominent, and the environment deteriorating somewhat. Domestically, then, the task of combined planning (统筹) of development and ecological protection is extremely complex and important. It is evident, therefore, that in the latest stage of the new century, we must establish both maritime great power awareness, maritime sustainable development awareness, and maritime rights and security awareness that serves our national circumstances and moves with the times."

SOA, ZGHYNJ 2009, 18-19.

CMS South Sea Branch entry in the SOA yearbook, 2009:

"Regular rights protection patrol law enforcement saw historic breakthroughs. In 2008, under the correct leadership of the higher authorities, grasping the overall situation of rights defense and stability maintenance, with meticulously organized command, the CMS South Sea Region enacted regular rights defense patrol law enforcement work in all areas of the South China Sea. It dispatched CMS vessels and aircraft to participate in the maritime patrol law enforcement fleet organized by the SOA, overcoming difficulties such as complicated oceanic conditions, and staff and equipment fatigue, to complete the mission of patrolling the South China Sea."

SOA, ZGHYNJ 2009, 152.

Internal report on South China Sea situation, published 2009

China's South China Sea policy should “continue to earnestly implement the centre's foreign affairs work major policy guidelines and strategic deployments (大政方针和战略部署), coordinating the two overall situations, domestic and international, uphold the unity of rights defense and stability maintenance, and continue to maintain the stability of the overall situation of the periphery. … China is facing new circumstances, new problems and new challenges in the South China Sea, [making] rights defense and stability maintenance tasks urgent.”

“Rights defense and stability maintenance”

Minister of Land & Resources Xu Shaoshi, February 26, 2011:

“We must protect and expand maritime rights, using all kinds of means together to effectively strengthen control of the oceans. **We should strive to defend rights and maintain stability.**”

SOA, ZGHYNJ 2012, 7.

Report on the SOA Work Meeting on National Maritime Rights Defense and International Cooperation, March 10, 2011, from the SOA’s newspaper:

“The meeting confirmed the guiding thought for maritime rights defense and international cooperation work in the time of the 12th Five Year Plan is: with the Scientific Concept of Development in command, **resolutely implement the centre’s policy of unification of rights defense and stability maintenance, taking account of both domestic and international overall situations**, establish a global vision, make efforts to properly national maritime rights defense work, further expand cooperative spaces and domains, continuously strengthen our country’s voice and influence in international maritime affairs...”

Liu Chunxiao, “2011 nian.”

SOA Party Secretary Liu Cigui, in a long speech to the SOA’s annual Party Construction and Political Work Meeting, March 29, 2011:

“Fifth, the **overall planning of our country’s maritime rights defense and stability maintenance.** Maritime rights defense law enforcement is, on one hand, a strategic, big-picture issue that relates to our country’s sovereignty and security, sustainable economic development, and the expansion of strategic interests, and on the other, a highly sensitive issue that bears upon the healthy development of relations between China and its neighbours and domestic social stability. **Rights defense and stability maintenance are equally important to strategic maritime planning (略海洋).** Rights defense law enforcement work must uphold and implement the **Party Centre’s basic policy (基本方针) of ’sovereignty is ours, shelf disputes, jointly develop,’ and guidance policy (指导方针) of ’the unity of rights defense and stability maintenance,’ and must do coordinated planning of the defense of maritime rights and the maintenance of stability in the international and domestic overall situations (大局).** First, the way to effectively take both rights defense and stability maintenance into account is to do proper planning of the setup of rights defense law enforcement led by CMS with mutual assistance from the other forces. Second, strategically, rights defense work must accord with
the overall situation of the state's political, diplomatic and economic construction, we cannot only emphasize rights defense and sacrifice stability maintenance, affecting the overall situation. Third, we also cannot only seek to maintain stability and not dare to defend rights. We should, on the premise of not affecting stability, actively launch rights defense struggles, while at the same time strongly avoid military confrontation, defending the state's maritime rights with full force. Fourth, we must fully recognize the long-term and complicated nature of rights defense work, avoid going after quick results, starting fights in all directions. We must fully understand the situation, earnestly analyze the circumstances, proceed from the real-world situation, launching rights defense struggles step-by-step, with focal points, in separate stages, maintaining the overall stability of relations with the overwhelming majority of neighbouring countries. Fifth is to uphold the close integration of maritime rights struggle with military, economic and diplomatic struggle, multi-pronged approaches, flexible responses, and the maximization of the state's material interests.

Liu Cigui, "Qianghua dui haiyang shiwu de guanli."

PLA National Defense University Strategic Research Department researcher Gao Yitian, writing in 2011:

"Rights defense refers to defending national sovereignty and interests; stability maintenance refers to maintaining our country's regional stability, providing a peaceful environment for economic development, and protecting the period of strategic opportunity for the country's development."

*Stability maintenance has three levels: stability in peripheral security; stability of economic development; and maintenance of the period of strategic opportunity. There is no need to pursue absolute stability on the first level (regional security) because “reasonable, beneficial and restrained struggle” (有理，有利，有节) won't necessarily affect the other two levels.*

"The core of stability maintenance is control of the situation, so as long as the situation is under control, even if there is conflict, that does not necessarily mean a failure of stability maintenance."

"For China at present, it is most crucial to, at the same time as strengthening and consolidating China's position in the global strategic situation, actively guard against (防范) and prevent (制止) direct conflict with Western powers. Our country cannot take simple direct routes to its security pursuits, it needs to develop wider resources and wider strategic room for manouevre, which can only be achieved by taking a long and winding path. Between the use and non-use of military force, there exists the form of 'potential use' [aimed at] forcing the adversary to recognize their difficulty
“Rights defense and stability maintenance”

and back down (知难而退) through active strategic deployments (布势) and strategic balancing of the whole situation. Adopting this kind of method accords with the current changes in the security situation.

Gao, “Guojia anquan zhanlüe,” 65

PLAN North Sea Fleet Political Department Deputy Director, Chen Xuebin, in a 2012 article in a political work journal:

“In carrying out tasks, whatever difficulties are encountered, we must maintain the use of orders and directions from above to unify thought and action, have full belief that the Party Centre and CMC’s strategic policymaking are based on farsighted vision, long-term planning and scientific judgements, and fully possess the ability to drive and direct military operations under complex circumstances. [We must] prevent comrades carrying out their tasks from being influenced by extreme public sentiment, media stimulation and personal emotions to act blindly, impulsively or misguidedly in their independent actions, bringing needless passivity to the overall situation... military planning and organization, including all troop movements, must be done “from the overall situations of the country’s security and development, and the state’s political diplomacy, in accordance with the principle of the unification of rights protection and stability maintenance... guarding against the occurrence of sensitive military-related problems.”

Chen Xuebin, “Lizu xianshi, yi shi wei jian,” 12

FLEC officials Chen Yide, Ma Weijun and Yang Changjian, in a 2012 journal article on the topic of “fisheries protection rights defense and stability maintenance work in the new circumstances”:

1. Responsibilities, meanings and understandings of fisheries protection rights defense-stability maintenance (weiquan-weiwen) work. “We believe that in a broad sense, fisheries protection weiquan-weiwen work means protecting national sovereignty and maritime rights, safeguarding the just and legal rights of the masses of fishers, and boosting the stability of the regional situation and domestic society. In terms of the realities of the responsibilities and tasks of fisheries administration and participation in fisheries protection weiquan-weiwen work at present, our understanding is: rights defense is embodied more in externally-directed fisheries protection and declaring sovereignty, while stability maintenance is more about domestic management. Taking the South China Sea as an example, rights defence is, under the premise of according with and serving the state’s overall diplomatic situation of a stable periphery, safeguarding the state’s sovereignty and maritime interests, safeguarding the overall situation of stability on the periphery, and protecting our country’s fisherfolk’s just and
legal rights and security of property and life, through means such as exploiting Spratly fisheries, fisheries protection patrols, rescues and assistance, and helping guard reefs. Against the present regional backdrop of intensifying struggle over sovereignty in the South China Sea, although fisheries is low-sensitivity and low-intensity, it is nonetheless a domain in which all sides are vying over and pressuring each other. "Stability maintenance, meanwhile, means strengthening domestic management while serving fishers better. Specifically, this includes: strengthening registration, inspections, licensing and safety of fishing boats to uphold order on the water and protect fish stocks, and better regulating entry and exit from ports, seasonal fishing bans and cross-border fishing activities that cause international incidents, providing good licensing services, installing good communications equipment, providing training, giving fuel subsidies and compensation for losses at the hands of foreign countries, rescuing fishers in trouble, increasing fish stocks by releases, and promoting mutual insurance for fishers to minimize losses.

2. Fisheries administrative management needs to maintain the unity of rights defense and stability maintenance. "Protecting and fully exploiting the important period of strategic opportunity, creating a stable international environment for the construction of a moderately prosperous society; with the resolution of prominent issues affecting social harmony and stability as the breakthrough, elevating the level of scientificization of social management is the important thinking and action for properly doing diplomatic work and mass work under the new circumstances. In terms of the responsibilities of fisheries administration and management, we need not only to take on the important task of externally-oriented fisheries protection, we also need to strengthen domestically oriented management of fisheries resources, fishing boats, and orderly production in order to bring about increased efficiency, greater yields and social stability in fishing areas. Therefore, we need to place the planning of weiquan-weiwen work within the country's overall political diplomatic situation, maintaining the achievement of the unification, cross-coordination and mutual reinforcement of rights protection and stability maintenance."

Domestic political stability and unity at home is an important premise of a "decisive victory" in the externally-oriented rights protection struggle. Therefore, in enacting rights protection patrols, Fisheries needs to ensure that "disaster does not befall the home, and fire does not engulf its back yard," referring to stability both at home and on the periphery. However, the authors go on to note that externally-directed rights protection work itself has a role in ensuring domestic stability: by promoting the state's prestige and national dignity, and raising public confidence in the government, fisheries actions help make sure patriotism stays "rational" and cannot be used by enemy forces seeking to undermine the Party's rule. The fisheries patrols following the 2010 Diaoyu Islands incident, actions against other countries' armed seizures of Chinese fishers in the South China Sea, and the harassment of the USNS Impeccable in 2009 are cited as specific examples of where Fisheries
rights protection work and diplomacy have acted “in concert” (配合) to take the initiative internationally and win over the people’s hearts at home.

The keys to appropriate handling of rights defense and stability maintenance, according to the authors, are proportionality, planning, and flexibility, “practically ensuring work measures are consistent with the centre’s deployments (中央部署) with the degree of force adapted to the circumstances on the periphery” as well as present capabilities, while at the same time making the resolution of domestic resource and vessel management issues the centre of the Fisheries force’s work.

3. Two points of convergence: Two points of convergence must be born in mind when doing weiquan-weiwen work: long-term/short-term, and local-internal/overall-external situations.

a.) Long-term & short-term: response mechanisms for fast-breaking incidents are inadequate, with "some Fisheries Administration staff not daring to enforce the law, while others are simply violent." What is needed are laws, contingency plans, education of fishers, stern enforcement, and giving administration of fisheries a service orientation.

b.) Local-internal & overall-external: The second point of convergence that must be recognized is between the immediate situation and the overall situation, and between internal and external (局部与全局、内部和外部): "As noted, from the perspective of fisheries administration and management, we should place planning of weiquan-weiwen work within the overall national political-diplomatic situation and modernization process, sticking with the unification, coordination and mutual facilitation of rights protection and stability maintenance (维权维稳相统一、相协调、相促进)."

The authors feel that this has been done well so far, but "constant vigilance" must be maintained to prevent “some regions and some units’ lackluster management and inappropriate handling resulting in local on-water confrontations and fisheries conflicts, especially large-scale cross-border fishing or major accidents, that interfere with and affect our overall situation.”

Chen, Ma and Yang, "Xin xingshi," 14-15.

Li Guoqiang, CASS Border Affairs Institute researcher, in May 8, 2012 newspaper report during Scarborough Shoal standoff:

"In fact, maritime rights defense and peripheral stability maintenance are united in contradiction. For example, if we find others illegally extracting oil and gas, how would we respond? We can initiate our own wells, thereby squeezing their space. We can warn third-parties off and sanction them. We can also complement this with diplomatic statements and protests. If the adversary does not take further action to exploit
resources, the SCS will be relatively stable, and our sovereignty will have been defended.”

Deng Yajun, “Zhongguo haijiang.”

Deputy Secretary-General of China Council for National Security Policy Studies, Li Qinggong, in May 2012 interview with 21st Century Business Herald:

“The South China Sea desperately needs to promote stability maintenance through rights defense (以维权促稳) and guarantee rights defense through stability maintenance (以稳促维权), because it is not just the South China Sea rights defense struggle that is getting increasingly serious, the South China Sea stability maintenance struggle is also getting increasingly intense. We cannot simply look at the South China Sea, Scarborough Shoal, the East China Sea, and Diaoyu Islands issues as problems of rights defense, in which rights defense is giving way to stability maintenance. Both maritime rights defense and stability maintenance should be grasped, and both hands should be firm.”

21st Century, “Zhongguo xuyao jinkuai zhiding.”

PLAN Vice Admiral Jiang Weilie, in Navy newspaper, November 2012:

"We need to do more to strengthen our theoretical research on strategic management of the South China Sea; proactively combine [actions that] safeguard rights and [actions that] safeguard stability; thoroughly augment the strength of our strategic control over the South China Sea; and thoroughly guard, build and strategically manage the South China Sea.”

Cited in Martinson, “Jinglüe haiyang.”

SOA South Sea Branch Director Cheng Chunfa, in December 2012 journal article:

"The SOA South Sea Branch will continue to implement the South China Sea issue guideline of the 'unity of rights defense and stability maintenance,” strengthening law enforcement with South China Sea regular rights defense patrols and special rights defense law enforcement, reinforcing the construction of rights defense capabilities, island surveillance, monitoring systems, and South China Sea issue policy and legal research, protect domestic units and individuals' normal productive activities and resource exploration and development in South China Sea waters, steadfastly defending state sovereignty and safeguarding our country’s maritime rights.”

Cheng Chunfa “Tongzhou-gongji,” 30
PLA National Defense Technology University researchers Xiao Xunlong and Li Shouqi in 2013 journal article on public opinion warfare in the maritime rights defense struggle:

"Actively innovate in public opinion warfare tactics, increasing the battle efficacy of maritime rights public opinion warfare . . . Second, attenuate (调控) public opinion. We must uphold the peaceful development strategy, grasp the situation of rights defense and stability maintenance, and implement the policy guideline (方针) of the unity of rights defense and stability maintenance."

Xiao and Li, "Haishang weiquan," 102.

Xi Jinping in Politburo study session on maritime rights, July 2013, as reported in a Xinhua article carried on the front page of the People's Daily:

"Xi Jinping pointed out, we should defend the state's maritime rights and interests, making efforts to advance the shift of maritime rights defense towards a coordinated planning and dual consideration (兼顾) model. We love peace, and stick to the path of peaceful development, but absolutely cannot give up legitimate rights and interests, much less sacrifice the state's core interests. We should do coordinated planning of the two overall situations of stability maintenance and rights defense, maintaining the unified safeguarding of the state's sovereignty, security and development interests, matching the safeguarding of maritime rights with rising comprehensive national power."

"Jinyibu guanxin haiyang."

Fisheries Law Enforcement Command, in 2013 Fisheries yearbook:

"Earnestly implementing the Centre's demands regarding the proper carrying out of maritime rights defense and stability maintenance under the new circumstances, [FLEC] organized fisheries patrol law enforcement forces to strengthen supervision (监督) in our EEZ and other waters[.]"

Fisheries, ZGYYNJ 2013, 145.

Dean of China Institute of International Studies and MFA Foriegn Policy Consultants Committee member Qu Xing, in September 2013 media interview:

"[We] need to properly handle China's relations with neighbouring countries. The core of neighbouring country [peripheral] diplomacy is
properly handling problems left over from history, and the key to that lies in defending rights and maintaining stability. We absolutely do not make concessions on sovereignty interests, but we also need a peaceful peripheral environment. We seek to resolve problems, and where they can’t be resolved, shelve disputes and, when doing that, advance cooperation. This is the idea of handling peripheral diplomacy: how to shelve disputes, defend rights and maintain stability, and seek win-win.

...“Stability maintenance cannot come at the price of harming sovereignty interests, and rights defense cannot make China’s periphery fall into a state of conflict... The dialectical relationship between rights defense and stability maintenance is shown quite clearly in the three examples [of Diaoyu, Scarborough Shoal and Sansha].”

Deng Yuan, “Qu Xing: Zhongguo waijiao.”

Article in PLA publication National Defense, in July 2015:

"Since its formation three years ago, Sansha has actively implemented maritime law enforcement and weiquan-weiwen work, exploring the practice of "Six Singles" military-police-civilian integrated defense”

Appendix 5

PRC online media reporting on the South China Sea issue, 2009-2012

Baidu News searches offer a useful way to retrospectively gauge the treatment of the South China Sea in China’s online media, offering an indication of the stories that were circulating in China’s online mediascape during attention spikes. Baidu News is a PRC news content aggregation platform similar to Google News. Its searchable database includes a wide array of content from across China’s online media, including:

1. Online news platforms affiliated with central media such as Xinhua (新华网), CNS (中国新闻网), CCTV (央视网), Global Times (环球网), People’s Daily (人民网), Guangming Daily (光明网), Seeking Truth (求是理论网), China National Radio (央广网), etc.;
2. Major commercial news portals like NetEase (网易新闻), iFeng (凤凰网), Sina (新浪网), Sohu (搜狐网), and Tencent (腾讯新闻);
3. Regional media and their websites, such as the Nanfang Media Group (南方网), Oriental Morning Post (东方网), Beijing Times (京华时报), Guangzhou Daily (广州日报), Chongqing Morning News (重庆晨报), Huaxi Metropolitan Daily (华西都市报), Sichuan TV (四川网), New Express (新快报), Yangcheng Evening News (金羊网), Tianjin Media Group (北方网), etc.;
4. Commercial niche publications such as Caijing (财经网), Caixin (财新), First Financial (一财网), ThePaper (彭拜新闻), 21st Century Economic Herald (21世纪网), Economic Times (经济时), etc..

These examples are just a tiny sample of the range of platforms whose content is aggregated in the Baidu News database. Systematic searching of this resource can provide a helpful indication of which news stories on a specified keyword were most widely republished across China’s online media over a given time period.

Wide syndication of a particular story on China’s mostly commercial online news media is generally a reflection of editors’ assessment of the story’s capacity to attract readers. Read in combination with the Baidu Search Index data (see Appendix 1), the lists below offer a reasonably systematic indication of what information is likely to have stimulated commercial news editors and the online

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1 In the past, Baidu News also took results from forum sites such as China.com (中华网) and Xilu (西陆网), which appear to have found ways of manipulating the aggregator to promote their pages. This problem seemed to have been resolved by 2016, but it required the use of negative search operators to eliminate these sources from the earlier results lists.
public's appetite for information on the South China Sea issue over the periods in question. They were used in this project in conjunction with manual checks of major official mass media such as the *People’s Daily, PLA Daily*, and *CCTV’s national broadcasts Network News* (新闻联播) and *Evening News* (晚间新闻),

Baidu News searches can be set to include all news articles containing the keyword anywhere in the full text of the article, or they can be limited to articles containing the keyword in the headline. Full-text searches are useful for identifying whether a particular event was widely mentioned in online reports at the time (for example, searching for “Reed Bank” {礼乐滩} in March 2011). Headline searches of much more general keywords, such as “South China Sea” {南海}, allows retrospective exploration of which South China Sea-related developments were most prominent at particular times. Helpfully, Baidu News displays duplicate reports – that is, stories published across multiple platforms – under a single headline, together with the approximate number of reposts {相同新闻}. This number offers a preliminary indication of a report’s pervasiveness in online media at that time.

In order to systematically analyze results lists often in the hundreds or thousands, I first set a threshold for the number of reposts identified by Baidu (usually 10, but 5 for smaller results lists), and collected all stories above that threshold. The second step was to verify the number of reposts by opening the full list of reposts via the link provided by Baidu, and checking the number and dates of the syndicated stories. The number often varies slightly from that displayed in the main results list, sometimes due to the addition of content in subsequent years that uses parts of the report in question. Such cases were subtracted from the total verified number of reposts shown in the tables below. The third step was to check the report’s source and content. Because most Mainland-based online news platforms are not permitted to do their own reporting, stories generally state the source at the beginning or at the end, and many provide a link to the original version. After opening a story, confirming its content and, where possible, following any links to the original platform, I added it to the list, together with the original source, verified number of reposts, and any rough notes on its content. Of course, multiple stories often deal with essentially the same content. Where this was identified, they are treated as a single case in the tables below.

Although they are refined from a very large sample, the lists below are not necessarily comprehensive. The stories listed, and the numbers of reposts, are only those that Baidu News’ aggregation process has picked up. Comprehensive though it seems to be, Baidu’s methodology is not publicly known, and state censorship may have removed some prominent stories that stimulated interest at the time. Baidu’s repost numbers are sometimes split between two or more versions of a story, potentially resulting in none reaching the threshold for further investigation. While I tried to look out for this during the initial collection stage, inevitably some will have slipped through. Therefore, the tables below constitute a solid sample of stories prevalent on Chinese mass news platforms across the given time period, but they are not necessarily exhaustive. Additionally, while the verified repost numbers provide a guide to a story’s degree of prevalence, they are not precise enough to be directly comparable with each other.
Abbreviations used

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>21CBH</td>
<td>21st Century Business Herald (21世纪经济报道), Shanghai-based commercially-oriented media platform, closed down in 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BJCB</td>
<td>Beijing Morning News (北京晨报)</td>
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<tr>
<td>BJRB</td>
<td>Beijing Daily (北京日报)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BJWB</td>
<td>Beijing Evening News (北京晚报)</td>
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<tr>
<td>CCTV</td>
<td>China Central Television, and its online platform, China Network Television</td>
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<tr>
<td>CDWB</td>
<td>Chengdu Evening News (成都晚报)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CNR</td>
<td>China National Radio (中央广播电台)</td>
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<tr>
<td>CNS</td>
<td>China News Service (中国新闻社), the PRC’s second news agency, traditionally with more of an international focus</td>
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<td>CQCB</td>
<td>Chongqing Morning News (重庆晨报)</td>
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<tr>
<td>CRI</td>
<td>China Radio International Online (国际在线)</td>
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<tr>
<td>CYD</td>
<td>China Youth Daily (中国青年报), published by Communist Youth League</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CYDL</td>
<td>China Youth Online (青年在线), online platform affiliated with CYD</td>
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<tr>
<td>DFW</td>
<td>Dongfang Wang (东方网), portal affiliated to Oriental Morning Daily</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FZRB</td>
<td>Legal Daily (法制日报)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FZWB</td>
<td>Legal Evening News (法制晚报), which goes by the English title, The Mirror</td>
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<tr>
<td>GMRB</td>
<td>Guangming Daily (光明日报)</td>
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<td>GMW</td>
<td>Guangming Online (光明网)</td>
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<tr>
<td>HQW</td>
<td>Global Times Online (环球网)</td>
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<tr>
<td>HQSB</td>
<td>Global Times (环球时报)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IHL</td>
<td>International Herald Leader (国际先驱导报), newspaper published by Xinhua</td>
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<tr>
<td>IFJ</td>
<td>PLA Daily (解放军报)</td>
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<tr>
<td>JFRB</td>
<td>Liberation Daily (解放日报), Shanghai-based newspaper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LWDF</td>
<td>Oriental Outlook (瞭望东方) magazine published by Xinhua</td>
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<tr>
<td>SMG</td>
<td>Publications of the liberal-leaning Southern Media Group of the Guangzhou provincial government, including Southern Daily (南方日报), Southern Metropolis Daily (南方都市报), and Southern Weekend (南方周末)</td>
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<tr>
<td>RMRB</td>
<td>People’s Daily</td>
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<tr>
<td>RMRBHWB</td>
<td>People’s Daily Overseas Edition</td>
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<tr>
<td>RMW</td>
<td>People’s Daily Online (人民网)</td>
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<td>SCIO</td>
<td>State Council Information Office</td>
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<td>SCS</td>
<td>South China Sea</td>
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<td>SJXWB</td>
<td>World News (世界新闻报), published by CNS</td>
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<td>XH</td>
<td>Xinhua</td>
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<td>XJB</td>
<td>Beijing News (新京报)</td>
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<td>XWCB</td>
<td>News Morning (新闻晨报), under Shanghai’s JFRB</td>
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<tr>
<td>XXSB</td>
<td>Information Times (信息时报)</td>
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</table>

Repost numbers verified manually are indicated in brackets after the Baidu figure. For uncontroversial stories on topics such as weather events, the source was not traced, and Baidu’s repost numbers were used directly, as indicated by the ~ symbol beside the number.English renderings of headlines are translations where underlined, the others are summaries.
2009, February-March: Philippines baselines bill

Baidu News searches:

- "South China Sea" {南海} in headline, Jan 27-Feb 26, 2009, 363 results (conducted May 27, 2016).
- "South China Sea" {南海} in headline, Feb 7-March 6, 2009, 223 results (conducted May 27, 2016).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Stories with 5+ reposts</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Reposts</th>
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<tr>
<td>February 5, 2009</td>
<td>Philippines legislature seizes SCS islands, giving China a wake-up call</td>
<td>IHL/XH</td>
<td>25</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• 菲律宾立法争夺南海岛屿 给中国敲响警钟 腾讯新闻 2009年02月05日 09:00 7条相同新闻&gt;&gt;[19]</td>
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<td>• 专家称菲律宾立法争夺南海给中国敲响警钟 新浪新闻 2009年02月05日 09:00 6条相同新闻&gt;&gt;[6]</td>
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<td>February 6-8, 2009</td>
<td>PLAN South Sea Fleet amphibious ship holds joint landing combat exercises with Navy Marines near Zhanjiang</td>
<td>JFJB</td>
<td>11</td>
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<td>• 中国南海舰队紧急演练千里奔袭对陆围歼作战 新浪 2009年02月08日 08:00 5条相同新闻&gt;&gt;[6]</td>
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<td>• 南海舰队登陆舰与海军陆战队演练联合登陆作战 新浪 2009年02月06日 07:00 5条相同新闻&gt;&gt;[5]</td>
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<td>February 18, 2009</td>
<td>Nanhai-1 shipwreck (not in disputed area) may be raised in first half of 2009</td>
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<td>• 我国上半年有望发掘宋代沉船南海一号 新浪新闻 2009年02月18日 15:00 7条相同新闻&gt;&gt;</td>
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<td>• &quot;南海一号&quot;上半年有望试掘 新浪新闻 2009年02月18日 08:00 8条相同新闻&gt;&gt;</td>
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<td>February 21, 2009</td>
<td>Expert says China must break through &quot;island chain&quot;, must not allow others to make trouble – interview with Guan Li of Central Party School</td>
<td>CNS</td>
<td>16</td>
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<td>• 专家说中国须突破岛链包围 南海不容他人折腰 新浪新闻 2009年02月21日 15:00 13条相同新闻&gt;&gt;[16]</td>
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<td>February 24, 2009</td>
<td>CNOOC announces discovery of SCS deepwater prospect – find is with Husky in Liwan 3-1; Li Ka-shing may invest.</td>
<td>XH</td>
<td>32</td>
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<td>• 我国南海深水天然气发现首个评价并获得成功 搜狐新闻 2009年02月24日 20:00 23条相同新闻&gt;&gt;[26]</td>
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<td>• 李嘉诚携手中海油2000亿开发南海深水油气 新浪财经 2009年02月26日 02:00 5条相同新闻&gt;&gt;[6]</td>
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<td>February 26, 2009</td>
<td>Maritime economy accounts for 1/3 of Hainan GDP; SCS is a &quot;sea of hope&quot;</td>
<td>Hainan Daily</td>
<td>9</td>
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<td>• 海洋经济占海南GDP近3成 南海成“希望之海” 腾讯新闻 2009年02月26日 07:00 7条相同新闻&gt;&gt;[9]</td>
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<td>February 26, 2009</td>
<td>Xinhua journalist Zha Chunming (查春明) aboard the destroyer Guangzhou: lots of photos as the Guangzhou's Zhi-9C helicopter practices takeoff and landing. &quot;in the SCS south of the Spratly.&quot;</td>
<td>XH</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• 本网记者南海上空拍“广州”号导弹驱逐舰 新华网 2009年02月26日 08:56 12条相同新闻&gt;&gt;[12]</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>February 27, 2009</td>
<td>Clear and present urgency of patrolling SCS – IHL story by Special Military Affairs Observer &quot;Hai Tao&quot; (海韬), notes that &quot;shelving disputes and joint development&quot; policy faces major challenges. Story is framed with Philippines Baselines bill passing on Feb 17.</td>
<td>IHL</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• 巡航南海迫在眉睫 新浪新闻 2009年02月27日 09:00 23条相同新闻&gt;&gt;[30]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
February 27, 2009 "SCS 110" system launched, guaranteeing Chinese fishers' normal operations in Spratlys – against threat of foreign detention, story frames it as response to the Philippines Baselines legislation passed on Feb 17. Story ran in CYD paper on Feb 24.

Story ran in CYD paper on Feb 24.

March 2-3, 2009 Fishermen caught by bad weather in SCS.

• "navigator" launches to rescue 1 day 3 persons (2) 新浪新闻 2009年03月03日 01:00 9条相同新闻>>>(11)
• 海事局发布南海海域2渔船沉没5人溺水失踪21CN 2009年03月02日 19:19 14条相同新闻>>>(16)

March 4, 2009 PLAN South Sea Fleet Political Commissar Huang Jiaxiang: permanent reef forts now established in Spratlys – Attending the NPC, Huang gives interview to Xinhua, outlining major construction done in the disputed area.

• 南海舰队政委黄嘉祥:南沙已建永久式礁堡 (图) 搜狐新闻 2009年03月04日 09:00 8条相同新闻>>>(8)

March 4, 2009 Former PLAN East Sea Fleet commander and now CPPCC member Zhao Guojun’s comments at the Two Meetings, stating that China absolutely does have the ability to defend the SCS.

• 原东海舰队司令:中国完全具备保卫南海实力 泉州网 2009年03月04日 15:19 28条相同新闻>>>(38)

2009, March: Impeccable incident

Baidu News searches:

• "Impeccable" 无瑕号 in-text, March 10-March 31, 2009, 917 results (conducted February 26, 2014).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>News</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Reposts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>March 10, 2009</td>
<td>US ship trespasses into Chinese EEZ, China issues stern protest</td>
<td>CNS, XH, MFA website</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 11, 2009</td>
<td>&quot;Spy ship&quot; nature of American surveillance ship in our SCS clear</td>
<td>HQSB</td>
<td>25</td>
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<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Article</td>
<td>Source</td>
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<tr>
<td>March 11-13, 2009</td>
<td>Ministry of Defense: US surveillance activities in China's EEZ are illegal</td>
<td>CNS, XH</td>
<td>57</td>
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<tr>
<td>March 11, 2009</td>
<td>US Director of National Intelligence Blair says Sino-US vessels' friction most serious incident for 8 years</td>
<td>HQSB</td>
<td>11</td>
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<tr>
<td>March 12, 2009</td>
<td>Russian media say US intensifies seizure of China's SCS and Yellow Sea resources</td>
<td>HQSB</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>March 12, 2009</td>
<td>US sends Aegis destroyer to protect Impeccable, continues to rampage in SCS</td>
<td>HQSB</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 13, 2009</td>
<td>US should stop surveillance around China's periphery, says CASS expert Hong Yuan</td>
<td>China Youth Reference</td>
<td>16</td>
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<tr>
<td>March 16, 2009</td>
<td>US Military claims again that it has right to enter China's EEZ</td>
<td>HQW</td>
<td>18</td>
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<td>March 19, 2009</td>
<td>MFA March 19 press conference</td>
<td>MFA website</td>
<td>22</td>
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<tr>
<td>March 19, 2009</td>
<td>US Defense Secretary: no need for warship to escort surveillance ship</td>
<td>CNS</td>
<td>10</td>
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<td>March 20, 2009</td>
<td>Li Hongwen: China's economic muscle has ripple effect in SCS</td>
<td>CYD</td>
<td>13</td>
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<td>March 20, 2009</td>
<td>US Pacific Commander: US spy ship's trespass was Chinese provocation</td>
<td>CNS</td>
<td>11</td>
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<td>March 24, 2009</td>
<td>MFA press conference</td>
<td>MFA website</td>
<td>14</td>
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<tr>
<td>March 24, 2009</td>
<td>HK media: US survey ship in SCS, expert says is &quot;provocative&quot;</td>
<td>XH</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 25, 2009</td>
<td>US research ship will once again illegally arrive in China's waters</td>
<td>DFW</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>March 26, 2009</td>
<td>240 hours on the SCS – New People Weekly article, discussing Yuzheng-311 going to Paracels, refers to Impeccable as having been &quot;besieged&quot; by Chinese boats in a standoff.</td>
<td>XH/New People Weekly</td>
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</table>

Repost numbers in this table were counted manually, rather than using Baidu's numbers.
2009, May: Continental Shelf controversy

Baidu News searches:


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<th>Stories with 10+ reposts</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Reposts</th>
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<td>May 4, 2009</td>
<td>Typhoon</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>~20</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• 热带风暴“灿鸿”在南海生成 影响西南中沙海域 腾讯新闻 2009年05月04日 22:00 9条相同新闻&gt;&gt;</td>
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<td>• “灿鸿”影响南海中南部,西南地区将有中到大雨 搜狐新闻 2009年05月04日 19:00 11条相同新闻&gt;&gt;</td>
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<tr>
<td>May 7-26, 2009</td>
<td>Malaysia constructs SCS fleet, and other stories on PRC-Malaysia leaders’ meeting</td>
<td>DFZB</td>
<td>10</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• 马来西亚打造南海机动舰队 对外展示新舰艇(图) 搜狐新闻 2009年05月07日 03:00 11条相同新闻&gt;&gt;(10)</td>
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<tr>
<td>May 8, 2009</td>
<td>PLA South Sea Fleet holds first awards ceremony for escort task exercises – PLA Daily announces awards for 124 days of exercises by the Wuhu and Haikou and the Weishanhu supply ship, from December 2008 to late April 2009</td>
<td>JFJB</td>
<td>17</td>
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<td>• 海军南海舰队举行首批护航任务总结表彰大会 搜狐新闻 2009年05月08日 07:00 15条相同新闻&gt;&gt;(17)</td>
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<tr>
<td>May 8, 2009</td>
<td>MFA spokesperson statement responding to Malaysia-Vietnam CLCS submission</td>
<td>MFA website, DFZB and others</td>
<td>56</td>
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<td>• 外交部就越南再次单独提交所谓南海划界案答问 新浪新闻 2009年05月08日 20:00 25条相同新闻&gt;&gt;(30)</td>
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<td>China’s objections effective: Malaysia-Vietnam SCS boundary submission stillborn</td>
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<td>• 中国反对奏效 马来西亚越南南海划界案流产 搜狐新闻 2009年05月08日 02:00 18条相同新闻&gt;&gt;(26)</td>
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<td>May 10-20, 2009</td>
<td>VN builds submarine fleet, hoping to seize SCS initiative - GZRB story, based on Russian media reports, reposted by HQW among others</td>
<td>GZRB, HQW, CQCB</td>
<td>21</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• 越南建潜艇部队 南海欲占先机(图) 网易新闻 2009年05月10日 04:00 11条相同新闻&gt;&gt;(9)</td>
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<td>• VN plans ambushes in Straits of Malacca – from CQCB, starts with submarine purchase</td>
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<td>• 越南拟在南海马六甲海峡人口处建潜艇伏击区 腾讯新闻 2009年05月19日 08:00 16条相同新闻&gt;&gt;(12)</td>
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<td>May 10, 2009</td>
<td>SCS fishing ban north of 12° implemented early</td>
<td>XH, HQSB</td>
<td>36</td>
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<td>• 南海伏季休渔时间提前 腾讯财经 2009年05月10日 20:00 14条相同新闻&gt;&gt;(14)</td>
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<td>• VN unreasonably objects to SCS fishing ban - by HQSB reporter Cheng Gang, who follows up with online chats with netizens</td>
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<td>• 越南无理抗议中国南海休渔令 称侵犯越领土 新浪新闻 2009年05月21日 07:00 17条相同新闻&gt;&gt;(22)</td>
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<td>• 环球时报记者在南海问题与网友在线访谈录 新浪新闻 2009年05月26日 15:00</td>
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<td>• 环球时报记者在南海问题与网友在线访谈录 新浪新闻 2009年05月25日 11:00 3条相同新闻&gt;&gt;</td>
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<tr>
<td>May 19-26, 2009</td>
<td>China again dispatches Fisheries patrol boats to guard SCS, uses soft measures to deal with complicated situation - story about fisheries patrols from CNS and its affiliated magazine SJXWB</td>
<td>CNS</td>
<td>24</td>
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<td>• 中国再派渔护船守南海 用柔性手段对付复杂局面(图) 网易新闻 2009年05月19日 14:00 9条相同新闻&gt;&gt;(11)</td>
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2009, June: emotive state media reports, Indonesia's arrest of PRC fishers

Baidu News search:

- “South China Sea” {南海} in headline, June 1-15, 2009, 373 results (conducted May 30, 2016).

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Stories with 10+ repots</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Reposts</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>June 3, 2009</td>
<td>Wen liobao meets Malaysian PM, calls for appropriate handling of SCS issue</td>
<td>CNS</td>
<td>26</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• 温家宝会晤马来西亚总理 呼吁妥善处理南海问题 新浪新闻 2009年06月03日 19:00 19条相同新闻&gt;&gt; (26)</td>
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<tr>
<td>June 6, 2009</td>
<td>VN demands cancellation of fishing ban – emotive Huanqiu headline using &quot;unreasonably demands&quot; was widely reproduced</td>
<td>HQSB</td>
<td>14</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• 越南要求中国取消南海休渔令 新浪新闻 2009年06月08日 16:00 11条相同新闻&gt;&gt; (14)</td>
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<tr>
<td>June 9, 2009</td>
<td>PLAN South Sea Fleet's Kunlunshan and Lanzhou conduct far-seas training in Spratlys – on CCTV Network News, June 13</td>
<td>JFJB</td>
<td>19</td>
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<td>• 南海舰队昆仑山舰兰州舰等在南沙举行远海演练 腾讯新闻 2009年06月09日 07:00 11条相同新闻&gt;&gt; (19)</td>
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<tr>
<td>June 13, 2009</td>
<td>US says submarine bumped by PLAN counterpart – stories all based on CNN June 12 report</td>
<td>HQSB</td>
<td>20</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• 美军称美舰被撞系在其南海碰撞中国潜艇 华商网 2009年06月13日 16:13 6条相同新闻&gt;&gt; (6)</td>
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<td>• 美国媒体称美军舰被撞声纳在南海碰撞中国潜艇 华商网 2009年06月13日 16:00 6条相同新闻&gt;&gt; (13)</td>
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<td>June 15, 2009</td>
<td>Collision with American sub’s sonar not simply an accident, is US training for anti-sub war to lock down SCS?</td>
<td>CYOL, CNR, IHL</td>
<td>30</td>
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<td>• 美舰声纳被撞不仅意美军联反潜为封锁南海 新浪新闻 2009年06月16日 15:00 15条相同新闻&gt;&gt; (19)</td>
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<td>• “Hide and seek” in the SCS - IHL headline states US changes SCS surveillance policy, directly sending warships to conduct underwater monitoring (美改变南海侦察策略:直派军舰实施水下探测). Stories are all based on June 12 report on US’s CNN.</td>
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<td>• 中美南海“隐身猫” 新浪新闻 2009年06月15日 10:00 6条相同新闻&gt;&gt; (11)</td>
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<td>June 16, 2009</td>
<td>China strengthens maritime outdoor measurement research</td>
<td>CNS</td>
<td>8</td>
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<td>• 我国加强海洋野外观测研究 增加南海台站布点 腾讯新闻 2009年06月16日 21:00 7条相同新闻&gt;&gt; (8)</td>
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<td>June 17, 2009</td>
<td>Sinopec employee says company plans to drill its first well in 2010, no more delays in drilling in waters disputed with Vietnam</td>
<td>DFZB</td>
<td>8</td>
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<td>June 16-17, 2009</td>
<td><em>National History</em> magazine cover story on SCS history</td>
<td>National History</td>
<td>13</td>
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<tr>
<td>June 21, 2009</td>
<td>Nanhai-1 archaeological wreck salvage attempt (in non-disputed waters)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>~18</td>
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<tr>
<td>June 22, 2009</td>
<td>SCS fishers' plight: often arrested by other countries, families ruined – cover story of <em>Xinhua's Oriental Outlook</em> by Zhao Yeping (赵叶苹)</td>
<td>LWDF</td>
<td>15</td>
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<tr>
<td>June 23, 2009</td>
<td>Translation of article in US <em>Signal</em> magazine, <em>Hainan: Tip of the Spear</em>, talking up the PLAN South Sea Fleet's capabilities</td>
<td>CYOL</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 25, 2009</td>
<td><em>Indonesia arrests 75 fishers in our SCS traditional fishing grounds</em> – <em>HQSB</em> story, begins by declaring &quot;Friction has once again emerged between China and Indonesia in the SCS,&quot; goes on to quote a &quot;Chinese expert who did not want to be named&quot; stating that on June 24 that the fishers were in China's traditional fishing grounds, when Indonesia took actions that were fundamentally unreasonable. <em>HQSB</em> understands a diplomatic protest has been lodged by the Jakarta embassy.</td>
<td>HQSB</td>
<td>35</td>
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<tr>
<td>June 28, 2009</td>
<td><em>Worrying about the SCS!</em> - illustrated full-page story featuring history, current developments, and interview with Zhang Zhaozhong. Begins with inaccurate statement that China only occupies 4 out of 500 Spratlyis.</td>
<td>GZRB</td>
<td>48</td>
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<tr>
<td>June 30, 2009</td>
<td><em>Chinese fishers in SCS often seized by foreign countries, traditional fishing grounds continuously shrinking</em> – front-page IHL story from journalist Zhao Yeping, datelined Haikou. Framed by Indonesia's arrest of 8 boats and 75 fishers reported on June 25. Original headline 中国渔民南海经历抢劫</td>
<td>IHL</td>
<td>23</td>
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<tr>
<td>June 30, 2009</td>
<td>China will set up first SCS tsunami warning buoy system</td>
<td>XH</td>
<td>13</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
2010, July-August: Clinton’s intervention and the PLA media wave

Baidu News searches:

- “South China Sea” {南海} in headline, July 15-August 31, 2010, ~220,000 results (conducted May 31, 2016)

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Stories with 10+ reposts</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Reposts</th>
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</table>
| July 25, 2010 | **FM states China’s position and claims, refutes SCS distortions** – Yang Jiechi’s 7-point rebuttal of Clinton's speech and its potential effects are worth neighbouring countries being wary of”
  - 外交部长阐述中方立场和主张 驳斥南海问题谬论 中国政府网 2010年07月25日 00:00 128条相同新闻>>(58)           | MFA website | 58      |
| July 26, 2010 | **China strongly counterattacks against America’s interference in the SCS** – story based on HK, Taiwan and overseas Chinese newspapers’ alleged “major attention on China’s stern and strong position” delivered by Yang Jiechi's 7-point rebuttal of Clinton's speech and its potential effects are worth neighbouring countries being wary of”
  - 中国强烈反击美国插手南海 专家:以不变应万变 网易新闻 2010年07月26日 11:00 19条相同新闻>>(21)       | CNS         | 21      |
| July 26, 2010 | **America openly interferes in SCS for first time, making it new point of Sino-American friction** – probably HQSB’s front-page report. This report was itself reported on by Xinhua
  - 美国首次公开干预南海争端 成为中美新摩擦点 新浪新闻 2010年07月26日 07:00 16条相同新闻>>(21)          | HQSB        | 21      |
| July 27, 2010 | **Beware outside forces intervening in SCS issue** – XH international commentary warns neighbouring countries, “the intention behind [Clinton’s] speech and its potential effects are worth neighbouring countries being wary of”
| July 28, 2010 | **People’s Daily Overseas Edition “Wangyuanlou” commentary by XH International Dept commentator Chen Hu**
  - 捕获《海外版•环球评论》撰稿人：夏华江(blog) 搜狐新闻 2010年07月28日 07:00 19条相同新闻>>(23)   | RMRB Overseas | 23      |
| July 30, 2010 | **Dramatic galleries of PLAN live-fire exercises – first story is from CNS, based on HK media translations, second is from JFB**
  - 中国三大舰队南海演练:表明寸土必争决心 腾讯新闻 2010年07月30日 08:00 14条相同新闻>>(18)       | CNS, JFB    | 36      |
| July 30, 2010 | **US, moving out from behind the curtain, takes opportunity to "return" to SE Asia – long article by Li Jing (李静) from SJXWB, reposted by XH among others**
  - 美国从幕后到高调插手南海 借机"重返"东南亚 新浪新闻 2010年07月30日 13:00 22条相同新闻>>(8) | CNS         | 8       |
| July 30, 2010 | **Chinese military responds to US Secretary's speech, opposes internationalization of SCS issue** – report on press conference organized by SCIO, spokesman Geng Yansheng’s reported comments very boilerplate
  - 中国军方回应美国务卿言论 反对南海问题国际化 搜狐新闻 2010年07月30日 16:00 10条相同新闻>>(10) | CNS         | 10      |
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event Description</th>
<th>Source(s)</th>
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<tr>
<td>July 30, 2010</td>
<td>Malaysia media criticizes US for playing with China-ASEAN relations</td>
<td>CNS, picked up by HQW</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>• 马来西亚批评美国挑拨中国东盟关系: 南海问题千头万绪? 网易新闻 2010年07月30日 17:00  13条相同新闻&gt;&gt;(5)</td>
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<td>August 4, 2010</td>
<td>Liu Zhongmin, a Middle Eastern Languages professor at Shanghai Foreign Languages University, warns against multilateral talks, rebuffing previous opinion piece by Pang Zhongying</td>
<td>HQSB</td>
<td>9</td>
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<td>• 刘中民:南海问题不能简单谈多边 网易新闻 2010年08月04日 10:00 10条相同新闻&gt;&gt;</td>
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<td>August 5, 2010</td>
<td>Japanese media says US intervention in SCS is already a fact, good for Vietnam</td>
<td>HQW</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>• 日媒称美国事实上已介入南海 形势对越南有利 新浪新闻 2010年08月05日 14:00 14条相同新闻&gt;&gt;</td>
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<td>August 6, 2010</td>
<td>US scholar writes of new opportunity for cross-strats defense of SCS sovereignty</td>
<td>CNS</td>
<td>7</td>
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<td>• 美学者撰文指出两岸共护南海主权有机遇 腾讯新闻 2010年08月06日 13:00 11条相同新闻&gt;&gt;</td>
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<tr>
<td>August 10-12, 2010</td>
<td>US wants to oppose China, Philippines says SCS issue “doesn’t need America” – story from Chengdu Evening News, headline is from part of a longer story (probably a feature page) that is primarily on the US-VN military exercises</td>
<td>CDWB, CNS</td>
<td>21</td>
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<td>• 美欲借抗衡中国 菲律宾:南海“不需要美国” 搜狐新闻 2010年08月11日 07:00 29条相同新闻&gt;&gt;</td>
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<td>Philippines FM says resolving SCS dispute does not need America or 3rd party help – CNS stories on Romulo’s comments in PHL media</td>
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<td>• 菲律宾外长称解决南海争端无需美或第三方协助 搜狐新闻 2010年08月10日 08:00 9条相同新闻&gt;&gt;</td>
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<td>• 菲律宾媒体:菲外长拒绝美国插手南海勇气可嘉 新浪新闻 2010年08月12日 15:00 9条相同新闻&gt;&gt;</td>
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<tr>
<td>August 11, 2010</td>
<td>US media: Chinese navy &quot;shadows US aircraft carrier&quot; in South China Sea (pictures) – translation-based XWCB report, carried by CNS, CYOL etc. - headline actually taken from the very last line of the story</td>
<td>XWCB, CNS, CYOL, etc.</td>
<td>22</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• 美军在中国海:“徘徊”航母 (图) 搜狐新闻 2010年08月11日 07:00 20条相同新闻&gt;&gt;</td>
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<td>August 12, 2010</td>
<td>US &amp; Vietnam told hold week-long joint military exercise in SCS – from XWCB and CDWB</td>
<td>XWCB, CDWB, HQW</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>• 美国越南将在南海举行一周联合军演[图] 新华网 2010年08月12日 08:17 11条相同新闻&gt;&gt;10+, 26+ more under “美国欲借…” headline</td>
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<td>Korean media say US-Vietnam relations are in honeymoon period – HQW translation piece, carried by CRI and 12+ others</td>
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<td>• 韩国媒体称美越步入蜜月期待美越联合行动 [图] 新浪 2010年08月11日 08:00 10条相同新闻&gt;&gt;</td>
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<td>Yang Yi on Phoenix TV: Vietnam will regret getting too close to America – iFeng most-clicked story August 11, was in top headlines.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• 解放军少将杨毅：越南将来会对“在校自重”行为后悔,资讯频道,凤凰网 scream</td>
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<td>August 12, 2010</td>
<td>Media say China needs to change security outlook to prevent America from interfering in SCS – based on Taiwan &amp; HK media</td>
<td>CNS</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• 媒体称中国需改变安全观因美国干涉南海问题 新浪 2010年08月12日 08:00 13条相同新闻&gt;&gt;</td>
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<tr>
<td>August 13, 2010</td>
<td>Vietnam attacks with words and prepares with weapons, planning internationalization of SCS Issue, bringing in America to check China – full-page splash from Sichuan regional media, with photos of US navy visit to Vietnam. Intriguingly, something appears to</td>
<td>Huaxia Shibao</td>
<td>26</td>
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<td></td>
<td>China – full-page splash from Sichuan regional media, with photos of US navy visit to Vietnam. Intriguingly, something appears to</td>
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<td>August 13, 2010</td>
<td>PLA Maj-Gen: America wants to stir up muddy waters in SCS, plan will fail – Luo Yuan interview</td>
<td>CNS</td>
<td>16</td>
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<tr>
<td>August 13-15, 2010</td>
<td>PLA Daily publishes two consecutive articles by Major-Generalss accusing US of challenging China's dignity – reviews Luo Yuan article on Yellow Sea, Yang Yi article on Yellow Sea, Zhu Chenghu comments on both Yellow Sea and SCS</td>
<td>XJB</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 16, 2010</td>
<td>Australian society fiercely debates foreign policy, SCS issue position falls towards China – report on Australian FMs debate 5 days before election, notes unusual “unanimity” in their SCS positions, claims Smith said Australia was working for bilateral solutions.</td>
<td>DFBZ</td>
<td>12</td>
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<tr>
<td>August 17, 2010</td>
<td>US expert says China may wipe the floor in in SCS war – based on translation from Wall Street Journal by Claremont Institute scholar</td>
<td>HQSB</td>
<td>12</td>
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<tr>
<td>August 19, 2010</td>
<td>Japanese media falsely claims Asian countries should come together to prevent China from entering and exiting the SCS</td>
<td>HQSB</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>August 19, 2010</td>
<td>Admiral Willard in Manila: US will maintain presence in SCS over long term</td>
<td>XH, CNS</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 20, 2010</td>
<td>PLAN marines fire new type cannons in SCS, August 11 – first-hand report</td>
<td>JFB</td>
<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td>August 22, 2010</td>
<td>Typhoon</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>~32</td>
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<tr>
<td>August 23, 2010</td>
<td>Sino-American war in SCS? – XH international commentary by Ling Dequan (凌德权) hosing down speculation about a war in the SCS</td>
<td>XH</td>
<td>12</td>
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<tr>
<td>August 23, 2010</td>
<td>United Morning Daily: Why has SCS become China’s &quot;core interest?&quot; – translation of Singapore media story</td>
<td>CNS, XH</td>
<td>15</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
### 2010, September: ASEAN-US meeting

**Baidu News searches:**

- “South China Sea” {南海} in headline, September 1-30, 2010, ~2,250 results (conducted May 31, 2016)

<table>
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<th>Date</th>
<th>Stories with 10+ reposts</th>
<th>Source</th>
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<tr>
<td>Aug 24, 2010</td>
<td><strong>PLAN South Sea Fleet helicopter conducts successful night landing on new-type destroyer</strong>&lt;br&gt;• 南海舰队直升机夜间成功降落新型驱逐舰甲板 新浪 2010年08月24日 06:00 <a href="16">10条相同新闻</a> China's new PLAN warships display power in SCS, strictly guarding strategic maritime space – on China’s large-scale SCS exercises in late July]&lt;br&gt;• 中国新型战舰南海显实力 严守海上战略空间 网易新闻 2010年08月24日 16:52 <a href="11">13条相同新闻</a></td>
<td>JFJB, CRI/SJXWB</td>
<td>27</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aug 24, 2010</td>
<td><strong>SCS policy – Carl Thayer on China’s security dilemma, followed by several Chinese scholars’ comments, including on Australia's position supporting regional stability.</strong>&lt;br&gt;• 南海策[图] 网易新闻 2010年08月24日 11:47 <a href="12">10条相同新闻</a></td>
<td>IHL</td>
<td>12</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aug 26, 2010</td>
<td><strong>CNOOC cooperates with Aus company ROC Oil in Gulf of Tonkin block 22/12 (granted 10 yrs prior)</strong>&lt;br&gt;• 中海油开发南海两油田 新浪财经 2010年08月26日 04:00 <a href="6">11条相同新闻</a></td>
<td>21CBH</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aug 27, 2010</td>
<td><strong>Planting a 5-star red flag on the SCS floor, manned submersible dives to 3759m – full-page Jiaolong splash, with lots of pictures</strong>&lt;br&gt;• 南海海底插上五星红旗 潜人潜水器潜3759米(图) 搜狐新闻 2010年08月27日 04:00 <a href="44">28条相同新闻</a></td>
<td>GZRB</td>
<td>44</td>
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<td>Aug 29, 2010</td>
<td><strong>Big waves in SCS</strong>&lt;br&gt;• &quot;雅子山&quot;逼近 南海北部海面掀起4到5米巨浪 腾讯新闻 2010年08月29日 17:00 <a href="14">14条相同新闻</a></td>
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<td>Sept 25-26, 2010</td>
<td>Chinese side responds to PHL's so-called statement that ASEAN will unanimously deal with the SCS issue – 4-par report straight from the MFA press conference, became 5th-top headline on iFeng, snapshot 10pm Sept 25, and 9th-most clicked story on Sina.</td>
<td>MFA, XH</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sept 25, 2010</td>
<td>US military Guam exercise hints at SCS, consolidating containment of China within &quot;second island chain&quot;</td>
<td>CNS</td>
<td>12</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sept 26, 2010</td>
<td>Attempt by some ASEAN countries attempt to push summit meeting to raise SCS issue unsuccessful – report on US-ASEAN summit meet</td>
<td>XH</td>
<td>14</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sept 26, 2010</td>
<td>Obama sends hardline signal, US loudly intervenes in SCS to check China, accused of cultivating &quot;agents&quot; – i.e. ASEAN countries</td>
<td>XH</td>
<td>40</td>
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<td>Sept 27, 2010</td>
<td>US wants to use SCS to check China, ASEAN doesn’t want to be dragged into great power conflict</td>
<td>HQSB</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sept 27, 2010</td>
<td>SSF deputy commander Hou Yuexi visits Australia’s &quot;Wangaratta&quot; ship</td>
<td>CNS</td>
<td>11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sept 29, 2010</td>
<td>China’s most advanced Fisheries Enforcement ship commissioned, has helicopter, will patrol SCS</td>
<td>CNS</td>
<td>27</td>
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</table>
2011, March: Reed Bank

- “Reed Bank” in full text, February 1-June 30, 2011, 787 results (conducted June 30, 2016)

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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Stories with 10+ reposts (March-May)</th>
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<tr>
<td>March 4, 2011</td>
<td>Philippines claims &quot;harassment&quot; by Chinese patrol boats, deploys fighter jets to South China Sea – short summary of an AFP story on the Philippines’ allegations of harassment in the Reed Bank on March 3 菲律宾称遭中国巡逻船“骚扰”已在南海部署战机 环球网 2011年03月04日 10:00 6条相同新闻(6)</td>
<td>HQW</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>March 7, 2011</td>
<td>Philippines claims oil exploration ship harassed by Chinese patrol boats in Spratlys and forced to retreat – summary of a US Time magazine report 菲称探油船在南沙海域中国巡逻船骚扰被迫后退 环球网 2011年03月07日 08:00 16条相同新闻(19)</td>
<td>HQW</td>
<td>19</td>
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<tr>
<td>March 9-11, 2011</td>
<td>PHL president Aquino wants to pull in ASEAN to jointly develop SCS oil and gas – story by HQSB Manilla correspondent Wang Chuanjun 菲律宾总统阿基诺三世欲拉东盟联合开发南海石油资源 新浪新闻 2011年03月09日 07:00 PHL military commander: Spratly brigade will hold party with Vietnamese military on Pagasa – page 3 HQSB story, March 9, apparently went around online March 11, at least 12 reposts 菲军司令:南沙驻军将与越军在中业岛狂欢 环球网 2011年03月11日 08:00 20条相同新闻(21)</td>
<td>HQSB</td>
<td>21</td>
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<td>March 24, 2011</td>
<td>Foreign wires: PHL insists on exploring in SCS Reed Bank – summary of AFP story 外电:菲律宾执意在南海乐滩探油 网易新闻 2011年03月24日 09:05 13条相同新闻(14)</td>
<td>XH</td>
<td>14</td>
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<tr>
<td>March 29, 2011</td>
<td>PHL claims will upgrade Spratly outpost runway to land C-130s – summary of Reuters March 28 story 菲律宾称将升级驻南沙岛机场便于起降C-130 新浪 2011年03月29日 10:00 6条相同新闻(6)</td>
<td>HQSB</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>April 21, 2011</td>
<td>China says PHL &quot;violated&quot; Spratlys, PHL side says some moves are necessary – HQSB story from Manila correspondent Wang Chuanjun, on China’s &quot;first use of term invade&quot; (入侵) to describe PHL actions 中国称菲律宾“入侵”南沙 菲方表示须有所行动 腾讯新闻 2011年04月21日 07:00 49条相同新闻(56)</td>
<td>HQSB</td>
<td>56</td>
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<tr>
<td>May 25, 2011</td>
<td>PRC-PHL Defense Ministers talk about 2 unidentified planes flying near Reed Bank 中菲防长谈及2架不明战机飞临礼乐滩一事(图) 腾讯新闻 2011年05月25日 09:00 8条相同新闻(11)</td>
<td>DFZB</td>
<td>11</td>
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</table>
2011, April: UN diplomatic notes

Baidu News search:

- “South China Sea issue/dispute” (南海问题 | 南海争端) in text, April 1-April 30, 2011, 917 results (conducted June 10, 2016)

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<th>Date</th>
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<tr>
<td>April 14, 2011</td>
<td>Philippines buys large American patrol ships, strengthening capabilities for confronting China</td>
<td>BJR, also CNS, GMW</td>
<td>39</td>
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<tr>
<td>April 14-15, 2011</td>
<td>MFA: we do not accept the Philippines’ questioning of China's South China Sea claims – direct from website, plus Xinhua / People’s Daily Overseas Edition story – quite terse, not mentioning China submission of its own counterprotest</td>
<td>MFA, XH, RMRBHWB</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 15-17, 2011</td>
<td>China accelerates exploitation of SCS oil and gas – April 15 China Times (华夏时报) story with headline comparing SCS to Daqing</td>
<td>Huaxia Shibao</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 17, 2011</td>
<td>Philippines Senate President [Enirel] says SCS protests are pointless, calls for military upgrades</td>
<td>HQW</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>April 21, 2011</td>
<td>China condemns Philippines for invading SCS, PHL official claims actions needed – HQW summary of HQSB story, lead paragraph (and most common headline) says the PRC's April 14 diplomatic note to UN in response to the Philippines April 4 note was &quot;first time&quot; China had condemned PH “invasion” (入侵), using &quot;hardline language that is different from the past.&quot; Article cites ABS-CBN and AP both for this claim, and for the existence of the diplomatic protest.</td>
<td>HQSB, HQW</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
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<td>April 22, 2011</td>
<td>Chinese ambassador to Malaysia: PRC and Malaysia both do not want the South China Sea issue to be internationalized</td>
<td>CNS</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>April 26, 2011</td>
<td>Wen Liabao discusses SCS issue ahead of visit to Malaysia and Indonesia – on Wen's interview with Malaysian &amp; Indonesian media</td>
<td>XH, XJB</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 26, 2011</td>
<td>US strongly boosts Philippines in SCS dispute</td>
<td>SJXWB, CRI</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 26, 2011</td>
<td>US former officials advocate intervening in SCS through &quot;law&quot; - full translation of Armitage, Allen, and Hamre article in New York Times, April 24</td>
<td>XH</td>
<td>26</td>
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</tbody>
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2011, May: pre-cable-cutting
Baidu News searches:

- “South China Sea” {南海} in headline, May 1-June 6, 2011, ~155,000 results (conducted July 4, 2016)

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<tr>
<td>May 5, 2011</td>
<td>Looking at the SCS's historical development in terms of geographical names</td>
<td>GMRB, CCP website</td>
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<td>• 从地名演变看南海疆域的历史形成 中国共产党新闻网 2011年05月05日 10:00 [17条相同新闻] [4]</td>
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<td>May 8, 2011</td>
<td>Launch of CMS South Sea Branch’s Haijian-84 ship</td>
<td>CNS, XH</td>
<td>13*</td>
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<td>• “中国海监84”船入列中国海监南海总队 搜狐新闻 2011年05月08日 11:00 [18条相同新闻] [4]</td>
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<td>• “中国海监84”船入列海监南海总队船艇数量已近13艘 中国网络电视台 2011年05月08日 11:00 [22条相同新闻] [1]</td>
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<td>• 中国海监南海总队船艇总数达到13艘 腾讯新闻 2011年05月08日 14:00 [16条相同新闻] [4]</td>
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<td>• “中国海监84”船入列中国海监南海总队 中国政府网 2011年05月08日 22:16 [10条相同新闻] [4]</td>
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<td>May 8, 2011</td>
<td>Typhoon Yili</td>
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<td>~27</td>
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<td>• 广东遭遇强雷雨热带风暴“艾利”趋向南海东北部 网易新闻 2011年05月08日 16:39 [10条相同新闻] [14]</td>
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<td>• 专家预测广东南海遭遇强雷雨袭击时间不超过1分钟 网易新闻 2011年05月08日 23:00 [11条相同新闻] [13]</td>
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<td>May 11, 2011</td>
<td>PH military says not concerned with China's strengthening maritime surveillance force, former president urges resolution of SCS dispute – follow-up to high-profile launch of CMS Haijian-84 patrol ship</td>
<td>HQSB, also CNS, XH, RMW</td>
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<td>• 菲军称不惧中国加强海监力量 前总统促解决南海问题 网易新闻 2011年05月11日 16:00 [13条相同新闻] [10]</td>
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<td>May 13-17, 2011</td>
<td>Fishing bans begin on May 16</td>
<td>XH, CNS</td>
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<td>• 南海海域16日起开始伏季休渔 网易新闻 2011年05月13日 12:22 [10条相同新闻] [12]</td>
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<td>• 南海伏季休渔正式启动 为期2个半月 新浪财经 2011年05月16日 17:00 [14条相同新闻] [13]</td>
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<td>• 中国连续13年在南海海域实施伏季休渔 腾讯财经 2011年05月16日 16:00 [16条相同新闻] [19]</td>
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<td>• 南海伏季休渔期开始 澳门举办“休渔渔家乐” 搜狐新闻 2011年05月17日 01:00 [11条相同新闻] [13]</td>
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<tr>
<td>May 16, 2011</td>
<td>PLAN South Sea Fleet Hong-6 enacts guided missile attack in rainy conditions against on-water target</td>
<td>JFJB</td>
<td>18</td>
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<td>• 南海舰队轰六机群冒雨对海上目标实施导弹攻击 新浪 2011年05月16日 04:00 17条相同新闻&gt;&gt;(18)</td>
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<td>May 16, 2011</td>
<td>China to build SCS tsunami warning center</td>
<td>JHSB, carried by CNS</td>
<td>12</td>
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<td>• 我国将建南海海啸预警中心 网易新闻 2011年05月16日 01:59 10条相同新闻&gt;&gt;(12)</td>
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<td>May 17, 2011</td>
<td>Expert says PLA Chief of Staff (Chen Bingde) may talk about SCS on US visit – NetEase runs the story with a silly-looking picture of a grinning Chen Bingde</td>
<td>XJB</td>
<td>12</td>
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<td>• 专家称解放军总长访美可能谈及南海问题 网易新闻 2011年05月17日 03:36 16条相同新闻&gt;&gt;(12)</td>
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<td>May 23, 2011</td>
<td>20,000 tons of our SCS oil being taken every year by neighbouring countries – Oriental Outlook (Xinhua) magazine story from May 23. Search in 2014 found at least 60 reposts.</td>
<td>LWDF</td>
<td>13*</td>
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<td>• 我国南海每年2000万吨油气被周边国家获取 新浪新闻 2011年05月23日 10:00 18条相同新闻&gt;&gt;(3)</td>
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<td>• 我国南海每年2000万吨油气被周边国家获取 (3) 人民网 2011年05月24日 08:00 9条相同新闻&gt;&gt;(10)</td>
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<tr>
<td>May 24, 2011</td>
<td>Our country’s first super-deep-water drilling platform enters production in SCS – on launch of HQSY-981 rig</td>
<td>BJRB</td>
<td>8*</td>
</tr>
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<td>• 我国首座超深水钻井平台将在南海投产(组图) 新浪新闻 2011年05月24日 03:00 22条相同新闻&gt;&gt;(8)</td>
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<tr>
<td>May 25, 2011</td>
<td>PLAN South Sea Fleet airborne division dispatches 4 fighters for successful mid-air refuelling</td>
<td>JFJB</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>• 南海舰队航空兵出动4架歼击机成功演练空中加油 新浪 2011年05月25日 04:00 15条相同新闻&gt;&gt;(17)</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 25, 2011</td>
<td>Defense Ministry answers questions on SCS issue, PLA recruitment policy etc. – Xinhua journalist invites spokesman Geng Yansheng to comment on Defense Minister Liang Guangjie’s trip to Singapore, Philippines and Indonesia. Geng says General Liang exchanged views with his counterparts, and Indonesia had responded that it hoped the issue would be resolved bilaterally, Philippines that the SCS is a sea of cooperation not conflict.</td>
<td>MOD website</td>
<td>4*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• 国防部就南海问题 – 解放军人才招募政策等答问 中国网络电视台 2011年05月25日 17:00 11条相同新闻&gt;&gt;(4)</td>
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<td>• 国防部就军力访问亚洲国家及南海问题答问 新浪 2011年05月25日 17:00 13条相同新闻&gt;&gt;(0)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>May 26-27, 2011</td>
<td>China holds 2011 South Sea international joint maritime search and rescue drill</td>
<td>CNS, XH</td>
<td>17*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• 中国举行“2011年南海部长级联合海上搜救演习”网易新闻 2011年05月27日 21:00 9条相同新闻&gt;&gt;(12)</td>
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<td>• 中国在南海举行海上搜救联合演习 新浪新闻 2011年05月26日 00:07 31条相同新闻&gt;&gt;(1)</td>
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<td>• 中国在南海举行海上搜救联合演习 新华网 2011年05月27日 20:02 14条相同新闻&gt;&gt;(3)</td>
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<td>• 中国举行2011年南海部长级联合海上搜救演习 网易新闻 2011年05月27日 09:00 13条相同新闻&gt;&gt;(1)</td>
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</table>

* denotes likely understated count; number declined between preparation of article list and verification of repost count.
2011, May-June: cable-cuttings and the peak of tensions

Baidu News searches:

- “South China Sea” {南海} in headline, May 1-June 6, 2011, ~155,000 results (conducted July 4, 2016)
- “South China Sea” {南海} in headline, June 7-June 30, 2011, ~153,000 results (conducted June 23, 2016)
- “South China Sea” {南海} in headline, May 26-June 30, 2011, (conducted February 13, 2014)
- “South China Sea” {南海} and “exploration” or “survey” {勘探 | 探测} in full text, May 26-June 30, 2011, (conducted February 13, 2014)

Note: searches in 2016 found no results between June 7 and June 14, and few between June 15-21, a possible sign of retrospective censorship. Results from between these dates were mostly from the 2014 searches.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Stories with 10+ repots</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Reposts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>May 28, 2011</td>
<td>Vietnam claims Chinese patrol boats in SCS sabotaged VN oil exploration boat and issued warning – HQW Li Zongze summary translation of FT and The Australian reports on VN allegations.</td>
<td>HQW</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
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</table>
|            | • “South China Sea” {南海} in headline, May 1-June 6, 2011, ~155,000 results (conducted July 4, 2016)  
• “South China Sea” {南海} in headline, June 7-June 30, 2011, ~153,000 results (conducted June 23, 2016)  
• “South China Sea” {南海} in headline, May 26-June 30, 2011, (conducted February 13, 2014)  
• “South China Sea” {南海} and “exploration” or “survey” {勘探 | 探测} in full text, May 26-June 30, 2011, (conducted February 13, 2014)  
• Vietnamese and Chinese media claim SCS facing new conflict, China uses vessels’ advantage to proclaim sovereignty (越南称南海面临新冲突 中国船只优势宣誓主权) | MFA website, CNS | 40      |
| May 30, 2011 | MFA states position on Vietnam’s accusation that China harassed its SCS survey – MFA website stub, and CNS report report on Jiang Yu’s Saturday ad hoc statement  
• “South China Sea” {南海} in headline, May 1-June 6, 2011, ~155,000 results (conducted July 4, 2016)  
• “South China Sea” {南海} in headline, June 7-June 30, 2011, ~153,000 results (conducted June 23, 2016)  
• “South China Sea” {南海} in headline, May 26-June 30, 2011, (conducted February 13, 2014)  
• “South China Sea” {南海} and “exploration” or “survey” {勘探 | 探测} in full text, May 26-June 30, 2011, (conducted February 13, 2014)  
• Vietnamese and Chinese media claim SCS facing new conflict, China uses vessels’ advantage to proclaim sovereignty (越南称南海面临新冲突 中国船只优势宣誓主权) | HQSB            | 19      |
<p>| May 31, 2011 | MFA spokesperson on Libya, SCS issue, etc. – transcript of May 31 MFA press conference                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | CNS             | 23      |
| June 1, 2011 | Foreign media say SCS dispute threatens China’s relation with SE Asian countries – on Singapore, Indonesia etc. media                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | HQW             | 12      |
| June 2, 2011 | PHL protests China’s SCS drilling platform, summons China’s ambassadorial representative                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | HQSB            | 30      |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>June 2, 2011</td>
<td>Philippine military calls for handling SCS issue with China via diplomatic ministries – report by Li Zongze; HQW headline adds “whether or not to send troops decided by leaders”</td>
<td>HQW</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 3, 2011</td>
<td>Philippines president claims may protest China’s SCS activities at UN</td>
<td>HQW</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 3, 2011</td>
<td>China &amp; Vietnam defense ministers meet, VN will not allow third countries to interfere in the Sino-Vietnamese SCS dispute – original and more widespread headline only said they discussed the issue: 中越防长会谈 谈及南海及海上安全合作等话题</td>
<td>CNS</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 3, 2011</td>
<td>MFA spokesperson: China has always put effort into safeguarding SCS region’s peace &amp; stability – stub report from MFA press conference</td>
<td>XH</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 5-6, 2011</td>
<td>Liang Guangjie: SCS negotiation channels open, situation stable overall – report from correspondent in Singapore</td>
<td>XH</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 7-8, 2011</td>
<td>MFA: China doesn’t accept the Philippines protest</td>
<td>XH, RMRHBWB</td>
<td>39†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 8, 2011</td>
<td>Vietnamese government website hacked, Chinese flag appears</td>
<td>HQW</td>
<td>22†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 8, 2011</td>
<td>PH Defense Secretary publicly calls for US bases</td>
<td>Carried by HQW</td>
<td>14†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 8, 2011</td>
<td>Foreign media say Vietnam holds large-scale protests against China’s actions in SCS, China responds</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>13†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 9, 2011</td>
<td>MFA responds to Vietnam chasing away Chinese fishing boat in SCS</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>12†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 10-15, 2011</td>
<td>VN live-fire drills. Original HQW headline: Vietnam will hold live-fire military exercises in SCS, US media says is response to China</td>
<td>HQW, SJXWB; carried by CNS, JHSB</td>
<td>178†</td>
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<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>News Event</td>
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<tr>
<td>June 12, 2011</td>
<td>PH exercises with US</td>
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<tr>
<td>June 13, 2011</td>
<td>VN waves flag in SCS to trouble China</td>
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<tr>
<td>June 14, 2011</td>
<td>Real Admiral Yin Zhuo: Interceding in SCS is an important part of US return to Asia</td>
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<tr>
<td>June 14, 2011</td>
<td>Expert says red line should be drawn in SCS, cannot be completely won with military principles</td>
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<tr>
<td>June 15, 2011</td>
<td>Taiwan to hold military exercises: TAO calls for cross-strait cooperation</td>
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</table>

**Comments:**

- Luo Yuan: China is the victim, can't take any more friendship.
- Rear Admiral Yin Zhuo: Interceding in SCS is an important part of US return to Asia.
- VN waves flag in SCS to trouble China.
- PH exercises with US.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Source/Details</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>June 15, 2011</td>
<td>Ding Gang: trouble for those who don't do joint development</td>
<td>HQW? 10†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 15-20, 2011</td>
<td>China’s Haiyun-31 will patrol SCS, pass by Paracels, Zhongsha, Spratlys</td>
<td>- 66†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 15, 2011</td>
<td>Some countries attempt to expand the SCS dispute – provincial reports on MFA June 14 press conference</td>
<td>Regional press 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 16, 2011</td>
<td>Philippines claims to have demolished China’s markers in SCS</td>
<td>Carried by HQW 35†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 16-17, 2011</td>
<td>MFA responds to issue of VN continuing to explore for oil</td>
<td>DFZB 48†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 16-19, 2011</td>
<td>2 PLAN drills in SCS including island landing</td>
<td>JFJB, carried by HQW, CNS 63†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 17, 2011</td>
<td>SCS Chinese fishers face down foreign warships</td>
<td>Carried by XH 16†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 17, 2011</td>
<td>Vietnam claims it will put national interest first and continue extracting SCS oil and gas – begins with PetroVietnam comment that it will continue its SCS oil and gas program as scheduled, then discusses online chat by MFA’s head of diplomatic mission to the EU Song Zhe, in which Song says he “completely understands” netizens’ &quot;tough anger” (硬气) but tells them China's resolute defense of its rights is a reason why it has been criticized for becoming more assertive.</td>
<td>DFZB 18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 18, 2011</td>
<td>Expert says (China) can use Shanghai Cooperation Organization experience in resolving SCS dispute – Oriental Outlook (Xinhua) magazine interview with Yan Xuetong</td>
<td>LWDF 18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 21, 2011</td>
<td>HQSB editorial: Use two means to respond to Vietnam’s provocations</td>
<td>HQSB 14</td>
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<td>Date</td>
<td>Event</td>
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<tr>
<td>June 22, 2011</td>
<td>US: Japan demands China cease obstructing navigation of foreign ships.</td>
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<td>June 22, 2011</td>
<td>Philippines warship enters SCS. President claims Philippines' SCS sovereignty indisputable.</td>
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<td>June 22, 2011</td>
<td>SCS dispute: China's restraint is a kind of self-confidence.</td>
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<tr>
<td>June 22, 2011</td>
<td>Wu Xiaotian: on SCS, China's restraint is a kind of self-confidence.</td>
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<td>June 22, 2011</td>
<td>Chinese President Hu Jintao and Japan Prime Minister Naoto Kan discussed the SCS issue.</td>
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<td>June 23, 2011</td>
<td>MFA: China will not take provocative actions.</td>
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<td>June 23, 2011</td>
<td>SCS dispute: China's restraint due to international public opinion and strategic errors.</td>
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<tr>
<td>June 23, 2011</td>
<td>Carried by Xinhua, CCTV, CCTV News, China Radio International, etc.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>News Source</td>
<td>Summary</td>
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<tr>
<td>June 24-25, 2011</td>
<td>Scholar says stirring up chaos in the South China Sea benefits no country – interview with Ma Zhengang, MFA public diplomacy consultant, who says development is most important for SE Asian countries and pushing the SCS does nothing for that</td>
<td>• 学者称搞乱南海局势对各国都无好处             网易新闻 2011年06月24日 18:00 <a href="23">16条相同新闻</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 25, 2011</td>
<td>US Asst. Secretary: US side has no intention of fanning flames in SCS – Kurt Campbell in Hawaii for regular US-China Asia-Pacific affairs discussion meeting with Cui Tiankai, originally a Phoenix TV report, picked up by CNR, and the next day by Shandong’s Qilu Evening News (齐鲁晚报)</td>
<td>• 美助理国务卿:美方无意在南海问题上煽风点火 搜狐新闻 2011年06月25日 10:00 <a href="32">23条相同新闻</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>June 26, 2011</td>
<td>Nearly 200 Vietnamese gather in Tokyo to protest China in the SCS – summary of AFP report</td>
<td>• 近200名越南人在东京集合就南海问题抗议中国 新浪新闻 2011年06月25日 16:00 <a href="11">10条相同新闻</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 26, 2011</td>
<td>Vietnam and Philippines make ‘selfish calculations’ in SCS – newspaper feature from Beijing News</td>
<td>• 越南菲律宾打南海“小算盘”为转移国内矛盾 搜狐新闻 2011年06月26日 02:00 <a href="18">13条相同新闻</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>June 26, 2011</td>
<td>China and Vietnam say they will peacefully resolve SCS disputes through negotiation and friendly consultation – report on Dai-Ho meeting released about 3pm, websites appear to have been ordered to prominently publicize, judging by the multiple versions on the same website, with the same time-stamp, under exactly the same headlines. Second story below is a Beijing News report.</td>
<td>• 中越称将通过谈判与友好协商和平解决南海争议 腾讯新闻 2011年06月26日 15:00 <a href="56">58条相同新闻</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>June 27, 2011</td>
<td>Japanese media US in SCS unbearable for for China – summary of The Diplomat article “Is America pushing China beyond what it can stand?”</td>
<td>• 日媒:美国在南海的所作所为让中国无法忍受 新浪新闻 2011年06月27日 08:00 <a href="23">11条相同新闻</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 27-28, 2011</td>
<td>US-PHL begin joint military exercises at sea, PH insists unrelated to SCS issue – CNS stories on US-PHL CARAT exercise</td>
<td>• 美菲今起联合海上军演 菲坚称与南海问题无关 腾讯新闻 2011年06月28日 00:09 <a href="61">52条相同新闻</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>June 28, 2011</td>
<td>Expert: Our territorial seas in SCS do not violate UNCLOS - radio program</td>
<td>• 专家:对南海领域划定不违背联合国海洋法公约 新浪新闻 2011年06月28日 07:00 <a href="37">23条相同新闻</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>June 28, 2011</td>
<td>Ten years of challenges to the DOC</td>
<td>• 南海宣言被挑战的十年 新华网 2011年06月28日 09:16 <a href="25">16条相同新闻</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 28, 2011</td>
<td>Aus think tank says SCS may spark war, frictions between China and neighbours will be persistent – on Lowy institute report by Rory Medcalf and Raoul Heinrichs</td>
<td>• 澳智库称南海争端或引发战争 中国与邻国摩擦将长期化 环球网 2011年06月28日 14:00 <a href="20">11条相同新闻</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 28, 2011</td>
<td>MFA: China hopes Vietnamese side will make joint efforts to safeguard stability in SCS</td>
<td>• 外交部:中方希望越方为维护南海稳定作出共同努力 国际在线 2011年06月28日 16:11 <a href="22">16条相同新闻</a></td>
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<td>June 29,</td>
<td>Taiwan Affairs Office: defending sov of SCS islands is responsibility of both sides of the Straits</td>
<td>XH</td>
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<td>2011</td>
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<td>June 29,</td>
<td>China is a constructive force for maintaining SCS regional peace and stability – Wu Shicun writing in Guangming Daily</td>
<td>GMNBR</td>
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<td>2011</td>
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<td>2011</td>
<td>CNS also promote. Also addresses US congressional resolution; rumours of first China’s aircraft carrier being launched and sent to SCS.</td>
<td>CNS, HQW</td>
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<td>Yang’s acknowledgement that the PLA had held six successive PLA exercises in June was the most interesting aspect for commercial news providers,</td>
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<td>placing the transcript under such headlines as <strong>中国南海舰队本月连续举行多次军演</strong> and <strong>南海舰队本月连续举行6次军演 国防部称与南海局势无关</strong>.</td>
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<td><em>MND: navy exercises unrelated to the SCS situation</em> – some headlines, such as the 5th one below, from HQW, make it sound ridiculous that</td>
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<td>the actions were unrelated to SCS.</td>
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<td><em>国防部:海军训练与南海局势无关</em>  人民日报官方版-人民网  人民日报人民网  2011年06月30日 03:32  <a href="#">18条相同新闻</a><strong>(28)</strong></td>
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<td><em>海军例行训练与南海局势无关</em> 新浪新闻  2011年06月30日 02:57  <a href="#">15条相同新闻</a><strong>(21)</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<td><em>国防部:海军近期训练是例行安排与南海无关</em>  腾讯新闻  2011年06月29日 19:00  <a href="#">37条相同新闻</a><strong>(58)</strong></td>
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<td><em>国防部:中国海军近期训练与当前南海局势无关</em>  中国新闻网  2011年06月29日 17:00  <a href="#">14条相同新闻</a><strong>(16)</strong></td>
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<td><em>南海舰队连续举6次军演 国防部:与南海无关</em>  中华网  2011年06月30日 08:19  <a href="#">10条相同新闻</a><strong>(16)</strong></td>
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</table>

† denotes unverified count: most results from period June 7-15, 2011 identified in 2014 searches, were no longer present by 2016 when verification of the number of reposts was conducted. In these cases the figures displayed in the original 2014 Baidu News search results list were used.
### 2012, February-April: the leadup to Scarborough Shoal

Baidu News search:

- “South China Sea” {南海} in headlines, February 20-March 5, 2012, 1,390 results (conducted August 14, 2016)
- “South China Sea” {南海} in headlines, March 6-April 9, 2012, ~179,000 results (conducted August 14, 2016)
- “South China Sea” {南海} in headlines, April 8-11, 2012, 603 results (conducted August 14, 2016)

<table>
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<th>Stories with 10+ reprints</th>
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<th>Reposts</th>
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<tr>
<td>February 20</td>
<td>Analysis says China may build 8 Type-071 destroyers for SCS dispute</td>
<td>HQW</td>
<td>12</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• 分析称中国或建8艘071型导弹驱赴南海领土争议 新浪 2012年02月20日 09:00 <a href="2">11条相同新闻</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>February 21</td>
<td>US-Philippines 'Cobra Gold' exercises</td>
<td>RMRB, carried by XH</td>
<td>26</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• 菲军将在南海再次军演 亚太军演升温背后的考量 网易财经 2012年02月21日 07:56 <a href="18">29条相同新闻</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>March 2</td>
<td>PHL ignores China's objections, invites foreign capital to explore SCS oil &amp; gas resources from RMW Bangkok reporter Ji Peijuan</td>
<td>RMW, HQW</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>• 菲军无视中方反对邀请外资勘探南海油气资源 腾讯新闻 2012年02月27日 23:00 <a href="92">97条相同新闻</a></td>
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<td>March 2</td>
<td>• 菲军无视中方警告继续在南海油气勘探 腾讯新闻 2012年02月27日 23:00 <a href="12">11条相同新闻</a></td>
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<td>March 2</td>
<td>• 菲军无视中方警告继续在南海油气勘探 腾讯新闻 2012年02月29日 17:00 <a href="21">19条相同新闻</a></td>
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<td>March 2</td>
<td>• 菲军无视中方警告继续在南海油气勘探 腾讯新闻 2012年03月01日 08:00 <a href="18">17条相同新闻</a></td>
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<td>March 2</td>
<td>• 菲军无视中方警告继续在南海油气勘探 腾讯新闻 2012年03月02日 04:00 <a href="20">20条相同新闻</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>February 28</td>
<td>Luo Yuan: fast-breaking incidents may explode in SCS in 2012 – interview, part of Guangzhou Daily full-page splash on SCS</td>
<td>GZRB</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
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<td>• 罗瑾少将:2012年南海很可能爆发一些突发事件 腾讯新闻 2012年02月28日 08:00 <a href="15">13条相同新闻</a></td>
<td></td>
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<td>February 28</td>
<td>Sinopec denies investing in Philippines disputed oil blocks</td>
<td>HQW</td>
<td>12</td>
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<td>• 中石化否认投标菲律宾所开采南海争议油气田 新浪新闻 2012年02月28日 18:00 <a href="12">16条相同新闻</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>February 29</td>
<td>Philippines Daily: People must learn self-restraint on SCS issue – Zhong Sheng commentary</td>
<td>RMRB</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• 人民日报:菲律宾在南海问题上须学会自我约束 新浪新闻 2012年02月29日 03:00 <a href="33">30条相同新闻</a></td>
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<td>February 29</td>
<td>MFA: PHL oil &amp; gas offerings illegal</td>
<td>MFA website</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• 外交部:菲律宾在南海勘探石油非法 腾讯新闻 2012年02月29日 03:00 <a href="22">15条相同新闻</a></td>
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<td>February 29</td>
<td>PLAN South Sea Fleet exercises</td>
<td>CRI</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>中国南海舰队新型扫雷舰实弹演练 [图片] 新浪新闻 2012年02月29日 17:00 10条相关新闻&gt;&gt;[13]</td>
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<tr>
<td>February 29-March 1</td>
<td>MFA: SCS freedom of navigation has never been a problem, China hasn't claimed the whole SCS</td>
<td>CNS</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 3</td>
<td>SCF fog</td>
<td>南海连日大雾海上事故频发 救助局救获12人 腾讯新闻 2012年03月03日 20:00 10条相关新闻&gt;&gt;</td>
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<td>March 4</td>
<td>Japanese SDF will participate in US-PHI military exercises for first time</td>
<td>CNS</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 16</td>
<td>Senior US military official talks about SCS, commentary says &quot;don't stir muddy waters&quot; – People's Daily &quot;Zhong Sheng&quot; commentary</td>
<td>RMRB</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 16</td>
<td>MFA responds to SCS clash: unreasonable accusations by relevant countries not accepted – on PRC arrests of Vietnamese fishers in Paracels</td>
<td>MFA website</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 19</td>
<td>Philippines says can develop SCS oil with China, subject to its &quot;supervision&quot;</td>
<td>SMG, HQW</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 21-23</td>
<td>CMS finds 30+ foreign oil &amp; gas wells in SCS – on CMS regular rights defense patrol covered in People's Daily on March 21, p.9</td>
<td>RMRB, CNS, JHSB</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 22</td>
<td>US senior official visits Vietnam, says SCS needs peaceful resolution as soon as possible</td>
<td>HQW, XH</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 23</td>
<td>SOA and MSA issue SCS weather reports</td>
<td>CNS</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 24</td>
<td>Wu Jianmin says fighting a war in SCS would throw neighbourhood into chaos</td>
<td>SMG</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 26</td>
<td>13 departments to launch new SCS map to help raise &quot;map consciousness&quot;</td>
<td>CNS, many others</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>我国将编制发布南海诸岛地形图 [图片] 新浪新闻 2012年03月26日 08:00 92条相关新闻&gt;&gt;[102]</td>
<td></td>
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<td>中国将编制发布南海诸岛图 开展国家版图意识教育 21CN 2012年03月26日 09:19 39条相关新闻&gt;&gt;[27]</td>
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<td>Date</td>
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<td>Source(s)</td>
<td>Page</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
| March 26-28 | MOA South Sea Region Fisheries Administration Bureau confirms detention of 21 Vietnamese fishers – more on arrests of Vietnamese fishers in Paracels  
  - 农业部南海区渔政局证实扣押21名越界捕鱼越南渔民  中广网 2012年03月28日 10:00 9条相关新闻>>(13)  
  - Analyis says Vietnam has touched China’s bottom line in SCS – on PRC arrests of Vietnamese fishers in Paracel Islands, from  People's Daily International Department Asia-Pacific Team leader  
  - 分析称越南在南海触碰中国底线 综合报道国内舆论  新浪财经 2012年03月26日 15:00 13条相关新闻>>(16) | RMW                      | 29   |
| March 27  | Indian media say China warns India not to get caught up in SCS dispute – Xinhua review of foreign media coverage  
  - 印媒体称中方告诫印度勿卷入南海争端 新浪新闻 2012年03月27日 09:00 22条相关新闻>>(19) | XH                        | 19   |
| March 28-31 | US plans to deploy drones to Australia to surveil SCS, China responds – on touted plan for drones on Cocos Island  
  - 美拟在澳大利亚部署无人机监视南海 中方回应 搜狐新闻 2012年03月28日 22:00 23条相关新闻>>(19)  
  - 美拟在海外领地部署无人机随时起飞监视南海 搜狐新闻 2012年03月31日 07:00 19条相关新闻>>(9) | RMRB, CNS                | 28   |
| March 29  | Philippines and Vietnam planning joint exercises in SCS  
  - 菲律宾与越南拟在南海进行联合军演 新浪新闻 2012年03月29日 00:42 68条相关新闻>>(57)  
  - MFA hopes PHL and VN will avoid actions that will harm regional peace and stability  
  - 外交部:望菲越避免采取损害南海和平稳定行动 腾讯新闻 2012年03月29日 18:00 22条相关新闻>>(24) | RMW, MFA website         | 81   |
| March 29-31 | PHL to raise SCS in ASEAN summit, plans wharf on Pagasa – People's Daily Online Bangkok correspondent Han Shuo, and HQSB  
  "special correspondent" in Cambodia, Ji Peijuan (who is also a People's Daily Online Bangkok correspondent)  
  - 菲将在东盟峰会提及南海问题 拟于争议岛修码头 搜狐新闻 2012年03月29日 23:00 33条相关新闻>>(18)  
  - 菲民欲在东盟峰会谈南海 与美扩大合作拉越南军演 新浪财经 2012年03月31日 07:00 20条相关新闻>>(9)  
  (12 more mistakenly grouped under MFA responses to SCS clash headline from March 16) | RMW, HQSB                | 39*  |
| March 30  | First SCS typhoon of year  
  - 今年第1号热带风暴帕卡在南海海面生成 新浪新闻 2012年03月30日 08:00 11条相关新闻>> | -                         | ~11  |
| March 31  | Li Keqiang meets Vietnam Deputy Premier, both sides to appropriately handle SCS issue  
  - 李克强会见越南副总理 吕双方妥善处理南海问题 新浪新闻 2012年03月31日 20:00 22条相关新闻>>(9) | CNS                      | 9*   |
| March 31-April 1 | Japan predicts earthquake, 34m tsunamis in SCS  
  - 日本预测南海域或有9级地震 海啸将袭击上海等江浙城市 21CN 2012年03月31日 19:10 11条相关新闻>>  
  - 日本预测“南海大地震”海啸最高34米 腾讯体育 2012年04月01日 02:00 16条相关新闻>>  
  - 日南海域地震余震预测海啸最高可达34米多 腾讯新闻 2012年04月01日 23:00 24条相关新闻>> | -                         | ~51  |
| April 2-3 | ASEAN summit  
  - 第20届东盟峰会即将举行 南海议题成为焦点 搜狐新闻 2012年04月02日 22:00 31条相关新闻>>(17)  
  - 东盟称各国尊重中方等利益期待落实南海宣言 新浪新闻 2012年04月03日 17:00 18条相关新闻>>(17) | RMW, CRI                 | 34*  |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>April 2-5</th>
<th>PRC Cambodia issue joint statement calling for upholding SCS peace and stability — full text from Xinhua, report from CNS Manila</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>April 4</td>
<td>Vietnam, Russia into SCS oil and gas. VN drags Russia into SCS, accused of deliberately</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 5</td>
<td>Indian FM says SCS is world's property</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 6</td>
<td>CASS Li Guoqiang says China could make disputed islands an administrative zone as a response — Li Guoqiang of CASS re-floats the Sansha City proposal</td>
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<td>April 7</td>
<td>FZRB, carried by CNS, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 8</td>
<td>28</td>
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<td>April 9</td>
<td>18</td>
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<tr>
<td>April 10-11</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 12</td>
<td>219</td>
</tr>
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</table>

**Note:** The table appears to be a compilation of statements and events related to the South China Sea (SCS) dispute, involving Vietnam, Russia, and China. The entries include quotes and actions by various countries and organizations, including China's Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), the People's Daily, and the State Oceanic Administration (SOA). The text is in Chinese, and the table appears to be a summary of articles and statements from various news sources, including Xinhua, CNS, and other media outlets. The dates listed range from April 2 to April 11, with some entries marked as 2012.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Stories with 10+ reposts</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Verified reposts</th>
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<tr>
<td>April 11</td>
<td><strong>Chinese embassy demands PHL immediately stop its illegal Huangyan activities</strong> – from CNS Manila correspondent, time stamped 14:55 on CNS site, reports Manila embassy says fishers were taking refuge from storm.</td>
<td>CNS</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
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<td><strong>中国使馆要求菲律宾立即停止黄岩岛非法活动</strong> – from CNS Manila correspondent, time stamped 14:55 on CNS site, reports Manila embassy says fishers were taking refuge from storm.</td>
<td>CNS</td>
<td>24</td>
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<tr>
<td>April 11</td>
<td><strong>MFA: Philippines’ “law enforcement” action in Huangyan Island waters violates China’s sovereignty</strong> – MFA April 11 press conference, Xinhua report time stamped 16:17.</td>
<td>XH, CNS</td>
<td>49</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>外交部:菲律宾在黄岩岛海域“执法”行为侵犯中国主权</strong> – MFA April 11 press conference, Xinhua report time stamped 16:17.</td>
<td>XH, CNS</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>中方:菲律宾在黄岩岛“执法”是侵犯中国主权</strong> – MFA April 11 press conference, Xinhua report time stamped 16:17.</td>
<td>XH, CNS</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* denotes likely understated count: number declined between preparation of article list and verification of repost count.

2012, April 8-13: Scarborough Shoal April standoff phase

Baidu News search:

- “Scarborough Shoal” {黄岩岛} in headlines, April 8-13, 2012, 648 results (conducted August 13, 2016)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| April 12 | Philippines sends coastguard ship to Huangyan Island, PRC-PHL standoff continues  
• 菲律宾向黄岩岛派警卫队船只 中菲对峙仍继续 搜狐新闻 2012年04月13日 05:00 10条相同新闻>>(13+)  
• 中国向黄岩岛派出公务船而非军舰 对峙仍在继续 搜狐网 2012年04月13日 16:00 16条相同新闻>>(18+)                                                                 | XH, BJRB, BJCB              | 31   |
| April 12 | Philippines today sends more coastguard ship towards Huangyan Island waters – HQW story from Li Zongze, lead par says Philippines "ignored China's stern representations"  
• 菲律宾今日再向南海黄岩岛海域派海岸警卫队船只 新浪新闻 2012年04月12日 13:00 20条相同新闻>>(25+)                                                                 | HQW                         | 25   |
| April 12 | CMS fleet remains at Huangyan Island monitoring, Chinese fishermen's emotions stable  
• 中国海监船队仍在黄岩岛监视 中国渔民情绪稳定 搜狐新闻 2012年04月12日 05:00 16条相同新闻>>(17+)                                                                 | RMRB                        | 17   |
| April 12 | MFA: China has sent govt ships to Huangyan waters – MFA website transcript  
• 外交部:中国已派政府公务船前往黄岩岛海域 腾讯新闻 2012年04月12日 17:18 26条相同新闻>>(30+)                                                                 | MFA                         | 30   |
| April 12 | PHL warship harasses Chinese fishing boats in Huangyan Island waters, China issues stern representations – most reposts are of Zhejiang provincial paper Qianjiang Wambao April 12 full-page illustrated report: 菲军舰逼近黄岩岛要挟我渔船  
• 菲军舰逼近黄岩岛要挟中国渔船 中方强硬正交涉 搜狐新闻 2012年04月11日 18:00 43条相同新闻>>(45+)                                                                 | Qianjiang Evening News      | 45   |
| April 12 | Philippines says won’t abandon Huangyan, will not use military force or get help from America – from People’s Daily correspondent Ji Peijuan (暨佩娟) in Bangkok  
• 菲律宾称不会放弃黄岩岛 不诉诸暴力不求助美国 搜狐新闻 2012年04月12日 17:00 24条相同新闻>>(35+)                                                                 | RMW                         | 35   |
| April 12 | MFA spokesperson: China demands Philippine warship immediately withdraw from Huangyan waters – reports on MFA press conference  
• 外交部发言人:中方要求菲律宾军舰立即撤离黄岩岛海域 腾讯财经 2012年04月12日 19:00 18条相同新闻>>(24+)  
• 中国外交部要求菲律宾军舰立即撤离黄岩岛海域 搜狐新闻 2012年04月12日 17:00 11条相同新闻>>(15+)                                                                 | XH, BJCB                   | 39   |
| April 12 | Philippines warship withdraws from Huangyan waters, coastguard ship sent – from CNS Manila correspondent Zhang Ming (张明)  
• 菲律宾军舰撤出黄岩岛海域 政派海岸警卫队船只 搜狐新闻 2012年04月12日 19:00 22条相同新闻>>(27+)                                                                 | CNS                         | 27   |
| April 12 | Zhejiang provincial paper Qianjiang Wambao April 12 full-page illustrated report: 菲军舰逼近黄岩岛要挟我渔船  
• 中国海监船队仍在黄岩岛监视 搜狐新闻 2012年04月12日 05:00 16条相同新闻>>(17+)                                                                 | BJCB, BJRB, BJCB           | 31   |
2012, May 1-18: Scarborough Shoal standoff May escalation phase

Baidu News search:

- “Scarborough Shoal” 黄岩岛 in headlines, May 1-31, 2012, ~16,300 results (conducted August 14, 2016)
- “Scarborough Shoal” 黄岩岛 in headlines, May 1-15, 2012, 1,050 results (conducted November 1, 2016)

Note: when the second search was conducted in November, 2016, fewer articles on this phase of the standoff were found, perhaps connected with the major improvement in China-Philippines relations apparent in President Duterte’s October 2016 state visit to Beijing. Therefore, the threshold for inclusion on the list was reduced from 10 to 5 reposts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Stories with 5+ reposts</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Reposts</th>
</tr>
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</table>
| May 1| **PHL Foreign Minister: US demanded peaceful resolution of Huangyan Island controversy through multilateral means** – from *People's Daily Washington correspondent*  
  - 菲外长:美要求以多边方式和平解决黄岩岛争端 新浪新闻 2012年05月01日 14:00 [5条相同新闻 >>](5)                                                                 | RMW        | 5       |
| May 1| **Philippines maintains international court resolution of Huangyan standoff** – translation by "Online Network News" (网络新闻联播)  
  - 菲律宾坚持通过国际法庭解决黄岩岛对峙事件 新浪新闻 2012年05月01日 17:00 [6条相同新闻 >>](6)                                                                 | CCTV       | 6       |
| May 3| **PHL claims 'more' Chinese boats have arrived in Huangyan waters** – based on translation of Philippines media story  
  - 菲律宾称“更多”中国船只抵达黄岩岛海域 环球网 2012年05月03日 08:00 [9条相同新闻 >>](8)                                                                 | HQW        | 8       |
| May 3| **An investigation of the living conditions of the fishers in the Huangyan Island dispute** – *Southern Weekend* illustrated feature.  
  - 黄岩岛争端中的中国渔民生存现状调查 腾讯新闻 2012年05月03日 12:00 [9条相同新闻 >>](12)  
  - 海南渔民:我们坚守住黄岩岛 祖辈都在那打渔 腾讯新闻 2012年05月03日 14:00 [6条相同新闻 >>](6) | SMG, FZWB  | 18      |
| May 3| **MFA press conference transcript, including question and answer on Huangqiu poll showing 80% public support for military force**  
  - 外交部就渔船与菲律宾船只冲撞及黄岩岛等答问 搜狐新闻 2012年05月03日 19:00 [7条相同新闻 >>](7)                                                                 | MFA website| 7       |
| May 3| **PHL mass media publishes article stating Huangyan Island is indeed China's, criticizing government’s obfuscation** – on Victor N. Arches article  
  - 菲民众发文称黄岩岛确属中国并指责政府模糊 新浪新闻 2012年05月03日 23:00 [23条相同新闻 >>](22)                                                                  | HQW        | 22      |
<p>| May 4| <strong>Luo Yuan says China should be polite first before sending troops, military measures indispensable</strong> – Luo Yuan interview with CNS &quot;Big News Talk&quot;, repeats his claim that Philippines has, in a strategic sense, already fired the first shot. &quot;As to whether China will or won’t respond militarily in a tactical sense, that will be decided by the development of the situation.&quot; | CNS        | 9       |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>News Title</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>May 4</td>
<td>Chinese side: position of resolving Huangyan dispute through diplomatic consultations has not changed</td>
<td>MFA website</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 4</td>
<td>PHL exporters say banana exports to China are being hindered by Huangyan Island incident – from CNS Manila correspondent Zhang Ming</td>
<td>CNS</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 5</td>
<td>Philippines calls Huangyan Island 'Panatag Reef', claims it more easily shows its sovereignty – translation from &quot;Online Network News&quot;</td>
<td>CCTV</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 6</td>
<td>Philippines media website hacked, 'Huangyan Island belongs to China'message – based on May 3 reports in Philippines media, delay perhaps implying clearance for publication took 2 days</td>
<td>CNTV, CRI, RMW</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 6</td>
<td>Wu Shicun: Philippine claim to Scarborough Shoal is completely baseless – interview</td>
<td>CNS</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 7</td>
<td>Philippine Coast Guard ship may withdraw from Huangyan waters due to typhoon</td>
<td>XJB</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 7</td>
<td>Dai Xu: Philippines actually wants China to use force</td>
<td>HQSBJ</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 7-8</td>
<td>PHL orders Coast Guard to destroy all non-Philippine structures – reports based on MFA press conference, all begin with Philippines' alleged threat to remove (nonexistent) Chinese markers</td>
<td>HQW, JHSB, CNS, CCTV, also carried by XH</td>
<td>32*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 8</td>
<td>Commentary: No need to tolerate the intolerable, make a Huangyan Island model – front-page People's Daily Overseas Edition &quot;Wangyuanlou&quot; commentary by Qin Hong</td>
<td>RMRBHWB</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 8</td>
<td>Fu Ying's &quot;all preparations&quot; warning</td>
<td>MFA website</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 8</td>
<td>MFA: whatever the Philippines does, Huangyan Island is still China's – from MFA press conference</td>
<td>CNS</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 8</td>
<td>CCTV-13 TV detailed report on recent developments – says Philippine bananas held up in inspections</td>
<td>CCTV</td>
<td>9*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Source</td>
<td>Notes</td>
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<tr>
<td>------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 9</td>
<td>PHL media say Chinese government boats are preventing PHL fishers from entering Huangyan Island lagoon – story by Zhong Weidong</td>
<td>HQW, carried by XH</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 9</td>
<td>PHL media say China’s ships numbers have increased from 14 to 33</td>
<td>HQW</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 9</td>
<td>Full account of Yuzheng-310 fisheries protection at Huangyan Island – photo gallery from Southern Metropolis Daily reporter embedded with Yuzheng-310</td>
<td>SMG</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 9</td>
<td>Philippine scholar proves Huangyan Island belongs to China, says is only speaking the truth – interview with Victor N. Arches</td>
<td>XH</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 9</td>
<td>People's Daily &quot;Zhong Sheng&quot; commentary on the impeccable legality of China’s claim</td>
<td>RMRB</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 9</td>
<td>Four focal points of the Huangyan Island incident – interviews with &quot;industry experts&quot; (业内专家) refuting Philippines’ claims</td>
<td>XH, CYD</td>
<td>20*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 9</td>
<td>PLA Daily May 9 commentary on &quot;ironclad evidence&quot; of China’s claim</td>
<td>JFJB</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 9</td>
<td>Philippines government denies provoking China in Huangyan waters – from Manila correspondent Zhang Ming</td>
<td>CNS</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 9-10</td>
<td>Huangyan Island incident: all preparations have been made - TV broadcast report</td>
<td>CCTV</td>
<td>11*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 10</td>
<td>Military paper: Chinese military will not allow anyone to steal Huangyan Island sovereignty – PLA Daily May 10 commentary</td>
<td>JFJB</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 10</td>
<td>Huangyan Incident ongoing for a month: China’s response reasonable and powerful</td>
<td>CNS</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 10</td>
<td>PHL restores dialogue with China’s embassy on Huangyan Island incident – based on information from PRC Manila embassy</td>
<td>CRI</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 10</td>
<td>All parts of Chinese society paying attention to Huangyan Island incident and condemning Philippines’ unreasonable provocations</td>
<td>XH</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Source</td>
<td>Page</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 11</td>
<td>PHL military silent on Huangyan, Defense Secretary says don't amplify the issue</td>
<td>CNS</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 11</td>
<td>MFA official: PHL has said many times that Huangyan Island is not PHL territory – MFA website post of Vice Foreign Minister Deng Zhonghua’s interview with Phoenix TV</td>
<td>MFA website</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 12</td>
<td>Little moves cannot make big waves – full-page illustrated splash</td>
<td>RMRB Overseas</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 12</td>
<td>Military paper says Huangyan is under China's control, no need to go to war in anger – commentary by Wen Bing</td>
<td>JFJB</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 12</td>
<td>Hainan fishers say Fisheries Administration ships are protecting them, very calm about fishing at Huangyan – Xinhua’s Zhao Yeping and Xia Guannan meet the hero-fishermen</td>
<td>XH</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 13</td>
<td>PHL says will never agree to China’s demands over Huangyan – based on Philippine media reports on Del Rosario comments</td>
<td>HQW</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 13</td>
<td>China-Philippines military balance favours China</td>
<td>BJBWB</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 13</td>
<td>MoA says Huangyan has entered fishing ban period, no trawl nets allowed</td>
<td>XH</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 14</td>
<td>During fishing ban period, China’s Fisheries and CMS ships will continue to patrol and enforce law at Huangyan</td>
<td>CRI</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 14</td>
<td>American Chinese demonstrate at PHL embassy demanding PHL withdraw from Huangyan Island – on demonstrations in Washington</td>
<td>RMW</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 15</td>
<td>Scholar says Philippines claims have no ground in law – long article by East China Politics and Law University's Ding Chengyao</td>
<td>FZRB</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 15</td>
<td>Xue Li: resolving the Huangyan stalemate does not necessarily need war – Xue Li of CASS’s opinion piece advocates mutual withdrawal, fisheries agreement</td>
<td>HQSB</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 15</td>
<td>Aquino confident Scarborough Shoal will soon be resolved, implies no need to resort to international court</td>
<td>CNS</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 15-16</td>
<td>Netizens advocate military resolution to Huangyan Island issue, MFA continues to stick to consultations – most common headline is MFA answers questions on Huangyan and UK Prime Minister meeting Dalai Lama</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>May 15</td>
<td>2012年05月15日 18:00 48条相同新闻&gt;&gt;(36)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 16</td>
<td>Chinese Major General: we should have people on guard at Huangyan 24/7 – interview with Peng Guangqian</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 16</td>
<td>PHL government says Huangyan crisis can be resolved through peaceful consultation – from Manila correspondent Zhang Ming</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 16</td>
<td>Hainan fisherfolk return with full catches, saying Huangyan Island is like a gemstone mine</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 17</td>
<td>China hopes for clear signal from PHL regarding diplomatic resolution of Huangyan incident – report on MFA May 17 press conference</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 18</td>
<td>Zhang Zhaozhong says if PRC-PHL conflict ensues over Huangyan, US has no obligation to defend</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 18</td>
<td>Philippines retired military officer cancels plan to go to Huangyan – story on Nicanor Faeldon’s aborted trip to Scarborough, foregrounds the fact that he cancelled after a call from Aquino</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 18</td>
<td>Philippines retired military officer cancels trip to Huangyan: Faeldon’s cancelled trip to Scarborough, foregrounds the fact that he cancelled after a call from Aquino</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 18</td>
<td>MFA: China will continue to maintain high alert at Huangyan Island – MFA press conference, May 18, on Faeldon’s cancelled trip</td>
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</table>

* denotes likely understated count: number declined between preparation of article list and verification of repost count.
Appendix 6

PRC officials’ comments on public opinion and the South China Sea issue

Over the five years of this project I have collected various examples of PRC officials’ foreign-directed comments on the topic of Chinese public opinion on the South China Sea issue. The earliest is from a March 2009 US State Department cable in the wake of the Impeccable incident. Since that time, PRC officials have alluded to nationalist public opinion as a driver of assertive actions in the South China Sea many times, and linked it to the potential for irrational escalation at sea – a possibility that the outside world seems to take seriously. Sources include media reports, academic works, and press conference transcripts. All were collected casually in the course of the research process, and news reading.

Some comments were made in the context of more general discussions of Chinese foreign policy and maritime disputes. Care has been taken not to include comments that were referencing unrelated issues, but where the comment rolled together the South China Sea with other similar issues, such as those in the East China Sea or Yellow Sea, these were included. Although it is possible that in these cases the speaker primarily had the Diaoyu issue in mind, any implicit equation of the two is significant, given the highly inflammatory nature of the Sino-Japanese dispute, which produced mass protests and rioting in China in 2010 and 2012.

All of the statements were in some measure foreign-directed, most primarily so, being made to journalists in press conferences. Because they concern the basic nature of the state-society relationship over foreign policy, these remarks concern the state’s vital interests, and are therefore not likely to have been made lightly. Diplomats are trained to avoid expressing views that, if accepted, would be contrary to the state’s view of its interests. Thus, whether they reflect the sincere beliefs or feelings of the speakers or not is largely immaterial. Where particular themes are repeated by many individuals in different settings over a period of years, it should be safe to conclude that the image projected is considered a beneficial one.

These statements project an image of Chinese public opinion as a driver of the party-state’s assertive conduct in the present, and possibly in the future. They seem, moreover, to have increased in frequency over time, though a more rigorous assessment would need to factor in the present-centric bias in international discussions of this issue noted in Chapter 3. As international interest in the issue has grown, not only have Chinese officials probably been asked more questions about it, reporting of the statements they do make is likely to have intensified.
Many earlier examples exist where Japan and the United States are concerned, suggesting that the projection of this image of the Chinese public's role in PRC diplomacy is longstanding. Comments positing popular nationalism as a driver of policy in the South China Sea thus link to an existing narrative of bottom-up influence on Japan and US policy.

2009, March: MFA departmental Director-General to US diplomats, as reported by US Embassy in Beijing in cable dated March 25. The official references domestic Chinese public opinion in an appeal for a conciliatory shift in US policy. Coming after the contentious *Impeccable* incident, the implication was that if the US did not moderate its conduct, China may be compelled to take even more escalatory steps due to public pressure.

[The Director-General] maintained, since the recent incident involving the USNS *Impeccable* and Chinese vessels in the South China Sea, U.S. Navy ships, "one after another" had continued to conduct surveillance activities in China’s EEZ. These activities were widely reported in the international media and were creating pressure from Internet users and others for the PRC government to respond.

State Department, "China seeks reduction."

2011, June: Vice Foreign Minister Cui Tiankai, speaking to foreign reporters at the PRC Foreign Ministry in Beijing, ahead of a meeting in Hawaii with US officials at a time of heightened domestic agitation in China over the South China Sea issue, as reported by the *New York Times*. Cui emphasizes the danger of a conflagration, before invoking the Chinese public’s scrutiny.

“I believe the individual countries are actually playing with fire, and I hope the fire will not be drawn to the United States. . . . To be honest with you, the Chinese public is following very closely whether the United States will adopt a just and objective position on matters like these.”

Wong, “China warns U.S.”

2011, July: PRC ambassador to ASEAN Tong Xiaoling, in a state media commentary published shortly before the 2011 ASEAN Regional Forum (also published on the MFA’s Public Diplomacy Advisory Panel website). Against the backdrop of the PRC-ASEAN agreement on implementing the DOC, Tong's invocation of the Chinese
people's "national sentiments" (民族情绪) formed part of an appeal to ASEAN countries to restrain their actions in the South China Sea.

**PRC-ASEAN trade relations are mutually beneficial. However:**

"At the same time, we should see that some problems and disputes still exist between China and some ASEAN members, for example, the sovereignty dispute over some islands and reefs in the Spratly Islands that everyone has been paying so much attention to, and disputes over part of the South China Sea's maritime boundaries. The South China Sea dispute relates to China's core interests, concerning the Chinese people's national sentiments. So how to approach and handle the South China Sea issue?

The answers are to not involve unrelated parties such as American, and to uphold stability.

Tong, "Bu neng rang Nanhai."

2011, November: MFA Director-General for Asian Affairs Luo Zhaohui, in interview with journalists from South and Southeast Asia, November 10, 2011, as reported by *Jakarta Post*. Luo makes a statement of intransigence and, alluding to the Chinese public's questioning of the current policy, raises the prospect of a hardening of China's policy.

“On issues related to China’s sovereignty, there is no room for China to back off. . . The Chinese general public has been asking whether the government has been too weak and easy to bully.”

Haswadi, "No room to back off."

2012, April: Hainan Province Foreign Affairs Office Director and National Institute of South China Sea Studies President Wu Shicun, April 2012, as reported by *Times of India*. Wu tells India’s paper of record that the Chinese government will not tolerate its cooperation with Vietnam in the disputed area, adding that compromise will not be tolerated by the nationalistic Chinese public.

“China will not stand any joint cooperation [by India and Vietnam] in our claimed maritime areas.”

*India and Japan should "play a positive role in pushing for settlement"

. . .

*The Chinese government will not compromise on its claims because "nationalism prevails strongly in China."

Dasgupta, "Keep off South China Sea."
2012, May: MFA spokesperson Hong Lei, in regular press conferences at the height of the Scarborough Shoal tensions in May 2012, per official English-language transcripts. Hong repeatedly warned of the Chinese population’s reactions, particularly to the Philippines’ own attempts to rally domestic support. This suggested, paradoxically, that China’s own channeling of popular sentiments towards the issue was designed in part to persuade the Philippines to cease doing the same (Chapter 5). This may also have been the case with Vietnam in 2011 (see Chapter 5).

“We noticed that the Philippines have kept making strong-worded remarks on the issue to play up public feelings, which seriously undermines the atmosphere of China-Philippines relations. The Philippines has also incited domestic public and overseas nationals to stage anti-China protests. Such behaviours have triggered strong reaction and concerns from the Chinese people at home and abroad.”

MFA press conference (Hong Lei), May 9, 2012

“The Philippines has kept making strong-worded remarks on the Huangyan Island issue to play up public feelings, which seriously undermines the atmosphere of China-Philippines relations. The Philippines has also incited domestic public and overseas nationals to stage anti-China protests. Such behaviours have triggered strong reaction and concerns from the Chinese people at home and abroad.”

MFA press conference (Hong Lei), May 10, 2012

2012, September: Premier Wen Jiabao, at beginning of a meeting with visiting US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, September 5, 2012, as reported by AP. Premier Wen was almost certainly referring to the South China Sea issue, as this was very high on the agenda of Secretary Clinton’s visit. Wen’s comment effectively asks the US to moderate its conduct in order to prevent nationalistic outbursts.

“The U.S. should respect China’s national sovereignty and territorial integrity, respect China’s national core interests and the people's feelings.”

Lee, “Clinton, China haven't narrowed gaps.”


"If you look carefully at what happened in the last couple of years, you will see that the others started all the disputes. We did not start them, but we
had to respond because these issues concern China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, and there is strong public sentiment on these issues.

FA, "Bejing' brand ambassador."

2014, May: PLA Chief of Staff Gen. Fang Fenghui, addressing tensions over the HYSY-981 oil rig’s activities in the South China Sea, in a joint press conference with US Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman in Washington. General Fang invokes the Chinese people’s ancestral complexes to explain non-compromise on the territorial issue. Given the issue at hand was one of oil drilling, it also suggested an ancestrally-determined inability to compromise on China’s claimed maritime resource rights.

"I want to underscore, finally, that for the territory, which has passed down by our ancestors into the hands of our generation, we cannot afford to lose an inch."

DOD, "Transcript: Joint Chiefs."

2014, October: PRC National People’s Congress Foreign Affairs Committee Chairperson Fu Ying, in US media article compiled from a speech to the Asia Society, October 12, 2014. Fu attributes China’s escalatory response to the Scarborough Shoal incident to domestic anger.

"On April 10th, 2012, a Philippine navy ship sent armed men into the lagoon of Huangyan Island to harass Chinese fishermen who were working there. Photos of the scene angered the people back home who called for actions to protect Chinese citizens and territory.

. . . China took effective measures in response to both [Scarborough Shoal and Diaoyu Islands] provocations to firmly uphold territorial rights and interests. At the same time, China has exercised restraint and has not given up on resolving disputes through dialogue or the principle of "putting aside differences and going for joint development."

Fu Ying, "Answering four questions."

2015, May: Foreign Minister Wang Yi, to reporters following meeting with US Secretary of State John Kerry, during controversy over island-building in the Spratly Islands, as reported by Reuters. In this context, Minister Wang appeared to imply that the island-building program, as a form of safeguarding of sovereignty and territorial integrity, was not only legitimate, but required by the population.

"With regard to construction on the Nansha islands and reefs, this is fully within the scope of China’s sovereignty. . ."
"I would like to reaffirm that China's determination to safeguard its sovereignty and territorial integrity is as hard as a rock... It is the people's demand of the government and our legitimate right."

Brunnstrom and Martina, "U.S., China clash."

2015, June: Foreign Minister Wang Yi, addressing World Peace Forum, June 27, 2015. Minister Wang makes two assertions of intergenerational nationalist influence to justify both non-compromise and warn of forceful reprisals for rights-violating behaviour. The population's ancestral beliefs prevent the PRC from compromising on the sovereignty issue, and its younger generations require the Chinese government put a stop to other claimants' existing practices that fail to respect China's claimed "rights and interests."

"1,000 years ago, China was already a major country in sea navigation. China was surely the first country that found, exploited and governed the Nansha Islands.

..."

"China's claim of sovereignty over the Nansha Islands has not expanded, but will never lessen as well; otherwise we will not be able to face our ancestors and predecessors. Meanwhile, the phenomena of encroaching and violating China's territorial sovereignty and rights and interests shall not be continued, for that will make us unable to face our descendants."

MFA, "Wang Yi: China has firm faith and sufficient capability."

2015, September: NPC Foreign Affairs Committee Chairperson Fu Ying, in a September 2015 online article. Fu cites the Chinese public as sufficient to prevent PRC compromise.

"As for the current disputes, China, out of a genuine hope for maintaining peace and stability in the area, has agreed to resolve them through peaceful negotiation, and proposed to shelve the disputes and jointly develop the area. But China cannot give up its sovereignty, and the Chinese people will never allow that."

Fu Ying, "How Chinese and Americans are misreading each other."

2015, October: CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping, in written answers to Reuters questions. Xi invokes the ancestral connection, asserting that the Chinese population will not allow infringements of China's claims. At a glance, Xi simply means the Chinese government and public's views are identical on this issue. However, unless the reader accepts this fiction, the statement may also suggest
that any state actions to prevent such infringements are a result of the Chinese people’s views.

“The islands and reefs in the South China Sea are Chinese territory since ancient times. They are left to us by our ancestors. The Chinese people will not allow anyone to infringe on China’s sovereignty and related rights and interests in the South China Sea.”

Reuters, “Exclusive Q&A.”

2016, January: Retired PLA Colonel Yue Gang, discussing US “Freedom of Navigation” patrol in South China Sea, in interview with South China Morning Post:

“There will probably be more provocation if Beijing does not step up. Public sentiment in China will rise and it will become difficult for the Chinese government to handle.”

Ng, “China urged to get tough.”

2016, July: Former State Councilor Dai Bingguo, ahead of Philippines vs. China UNCLOS arbitral tribunal decision, keynote speech at event with US and Chinese think tank leaders, Washington, July 5 2016. Dai brings up the risk of “accidents,” asking his American audience to consider Chinese domestic audiences’ perceptions of US patrols in the South China Sea, before declaring they would not be intimidated by any amount of naval weaponry, and warning the US of the “unexpectedly heavy price” it could pay for getting involved in a South China Sea conflict.

“The temperature of the South China Sea is now high enough. Some people even clamored for ‘fight tonight’. If such momentum went unchecked, accidents could happen and the South China Sea might sink into chaos and so might the entire Asia. Should that happen, it will be countries around the South China Sea, the Asian countries and even the US itself that will suffer.

...“The US’s heavy-handed intervention in the South China Sea issue needs to be scaled back. There is deep concern about the US continued reinforcement of its military alliances in the Asia-Pacific and forward deployment of its military assets. Since last year, the US has intensified its close-in reconnaissance and ‘Freedom of Navigation’ operations targeted at China. The rhetoric of a few people in the US has become blatantly confrontational. How would you feel if you were Chinese and read in the newspapers or watch on TV reports and footages about US aircraft carriers, naval ships and fighter jets flexing muscles right at your doorstep and hear a senior US military official telling the troops to be ready ‘to fight tonight’?
Wouldn’t you consider it unhelpful to the US image in the world? This is certainly not the way China and the US should interact with each other.

“Having said that, we in China would not be intimidated by the US actions, not even if the US sent all the ten aircraft carriers to the South China Sea. Furthermore, US intervention on the issue has led some countries to believe that the US is on their side and they stand to gain from the competition between major countries. As a result, we have seen more provocations from these countries, adding uncertainties and escalating tensions in the South China Sea. This, in fact, is not in the interest of the US. The risk for the US is that it may be dragged into trouble against its own will and pay an unexpectedly heavy price.”


2016, July: State Councillor Yang Jiechi in interview published in English on MFA website on July 15, regarding the Philippines vs. China UNCLOS arbitration result. Yang draws attention to online nationalist expression, and cites ancestry as determining that China will take unspecified “resolute” actions to hold onto not only claimed island territories, but “every swath” of claimed maritime space.

“This award is illegal and invalid in every sense. The Chinese government has released relevant statements and a White Paper stating its solemn position of firmly opposing the arbitration and not accepting or recognizing the award. This position of the central government has the strong support and endorsement from people of various social sectors in China. They have expressed their unequivocal attitude of opposing the illegal arbitration and safeguarding sovereign rights and interests by contributing articles and articulating views through the press, TV and SMS as well as online platforms like WeChat and Weibo.

...  

“The South China Sea, important to the Chinese people since ancient times, is our heritage to which our forefathers devoted their wisdom and even lives. The Chinese government remains unwavering in its resolve to safeguard China’s territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests in the South China Sea. The Chinese people do not covet other countries’ interests or envy their development. At the same time, we will never give up our legitimate interests. No country should expect us to trade our core interests away or swallow the bitter consequences of our sovereignty, security and development interests being undermined. The Chinese government and people will remain united and act resolutely to safeguard every inch of our land and every swath of our waters.

MFA, “Yang Jiechi gives interview.”
2016, May: Fu Ying, and Wu Shicun, in major essay published in *The National Interest*, cite public opinion as a cause of assertive behaviour at least six times. In this 9,000-word, authoritative external propaganda statement, the two officials repeatedly claim that the PRC shifted its policy as a result of pressure from public opinion. Evidence strongly disconfirms their account of the reasons for China’s sending of patrol ships to Scarborough Shoal: China’s patrol boats had already been at the shoal for around 18 hours when the incident became public (see Chapter 6). The essay’s also links the risk of irrational escalation to the Chinese people’s historical memories.

“The South China Sea issue has become one of the major irritants in the China-US relations in recent years, over which the public opinion in the two countries are very critical of each other. There are even frictions in the sea between the two navies. The South China Sea seems like an outlet for the rivalry and confrontation that are building up of late between China and the US. As a result, the two sides seem to be reassessing each other’s intentions on a strategic level. The latest rhetoric is about ‘militarizing the South China Sea’, and on the part of the US, announcements to carry out ‘freedom of navigation operational assertions’. Hawkish voices are growing louder in both sides of the Pacific.

... "In nearly ten years after the introduction of the DOC, China was the only keen abider of the document. It refrained from taking actions that might escalate the dispute in the South China Sea, and kept pushing for peace and cooperation and joint development in disputed areas. By contrast, Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines and some other ASEAN countries were half-hearted about the DOC. They kept on transforming and expanding occupied islands, reinforcing their administrative management of them, and accelerated the development of oil and gas in surrounding waters. They also made occasional arrests of Chinese fishermen working in these waters. One common efforts of these countries is to solidify their illegal occupation and extend the territorial dispute to the maritime sphere. What they were trying to do was more of denying the existence of the disputes than shelving them. This continuously enraged the Chinese public and media, eliciting sustained attention.

... ASEAN countries in 2011 upgraded infrastructure on disputed islands, Manila introduced the ‘West Philippine Sea,’ Philippines-Vietnam joint military exercises were held, and Vietnamese monks were sent to temples in the Spratly Islands

“These provocative activities by some ASEAN member countries and the US’s intervention have been closely watched and widely reported in China, evoking strong repercussions among the public. Under the
doubling-down pressure of policy sustainability and public opinion, China’s restraint policy is approaching to its brink

“In April 2012, the Philippine Navy made a provocative arrest of Chinese fishermen working in the Huangyan Island waters in what was later known as the Huangyan Island Incident. Arguably this became the ‘last straw on the camel's back’ in the fragile stability in the South China Sea, and it tested the bottom line of China's policy and patience.

“On April 10, 2012, Philippine warships launched a surprise raid on twelve Chinese fishing vessels working in the lagoon, disturbing and harassing their operations, and even forcibly boarding one vessel and arresting the fishermen. Almost instantly, images of the arrested Chinese fishermen being stripped to the waist and exposed to the scorching sun on the deck made headlines on print and digital media in China, triggering off an outcry among the Chinese general public. China was thus forced to take countermeasures, making urgent diplomatic representations to the Philippines, and sending marine surveillance ships and fishing administrative ships to the waters around Huangyan Island.

... 

“So now, what’s next, what will happen in the South China Sea? The US is trying to find out what China's next move will be. On the part of China, suspicion is rising about the US's intention. Obviously, there is a risk of escalation of tension and danger of miscalculations at strategic level.

“China’s pursuit in the South China Sea has been consistently maintained. That is to safeguard national territorial integrity and maintain regional peace and tranquility. To observe China, one should never lose sight of the historical dimension. Thouth China is growing into a strong country, the painful memory of history is not long gone. The Chinese people have not forgotten that the country stumbled into the 20th century with its capital under the occupation of the imperialists' armies, and for over a century before and after, China suffered the humiliation of foreign invasion and aggression. That is why the Chinese people and government are very sensitive about anything that is related to territorial integrity and would never allow such recurrence even if it’s just an inch of land. This is something the outside world needs to keep in mind when looking at China and trying to understand China's behavior. Admittedly, there is no major external threat that can endanger China's survival or development in today's world. China adheres to the path of peaceful development and it dedicates to promoting world peace, development and cooperation. Its belief and commitment are firm and unchanged.

...
“China's fundamental policy objective for the South China Sea is to protect the security of its sovereignty and maritime rights. Tactically, China has been coping with all motions by refraining from proactive motions, which means to act with restraint, and to take countermeasures when provoked. The Chinese people will not allow any further infringement of the country’s sovereignty and rights concerning land features in the South China Sea, and therefore hold high expectations towards the government to protect its national interests. As for the current status quo of some of the Nansha islands and reefs under other countries’ occupation, China will not give up its sovereignty stance.

Fu and Wu, “South China Sea.”
Notes

Chapter 1

1 "Grassroots deterrence" attempts to capture the hybrid popular/official nature of popular participation (grassroots) in the realization of the state's strategic goals (deterrence). The most appropriate Chinese rendering is *minjian weishé* 草根威胁, which would translate back as "deterrence from among the population." While in English, "grassroots" refers to the political activities of ordinary citizens, the directly translated Chinese term *caogen* 草根 often connotes the very bottom rungs of society. This was probably the intent in the original use of the phrase *caogen weishé* 草根威胁 by a Beijing academic in describing the effects of the wave of sometimes violent protests in China in 2012 over the Diaoyu Islands, in which disaffected migrant workers were prominent. The event was conducted under Chatham House rules, and my request for an interview with the academic was unsuccessful, so their coinage unfortunately cannot be properly attributed. The idea of *minjian weishé* that I use is similar, but broader, referring to nationalist expression among society at large, rather than the bottom rungs in particular.


8 Robert Jervis, The Logic of Images in International Relations (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 4. Jervis lists displays of fervent nationalism (34), and the mobilization of the population to sacrifice or support foreign policy goals (38), as indices, i.e. developments that carry some inherent evidence that the image they project is correct, due to being directly linked with the state’s capabilities or intentions. Indices are distinguished from signals, which all sides know are aimed at image projection. In the case of Chinese nationalism and PRC policy, both of these definitions are satisfied: the fervour of popular nationalism is a genuine factor in the government’s calculations, the elevation of popular sentiments raises in-group cohesion and thus fighting capabilities, and it is widely understood that the party-state wishes to project desired images in the process. This dualistic nature of China’s state-led popular nationalism turns out to be the source of much of its communicative power, according to the perspective put forward in this thesis.


13 Reilly, Strong Society, 5-6 and 12-15.
Homi Bhabha, 6n4.

A discussion of three different, but interrelated, measurements of nationalism can be found in Stephen Van Evera, “Hypotheses on nationalism and war,” International Security 18, no.4 (1997): 6n4. A discussion of three different, but interrelated, measurements of nationalism can be found in Table 5.1.


There were two main choices to guide the formulation of a working definition of “nationalism”: (1) common usage in analysis of Chinese foreign policy, which generally associates “nationalism” with hardline public criticism of the policy status quo, anti-foreign mobilizations, and other politically relevant phenomena; and (2) a more tightly defined cognitive and emotional concept used in social psychology, which revolves around pride, a sense of superiority, blind support for the nation-state, and denigrating views of other nationalities.

I have based my working definition on the former – common usage in Chinese foreign policy analysis – for two reasons. First, the findings of this thesis speak most directly to the literature on Chinese foreign policy, so it makes sense to examine the concept of nationalism as used in this discourse. Second, the cognitive-emotional concept of nationalism is a step removed from the kinds of phenomena potentially capable of creating political pressure on the state to alter its foreign policy, so it would be more difficult to use this as a variable to explain the kinds of Chinese policy outcomes under discussion here.


Notes – Chapter 1


26 This unavoidably hinges on assumptions about the decisionmakers’ awareness of foreign interests, and about diplomatic corps of other states having adequately communicated their own state’s view of its interests. As Linda Jakobson points out, many front-line agencies may have poor understanding of foreign states’ interests. See Jakobson, China’s Unpredictable Maritime Security Actors (Sydney: Lowy Institute, December 2014), 15.

27 In a comment related to the author via a British diplomat, a Japanese official emphasized the importance of a distinction between policy and behaviour: "If it is policy we can deter. If it is behaviour we cannot." Personal communication via email, April 2013.

28 For example, simply maintaining an official presence in a disputed area could be seen to weaken rivals’ positions, as principles of prescriptive acquisition have often been applied in state-state relations. Surya Prakash Sharma, Territorial Acquisition, Disputes and International Law (The Hague: Kluwer Law International, 1997), 108-115; Brian Taylor Sumner, “Territorial disputes at the International Court of Justice,” Duke Law Journal, no.53 (2004): 1787-1788.


30 Long-term objectives include increasing the PRC’s “comprehensive national power” and realizing the stated “core interests” of maintaining territorial sovereignty, Communist Party rule, and economic development.


34 Ross, “China’s naval nationalism,” 60.

35 Diversionary theory can be traced to Simmel’s in-group/out-group thesis, which contends that the cohesion of an in-group will increase in the presence of conflict with an out-group.” Ross Miller, ”Regime type, strategic interaction, and the diversionary use of force,” Journal of Conflict Resolution 43, no.3 (1999): 389. It might be argued, therefore, that the cause of the state’s actions in
such cases is not popular nationalism, but a universal feature of human psychology. But the degree to which a domestic audience will be susceptible to diversionary ploy depends at least to some extent on its level of latent proclivity to support conflict with out-groups – that is, the degree of latent nationalism existing in society.

36 Stephen Van Evera proposed 17 background conditions that could make nationalist-driven conflict more likely, of which 10 appear to be present in the South China Sea. The most dissatisfied state is the most powerful (H1); the borders are utterly indefensible geographically and enjoy no almost international legitimacy (H3a and H3b); claimants China and Vietnam have committed crimes against one another in the recent past that neither recognizes (H4a, H4b, and H4c); mythmaking on both sides has opened up an enormous perceptual gulf (H6); the PRC is believed to face legitimacy issues and slowing economic growth (H6a, H6c); and nationalist mythmaking is largely unchallenged in the media and academic historiography (H6d). See Van Evera, "Hypotheses on nationalism and war," 8-9.


38 He, “Remembering and forgetting,” 67.

39 Shirk, Fragile Superpower, 7.


43 The rise of right-wing populism in Western democracies has also been strongly linked to internet technology’s removal of the rationalizing, fact-checking filter of professional journalism from the system of political information. See Katharine Murphy, "Truth and the new politics: what role for journalism if facts don’t count?" Meanjin 75, no.3 (2016): 41-47.

44 I.e. a test with high certitude but low uniqueness. Failure can falsify the bottom-up nationalist legitimacy hypothesis in the case in question, but a pass will not strongly support it. See Stephen Van Evera, Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 31.

45 An diversionary state’s main intention may well be to focus popular anger on the external threat rather than its own tough response. However, it is hardly plausible that, having done so, such an insecure state would forego the opportunity to take the credit for its decision to strongly confront the threat.


was relatively low, Jiang was able to subdue his hardline opponents and pursue a less confrontational approach towards America, despite domestic popular nationalist dissatisfaction.


52 International Crisis Group, Stirring (I).

53 Reilly conceptualizes the “wave of mobilization” as the key variable affecting the likelihood of popular nationalist influence, but notes that elite divisions are only one of several reasons why an authoritarian state may tolerate such a wave. Others include the “safety valve” function to release a potentially dangerous buildup of unexpressed sentiments; a “trial balloon” to gauge public opinion; and “hands-tying” for strategic advantage in line with Weiss’s model discussed below. See Reilly, Strong Society, 40-44.

54 See Alastair Iain Johnston and Daniela Stockmann, “Six hypotheses on public opinion and foreign policy in China,” working paper, March 14, 2011, 4-5.

55 CCP leadership positions are believed to be decided before, not during, party congresses, so intensified jockeying for positions typically begins months or even years beforehand. After the official transition is complete, a new CCP administration may struggle for years to consolidate its influence.

56 E.g. Zhao, “A state-led nationalism”; Huang and Lee, “Peddling ideology”; Wang, Never Forget; Callahan, Pessimist.


59 He, “Remembering and forgetting.”


62 In-house censorship teams at major internet companies also delete or hide comments in anticipation of state authorities’ wishes, in line with the CCP’s systems of “responsibility.” See, for example, “Wangxinban yuetan Wangyi Gongsi fuzeren (Cyberspace Administration of China calls in NetEase Corp. representatives),” Zhongguo Wangxin Wang (Cyberspace Administration Online), February 2, 2015, at http://news.sina.cn/gn/2015-02-02/detail-icczmvn5706301.dhtml (accessed November 22, 2016). Indeed, this may well account for the bulk of the censorship on the PRC internet.
due to incompetence), and numerous imperial dynasties fostered periods of political and China under the Kuomintang, while also authoritarian, was less repressive in various ways (if only due to incompetence), and numerous imperial dynasties fostered periods of political and repression. This assertion does not imply China’s political system has never been more open; the Republic of China under the Kuomintang, while also authoritarian, was less repressive in various ways (if only due to incompetence), and numerous imperial dynasties fostered periods of political and
doubt that mass protests could have been mobilized if the state had chosen to allow them. Attitudes appear sufficiently widespread to conclude that these actions would have been larger if in June 2011, May 2012, May 2014, November 2015 and July 2016, and popular nationalist Resolution Journal of Conflict Tingley and Barbara Walter, “Can cheap talk deter? An experimental analysis,” 55, no.6 (2011): 996-1020.

Notes – Chapter 1


64 Interviews with news director at commercial portal, #12/05, Beijing, October 2012, and central public opinion monitoring unit employees, #13/11, Beijing, November 2013. Abundant examples from the 2011-2013 period are documented on the author’s blog, South Sea Conversations (http://southseaconversations.wordpress.com).


66 Research on social movements has suggested the presence of “radical flanks” – extremist or militant factions – can reframe moderates’ demands as both reasonable and urgent, increasing their chances of winning acquiescence from opponents. Herbert Haines, Black Radicals and the Civil Rights Mainstream, 1954–1970 (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1988). In accordance with the well-known negotiation technique, the buzz of loud jingoistic demands can allow the state to present itself as a “good cop” that be reasoned with, as long as its opponent acts cautiously and avoids provoking the “bad cop” of popular nationalism. Susan Brodt and Marla Tuchinsky, “Working together but in opposition: an examination of the ‘good-cop/bad-cop’ negotiating team tactic,” Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes 81, no.2 (2000): 155-177. From the opposite angle, a famous marketing experiment also demonstrated consumers’ increased favourability towards particular choices when they were “intermediate options.” Itamar Simonson and Amos Tversky, “Choice in context: tradeoff contrast and extremeness aversion,” Journal of Marketing Research 29, no. 3 (1992): 281-295.

67 Zhao A Nation-State, Chapter 6 and 7.

68 Zhao A Nation-State, 265.


70 Weiss, Powerful Patriots, 16-17.

71 Weiss, Powerful Patriots, 41.

72 Weiss, Powerful Patriots, 29.

73 Reilly, Strong Society, 147.

74 Stage management is typically most visible outside the target country’s embassy, so if tolerating protests raise domestic risks, Beijing is evidently more concerned about minimizing those risks than emphasizing them. If the CCP wanted to show the independent power of protesters to “tie its hands,” we might expect it to wind the protest movements down gradually, as an organic protest would. But on the contrary, authorities have allowed them one day and closed them down the next.

75 Weiss, Powerful Patriots, 223.

76 “Cheap talk” has been found to have significant effects under experimental conditions. Dustin Tingley and Barbara Walter, “Can cheap talk deter? An experimental analysis,” Journal of Conflict Resolution 55, no.6 (2011): 996-1020.

77 Nationalist demonstrations would almost certainly have occurred on the South China Sea issue, had the state not prevented them. As Chapters 5 and 6 show, small-scale protests were attempted in June 2011, May 2012, May 2014, November 2015 and July 2016, and popular nationalist attitudes appear sufficiently widespread to conclude that these actions would have been larger if sanctioned by state authorities. Where the United States has been involved in the issue, there is no doubt that mass protests could have been mobilized if the state had chosen to allow them.

78 This assertion does not imply China’s political system has never been more open; the Republic of China under the Kuomintang, while also authoritarian, was less repressive in various ways (if only due to incompetence), and numerous imperial dynasties fostered periods of political and
intellectual ferment. However, the situation of near-universal literacy among the population in China is novel to the PRC era, as is the volume of written political content published by ordinary citizens via the internet. Although China has a long history of public expression through traditions such as petitions and big-character posters, internet technology has dramatically lowered the barriers to and risks of participation in public discourse, while also providing the potential for global reach.


Frederick Yu, "Campaigns, communications, and development in communist China," in Daniel Lerner and Wilbur Schramm eds., Communications and Change in the Developing Countries, (Honolulu: East-West Center Press, 1967), 195-215. Also see Bennett, Yundong.


See Li-fung Cho, "The emergence of China's watchdog reporting," in David Bandurski and Martin Hala eds., Investigative Journalism in China: Eight Cases in Chinese Watchdog Journalism (Hong Kong: HKU Press, 2010), 166. Frank reporting of social problems and negative news has actually been a feature of Chinese journalism throughout much of the PRC's history. However, it has usually been restricted to high-level internal bulletins, rather than being published in mass media.

To practically implement this, Hu called for greater party-state participation in internet discourse, the adoption of more "intimate, attractive and infectious" forms of propaganda, and leveraging the "complementary functions" of market-oriented and online media as "propaganda resources." Hu Jintao, "Zai Renmin Ribao She kaocha gongzuo shi de jianghua (Speech during inspection of People's Daily Group work)," People's Daily Online, June 20, 2008, at http://politics.people.com.cn/GB/1024/7408514.html (accessed November 21, 2016).

For a comparative perspective on the various "modes of political participation" that have emerged as spaces of political contestation in Southeast Asia, see Jayasuriya and Rodan, "Beyond hybrid regimes," 782. After Xi Jinping took power in 2012, authorities briefly encouraged the exposure of corrupt officials via social media. One emblematic case was that of Yang Dacai, dubbed "Wristwatch Brother" (表哥) who was jailed for corruption after internet users published photographs of him wearing luxury watches he could not possibly afford on his cadre's salary. Since then, the CCP has moved to standardize and regulate this mode of popular participation through reporting channels operated by the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection.

As Randall Collins notes, "groups with solidarity are more capable of mobilizing and fighting." Randall Collins, "C-Escalation and D-Escalation: a theory of the time-dynamics of conflict," American Sociological Review 77, no.1 (2012): 2. The "Resist-America-Aid-Korea" mobilization campaign for the Korean War was mentioned above. Before the Sino-Vietnamese War, graphic imagery of alleged Vietnamese atrocities appeared prominently in party media, making clear that war was imminent. The classic counterexample is the widespread notion that a lack of social support was an important factor in the United States' defeat in the Vietnam War.
“Although exaggerating the danger of crisis instability would make a severe confrontation VPotentail for any such “venting effect” can only lower the risk of instability if it outweighs the “mobilization effect” under which permitting protests feeds back into further mobilization. “Ke Tizu” is a collective pseudonym for a topic-specific research team.

As Jervis points out, strategic messages are more likely to be taken seriously if they are overheard, rather than directly stated. Jervis, Logic of Images, 44. Alexandre Debs and Jessica Chen Weiss argue the propensity of “audience costs” to influence adversaries’ behaviour lies in their overhearing compelling domestic arguments favouring the use of force. Debs and Weiss, “Circumstances, domestic audiences, and reputational incentives in international crisis bargaining,” Journal of Conflict Resolution 60, no.3 (2016): 404.

For a discussion of this range of possible motivations, see Reilly, Strong Society, 40-44. The idea of allowing nationalist protests to appeal for international support is noted in John Ciorciari and Jessica Chen Weiss, "Nationalist protests, government responses, and the risk of escalation in interstate disputes," Security Studies 25, no.3 (2016): 549-550. The “safety valve” explanation has been posited by Michael Swaine, who argues that the CCP’s dependence on nationalist legitimacy makes it disinclined to suppress extreme nationalism. Michael Swaine, "The real challenge in the Pacific: a response to ‘How to deter China’,” Foreign Affairs 94, no.3 (2015): 152. Weiss notes that any such “venting effect” can only lower the risk of instability if it outweighs the “mobilization effect” under which permitting protests feeds back into further mobilization. Weiss, Powerful Patriots, 22-23.

more dangerous than it otherwise would be, it also would serve the useful function of keeping states from the brink of war.”


104 Schelling wrote that “if we scale down the risk to us, we scale it down to [the adversary] too.” Schelling, *Strategy of Conflict*, 192 However, the domestic side’s information advantage and opaque risk management techniques create the possibility of scaling down the risks without scaling down the adversary’s estimation of them to a corresponding degree.

105 As Jervis pointed out, deterrence depends on “the promise that war will not break out if the other cooperates.” Quoted in Russell Hardin, “The Illogic of American Nuclear Strategy (book review),” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 2, no.6 (1985): 46.

106 According to Jervis, top-down mobilization of the population for sacrifice may be regarded as an index – that is, a credible indicator of the state’s intentions. Jervis, *Logic of Images*, 38.

107 In Bhabha’s account of the colonial “mimic man,” the power of the hybrid (educated by, and thus resemblant of, the colonial authorities themselves, yet simultaneously resemblant of the “inscrutable” native other) was to confound the categorical knowledge schemes upon which colonial authority ultimately rested. Thus, Bhabha observed, the “mimicry” of colonial subjects adopting the intellectual forms of the colonizers was “at once resemblance and menace.” Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 86. The PRC’s state-led popular nationalism works (appropriately enough) in almost the same way, but not quite. It also leverages the menace of resemblance, but rather than colonial regimes, it is China’s adversaries whose certainties are confounded. State-led popular nationalism resembles a spontaneous anti-foreign movement but is clearly *not quite* the same. The resemblance means it creates an attention-grabbing and plausible threat, while the gap reassures adversaries that cooperation (i.e. acquiescence) on their behalf will avert the danger. State-led popular nationalism is also resemblant of a mobilization for war, but clearly *not quite* the same. The resemblance ensures the consequences being threatened are clear, while the gap reassures the adversary that war has not already been decided on. State-led popular nationalism also resembles a state-controlled rent-a-crowd but is clearly *not quite* the same. The resemblance means its displays are likely to be understood as threat signals from the state, while the gap ensures it this is plausibly deniable, protecting the state’s predominantly peaceful and rational image. (On the image-protecting function of such ambiguous signals, see Jervis, *Logic of Images*, Chapter 5.)


As documented by William Farris – among many other posts, see Farris, “Gu Kailai found guilty of murdering Neil Heywood – a chronicle of censorship of the case,” Fei Chang Dao, August 20, 2012, at http://blog.feichangdao.com/2012/08/gu-kailai-found-guilty-of-murdering.html (accessed September 16, 2016). As of 2012, China’s dominant search engine Baidu had at least two white lists, the stricter one being limited to around 12 state-run sites, the broader one being limited to China-based sites.

Baum and Potter, “The relationships.”

A long line of research in media studies has shown audiences are more susceptible to media influence on issues of which they have no direct experience. See Doris Graber, Mass Media and American Politics (Third Edition) (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 1989), 154; David Weaver, Media Agenda-setting in a Presidential Election: Issues, Images and Interest (New York: Praeger, 1981) 50.

Jervis, Logic of Images, 23; Reilly, Strong Society, 8, 47, 97.

For example, following the unfavourable UNCLOS arbitral tribunal ruling on the South China Sea issue announced in July 2016, Chinese media prominently publicized undated images of PLA Air Force bombers patrolling the skies above the disputed islands. They did not mention that the patrols had taken place several months prior. See Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, Cristina Garafola, Astrid Cevallos and Arthur Chan, “China signals resolve with bomber flights over South China Sea,” War on the Rocks, August 2, 2016, at http://warontherocks.com/2016/08/china-signals-resolve-with-bomber-flights-over-the-south-china-sea/ (accessed September 13, 2016).


Even dedicated nationalist activists often accept state signals that their participation on a particular occasion will not be beneficial to the state's diplomacy. For example, on the highly sensitive issue of Japanese Prime Ministerial visits to the Yasukuni Shrine, activists have pragmatically abandoned planned protests when authorities decided not to permit them. Asked why one such protest advertised in late 2013 had been cancelled, an organizer replied, matter-of-factly, “If they don’t let us, they don’t let us” (不让搞就不让搞). Interview #13/05, via telephone, December 27, 2013.

This appears to have been the case in 2012 after violence at anti-Japan protests prompted a moderate backlash and widespread condemnation for the perpetrators. See Cairns and Carlson, "Real-world islands," 36-37. This may have been in some measure a function of urban middle-class desire for stability, with the perpetrators of the violence were mostly migrant workers or members of the urban underclass. Zhu Huaxin, "The Internet is vital."

Reilly tested the similar-sounding hypothesis that "a wave of public mobilization is most likely to emerge in support of an assertive, nationalist foreign policy." This, however, referred to the propensity of social mobilizations to be nationalistic in character and therefore inclined to prospectively seek assertive foreign policies. Reilly, "The role of public opinion," 32, 246. By contrast, my hypothesis claims that existing assertive policies are a key cause of such mobilizations, whether the state intends this or not.

One text on CFP emphasizes that analysts of foreign policy must take account of both the internal and external environments in which state decision-making and action takes place. Rosenau, "Toward single-country theories of foreign policy: the case of the USSR," in Charles Hermann, Charles Kegley and James Rosenau eds., New Directions in the Study of Foreign Policy, (Winchester: Allen & Unwin, 1987), 53-74. Observing area studies' resistance to empiricism and generalization, and comparative politics' preoccupation with generalizable rather than single-country explanations, Rosenau defined a sub-field of dynamic theories of foreign policy to complement both approaches.


Rosenau, "Towards single-country theories," 61. Indeed, the major task of comparative foreign policy analysis, according to Rosenau and colleagues, is "either comparing different actors at one point in time and/or the same actor compared with itself through time." Rosenau, "Introduction," in Charles Hermann, Charles Kegley and James Rosenau eds., New Directions in the Study of Foreign Policy (Winchester: Allen & Unwin, 1987), 6.

Before 2007, coercive PRC actions were relatively rare, and were usually short-lived. By contrast, after 2007 they became a regular occurrence. These coercive actions not only constitute a qualitative shift in PRC policy, they also largely account for the quantitative increase in PRC assertiveness from 2007 onwards. See Chapter 3.


Bennett, "Process tracing," 705. See also Peter Lorentzen, M. Taylor Fravel and Jack Paine, "Qualitative investigation of theoretical models: the value of process tracing," Journal of Theoretical Politics (online August 29, 2016); and the special issue of Security Studies 24, no.2 (2015). Stephen Van Evera highlights two main data sources that process tracing typically seeks evidence from: the sequence of events, and the testimony of political actors involved in them. When data of this kind is available, process tracing is a way to examine whether or not the intermediate steps by which "initial case conditions are translated into case outcomes" are consistent with a theory of interest. Van Evera, Guide to Methods, 64-65.

to have made it challenging for the state to moderate its policies there without attracting nationalist willing to mobilize on the issue. The diversification of information sources in the internet era ought nationalist sentiments, while less historically antagonistic than those towards Japan and Western China Sea case's conditions favour the alternative, bottom-up explanations. The strength of theory of interest. (Rapport, “Hard thinking,” 447). On balance, it might be argued that the South China Sea case's conditions favour the alternative, bottom-up explanations. The strength of nationalist sentiments, while less historically antagonistic than those towards Japan and Western former imperialist nations, is nonetheless sufficient to have produced spontaneous social forces willing to mobilize on the issue. The diversification of information sources in the internet era ought to have made it challenging for the state to moderate its policies there without attracting nationalist dissent, and control the information environment during crisis situations. Intra-party political
developments during this period also arguably favour bottom-up nationalist influence. Between 2007 and 2012, the Chinese state was headed by Hu Jintao, a leader widely believed to have been politically weak, and after that time by Xi Jinping, who first needed to establish his authority. The lead up to the 18th Party Congress was accompanied by high-level political scandals, creating fertile soil for nationalist action under factional protection or leadership inaction. On the other hand, being concerned with remote atolls and maritime spaces, the issue is extremely unobtrusive, which favours state mediation of any nationalist influence. Overall, then, it is difficult to designate the South China Sea as either a likely or unlikely case on which to find a strategic channeling/risk management relationship.

139 Although the overall situation of the party-state’s relationship with public opinion on these issues is likely to be of interest to CCP leaders, they have onerous domestic policy issues to deal with, likely leaving little time to dedicate to foreign policy issues. Just as it is possible for sub-state actors like patrol boat captains and agency heads to push the boundaries of their mandates, make mistakes, or simply act unilaterally on the water, so too can the propaganda officials and commercial technology company employees who operate the state’s routine mechanisms for shaping domestic public opinion. Chapter 5 notes some examples of possible freelancing by military propagandists.


141 Bureaucratically, propaganda and ideological authorities should benefit most from the conceptualization and use of public opinion as a strategic asset. The extent to which China’s sprawling propaganda and ideological work system might be regarded as a distinct sub-state foreign policy actor is thus an issue worthy of consideration, as raised briefly by Reilly, Strong Society, 41; and Jakobson, China’s Unpredictable Maritime Security Actors, 26. The key question is, distinct from what, and whom? Who within the party-state system, for example, might actually oppose the ideas about “public opinion warfare” detailed in Chapter 6, and how would they advance such a policy preference? It seems likely at least some elements within the party-state have disagreed on the tactical wisdom of public handling of foreign policy issues at particular times, but that does not necessarily imply opposition to the general strategy of raising public awareness of, and involvement in, the issue. More speculatively, some MFA officials, PLA professional commanders, international relations scholars and even liberal-leaning propaganda officials might believe the entire approach of channeling public sentiments towards such issues to be unwise. If so, however, any such public opinion “doves” would appear to be up against not only the leaders of the CCP propaganda and ideology system – a core component of the party-state itself – but also official policies personally mandated by successive CCP General Secretaries, as detailed in Chapter 6. To describe such a position as marginal would be an understatement.

142 If the public opinion guidance approaches outlined in this dissertation have been implemented despite opposition from the CCP Politburo, whose function is to decide political matters, then the PRC would effectively be a party-state captured by its own mouthpiece. There is, however, no evidence of this – on the contrary, for Hu Jintao himself was heavily involved in setting the relevant policies, not only on “public opinion channeling,” but also on “external propaganda” (both party and military), “public opinion warfare,” and elevating “maritime consciousness.” For an interesting discussion on the rising power of the CCP central bureaucracies vis-à-vis the Politburo Standing Committee, see Tim Heath, “The declining influence of Politburo Standing Committee Members and the growing strength of the central party bureaucracy,” Sinocism Weekend Edition, January 15, 2015, at http://sinocism.com/?p=11381 (accessed September 24, 2016).

143 A survey conducted in the first half of 2012 as part of a collaborative project between the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and the China Strategic Culture Promotion Association (CSCPA) sampled American and Chinese perceptions of each other, producing some indications that PRC government officials were much more likely than the general public to say they
viewed the US as an enemy, and less likely to see it as a partner. *U.S.-China Security Perceptions Survey* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2013), 11. However, the extent to which CCP officials may have felt obliged to stake out “patriotic” positions is difficult to assess, especially given the CSCPA’s association with the CCP United Front Work Department and retired PLA academics.

Chapter 2

1 The fourth, Pratas Island (Dongsha 东沙群岛), is administered by the ROC, and for the present purposes is considered a subset of the Taiwan issue.


3 James Shoal continues to be widely regarded as China’s “southernmost territory” despite being a shallow patch of ocean, rather than territory. For recent examples of state textbooks making this claim, see Zheng Wang, “The nine-dashed line: ‘engraved in our hearts’, “The Diplomat, August 25, 2014, at http://thediplomat.com/2014/08/the-nine-dashed-line-engraved-in-our-hearts/ (accessed January 16, 2015). It is noteworthy, however, that one of China’s most important frontline maritime agencies, China Marine Surveillance (CMS), does not refer to James Shoal as China’s “southernmost territory,” even in the context of the dropping of PRC “sovereignty markers.” Instead, for CMS, it is considered the southernmost point of China’s “maritime domain” (海域) – that is, presumably, the area in which China lays claim to sovereign maritime rights, rather than territorial sovereignty. See Zhongguo Haiyang Nianjian (China Ocean Yearbook) 2011, (Beijing: Haiyang Chubanshe, 2011), 148. Hereafter ZGHYNJ.


6 The UNCLOS (Articles 46-47) specifies that such “archipelagic baselines” are only available for archipelagic states, defined as those “constituted wholly” by archipelagos, which the PRC plainly is not. In addition, while the convention specifies that the sea area enclosed must not exceed the land area by a ratio of more than 9:1, the sea area enclosed by China’s Paracel baselines is more than 17,000 square kilometres (sq km), while the land area adds up to no more than 10 sq km, a ratio of more than 1,700:1. The PRC justifies this by reference to other states’ illegal straight baselines around offshore archipelagos, such as those drawn by the UK around the Falkland Islands. See Sophia Kopela, Dependent Archipelagos in the Law of the Sea, (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 122-124.

Notes – Chapter 2

8 See, for example, PRC diplomatic note CML/8/2011 to the UN, which stated that “China’s Nansha Islands is fully entitled to Territorial Sea, Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and Continental Shelf.” The 2016 arbitral tribunal’s decision explicitly refuted this claim, defining all the Spratly Islands as “rocks incapable of sustaining human habitation” under UNCLOS Article 121(3).


11 At the time, its purpose was to depiction of the location of China’s claimed islands in the South China Sea, as indicated in the title of the map: Location Map of the South China Sea Islands (南海诸岛位置图). See “Statement of the Government of the People’s Republic of China on China’s territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests in the South China Sea,” MFA, July 12, 2016, at http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/nanhai/eng/snhwbtcwj_1/t1379493.htm (accessed October 2, 2016).

12 Renmin Ribao (People’s Daily), December 12, 1951, 2.


15 In 1995 then-Foreign Minister Qian Qichen reportedly stated at a regional meeting that “China has never claimed [that] the South China Sea is the territorial waters of China,” thereby implying the minimalist claim. William Dobson and M. Taylor Fravel, “Red herring hegemon: China in the South China Sea,” Current History (September 1997): 260. For a more recent statement to similar effect, see MFA regular press conference (Hong Lei), February 29, 2012.


18 In fact, the PRC has never offered compromise on the sovereignty of any offshore islands, with the exception of White Dragon Tail Island. See Fravel, Strong Borders, 267.

19 Fravel, Strong Borders, Chapters 2 and 3.

20 According to Ross, for example, the islands that China has been pursuing “are of little strategic or economic value.” Ross, “The problem with the pivot,” 78, 80. An Australian defense official working on Chinese security issues also expressed this view to the author. Interview #13/02, Canberra, October 2013.

21 See Marwyn Samuels, Contest for the South China Sea (New York: Methuen, 1982), 139.


Liu Huqing, Huiyilu, 524.


“South China Sea,” United States Energy Information Administration (EIA), March 2008; Li Weifeng, "Fangfei lanse guotu meng – Lianghui daibiao weiyuan reyi haiyang ziyuan kaifa liyong (Release the dream of blue territory – representatives and committee members enthusiastically discuss the development and exploitation of maritime resources at the Two Meetings),” Zhongguo Guotu Ziyuan Bao (China Land and Resources News), March 11, 2013, at
A 1983 Ministry of Land and Resources document estimated there were 23.3 billion tons (around 186 bbl) of combined oil and gas reserves "within China’s South China Sea domain", of which 13.1 billion tons were at risk of being exploited by foreign countries. The document appeared to use a working assumption that 1/3 of total reserves would be recoverable, concluding that China was missing out on 4.4 billion tons of oil, valued at US$1 trillion. Zhang Liangfu, *Nansha Qundao Dashiji (Chronology of the Spratly Islands)* (Beijing: Chinese Academy of Sciences, 1996), 104-105.

Hereafter *NSQDDSJ*. The CAS Comprehensive Survey’s preliminary investigations throughout the 1980s produced estimates for the Spratly Islands alone of 15 billion tons of oil (around 110 bbl) and 25 bcm (0.883 tcf) of natural gas. The expedition concluded that most of these reserves probably lay in the sedimentary basin northeast of James Shoal. Zhang, *NSQDDSJ*, 174-175. Even English-language Chinese reports were touting "rich oil and gas reserves" in the Spratly Islands from as early as 1987. "Oil discovered on Nansha Islands," Xinhua, July 24, 1987, cited in Hayton, *South China Sea*, 88.


A 2004 report on China Central Television’s flagship news program announced that a "strategic survey of oil and gas resources" in China’s waters had concluded they held more than 40 billion tons, equivalent to around 320 billion bbl, of oil and gas. This included 4.5 billion tons of methane hydrate in the Paracel Islands alone. CCTV Xinwen Lianbo (Network News), February 26, 2004, at http://www.cctv.com/news/swlb/20040226/101963.shtml (accessed February 17, 2014).


Guo Jinfu, ‘Nansha yuyue ziyuan de baohu he heli kaifa (Protection and rational development of Spratly fisheries resources)’, speech at inaugural Symposium on Spratly Comprehensive Scientific Surveys, Chinese Academy of Sciences, January 1988, in *Nansha Wenti Lunwen Ziliao Huibian*


48 Zheng Wang argues this narrative of past humiliation has become institutionalized in the CCP’s political decision-making process. Wang cites the official designation of the 1999 Belgrade embassy bombing as a deliberate humiliation of China, and the leaders’ demand for an apology following the 2001 EP-3 spyplane incident as examples of where the national humiliation narrative shaped the CCP leadership’s foreign policy in relations with the US. Wang, Never Forget, Chapter 7.

49 Chen, “China’s ASEAN policy,” 146.

50 Within the paradigm of national victimization, it is essentially impossible for the PRC to regard itself as engaging in aggressive conduct; any action taken to strengthen China’s position, including the use of military force, is inherently defensive. As Chen notes, “the Chinese have always claimed in all seriousness that they have all along shown self-restraint,” even when they have resorted to military force. Chen, “China’s ASEAN policy,” 148.

51 Liu Huaqing, Huiyilu, 538-539.

52 The best-known example is Admiral Liu himself, who was promoted to Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission in 1989, the year after he oversaw the establishment, by force, of the PRC’s first footholds in the Spratly Islands. A possible more recent example is former State Oceanic Administration Director Liu Cigui who, after presiding over several notable policy successes in the South and East China Sea disputes, was promoted to Governor of Hainan Province. Liu’s predecessors Sun Zhihui and Wang Shuguang received no such promotions. On the other hand, Liu was allegedly snubbed in his attempts to have the SOA upgraded to ministry level rank. See Jakobson, China’s Unpredictable Maritime Security Actors, 18.


54 Austin, China’s Ocean Frontier, 3.

55 On the role of Japan policy in 1980s political struggles, see Reilly, Strong Society, Chapter 2.

56 Following Gilley, ‘The meaning and measure,” 500. For a broader view of legitimacy that includes economic and social performance, see Zhao, “The Mandate of Heaven.”

57 This includes “territories” that are (or were) completely submerged, and therefore not subject to sovereign territorial claims under international law. Besides James Shoal, noted above, another notable example is Mischief Reef (美济礁) where China has since 2014 built a large artificial island with military installations. On the outsized symbolic – rather than territorial – significance of maps to the PRC, see William Callahan, “The cartography of national humiliation and the emergence of China’s geobody,” Public Culture 21, no.1 (2009): 171.

58 For a powerful statement of this filial imperative in South China Sea policy from the 1980s, see Wang Yuji, “Shoufu Nansha zuzhou wenti chutan (Preliminary discussion on the issue of operations to retake the Spratlys),” in Nansha Wenti Lunwen Ziliao Huibian (Compendium of Essays and Materials on the Spratly Issue) (Beijing: Haijun Junshi Xueshu Yanjiusuo, 1988), 135.

59 As per Foreign Minister Yang Jieli’s now infamous words, reportedly directed at the Singaporean Foreign Minister George Yeo, after the South China Sea issue was raised at the 2010

60 Alastair Iain Johnston, Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995). The "parabellum" thinking in these classical military texts contrasts with the Confucian notion that security can be achieved through moral rectitude, though the two might intersect where punishment is administered for educational purposes.


62 Chen, "China’s ASEAN policy," 145.

63 Austin, China’s Ocean Frontier, 3.

64 Bjorn Jerden, "The assertive China narrative: why it is wrong and how so many still bought into it," Chinese Journal of International Politics 7, no.1 (2014): 50-51. While this definition is useful, the following chapter strongly contradicts Jerden’s conclusion that no PRC foreign policy change has occurred regarding the South China Sea issue.


66 Samuels, Contest, 118-132.


68 Barry Buzan and Ole Waever place the regional distribution of power, together with ideational patterns of enmity and amity, at the heart of their elaborate theory of regional security complexes, emphasizing the importance of regional-level interaction in explaining security behaviour. The theory holds that most parts of the world, including East Asia, belong to one or another “regional security complex” – largely discrete regional systems of security interdependence, within which general theories designed to explain outcomes at the global level could also be expected to apply. Buzan and Waever, Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 46-47, 53. Kenneth Waltz maintained that foreign policy behaviour is outside the scope of neorealist theory. Waltz, "International politics is not foreign policy," Security Studies 6, no.1 (1996): 54–57. Waltz was responding to Colin Elman, "Horses for courses: why not neorealist theories of foreign policy?" Security Studies 6, no.1 (1996): 7–53.

69 Chen, "China’s ASEAN policy," 150-152. Chen also highlights how this international situation produced a stark contrast between the PRC’s strong diplomatic protests against Vietnamese occupations of islands in the Spratly archipelago in the 1970s, and its reticence regarding similar activities by non-communist ASEAN members the Philippines and Malaysia. Chen’s argument therefore holds that the CCP leadership’s perceptions of international alliance politics help explain not only the timing of China’s assertive shift, but also its target.

70 Fravel previously took a similar view, arguing that “China has escalated to seize disputed territory in response to opportunities created by an increase in the value of these islands and the development of its own naval capabilities.” In a later work, however, he discounts this explanation for China’s use of force, arguing the intention in 1974 was to persuade the South Vietnamese to leave without resisting. Fravel, “The long march,” 25; Fravel, Strong Borders, 34-35, 276-284. Still,
even if China did not intend to use military force, the window of opportunity remains a compelling explanation for the PRC’s assertive policy shift, in which it began planting flags on unoccupied islands, increased patrols and fishing activities in the area, and elevated its threatening diplomatic rhetoric towards Vietnam. Indeed, Fravel acknowledges the US’s policy of “Vietnamization” in Indochina gave China “the option to use force” in the Paracels – a position of strength from which it believed it could force Vietnam to back down. Fravel, *Strong Borders*, 279-280. Thus, even if we view the threat to China’s position in the Spratlys as the ultimate cause of the confrontation, at a minimum the “window of opportunity” to use force appears to have been a condition for its assertive response in the Paracels.

71 Jie Chen, “China’s Spratly policy: with special reference to the Philippines and Malaysia,” *Asian Survey* 34, no.10 (1994): 901-902. Détente between the US and Soviet Union, as exemplified by the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, also may have released China’s security planners from preoccupation with avoiding global superpower conflict and maintaining China’s position in the security triangle. According to Chen, this allowed them to devote greater attention to China’s own maritime periphery and preparation for local and limited regional wars. Indeed, the scope of China’s diplomatic attacks over the Spratly issue subsequently expanded beyond Vietnam to encompass the Philippines and Malaysia. In November 1987 the PRC declared that a proposed maritime boundaries bill before the Philippines congress would “hurt the Chinese people’s feelings, obstruct Sino-PHL relations” and perhaps most threateningly, “defy the trend (towards detente) of the current era.” This unprecedentedly harsh criticism was probably the first time the PRC had criticized an ASEAN country by name since the early 1970s. (Chen, “China’s ASEAN policy,” 159-169.) It suggests how China’s verbal assertiveness can also be influenced by external alliance and power politics.


73 Fravel, *Strong Borders*, 296. In 1974 China hoped to persuade South Vietnamese remnants to leave peacefully, while in 1988 a PLA Navy captain may have opened fire on Vietnamese troops without authorization.


75 Han Yujia of the PLA General Staff Intelligence Department told a naval symposium in mid-1987 that since China was already at war with Vietnam on the land border, fighting Vietnam in the Spratlys, “will not have much of an effect internationally … we estimate that the US and USSR will not stand with China, nor directly oppose China … in military terms the probability of their direct involvement is low.” Han Yujia, “Nanhai zhanlue geju yu zhoubian guojia junshi fazhan qianjing ji dui jiejue Nansha wenti de yingxiang (The impact of the South China Sea strategic structure on the military development outlook for neighbouring countries and the resolution of the Spratly issue),” in *Nansha Wenti Lunwen Ziliao Huibian (Compendium of Essays and Materials on the Spratly Issue)* (Beijing: Haijun Junshi Xueshu Yanjiusuo, 1988), 61-62. See also Feng Yuexin, “Wo Nansha Qundao bei Yue, Fei, Ma deng guo qinzhan qingkuang ji youguan xingshi zhanwang (Situation of VN, PHL, MYS etc. occupying our Spratly Islands, and relevant trends and outlook),” in *Nansha Wenti Lunwen Ziliao Huibian (Compendium of Essays and Materials on the Spratly Issue)* (Beijing: Haijun Junshi Xueshu Yanjiusuo, 1988), 54; Wang Yují, “Shoufu Nansha,” 129.


Since the South China Sea carries much of the PRC’s trade, and the reform-era economy’s reliance on trade has increased, it is reasonable to infer that China would have placed a higher value on the security of the merchant shipping channels in the area since that time. Therefore, assertive PRC actions to increase its naval and administrative control there after 1978 could be seen as consistent with the behaviour of a state whose estimation of the value of the disputed maritime spaces had increased. Yet the opposite inference can also be made with roughly equal certainty: actively attempting to increase naval and administrative control of the disputed area raises the risk of confrontation and destabilization of the area, putting the security of the increasingly important sea lanes in jeopardy.

Jack Levy defines a preventive war as “a war fought now in order to avoid the risks of war under worsening circumstances later.” Cited in Fravel, Strong Borders, 27.

Fravel, Strong Borders, 9. Bargaining power, or claim strength, is understood as the proportion of the disputed territory the state controls, plus its ability to project military power over the entire disputed area.

Fravel, Strong Borders 31.

Fravel, Strong Borders, 33.

In 1974, Fravel argues, the Philippines and South Vietnam’s occupation of islands in the Spratly archipelago, combined with an increase in the perceived value of the area’s resources following the 1969 UN report on hydrocarbon deposits, that led to China’s decision to extend its control into the western half of the Paracels. Warming Sino-US relations from 1972 reduced the probability of US intervention, but the PRC did not exploit South Vietnamese force reductions before 1974, which Fravel argues is “evidence against any windows of opportunity explanation for China’s use of force in 1974.” Similarly, Fravel explains China’s expansion into the Spratlys in 1987-1988 as a response to the further occupations of features by Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam throughout that decade, accompanied by the continued increase in underlying value of the maritime resources. Fravel, Strong Borders, 276-280, 288-296.

Compared to 1988, structural disincentives to the use of force in the 2010s include (1) a comparatively greater likelihood of United States or Japanese intervention in any military conflict; (2) widespread international opprobrium that would likely result from actions that affect stability in an area that is even more vital to dozens of states’ interests than it was before; and (3) the altered normative context of the South China Sea issue following the 2003 signing of the China-ASEAN Declaration, in which all parties foresaw the “threat or use of force” along with any new occupation of previously uninhabited features.


Notes – Chapter 2

92 As Nong Hong observes, the UNCLOS’s generation of overlapping maritime claims was a major source of the dispute. Nong Hong, *UNCLOS and Ocean Dispute Settlement: Law and Politics in the South China Sea* (Oxon: Routledge, 2012), 1.

93 Garver, “China’s push.”

94 Garver, “China’s push,” 1026-1027. There is little to suggest the MFA opposed the 1987-1988 Spratly push, but Garver cites the inclusion of specific reference to the disputed island groups, including the Spratlys and the Paracels, in the PRC’s 1992 *Territorial Sea Law* as one issue on which the MFA had been overridden, resulting in a more assertive policy outcome.


96 Fravel, *Strong Borders*, 296-298; Austin, *China’s Ocean Frontier*, 88-92. More generally, however, Austin argued the PLA’s allegedly hawkish preferences and autonomous influence during this period were overestimated.

97 In a 2013 CCTV documentary, Liu Guojun, then-director of the South Sea Regional Fisheries Bureau, recounted receiving a top-secret mission in August 1994 to install pile foundations on Mischief Reef. Liu states that he was instructed not to divulge the mission to anyone else within the bureau, including his deputy director. Liu did not specify who gave him the order, but his testimony strongly suggests it would have come from an official at the rank of the Fisheries Administration chief, and probably above. “Shen qing shouhu: Nanhai jixing di si ji (Standing guard with deep feeling: South China Sea chronicle, part four),” CCTV-4, aired December 31, 2013, at http://news.cntv.cn/special/nhjx (accessed November 2, 2016).

98 The English name displayed on this agency’s ships was “China Coast Guard” prior to the establishment of the unified China Coast Guard in 2013.


100 ICG, *Stirring (I)*, 18-19, 22-26. The report noted that the tensions to which the “dragons” had contributed were causing China’s neighbours to seek closer ties with the US, thereby undermining China’s strategic interests, concluding that China had “no high-level long-term policy” in the South China Sea.

101 Jakobson, *China’s Unpredictable Maritime Security Actors*, 6

102 Paul Godwin and Alice Miller, *China’s Forbearance Has Limits: Chinese Threat and Retaliation Signaling and its Implications for a Sino-American Military Confrontation*, China Strategic Perspectives no.6 (Washington, D.C.: Institute for National Strategic Studies, 2013), 32. These were twice-weekly until 2011 and have been daily since then. Liu Bin, “Waijiaobu lai le xin fayanren (New MFA spokespersons are coming),” *Nanfang Zhoumo (Southern Weekend)*, June 18, 2015, at http://www.infzm.com/content/110129 (accessed February 8, 2016)

103 Interviews with Chinese official and academics seem to be the most common source of evidence supporting the sub-state actors explanation. See ICG, *Stirring (I)*; Scobell and Harold, “An ‘assertive’ China?”; and Jakobson, *China’s Unpredictable Maritime Security Actors*.

104 Johnston, *Cultural Realism*.

105 Keohane, “Reciprocity.”
PRC as region (see and the Philippines, they would have refrained from using their capabilities as ancients strategic texts developed in the Warring States period where “inter-takings such actions. are a result of the PRC’s culturally determined failure to understand the security consequences of 118 117 116 115 114 113 112 changed, whether timing, leaders, or resources. When met with convincing capability testimony to hearing for the Armed Services Committee of the United States House of Representatives, December 11, 2013, 11, at http://www.andrewerickson.com/2013/12/china-naval-modernization-implications-and-recommendations-full-hasc-oral-written-testimony (accessed September 30, 2016). “Chinese leaders are acutely attuned to perceived changes in relative national power, and periodically examine other nations’ stated policies for potential changes in the will to maintain their position regarding issues that are important to Beijing. They will create incidents and probe relentlessly when circumstances suggest that something may have changed, whether timing, leaders, or resources. When met with convincing capability – provided that they do not perceive gratuitous humiliation or threats to the most vital of interests – they typically retreat. When insufficiently opposed, they see how far they can push.”

Interview #13/01 with Vietnamese MOFA official, September 2013. The distinction between the “Western” philosophy of aiming for total victory and the “Chinese” philosophy of managing contradictions, which Henry Kissinger claimed was reflected in the difference between weiqi and chess, becomes tenuous when one considers the popularity of Chinese chess, or xiangqi, which is in most ways identical to Western chess, including in its fundamental aim of total victory. Anecdotally, it is much more popular than weiqi in China today, and perhaps also among the CCP’s early leaders. For an interesting discussion of these and related points, see T. Greer, “Newsflash: the Chinese play chess too,” Scholar’s Stage, June 5, 2015, at http://scholars-stage.blogspot.com/2015/06/look-guys-chinese-play-chess-too.html (accessed September 30, 2016).


In other words, China’s hardline diplomatic stance and on-water actions in the South China Sea are a result of the PRC’s culturally determined failure to understand the security consequences of taking such actions. Luttwak argues this is due both to its historical position as a culturally superior “Middle Kingdom” at the centre of a tributary system, and due to its leaders’ alleged reliance on ancient strategic texts developed in the Warring States period where “inter-state relations were intra-cultural,” allowing near-perfect pragmatism to prevail (Luttwak, Rise of China, 74). If their ancient “unwisdom” had not blinded them to the intensity of nationalistic resistance from Vietnam and the Philippines, they would have refrained from using their capabilities assertively in their own region (see Luttwak, Rise of China, Chapters 15 and 19). The argument glides between a view of the PRC as the Middle Kingdom, and as one “warring state” among many.
Compare, for example, Thomas Robinson, “Chinese foreign policy from the 1940s to the 1990s,” in Robinson and David Shambaugh eds., Chinese Foreign Policy: Theory and Practice (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), 555-602; with Allen Whiting, “Forecasting Chinese foreign policy: IR theory vs. the fortune cookie,” 506-523; and David Shambaugh, “Patterns of interaction in Sino-American relations,” 197-265, both in the same volume.

Whiting, “Forecasting,” 521.


For example, Richard Baum suggests Deng Xiaoping’s repeated reference to the content of his “Four Cardinal Principles” speech as the views of the CCP Central Committee indicated he had been overruled by his colleagues. See Baum, Burying Mao: Chinese Politics in the Age of Deng Xiaoping (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994): 401n53.

This was probably the case with Hu Yaobang in the 1982 12th CCP Congress when he launched the “socialist spiritual civilization” campaign as an answer to the threat of “bourgeois liberalization.” Richard Baum, “The road to Tiananmen: Chinese politics in the 1980s,” in Roderick McFarquhar ed., The Politics of China (Second Edition) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 348-349.

The diversionary nationalism card model begins with the second scenario, in which decisionmakers perceive a worsening domestic legitimacy deficit, prompting confrontational foreign policy to rally popular support. The Frankenstein’s monster logic emerges from a combination of the second and third mechanisms, with the state focusing public attention on international disputes in order to divert domestic dissatisfaction, thereby generating a rise in popular nationalist consciousness that, in turn, requires hardline foreign policy actions to prevent it turning against its maker. The two “intra-state contention” models involve a combination of the first and third processes, with disunity at the top facilitating spikes in popular nationalism (whether through inattention or due to stimulation of nationalist sentiments by vested interests), which in turn incentivizes tough foreign policy behaviour and constrains moderate elites.

Johnston and Stockmann, “Six hypotheses.”
Chapter 3


3 Yahuda, “China’s new assertiveness.”


7 “PRC: cow’s tongue claim not licked, despite objections from the Philippines and Vietnam,” U.S. State Department cable #09BEIJING579, March 5, 2009, via Wikileaks.

8 Sutter and Huang, “China’s toughness.”


14 “China continues to fortify claims in disputed Spratlys,” Kyodo, July 12, 2002, via Factiva.


16 While China’s construction of artificial islands in the Spratlys has attracted major international attention since 2014, its unilateral occupations of those reefs in 1988 and 1995 registered only small blips in Western media coverage, as shown in Figure 3.1. If the PRC today were to send a naval task force to occupy disputed reefs, in the process fighting a naval battle, sinking Vietnamese ships and killing dozens sailors, as it did in 1988, there is no doubt this would be massive international headline news.
French leaders than to Putin. That the prospect of threats to its economic wellbeing is likely to be more of a concern to the PRC’s these measures have been ineffective against Russia, recent research by Jessica Weeks suggests doing so has resulted in economic sanctions due to perceived illegality under international law. See, for example, “Putin deals China winning hand as sanctions power rival,” Bloomberg, October 13, 2014, at http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2014-10-12/putin-deals-china-winning-hand-as-sanctions-power-rival.html (accessed October 2, 2016). Although some commentators have argued these measures have been ineffective against Russia, recent research by Jessica Weeks suggests that the prospect of threats to its economic wellbeing is likely to be more of a concern to the PRC’s leaders than to Putin. See Daniel Drezner, “The one book that Obama needs to read right now,”
The invasion of Iraq in 2003, and the military interventions in Ukraine since 2014 have shown that the ideas of international legal "constraints" on great power use of force remains optimistic. But the obvious worldwide reputational costs to the U.S., and the coordinated economic sanctions imposed on Russia in response to the Ukraine situation, appear directly attributable to the perceived illegality of those actions.

When Sino-Japanese tensions erupted after an incident in the East China Sea in 2010, the PRC made clear that its escalatory countermeasures were not a response to the physical detention of the Chinese fishing boat captain, but rather to Japan's decision to initiate domestic legal proceedings against him. China's escalatory steps did not begin until after Japan's decision to try the captain under domestic law, and the PRC Foreign Ministry repeatedly stated that this was China's objection. Fravel has also explained the PRC's escalation over the Diaoyu issue in 2012 in terms of the PRC's (incorrect) perception that Japan's ownership transfer threatened its claim to the islands in a legal sense. M. Taylor Fravel, "Explaining China's escalation over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands," Global Summits 2, no.1 (2016): 31.

Thanks are due to Gail Ma of ANU for the suggestion of developing a typology of assertive actions, and to Ryan Martinson who noted the distinction between declarative and coercive actions in China's maritime policy. See Martinson, "Here comes China’s great white fleet," The National Interest, October 1, 2014, at http://nationalinterest.org/feature/herecomes-china%E2%80%99sgreat-white-fleet-11383?page=show (accessed October 1, 2016).

Collected from open-source reports and the Vietnam MOFA website. List available from the author on request.

In 2012, for example, a feint watermark of a map including the nine-dash line began to appear on visa pages in newly issued PRC passports. Although clearly an assertive foreign policy action (i.e. externally-directed), the designers of the passports at the Ministry of Public Security may or may not have been aiming to advance China’s position in the dispute at the expense of others. To show an outline of the PRC's territory without the nine-dash line would have constituted publication of an illegal map. See SSC, "You cannot not support this," November 27, 2012.

As Fravel has shown, actions that demonstrate administrative control or external recognition of one state's claim can incentivize escalation from other claimants. The US's provision of a visa to Taiwan President Lee Teng-hui in 1995, for example, threatened the PRC's claim to the island, since it implied external recognition of its de facto independence. See Fravel, Strong Borders, 254-255.

The question of whether a given action reflects the intention of central authorities, mid-level bureaucracies or frontline actors is set aside within this framework, which is designed to describe behaviour, rather than explain it.

This concept of "coercive" forms of assertive action is similar to Schelling's notion of "compellence" intended to intimidate the adversary into doing something, as distinguished from "deterrence" aimed at forestalling hypothetical courses of action by the adversary. In Schelling's scheme, forcing an adversary to desist from an existing pattern of "aggression" is regarded as deterrence, not compellence, even though it requires the adversary to change their existing behaviour. Thus, the character of one state's coercion as either deterrence or compellence depends on the definition of the target state's existing pattern of action as "aggression" or not. In active territorial disputes, especially over disputed maritime spaces, this distinction is often impossible to make, since most assertive actions, including long-established patterns of unilateral activity in the disputed area, could be cast as "aggressive" from the perspective of the other side. Schelling noted that the distinction between deterrence and compellence can disappear once a conflict begins – and the maritime disputes under study here have been in a fairly constant state of low-intensity conflict for several decades. For this reason, I use the broader term "coercion" to describe the threat or use of force for both deterrent or compellent reasons. See Schelling, Arms and Influence, 80, 105.
41 Assertiveness continues where assertive actions maintain a previous pattern of assertive state behaviour in the dispute, but with no clear indication of quantitative intensification or geographical expansion. It is crucial to consider ongoing actions in order to appreciate the accumulation of assertive policies over time. Administrative and legal acts are particularly prominent in this category because once introduced they remain in effect indefinitely. Occupation of disputed land and the construction of infrastructure in disputed areas also continues to undermine the claims of rival states for the duration of its existence, by demonstrating effective administration, a legally significant criterion for establishing possession under international law (see Sharma, *Territorial Acquisition*, 108-115; and Sumner, “Territorial disputes,” 1787-1788). Assertiveness diminishes where a given assertive action is reduced in frequency or geographic area, or discontinued completely. This is the most challenging kind of change to observe. States have domestic and international incentives to avoid publicizing reductions in their operations in a disputed area. And while rival claimants may have domestic incentives to publicize such developments as a “victory,” there may be international disincentives to doing so if they wish to draw assistance or avoid opposition from abroad. It is important, therefore to give particularly close consideration to the ways in which assertiveness may have diminished across the given time period.

42 In another illustrative example, in 2002, special CMS operations against US and Russian targets were enabled by the new routine patrols that detected them. See SOA, ZGHYNJ 2003, 182 and 186. Garver suggests that early 1970s Paracel infrastructure construction helped facilitate the 1974 eviction of South Vietnam from the archipelago, and that the subsequent consolidation of China’s position there, in turn, helped facilitate the push into the Spratlys. See Garver, “China’s push,” 1000, 1008.


44 Ng-Quinn, “Analytic study,” 205.


46 Article 6 of the 1992 Territorial Sea Law also inscribed the PRC’s demand for foreign navies to obtain permission for “innocent passage” through its territorial seas, thus hardening the PRC’s position in its conflict with the United States over this issue.


48 This was reportedly confirmed by an MFA official: see Greg Torode, “Boats blamed for entering Viet waters,” *South China Morning Post*, October 21, 1994, via Factiva.

49 It also carries the policy-relevant implication that particular patterns of assertive Chinese actions – specifically, those that form part of long-term programs created in response to structural changes – will be especially difficult for other states to deter.

50 In recognition of the fact that events in the distant past are both harder to verify and less likely to be found in the first place, more relaxed standards of evidence were used for events prior to 2007. This ensures the findings of assertive change identified since that time are not overstated.

51 For confidence that the variation is not due to random chance or measurement error to fall below 95% (i.e. p>0.05) we would need to uncover about 50 extra coercive actions from the 1970-2006 period.

52 The p-value of 0.22 indicates an estimated 22% likelihood that random chance or measurement error, rather than special features of the post-2007 period, would be responsible for the higher average number of declarative and demonstrative acts of intensified assertiveness after 2007.

54 This multi-level perspective on the cases is loosely related to one outlined by Collier, who prepared a set of eight roughly similar cases, and then identified contrasting pairs within this overall similar set. Collier, “The comparative method,” 112.

55 Van Evera, Guide to Methods, 58-60. As Van Evera explains, cases with extreme values on the dependent variable are amenable to “congruence procedures,” in which the analyst looks for covariance between the dependent and hypothesized independent variables.

56 If the balance of power was a factor behind a change in PRC policy, we ought to find international political developments favourable to China ahead of the change in policy. Conversely, if declining claim-strength was a factor, we should find developments weakening the PRC’s position in the dispute in the lead-up to periods of heightened assertiveness. If increasing value of the disputed possessions contributed to an assertive policy change, there should be rising prices or increasing Chinese dependence on imports of the commodities believed to be present in the disputed area.

57 If a state’s assertive behaviour is plausibly the result of a nationalism card ploy to alleviate legitimacy problems, domestic challenges should have intensified prior to the confrontational international behaviour. If rising popular nationalism has forced the state’s hand, per the Frankenstein’s monster model, signs of nationalist activity should be apparent in the leadup to the foreign policy change. And if the combination of nationalist mobilization and elite contention is not observed, then bottom-up influence is unlikely to have been a factor via the mechanisms suggested by the “intra-state contention” models.

58 O’Rourke, China Naval Modernization, 3.

59 The concern was widespread enough that Chinese Foreign Minister Qian Qichen considered it necessary to explicitly state in a 1992 meeting with ASEAN ministers: “It is not necessary for any country to fill up this so-called vacuum.” Victor Mallet, “Spratly dispute overshadows ASEAN meeting,” Financial Times, July 22, 1992, 4, via Factiva.

60 From 2003 to 2006 the PLA Navy’s destroyer force more than doubled, with seven new modern ships added over three years. Meanwhile, its fleet of modern attack submarines trebled from nine to 27 over the same period. O’Rourke, China Naval Modernization, 18-27.

61 As noted in Chapter 2, increased administrative presence in the disputed area may bring China incrementally closer to controlling its own sea lanes, but such a policy also raises the risk of confrontation that could jeopardize the country’s trade.

62 World Bank statistics show an increase in the value of PRC fuel imports from US$29.45b in 2003 to US$89.57b in 2006. Chinese government figures for crude oil imports show a rise from US$19.8b to $66.4b over the same period.

63 This is reasonable since, as Fravel points out, the Paracels were “the only offshore islands in the South China Sea where [China] could project naval power.” M. Taylor Fravel, “Power shifts and escalation: explaining China’s use of force in territorial disputes,” International Security 32, no.3 (2008): 75.

64 Fravel “Power shifts,” 77. See, for example, “Waiguo qinzhu wo Nansha daoqiao qingkuang (Situation of foreign countries occupation of China’s Spratly islands and reefs),” in Nansha Zigu Shu Zhonghua (The Spratlys Have Belonged to China Since Ancient Times), (Guangzhou: Guangzhou Junqu Silingbu Bangongshi [Guangzhou MR], 1988), 203-207. This source lists eight new Vietnamese occupations between January and March 1988, after the PRC moved in, compared with two in 1987, two in 1986, one in 1983, and one in 1980, for a total of 14 features occupied between 1980-1988.

65 Malaysia occupied Ardasier Reef (光星仔礁) and Mariveles Reef (南海礁) in 1986, and Vietnam occupied Barque Canada Reef (柏礁) in early 1987. See Guangzhou MR, “Waiguo qinzhu,” 204-205; and Zhang, NSQDJSJ, 113 and 203. Vietnam also occupied West Reef (西礁) in December 1987, after China’s push into the Spratlys had already begun.
66 Chen, “China’s Spratly policy,” 901-902. Chen recalls these signals as being prominently featured in internal reference materials at the time. Specifically, numerous reports emphasized the significance of the USSR’s encouragement of socialist “self-reliance” among its allies. Diminished hostilities on the China-Vietnam land border also suggested Hanoi was concerned about the wavering of Soviet support, and struggling to maintain its position in Cambodia.

67 Even if the occupation of Mischief Reef was, as PRC authorities claimed, the work of low-level functionaries acting without central authorization, the US departure from air and naval bases in the Philippines could only have increased these sub-state actors’ confidence that such a scheme could be carried out without dragging China into conflict with the sole superpower.

68 Chen, “China’s Spratly policy,“ 896-897.

69 Quoted in Hayton, South China Sea, 87.

70 This area lies within the nine-dash line but closer to the Vietnamese coast than any claimed Chinese territory, beyond what the PRC could plausibly claim as its EEZ under the UNCLOS. Vietnam and its international partners thus proceeded in their joint ventures, confident that they were entitled to do so under the emerging international legal regime. As Chapter 4 argues, losing the prospect of access to this area’s resources, which Beijing had hoped to obtain via joint development, spurred China towards coercive action to maintain its increasingly tenuous claim.

71 Although the second phase of explorations eventually went ahead, by early 2008 the arrangement was mired in high-profile corruption allegations against the Arroyo administration, leaving it “dead in the water.” Hayton, South China Sea, 135.

72 NISCSS, “2006 NHXSPGBG,” 25-26; NISCSS, “2007 NHXSPGBG,” 37; Fisheries, ZGYYNJ 2007, 146-148. Fravel suggests this may have been an unintended result of the implementation of the Sino-Vietnamese maritime border in the Gulf of Tonkin. Fravel, “China’s strategy,” 305.

73 Compare, for example, Dingxin Zhao, “Mandate of heaven,” with Yu Jianrong and Elizabeth Perry, “Hongse wenhua yu Zhongguo geming chuantong (Red culture and China’s revolutionary tradition),” Nanfang Zhoumo (Southern Weekend), June 22, 2011, at http://www.infzm.com/content/60500?mid=5001786 (accessed October 2, 2016).


75 We might hypothesize that domestic security challenges draw state resources and attention away from maritime disputes, and increase the incentive to seek external cooperation. If so, this would constitute a different kind of “diversionary peace” mechanism, under which domestic security challenges can make compromise in territorial disputes more appealing for state leaders. In Fravel’s “diversionary peace,” the incentives for cooperation are the prospect of more securely sealed borders and restriction of assistance to domestic rebel movements. See Fravel, “The long march,” 33.


As Chapter 4 shows, Vietnam sent ships to oppose China’s new drilling initiatives in disputed waters, and strongly protested PRC threats against its foreign offshore oil partners. Hanoi also bitterly opposed the increased detentions of Vietnamese fishers in the Paracel Islands, and even allowed anti-China street protests against the plan to establish “Sansha City” in 2007.

As noted in the previous chapter, it is difficult to know precisely when a particular leader’s influence over foreign policy issues begins and ends.
Restraining the PLAN's development may have been important to Jiang's efforts to establish his political ascendancy. The naval expansion was a significant avenue of PLA power based on Deng's authority. Personal communication with John Garnaut via email, October 24, 2016.

Alice Miller, 'The Politburo Standing Committee under Hu Jintao,' China Leadership Monitor, no.35 (Summer 2011).
Chapter 4

1 In March 2016, for example, it was reported that Obama administration officials were concerned that the arbitral ruling would exacerbate tensions. Helene Cooper, “Patrolling disputed waters, U.S. and China jockey for dominance,” New York Times, March 30, 2016, at http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/31/world/asia/south-china-sea-us-navy.html?r=0 (accessed October 17, 2016).


3 Nemeth et al., “Ruling the sea,” 733. The same analysis also indicated that UNCLOS membership did not reduce the incidence of militarized tensions over contested areas, a finding the authors did not discuss in detail.

4 The “transnational legal process” perspective explains state adherence to international law as emerging through complex and dynamic interactions in the presence of legal norms, which results in those norms “internalization” in domestic legal and political structures. See Harold Koh, “Transnational Legal Process,” Nebraska Law Review, no.75 (1996), 181-207. China, as explained below, has strongly internalized the rights accorded to it under UNCLOS into its domestic processes, but not the limitations.

5 Reus-Smit, Politics of International Law, 8.


9 He raises fleetingly one of the issues discussed below – of the prospect of “costly and occasionally bloody unilateralism,” as against strict and consensual implementation of the UNCLOS. Oxman, “Territorial temptation,” 850.

10 Two PRC officials write that the 1958 continental shelf convention created “fresh incentives for other claimants to covet and grab China’s Nansha Islands.” Fu and Wu, “South China Sea.”

11 Duong, “Following the path of oil,” 1101.


13 Gao and Jia, ’Nine-dash line,” 103.


The relevant Chinese term can also be rendered as *rights protection, rights safeguarding, or rights maintenance*, but *rights defense* is both more accurate and more faithful to the concept in its original context, as explained in Appendix 4.


Interview # 16/04 with government-affiliated maritime policy research institution officials, Beijing, April 2016.

Chen, "China’s ASEAN policy,” 154.


By Kardon’s count, PRC organs have issued 156 legal instruments (laws, rules, regulations, measures etc.) on the UNCLOS-mandated Exclusive Economic Zone alone. Kardon, “China’s maritime rights and interests,” 27.

This is clear from the title of the map: *Location Map of Islands in the South China Sea* (南海诸岛位置图). The PRC has continued to use this as evidence of Chinese sovereignty over the islands. See, for example, Chinese Government, “Position Paper,” par.20.

The first official diplomatic note to which the PRC’s nine-dash line map was attached could be read as implying a link between the line and China’s maritime rights claims derived from the Spratly Islands. It stated: “China has indisputable sovereignty over the islands in the South China Sea and the adjacent waters, and enjoys sovereign rights and jurisdiction over the relevant waters as well as the seabed and subsoil thereof (see attached map).” UN document number CML/18/2009, May 7, 2009. Another diplomatic note two years later further specified, “China’s Nansha Islands is fully entitled to Territorial Sea, Exclusive Economic Zone and Continental Shelf.” UN document number CML/8/2011, April 14, 2011. This position was rejected in 2016 by the
Philippines vs. China arbitral tribunal, which found that none of the Spratly Islands met the criteria to be regarded as an “island” under Article 121(3). It was a precedent-setting landmark decision, the first time any island had been tested legally against these criteria.

29 Article 8, Law of the People’s Republic of China on the Territorial Sea and the Contiguous Zone, February 25, 1992. It was particularly provocative in relation to the Diaoyu (Senkaku) Islands in the East China Sea. The four South China Sea island groups had been listed in the PRC’s 1958 Territorial Sea Declaration – itself a response to that year’s Law of the Sea Convention – but had made no mention of the Diaoyu islands, so the 1992 law was effectively the PRC’s first official administrative claim to the islands. This drew explicit criticism from Japan’s Prime Minister Kiichi Miyazawa and other high-level officials. “Japan, China clash over disputed islands,” AFP, February 27, 1992, via Factiva; “Miyazawa opposes China’s territorial claim,” Jiji Press, February 27, 1992, via Factiva.


31 For example, in October-November 1999, “on the basis of the 1996 MSR Rules the SOA East Sea Branch sent the Shijian and Haijian-47 to conduct special surveillance (专项监视) of a foreign survey vessel that illegally entered waters under Chinese administration.” SOA, ZGHYNJ 1999-2000, 314.


33 The SOA’s chronologies describe the 2001 Sea Areas Law as “a crucial move to strengthen comprehensive maritime management,” to “further strengthen the construction of national rights in contiguous areas,” and create a “scientific comprehensive management system, defend national maritime rights.” Article 2 of the document specifies that it applies to China’s internal waters and territorial seas (which include the area enclosed by the Paracel baselines and, implicitly, perhaps, some straight baselines around the Spratlys). However, it does not appear to provide authority for rights defense work in waters beyond 12nm around disputed land features. SOA, “Dashiji: 2001.” Law of the People’s Republic of China on the Administration of the Use of Sea Areas, October 27, 2001, at http://www.npc.gov.cn/englishnpc/Law/2007-12/10/content_1383439.htm (accessed April 26, 2016).


37 SOA, ZGHYNJ 2001, 108. In particular, this included the commencement of construction of new ocean-going patrol ships and aircraft, and the establishment of laws and regulations to govern their use against foreign targets.
Notes – Chapter 4

38 "Shewai haiyang keyan zhifa jiancha youzhangkexun (There are rules to follow in foreign-related maritime scientific research law enforcement)," Zhongguo Haiyang Bao (China Ocean News), no.919, May 26, 2000, at http://www.soao.gov.cn/zfjc/919.htm (accessed October 5, 2016 via Archive.org). For example, in August and September 2002 CMS ships and aircraft shadowed two US military reconnaissance vessels, the USNS Bowditch and USNS Sumner, for several weeks in the East China Sea and Yellow Sea. Each day, according to the SOA, the Chinese patrols “interrogated” the US ships, ordering them to cease their “illegal operations” and leave “waters under China’s jurisdiction.” SOA, ZGHYNJ 2003, 186.

39 SOA, ZGHYNJ 2003, 182.

40 Interview #13/23 with US diplomat, Beijing, November, 2013. In 2005, CMS conducted what it called “surveillance and expulsion” (驱离) of US Navy reconnaissance ships USNS Mary Sears and USNS John McDonnell, and shadowed another, the USNS Loyal, for seven days. SOA, ZGHYNJ 2006, 164. In March 2008 PLA Navy ships shined high-intensity light beams at the USNS Victorious, which was conducting reconnaissance in China’s EEZ in the East China Sea, and air force planes conducted at least 75 “low-altitude passes.” “USN activities in China’s Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ),” US State Department cable #08STATE43018, April 23, 2008, via Wikileaks.

41 SOA, ZGHYNJ 2003, 186; SOA, ZGHYNJ 2005, 193. The operation against the Russian ships may have been more coercive than those conducted against US ships that year, with the CMS ships described as having “chased” them away (驱离).


43 Su Tao, “Zhongguo Haijian xinxing chuanbo, feiji jianzao ceji (Profiling CMS’s new vessel and aircraft construction),” Zhongguo Haiyang Bao (China Ocean News), December 17, 2007 at http://www.zzsofa.cn/news_view.asp?newsid=412 (accessed January 31, 2014). Premier Zhu and Vice Premier Wen personally instructed the State Planning Commission to organize the project’s implementation. The SOA quickly established a ship construction leading small group to begin program establishment and reporting preparation work, and in March 2000 submitted the proposal to build 13 ships. The SPC issued its in-principle approval in October of that year.


45 Once the State Planning Commission had allocated the funds, numerous studies were conducted to “scientifically” discover the best way to proceed. ZGHYNJ 2001, 109.

46 ZGHYNJ 2007, 173.

47 "Zhongguo Haijian Nanhai Zongdui jiang jian 4000-dun ji zhifa chuan jiaqiang haixun (CMS South Sea Branch to construct 4000-ton-class law enforcement ship to strengthen maritime patrols),” Zhongguo Haijian Nanhai Zongdui (CMS South China Sea Branch), July 21, 2009 at http://www.scsb.gov.cn/html/2/13/article-15.html (accessed April 4, 2016). Four of these ships were in the 1000-ton class, two in the 1500-ton class, and one new 4000-ton design. One was completed in 2010, and the remaining six were introduced in 2011.

48 Feng, “China’s recent expansion of the maritime agencies,” Information Dissemination, January 20, 2013, at http://www.informationdissemination.net/2013/01/chinas-recent-expansion-of-
maritime.html (accessed January 31, 2014). Most relevantly to the South China Sea maritime disputes, the Guangdong and Hainan provincial detachments were each allocated one 1500-ton and two 1000-ton ships, and Guangxi one 1000-ton ship. Coastal provinces on the East China Sea have also been equipped under this project. Fujian was assigned one of each type of ship, Zhejiang one 1500-ton cutter, and Jiangsu one in the 1000-ton class.


51 SOA, “Dashiji: 1999.” FLEC was a bureau-level (局级) unit, equivalent in rank to the CMS force’s parent institution, the State Oceanic Administration.

52 Zhongguo Haiyang 21 Shiji Yicheng (China’s Maritime Agenda for the 21st Century), State Oceanic Administration (SOA), March 1996, at http://sdinfo.coi.gov.cn/hyfg/hyfgdb/fg8.htm (accessed December 1, 2016), hereafter Yicheng. The document’s official English translation is China Ocean Agenda 21. Several years in the making, the document was designed to harmonize with the programmatic 1992 UN document on environmental sustainability, Agenda 21.

53 SOA, Yicheng, Chapter 10.

54 SOA, Yicheng, Preamble.

55 SOA, Yicheng, Chapter 1.

56 SOA, Yicheng, Chapter 10.


58 The SOA’s yearbook the same year stated the issue more candidly. “At present, China’s maritime rights issues are complicated, and the circumstances severe, as principally manifest in relevant neighbouring countries’ illegal violations of sovereignty over islands and reefs in waters under China’s jurisdiction, of waters legally under China’s jurisdiction, and of rights and interests in all kinds of maritime resources in waters under China’s jurisdiction.” Once again, the territorial sovereignty issue is bundled together with maritime boundary demarcation. Although China had nearly 3 million square kilometres of jurisdictional waters “a large part of this is disputed by neighbouring countries” who had, one after another “illegally placed waters originally belonging to China within the scope” of their EEZ and Continental Shelf claims. In particular, the yearbook noted, “since neighbouring countries declared their EEZs, China’s traditional fishing rights have been severely harmed.” SOA, ZGHYNJ 1997-1998, 206.


60 SOA, ZGHYNJ 2010, 127. The CMS East Sea Branch’s entry in the 2006 yearbook refers to a centrally approved guideline (中央批准的方针) of “display jurisdiction and embody China’s sovereign rights” in contested waters. SOA, ZGHYNJ 2006, 164. The previous year’s entry states, “The principles of ‘highlight presence, ensure safety, manifest our sovereign rights and administration of these waters’ were effectively implemented, and powerfully supported and complemented our government’s diplomatic actions.” SOA, ZGHYNJ 2005, 193.


62 Sumner, 'Territorial disputes,' 1782-1792.

63 Smith, Intimate Rivals, 104, 118-119.
Notes – Chapter 4

64 Zhou Yongkang’s speech is printed in SOA, ZGHYNJ 1999-2000, 10-11.
65 The formulation Zhou used was evidently no coincidence, given its repetition verbatim by other officials. See, for example, SOA Director Wang Shuguang’s 2001 speech printed in SOA, ZGHYNJ 2002, 39-40.
67 SOA, ZGHYNJ 2002, 40.
71 Interview #16/04.
72 Interview #16/01, with Vietnamese researcher via email, March 23, 2016.
73 Interview #16/04.
74 While the 2006 joint MFA-SOA 10th anniversary forum warned of the increasing UNCLOS-based “control capabilities” of China’s rivals in disputed waters, it also noted that the bilateral, regional and international maritime cooperation mandated by the Convention was also on the rise. See CON, “Jinian woguo pizhun.”
77 HCSCSS “2002 NHDQXSPGBG,” 10. The report goes on to describe how China had, in the negotiation of the deal, fought successfully to have two clauses removed. One was “without prejudice to existing territorial and maritime jurisdictional disputes.” The other was “erecting structures on uninhabited islands, reefs, atolls and banks.” HCSCSS, “2002 NHDQXSPGBG,” 8. Thus, Beijing seemingly wanted the option to bring the DOC to bear on future legal proceedings, as well as the right to occupy further unoccupied atolls: The belief that the DOC strengthened China’s legal position was apparent in China’s response to the arbitration case initiated by the Philippines in 2013, which has repeatedly stressed that the DOC calls for resolution through “consultations and negotiations” and not arbitration. See Chinese Government, “Position Paper,” par.35. The second demand, seeking to loosen the standard of acceptable behaviour, suggests on the one hand that Beijing was reserving for itself the right to occupy further reefs, as well as a genuine desire for the provisions that were in the document be strictly observed. This desire that the DOC be abided by has been evident in subsequent years in China’s frequent references to the DOC in its official comments on the matter, as well as the Guidelines on the Implementation of the DOC signed in 2011 in the hope of checking Vietnam and the Philippines’ energy survey activities. See also Fu and Wu, “South China Sea.”
78 It also showed that the correlation between domestic legitimacy issues and maritime assertiveness has been weak or even negative in the past, suggesting a degree of prior skepticism is warranted regarding this type of explanation.
79 The previous chapter identified four cases of coercive actions that intensified the PRC’s overall level of assertiveness in 2007 and 2008, of which three are examined here. The fourth, crackdowns
on Vietnamese fishing in the Paracel Islands, is set aside. The reason for this is that although this policy intensified in 2007, it had previously been observed in 2004 and 2005, well before the more general assertive shift. See Fisheries, ZGYNJ 2005, 144 and Fisheries, ZGYNJ 2006, 160.


81 CCTV, “Lan jiang weishi.”

82 CCTV, “Lan jiang weishi.”


84 SOA, ZGHYNJ 2008, 128.


87 CCTV, “Lan jiang weishi.”

88 SOA, ZGHYNJ 2008, 128, and photo section.


90 SOA, ZGHYNJ 2008, 128.

91 Interview #16/04.


93 SOA, ZGHYNJ 2008, 128.


95 The PRC made diplomatic representations to foreign oil companies on at least 18 occasions in 2006 and 2007. See Fravel, “China’s strategy,” 302-303. In 2000, according to a BP insider, MFA Asian Affairs Director-General Fu Ying made very strong private representations to BP’s London-based management regarding the company’s prospective involvement in Vietnamese offshore energy Block 6.1, which was located just inside the nine-dash line. Hayton, South China Sea, 136.

According to a company insider, in a meeting London on May 18, 2007, senior PRC diplomat Fu Ying told BP CEO Tony Hayward that China “could not guarantee the safety of BP staff working in the disputed area.” Hayton, South China Sea, 137.

Examples:
- May 1988 (Block 06-1): Vietnam signed deals with foreign companies for exploration.
- May 1992 (Block 11-2): Exploration contract signed with South Korea’s National Oil Co.
- October 1994 (Block 05-1a): PetroVietnam began production.
- November 1999 (Block 06-1): Nam Con Son Pipeline agreement signed.
- September 2000 (Block 111-04, 112 and 113): Vietnam and Russia sign to jointly develop several blocks.
- March 2001 (Block 04 and 04-2): exploration joint venture created between Vietnamese and Russian state oil companies.
- January 2003: (Block 6-1): First gas sold.
- November 2004 (Block 05-1b and 05-1c): exploration deals signed with Japanese consortium.


It is worth noting that the idea of “making foreign forces attempting to cooperate with Vietnam in developing the undersea resources of the Spratly feel a sense of danger” is a longstanding part of the thinking of PRC maritime policy strategists. See Wang Yuji, “Shoufu Nansha,” 128.

For example, Block 11-2 and Block 112. See ist of diplomatic protests in Fravel, “China’s strategy,” 302.

State Department, “Sino-Vietnam territorial dispute entangles.”


Baidu News Search for {秦刚 南海} in full text, April 1-30, 2007 (conducted April 28, 2016).

The one exception appears to be a story on a Communist Youth League-affiliated website published one week after Qin’s press conference, which was focused on delegitimizing Vietnam’s claim. “Yuenan lao diu ceng biaoming Nansha Qundao zhuquan shu Zhongguo (Old Vietnamese map marked Spratly Island sovereignty as China’s),” Zhongguo Qingnian Cankao (China Youth Reference), April 17, 2007 at http://news.sina.com.cn/w/2007-04-17/190612801614.shtml (accessed April 28, 2016).

In November 2006, Australian company Santos announced the discovery of oil in Block 12E, jointly owned with the operator Premier (UK) and Delek. “Santos Oil Discovery Offshore Vietnam,” Santos Limited media release, November 17, 2006, at https://www.santos.com/media-centre/announcements/santos-oil-discovery-offshore-vietnam (accessed October 5, 2016). However, discoveries had been made regularly in this area over the preceding two decades, so the discovery is unlikely to have been an independent influence.

Hayton, South China Sea, 139.

The latter report even explicitly recommended announcing oil and gas exploration blocks and unilateral developments that deliberately overlap with those of neighbouring countries, for the purpose of “forcing the other side to engage in joint development. This may have been the thinking behind CNOOC’s release of oil blocks straddling the nine-dash line and the Vietnamese coast in July 2012.

Hayton, South China Sea, 136.

110 See UNCLOS, Articles 74 and 83. "Equitable" maritime boundary demarcation begins with a median line, which is then adjusted to reflect, among other "special circumstances," the respective lengths of coastlines. This principle was established by the International Court of Justice in the 1969 North Sea Continental Shelf adjudication, and subsequently reaffirmed in numerous cases including the Black Sea delimitation case in 2009.


113 State Department, “Vietnam negotiates.” In June 2009 ExxonMobil and PetroVietnam signed a production sharing contract covering the area. Hayton, South China Sea, 142.


118 Whether this involved Vietnam suspending its activities is unclear. “Some in GVN apparently unworried about situation in South China Sea,” US State Department cable #08HANOI464, April 22, 2008, via Wikileaks.

119 SOA, ZGHYNJ 2009, 151.


122 SOA, ZGHYNJ 2009, 151. In addition, at the beginning of September 2008, the PLA General Staff Department organized joint exercises for CMS and rescue authorities to practice “responding to fast-breaking on-water incidents,” possibly in preparation for the risky actions that were to follow. See SOA, ZGHYNJ 2009, photos section.

123 Interview #15/02 with Vietnamese researcher via email, September 11, 2015.

124 State Department, “PRC: cow’s tongue claim not licked.”


126 A Vietnamese researcher noted that from 2002 to 2009 Vietnam maintained a “general policy” of dealing with the issue through "quiet diplomacy and bilateral engagement with China." Interview #15/02.

127 SOA, ZGHYNJ 2009, 151.

128 Interview #15/02; Interview #16/04.

129 The attachment of the nine-dash line map to one of these notes in May 2009 also hinted at the PRC’s simultaneous struggle against the Convention’s status as the sole source of legitimate maritime rights claims under the new regime.

130 According to the National Institute of South China Sea studies, these operations had the effect of “displaying presence and embodying [PRC] jurisdiction.” NISCSS, “2007 NHXSPGBG,” 38.

131 State Department, “Some in GVN apparently unworried.”

132 SOA, ZGHYNJ 2009, 151. CMS South Sea Branch Deputy Director Chen Huaibei explained his fleet’s three key objectives as 1.) patrol and declare presence 2.) understand the situation 3.) strengthen China’s administration of waters within the nine-dash line. Huang Yong, a CMS mariner
who performs these declarations of presence (喊话), concurred that the main tasks are to monitor and collect information and state the country’s position, which is “an embodiment of the state’s intention, and of our surveillance administration, so it is a most important law enforcement method.” CCTV, “Lan jiang weishi.”

133 He Zhonglong and colleagues at the influential Ningbo China Coast Guard Academy stressed the importance of distinguishing these civilian actors from naval forces in a 2006 analysis arguing that “strenuously trying to limit the conflict’s scope to among the civil maritime authorities, can avoid a resort to escalation of the crisis.” Quoted in Goldstein, Five Dragons, 32.

134 CCTV, “Lan jiang weishi.”

135 Interview #13/09, Beijing, November 2013.


137 CMSSCSB, “Zhongguo Haijian.”

138 CCTV Xinwen Lianbo (Network News), July 12, 2008.

139 The network’s October 19 bulletin also appears to have created another, smaller spike when it reiterated that “several days ago CMS realized rights defense patrol law enforcement in the southern part of the South China Sea.” CCTV Xinwen Lianbo (Network News), October 19, 2008.


141 Hai Tao, “Wu long zhi hai.”

142 CMSSCSB, “Zhongguo Haijian.”


144 Yu Wei, “Zhongguo Haijian youwang.”

145 CCTV, “Lan jiang weishi.”

146 E.g. SOA, ZGHYNJ 2010, 127; SOA, ZGHYNJ 2009, 151.

147 CCTV, “Xunhang Nanhai.”

148 CCTV, “Lan jiang weishi.”


150 The same observation, combined with the lack of popular attention, let alone mobilization on the issue, also disconfirms the “intra-state contention” models of bottom-up nationalist influence.

Chapter 5

1 Zheng Wang, "Chinese discourse on the 'Nine-Dashed Line': rights, interests, and nationalism," *Asian Survey* 55, no. 3 (2015): 502-524. Wang finds a very rapid increase in discussion of the South China Sea in centrally-run commercially oriented media in 2011 compared to 2010. That year the *Huanqiu Shibao* published three editorials on the South China Sea issue, but in 2011 this number was 26, a nearly ninefold increase. Even more strikingly, while CCTV-4’s nightly international affairs program Today's Focus (*Jinri Guanzhu*) made only one episode on the issue in 2010, it had 34 episodes on the issue in 2011. No doubt, as Wang notes, this was partly a result of the increased tensions in the area in 2011, which gave the issue a timely flavour and dramatic appeal, and these media's own commercial considerations. But it also implied a significant shift in the attitude of the propaganda information management authorities. One executive at a Beijing-based, overseas-listed online news service recalled a sense of trepidation among their organization over the running of a forum program on the South China Sea, with vigorous debate over government policy and discussion of the possibility of military force around this time. However, the anticipated state objections did not materialize. Interview #16/03, Beijing, April 2016.


As reflected in the comments of CMS official Pang Hailong in the case study on “regular rights defense patrols” in Chapter 4. As He Zhonglong and colleagues at the influential Ningbo China Coast Guard Academy explained in 2006: “ Naturally, in the course of the struggle for national interests, contradictions are inevitable. The real question is what means are used to settle these disputes. Giving full play to the government’s capabilities, deploying the navy cautiously and strenuously trying to limit the conflict’s scope to among the civil maritime authorities, can avoid a resort to escalation of the crisis.” Quoted in Goldstein, *Five Dragons*, 32.

4 See Ryan Martinson, "Shepherds of the South Seas," *Survival* 58, no.3 (2016): 187-212. Another likely example was the operations to interfere with rivals’ continental shelf surveys, which China hoped would prevent the formalization of such claims through submissions to the CLCS process (see Chapter 4). Some scholars argue coercive actions more generally have a deterrent effect through exemplification, as encapsulated in the Chinese idiom, "killing the chicken to scare the monkey" (杀鸡儆猴). You Ji, "Deciphering Beijing’s maritime security policy and strategy in managing sovereignty disputes in the China Seas," RSIS Policy Brief, October 2013, 1. Former MFA official Ye Hailin argued the Scarborough Shoal case was an important start for China in “clarify its strategic intent, and display its resolve, in order to prevent similar incidents from reoccurring." Ye Hailin, "Huangyao Dao shijian’ dui Zhongguo Nanhai weiquan douzheng de qishi (Lessons for China’s rights defense struggle from the ‘Scarborough Shoal incident’),” *Yutai Lanpishu* (Blue Book of Asia-Pacific) (Beijing: Shehui Kexue Wenxian Chubanshe, 2013). More recently, Ye has explained China’s assertive actions as a result of the fact that, after the United States became involved, the issue became one of regional prestige, and "showing weakness is obviously not an effective method for a great power to build regional authority and credibility (威信).” Ye Hailin, "Youxian chongtu yu bufen guankong – 2014 nian yilai Nanhai wenti de jihua yu youguan gefang de yitu he celue (Limited conflict and partial control – the intensification of the South China Sea dispute since 2014, and the tactics and strategies of the relevant sides),” Zhanlìe Juece Yanjiu (Strategic Policymaking Research), no.4 (2015), at http://www.cssn.cn/zzx/gjzzx_zzx/201511/t20151130_2718986.shtml (accessed October 11, 2016). Thanks to Ketian Zhang for bringing this paper to my attention.

5 Chen Yide, Ma Weijun and Yang Changjian, “Xin xingshi xia zuohao huyu weiquan weiweng gongzuo de sikao yu jianyi (Thoughts and suggestions on properly doing fisheries rights protection and stability maintenance work in the new circumstances),” *Zhongguo Shuichan (China Fisheries)*, no. 3 (2012): 13.

6 Chen, Ma and Yang, "Xin xingshi,” 13.

7 Deng Yuan, “Qu Xing: Zhongguo wajiao de dingceng sheji yu dixian siwei (Qu Xing: top-level design and bottom-line thinking in China’s diplomacy),” *Guoji Xianqu Daobao (International Herald
Notes – Chapter 5


9 Heath, China’s New Governing Party Paradigm, particularly Chapters 4 and 8.

10 Mao proposed that two different types of contradictions, “antagonistic” and “non-antagonistic,” which require distinct methods of handling in a 1957 speech. Antagonistic contradictions, such as those between classes with opposing interests, required all-out struggle and “dictatorship” in response. Non-antagonistic contradictions, such as those among “the people,” required management and coordination to produce gradual, non-violent resolution. The tension between China’s desire to assert and defend its claimed maritime rights and interests, while also needing to avoid war and instability, is a contradiction among two positive outcomes, which therefore requires management, coordination, flexibility, and even compromise. See Mao Zedong, “On the correct handling of contradictions among the people,” in Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung, Volume V (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1977), 384-422.

11 The party’s top think tank on the South China Sea issue cited the 2007 operations to defend the Triton-626 seismic survey and harass Vietnamese continental shelf survey ships (Chapter 4) as having “safeguarded our maritime rights, and also safeguarded stability in the South China Sea.” It is not clear whether, at this point, the formulation had the status of an official policy guideline, but it does demonstrate that expert researchers had identified its fundamental logic. NISCSS, “2007 NHXSPGBG,” III. References to the idea began to appear in maritime policymakers’ statements shortly afterwards, as seen in Appendix 4.

12 SOA, ZGHYNJ 2009, 14.

13 SOA, ZGHYNJ 2009, 19.


17 The dual purpose of Deng’s policy is evident in the fact that China has only ever proposed joint development of resources in areas it does not already control (see Chapter 2). As a 2002 internal report stated, joint development is a “temporary arrangement” that “both upholds our sovereignty and maritime rights, and also helps stabilize our peripheral security environment.” HCSSC, “2002 NHQXSPGBG,” 64-65.


19 As Craig Calhoun notes, the rhetoric of nation is the one basic factor that unites disparate phenomena like Japanese economic protectionism, Serbian ethnic cleansing, American anthem-singing at sports events, Chinese democracy protests, and pan-Arab political movements under the same conceptual umbrella. Craig Calhoun, Nationalism, (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1997), 21-22.

20 Unlike “obtrusive” issues such as pollution or food safety, the South China Sea issue revolves around islands and maritime spaces that are remote from audiences’ direct experience. Research has shown, logically enough, that it is on these kinds of “unobtrusive” issues that the media are most strongly able to convey their issue agenda to audiences. See Graber, Mass media, 154.

21 Ke Tizu, ”Wangluo yulun tedian.”
help the government put pressure on Japan.

chemical weapons near the northern city of Qiqihar: "We firmly support the Ministry of Foreign the Patriots Alliance Network 29 Maritime Consciousness 28 respondents who believed it suitable for handling one dispute compared to the other.


This was this only policy option that produced a substantial difference in the number of respondents who believed it suitable for handling one dispute compared to the other.

Further signs of this possible "rational nationalism" is noted in the report, Exploring China's Maritime Consciousness, 40 and 46.

Another example of this thinking among nationalist activists is found in the official declaration of the Patriots Alliance Network group regarding the 2003 Sino-Japanese controversy over leftover chemical weapons near the northern city of Qiqihar: "We firmly support the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' stern negotiations with Japan on August 8 and August 12 [and] hope that this campaign will help the government put pressure on Japan." Quoted in Weiss, Powerful Patriots, 172n104.
Notes – Chapter 5

30 Min Zhou and Hanning Wang, “Participation in anti-Japanese demonstrations in China: evidence from a survey on three elite universities in Beijing,” Journal of East Asian Studies, online August 18, 2016. This research found that while belief in the instrumental value of street protests to China’s diplomacy was widespread among elite university students, it was not a strong predictor of actual participation in such activities.

31 This argument is discussed in relation to the Diaoyu Islands issue in David Denemark and Andrew Chubb, “Citizen attitudes towards China’s maritime territorial disputes: traditional media and internet sources as distinctive conduits of political views,” Information, Communication & Society 19, no.1 (2016): 59-79.

32 Stockmann, Media Commercialization, 98-99, 140-141.


34 In a further disaggregation of different online information sources, the heavily user-driven Weibo microblog platform was the exception to this tendency. Perhaps reflecting the relatively high prominence of politically liberal viewpoints that tend to be skeptical of party-state policies, the most frequent users of Weibo were the least likely to express full certainty regarding China’s disputed claims. See author, Exploring China’s Maritime Consciousness, 57.

35 The theory is based on the idea that there are strong constraints on the influence of political messages on two very different groups: (1) highly engaged citizens, who are among the most likely to be exposed to media cues, but are also the most resistant to their influence due to strong pre-existing opinions, and (2) highly disengaged citizens, who are the least likely to be exposed to, or even understand, political cues. This leaves the moderately-engaged citizens in between these two groups as the most susceptible to media influence. While originally developed to explain effects of election campaign advertising in democracies, the model has also been shown to explain media effects in authoritarian contexts. Philip Converse, “Information flow and the stability of partisan attitudes,” in Angus Campbell et al. eds., Elections and the Political Order (New York: John Wiley, 1966), 136-157; Barbara Geddes and John Zaller, “Sources of popular support for authoritarian regimes,” American Journal of Political Science 33, no.2 (1989): 319-347.

36 Stockmann, Media Commercialization, Chapter 7.

37 This may help explain why the Chinese government is usually content to allow online discourse on foreign policy issues to proceed with relatively minimal interference from censors, despite the prevalence of criticism of important central policies, as outlined below.

38 Zhao, “A state-led nationalism”; Wang, Never Forget, Chapter 4.


40 Huangqi, Zhongguo Minyi Diaocha, 297-299; and author, Exploring China’s Maritime Consciousness, 28.


42 As Reilly shows, in the mid-2000s online platforms and sensationalist media facilitated a range of bottom-up nationalist campaigns on Sino-Japanese issues. Reilly, Strong Society, Chapter 3.


44 The assumption of basic similarity in the information structure becomes safer the closer we get to 2013, especially from 2011 onwards, when Weibo use began on a mass scale. According to CNNIC’s reports, the platform reached 194 million users by mid-2011 and 249 million by the end of the year. Although Weibo use has declined in recent years, it remained close to the height of its popularity in 2013.

CNNIC, Zhongguo Hulianwangluo.


See “Philippine compromise on Spratlys draws PRC ire,” U.S. State Department cable #09MANILA428, February 25, 2009, via Wikileaks.

CCTV, Xinwen Lianbo (Network News), February 18, 2009.

CCTV, Xinwen Lianbo (Network News), May 8, 2009; Fang Xiao, “Zhongguo fandui zouxiao, Malaixiya Yuenan Nanhai hua jie an liuchan (China’s objections see results: Malaysia-Vietnam South China Sea boundary demarcation stillborn),” Dongfang Zaobao (Oriental Morning News), May 8, 2009, at http://news.sohu.com/20090508/n263838344.shtml (accessed May 30, 2016). The South China Sea BSI moved from around 475 on May 6-7 to more than 640 on May 8, eventually reaching 848 on May 19. The highest weekly average BSI was 741 recorded for May 17-23.

Domestic reporting of Chinese assertive actions – specifically the yearly fishing ban protested by Vietnam (May 10) and the return of the Yuzheng-311 armed fisheries patrol boat from its two-month stint in the disputed area (May 19) – matches the peaks in information demand as closely as the reports of other countries’ provocations, such as Vietnam’s purchase of Russian Kilo-class submarines (May 10), and an upgrade of Philippines facilities in the Spratlys (May 21). Attention levels trailed off in early June after Wen Jiabao met Malaysian Prime Minister Badawi and both sides signaled their peaceful intentions. See Appendix 5.

The BSI average for the South China Sea search term was 602 in the second half of 2009, compared to 296 in the second half of 2008.

This figure is not directly comparable to the BSI figures quoted above, for 2009. This is because, in addition to “South China Sea” {南海} two narrower search terms, “South China Sea issue” {南海问题} and “South China Sea dispute” {南海争端} registered in the BSI database for the first time in on March 1, 2009. I use the combined total of these three index values from March 2010 onwards. The comparable figure for the first half of 2010 is the average for the single “South China Sea” {南海} search term, which was 605.


The subsequent reporting of the Jiaolong manned submersible’s planting of a five-star red flag on the South China Sea floor was another reminder of the commercial news appeal of assertive actions, personalized reporting and patriotic imagery. Fei Tian, “‘Jiaolong’ Nanhai cha guoqi quan guocheng (Full progression of Jiaolong’s planting of flag on SCS floor),” Guoji Xianqu Daobao (International Herald Leader), September 6, 2010, at http://news.163.com/10/0906/10/6FT1BB8E00014AE0.html (accessed May 31, 2016); “Nanhai haidi chashang wuxing hongqi, zairen qianshiqi qian 3759 mi (Planting a 5-star red flag on the SCS...
Notes – Chapter 5


58 On both days the top two most-commented stories were reports on statements by PLA officers. See iFeng snapshots, August 14 and August 15, 2010.

59 Swaine and Fravel, “China’s assertive behavior, part two.”

60 iFeng snapshot, 2200 hours, September 25, 2010. It was also the 9th-most-read story on Sina that day, per Sina News ranking, September 25, 2010, at http://news.sina.com.cn/hotnews/20100925.shtml (accessed October 20, 2016).

61 The South China Sea BSI was flat through until around September 20, suggesting, at a first glance, that the Diaoyu fishing boat incident, which began on September 7, did not draw attention towards the South China Sea in the way that the PLA’s Yellow Sea media campaign had the previous month. But on the other hand, it is possible that South China Sea attention levels would have been declining at this time had the events in the East China Sea not kept maritime issues at the forefront of the public agenda.

62 One major driver of attention in late 2010 was a heavily publicized live-fire exercise simulating an amphibious island-taking operation. See CCTV, Xinwen Lianbao, November 4, 2010.


64 Contrary to the author’s initial hypothesis, all the Beijing-based web editors and supervisors interviewed for this project stated that such news would not require positive intervention from state authorities to prompt widespread coverage. The party-state can demand prominence for a given story, but all the editorial staff interviewed attested that this is rarely if ever the reason behind commercial outlets’ promotion of South China Sea and other foreign policy-related news stories. Interview #12/05, Beijing, November 2012; Interview #12/06, Beijing, November 2012; Interview #13/12, Beijing, November 2013; Interview #16/02, Beijing, April 2016.


67 Participation is also broadened by the provision of “upvote” (👍) or “praise” (👍) buttons, which allow users who may not have the time or erudition to create their own content, to express support for other users’ comments.


70 Reilly defines a wave of mobilization as a “rapid shift in public opinion and popular emotions, growing political activism, and expanded sensationalist coverage in popular media and on the Internet.” See Reilly, Strong Society, 24.

See, for example, “Rang dongnanya ruqinzhe chandou ba, Zhongguo Haijian zai Nanhai jixiu you xingdong (Let the Southeast Asian invaders tremble, CMS continues to take action in the South China Sea),” Tiexue BBS, June 3, 2011, at http://bbs.tiexue.net/post_5115672_1.html (accessed June 13, 2016).


SSC, “China’s three cards,” July 5, 2011.


Zhong Weidong, “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 Philippines flag),” Huanqiu Wang (Global Times Online), July 20, 2011, at http://news.ifeng.com/mainland/special/nanhaizhengduan/content-3/detail_2011_07/20/7819289_0.shtml (accessed December 1, 2016). The comments thread on this story was deleted some time between July 27 and July 28. For a range of translated comments see SSC, “20.7 national shame day?” July 26, 2011.

Translations at SSC, “China’s three cards,” and SSC, “Their bottom line is Beijing’s 2nd ring road,” October 21, 2011. Although the policy contest model focuses on how contending elite political factions or policy interest groups may facilitate the expression of popular nationalist viewpoints in order to bolster their position in internal struggles, these kinds of accusations called into question the legitimacy of the party-state system as a whole, so it is unlikely any actors within that system would perceive them as beneficial.

SSC, “Philippines to pay a price,” August 7, 2011.

SSC, “India joins the South China Sea party,” September 19, 2011.


“Siyue Qingnian ‘Kanpeila 7.21’ baowei Nanhai, shengtao Yuenan shiwei huodong (April Youth ‘Canberra July 21’ action to defend the South China Sea and condemn Vietnam’s demonstrations),” m4 BBS, July 20, 2011, at http://bbs.m4.cn/forum.php?mod=viewthread&tid=3131439 (accessed June 13, 2016). Photos of the event on this page suggest some of the participants were nonplussed, perhaps even embarrassed, to be taking part (see Figure 9). If so, this may have been due to the small turnout, the nature of the issue, the identity of the opponent, or other circumstances.

Notes – Chapter 5

85 Ivan Zhai, “Cyberwar rages over disputed archipelagos,” South China Morning Post, June 10, 2011, via Factiva.


89 Signs of this include the CCP’s reactive responses to exogenous publicity about its own confrontational maritime activities: opportunistic attempts to generate positive propaganda from other policy actions, such as the jiaolong submersible’s flag-planting; and the occasional adoption of new forms of publicity like on-scene reportage from correspondents embedded with frontline units.

90 For the purposes of testing the bottom-up models as an explanation for policy assertiveness, more likely cases are those on which the level of popular nationalism is relatively high. As Rapport notes, a more- or most-likely case is one whose conditions lead us to expect a high value on the dependent variable. Rapport, “Hard thinking,” 436. Given that all the candidate cases also involve relatively high levels of PRC assertiveness, the case selection strategy used here also resembles the “modified most likely” design used by Taylor Fravel to test diversionary war theory. In this design, not only do the cases’ antecedent conditions favor the theory of interest, the theory’s expected outcome is also present, and the analyst’s role is to trace the intermediary steps between the two in order to test whether the posited causal mechanisms were present. Taylor Fravel, “The limits of diversion: rethinking internal and external conflict,” Security Studies 19, no.2, (2010): 307-341.

91 Baum and Potter, “The relationships,” 57. Although Baum and Potter’s theoretical synthesis specifically addressed democracies, the foreign policy information “marketplace” they described, in which a key variable is the “information gap” between the public and the government on a given issue, is present in the PRC today. Even if the only information available to the public is supplied by state media sources, increased attention to the issue still implies a narrower “gap.”

92 The mobilizations in mid-2011 were also detailed above. A March 2009 report from a state media public opinion monitoring office noted the uptick in extreme online expression on the issue at that time. Among a sample of 100 online posts on the issue, more than 76 were critical of the public status quo, and 42 called for military action. “Zhongguo Nanhai zhengduan (China’s South Sea dispute),” Renmin Wang Yuqing Jiance Shi (People’s Daily Online Public Opinion Monitoring Office), March 2009, 1.

93 Interview with US diplomat, #13/23, Beijing, November 2013. The US maintains that military surveillance activities are “peaceful”, and thus permitted in the EEZ. The PRC position, similar to that of India and around 16 other UNCLOS signatory states, is that military surveillance in the EEZ cannot be peaceful and thus violates the convention. See Peter Dutton ed. Military Activities in the EEZ, China Maritime Studies no.5 (Rhode Island: Naval War College, 2010), 35n49.


96 Video of the incidents at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z5CK3rEMlw0 (accessed December 3, 2016).


98 Garamone, “Chinese vessels shadow.”


102 Christensen, “The advantages,” 55.

103 It was in the service of this policy that PLA jet fighters repeatedly intercepted US surveillance aircraft from late 2000. In 2002, CMS ships had also followed and “chased away” (驱赶) two Russian surveillance ships in the East China Sea. SOA, *ZGYYNJ* 2003, 186.

104 Kristensen, “New Chinese SSBN.”


109 This coordination, and the fact that the harassment was sustained over a period of several days, eliminates the possibility of frontline units acting on their own initiative.

110 “Charge d’affaires protests harassment of USNS *Impeccable* in South China Sea,” US State Department cable #09BEIJING600, March 9, 2009, via Wikileaks. It is worth noting that although this cable reveals that the MFA American and Oceanian Affairs Department Director-General Zheng Zeguang was ready with a detailed defense of the Fisheries ships’ actions, he was apparently unaware that PLA Navy ships were present. This probably reflects the compartmentalization between China’s party and military “systems” (系统). The PLA leadership does not possess any formal institutional authority over the MFA or the CCP propaganda department, despite its higher rank.

111 Chen, Ma and Yang, “Xin xingshi xia,” 15. The authors refer to it indirectly, but unmistakably, as “expulsion of a foreign surveillance warship.”

112 This timeframe should have been sufficient to prevent reoccurrences if the leadership had been strongly opposed to such actions.

113 The Fisheries Administration’s South Sea Regional Bureau’s designation of the *Impeccable*’s activity as illegal, and its description of the operation to expel it from China’s EEZ – the new maritime zone created by UNCLOS – also suggest this connection. Fisheries, *ZGYYNJ 2010*, 124.
Because the operation was against an unarmed surveillance ship relatively close to the Hainan coast, it is likely that fishing boats and small patrol boats accompanied by navy ships—capabilities China had possessed since the 1980s—would have been sufficient to mount such an operation. 

Mastro argues, and I agree, that China originally wanted to engage in coercive “private signaling”—i.e., out of public view—but that the Pentagon’s announcement of the incident, and release of video evidence, forced China to undertake a media campaign aimed at “damage control” to negate the US’s accusations. Mastro, “Signaling and military provocation,” 229. However the key calculation that it “took three days for the first official statements and media messages to come out of China” understates the promptness of the PRC’s response: when the US went public with details of the incident on the morning of March 9, Washington time, it was already the evening of the same date in Beijing. MFA spokesperson Ma Zhaoxu then provided the PRC’s response at the MFA press conference the following afternoon, which was the first available opportunity, and still only around 18 hours after the US went public. As noted, Ma answered numerous questions on the topic in relatively close detail, suggesting he was well prepared. Furthermore, a number of high-ranking officials from different agencies issued consistent comments on the matter the same day, March 10. In comparison with other fast-breaking incidents, after which the PRC has sometimes avoided commenting officially for several days, this response was rapid. Together with the consistency of messaging in the PRC’s media treatment (also noted by Mastro), this indicates the public response was coordinated at a high level of the CCP leadership—i.e., at least above the Ministry level.

The English version was rendered, “The claims by the US are flatly inaccurate and unacceptable to China.” MFA press conference (Ma Zhaoxu), March 10, 2009.

Ma’s comments on 1.) the US version’s alleged inaccuracy; 2.) China’s adherence to international and domestic laws; 3.) China’s protest against the Impeccable’s illegal activities, and 4.) China demanding the US side prevent further incidents, formed a separate “MFA spokesperson statement” published in Chinese on the Ministry’s website the following day. This indicated that these four points constituted the most important elements of the PRC’s official position. “Waijiaobu fayanren Ma Zhaoxu jiu Mei hajjun jiancechuan zai Zhongguo zhuanshujingjiu huodong shi da jizhe wen (Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Ma Zhaoxu’s Remarks on US Navy Surveillance Vessel’s Activities in China’s Exclusive Economic Zone),” MFA, March 11, 2009, at http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/fyrbt_673021/dhdw_673027/t541674.shtml (accessed June 28, 2016).

MFA press conference (Ma Zhaoxu), March 12, 2009. The MFA press conferences on March 19 and March 24 also addressed the issue. In the former, spokesman Qin Gang commented that “China places great importance on its relations with the US as well as their military relations. We hope our bilateral relations could maintain healthy and stable development, which requires joint efforts from both sides.” In the latter, Qin described as “sheer lies” a report that the US Navy had returned to the area.


CNS, “Hajjun gaoceng.”


Mastro, “Signaling and military provocation,” 222, 225-230. The US’s public reaction was characterized as the result of its hypocrisy, hegemonic ambitions, civil-military dysfunction.
Eventually the narrative of the *Impeccable* being “besieged” by Chinese ships seems to have become more acceptable within the PRC’s media discourse, but only once the danger of escalation had passed. On March 26, more than two weeks after the incident became public in China, Xinhua’s *New People Weekly* published a cover story with an opening paragraph stating, as fact, that the *Impeccable* had been “besieged by five Chinese vessels.” The article added that in each of the recent South China Sea “dramas” (namely *Impeccable*, the Philippines’ Baselines Act, and the stationing of Fisheries’ patrol boat *Yuzheng*-311 in the Paracel Islands), China had “without exception pulled out the flag of sovereignty.” This article was widely republished, along with the magazine’s patriotic cover showing an upright PLA soldier in front of a vast expanse of ocean, accompanied by the headline, *Defending the South China Sea*. This suggests that propaganda authorities or other policy makers may, at that point, have begun using the incident to portray the state’s heroic defence of China’s waters against the US and other threats. Nonetheless, this kind of interpretation was all but absent in the first two weeks of domestic media coverage, when public attention was at its highest, showing domestic political mileage was not part of the thinking behind the incident’s original occurrence. “Nanhai fengyun 240 xiaoshi: heping zhengce ting bu daibiao ruanruo (240 hours of South Sea action: peaceful policy does not mean weakness),” *Xinmin Zhoukan* (New People Weekly), no.12 (2009), at http://news.163.com/09/0326/09/55AQUGVA0001124J.html (accessed December 4, 2016).

Baidu News search for {张华臣 东海舰队} in full text, across, all dates, returns 12 results, none from 2009. Baidu News search for {林永青 少将} in full text text, all dates, returns 147 results, only 3 from 2009, none relevant to the South China Sea. Searches conducted February 26, 2014. China’s central news agencies, Xinhua and CNS, focused on publicizing the official comments outlined in the previous section, which characterized China as the victim of a US incursion, and made only the briefest indirect mention of “rights defense.”

Quoted in Mastro, “Signaling and military provocation,” 225.


The combined 3-term BSI registered values of around 1,000 from March 1 onwards. This rose to just over 2,500 on March 13, in the incident’s aftermath.

See “Zhongguo haiyang quanyi zaoshou duo guo ranzhi, ying duoguanqixia weiquan (China’s maritime rights suffer encroachment from many countries, need coordinated rights defense),” CNS, March 17, 2009, at http://mil.news.sina.com.cn/2009-03-17/0900545628.html (accessed October 21, 2016). The same evening CCTV Evening News broadcast two prominent stories about the new fisheries patrolling in disputed areas. CCTV, Wanjian Xinwen, March 17, 2009. CCTV publicized the MFA’s denial of the evacuation rumours in the following day’s Evening News. “Waijiaobu fayanren jiyou chuanwen cheng Zhongfang kaolü cong Feilübin cheqiao da jizhe wen (MFA spokesperson...
October 16, 2016). The MFA issued a statement on June 3 in which spokesman Hong Lei flatly condemned the incident and CMS ships laying buoys and construction materials at Iroquois Reef (和中礁, 野蛮礁), language seen most recently in coverage of Xi’s visit to Belgrade in June 2016. Unlike Japan, from whom the PRC sought assistance after 1949, the US was the subject of sustained vilification in CCP propaganda and education through the 1950s and 1960s. See He, “Remembering and forgetting.”

Morgan, “U.S. says Chinese fishing vessels.”


Sending the initial signal of moderation during heightened tensions might therefore be seen as a kind of investment that stands to reduce the marginal audience costs of further cooperation or moderation. The price of the investment is limited to the reputational damage incurred among those audience members who a.) were attentive to the state’s handling of the issue at that time, and b.) believed de-escalation was the incorrect course of action. These initial outlays are also offset by any approval from attentive citizens who believed non-escalation was the right policy. If attention levels drop as a result of this initial moderate signal – which may simply be a lack of further escalatory signals – the domestic audience costs of subsequent, more substantive efforts to defuse tensions will be lowered. In other words, by first dampening audiences’ sense of the likelihood of conflict, states may be able to pursue subsequent de-escalation at a discount. And to the extent that audience members simply tune out from the issue without drawing a normative judgment about the state’s policy, the initial investment is costless.


This was the term used by a Chinese government-affiliated scholar, interview #13/16, Haikou, November 2013.


Other reported incidents included a PLA Navy frigate Dongguan 560 allegedly firing a warning shot across the bow of a Filipino fishing boat at Jackson Atoll some time in February; the “buzzing” of Philippines reconnaissance planes on May 21 by unidentified (presumed Chinese) fighter jets; and CMS ships laying buoys and construction materials at Iroquois Reef (和中礁) in the Spratlys on May 24. See Thayer, “China’s new wave.” Only the latter case was formally protested by the Philippines, on May 31. Vietnamese fishermen also reported unusually severe harassment in the Spratly Islands, including warning shots from fisheries law enforcement vessels, in late May or early June. See “Chinese naval boats threaten fishermen in Vietnam waters,” Thanh Nien News, June 2, 2011, at http://www.thanhniennews.com/index/pages/20110602115938.aspx (accessed October 16, 2016). The MFA issued a statement on June 3 in which spokesman Hong Lei flatly

Notes – Chapter 5

134 See Weiss, Powerful Patriots, Chapter 3. This is likely due both to the dramatic implications of great power (or even superpower) conflict, and historical animosities. Not only is America commonly regarded as one of the imperialist powers that humiliated China during the “Century of Humiliation” emphasized in “patriotic education” since the 1990s, the Belgrade embassy bombing continues to be seared into the minds of PRC citizens as a deliberate act of violent barbarism (野蛮), language seen most recently in coverage of Xi’s visit to Belgrade in June 2016. Unlike Japan, from whom the PRC sought assistance after 1949, the US was the subject of sustained vilification in CCP propaganda and education through the 1950s and 1960s. See He, “Remembering and forgetting.”

135 Morgan, “U.S. says Chinese fishing vessels.”


138 Sending the initial signal of moderation during heightened tensions might therefore be seen as a kind of investment that stands to reduce the marginal audience costs of further cooperation or moderation. The price of the investment is limited to the reputational damage incurred among those audience members who a.) were attentive to the state’s handling of the issue at that time, and b.) believed de-escalation was the incorrect course of action. These initial outlays are also offset by any approval from attentive citizens who believed non-escalation was the right policy. If attention levels drop as a result of this initial moderate signal – which may simply be a lack of further escalatory signals – the domestic audience costs of subsequent, more substantive efforts to defuse tensions will be lowered. In other words, by first dampening audiences’ sense of the likelihood of conflict, states may be able to pursue subsequent de-escalation at a discount. And to the extent that audience members simply tune out from the issue without drawing a normative judgment about the state’s policy, the initial investment is costless.

139 “China seeks reduction in surveillance ship activity for successful summit,” US State Department cable #09BEIJING781, March 25, 2009, via Wikileaks.

140 This was the term used by a Chinese government-affiliated scholar, interview #13/16, Haikou, November 2013.


142 Other reported incidents included a PLA Navy frigate Dongguan 560 allegedly firing a warning shot across the bow of a Filipino fishing boat at Jackson Atoll some time in February; the “buzzing” of Philippines reconnaissance planes on May 21 by unidentified (presumed Chinese) fighter jets; and CMS ships laying buoys and construction materials at Iroquois Reef (和中礁) in the Spratlys on May 24. See Thayer, “China’s new wave.” Only the latter case was formally protested by the Philippines, on May 31. Vietnamese fishermen also reported unusually severe harassment in the Spratly Islands, including warning shots from fisheries law enforcement vessels, in late May or early June. See “Chinese naval boats threaten fishermen in Vietnam waters,” Thanh Nien News, June 2, 2011, at http://www.thanhniennews.com/index/pages/20110602115938.aspx (accessed October 16, 2016). The MFA issued a statement on June 3 in which spokesman Hong Lei flatly
denied this had occurred. The credibility of the report is undermined somewhat by both the apparent lack of a formal protest, and inconsistencies in the descriptions of the “white painted” PRC boats with hull numbers 989, 27 and 28 that were alleged to have carried out the attacks. Ship number 989 is now the PLAN’s Changbaishan landing vessel, but that ship was not launched until September 2011, and there is no record of any PRC fisheries ship numbered 27.


144 “Russian captain condemns cable destruction,” Tuoi Tre, June 2, 2011, at http://english.vietnamnet.vn/fms/society/8434/russian-captain-condemns-cable-destruction.html (accessed October 16, 2016). However, the report quotes Captain Belov as saying the Binh Minh 02 was in “Vietnamese territorial waters” when he presumably meant Vietnam’s EEZ, given that the area was 120nm from the coast of Vietnam. This suggests there may have been some degree of looseness in his recollection of the Chinese ships declaring the Binh Minh 02 to have been in violation of Chinese “sovereignty.” The Chinese MFA spokesperson on May 31 described the Vietnamese ships as operating “illegally.” MFA press conference (Jiang Yu), May 31, 2011.


147 Zhao, “Foreign policy implications,” 537, 548-549; Ross, “Chinese nationalism,” 45.


150 China Statistical Yearbook and World Bank figures agree that after a temporary decline in 2009, the value of China’s oil imports bounced back so rapidly that the 2010 figure was an all-time high. The value of other raw materials followed the same pattern. See Figures 3.9, 3.10 and 3.11.

151 Fravel, “China’s strategy,” 307; also Thayer, “China’s new wave.” Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam researchers describe China’s obstruction of Southeast Asian countries’ hydrocarbon operations as “continuous.” Hai and Nguyen, “In retrospect of China’s policy,” 3.


153 According to a report from Nikkei in 2016, for example, energy analysts considered development of the Reed Bank to be unlikely without Chinese involvement due to “Beijing’s muscle-flexing.” Cliff Venzon, “After arbitration victory, Philippine company seeks exploration partner,”
Notes – Chapter 5


154 This proposal was repeated twice in the MFA’s March 8 press conference, following the Reed Bank incident, but it does not appear to have been raised publicly during the May-July period.

155 Haijian-74 and Haijian-84, part of Stage II of the same project, were commissioned 2010 and 2011 respectively. Yuzheng-303 entered service in 2000 following a 1999 funds allocation. Yuzheng-311, a refurbished PLA support ship, began its civilian law enforcement career in 2009.

156 Huy Duong was one of the first to point out that the location of the Binh Minh 02 incident was precisely outside the theoretical Chinese EEZ that would be generated by the Paracel and Spratly groups. Duong Danh Huy, “Sự kiện ‘Bình Minh’,” BBC Vietnamese, May 30, 2011, at http://www.viet-studies.info/kinhte/SuKienBinhMinh_DDHuy_BBC.pdf (accessed February 7, 2014).

157 Interview #13/01 with Vietnamese diplomat, October 2013.

158 In a context of increased relative capabilities and other positive changes in the balance of power, provoking a low-level confrontation lets a state update their assessment of adversaries’ resolve levels. Likewise, information yielded about opponents’ on-water capabilities and tactics may also serve plans for future attempts to access resources.

159 ICG, Stirring (I).

160 See CCTV, “Lan Jiang Weishi.” This documentary shows the CMS patrols in disputed areas routinely encountering rival claimants’ ships carrying out both energy surveys and actual exploitation of hydrocarbon resources. CMS’s normal law enforcement against such activities was limited to “hailing” announcements over two-way radio (呼话). However, the documentary also shows that, when authorized, the CMS took ad hoc coercive operations against Vietnamese ships.


163 The initial incidents gave Beijing’s decisionmakers both a reason and an opportunity to clarify their instructions to maritime agencies if such actions were contrary to their wishes.

164 Vietnamese media had published detailed reports of harassment of Viking II by unidentified fishing boats several days before the incident took place. “1 more Vietnam ship harassed by foreign vessels,” Tuoi Tre, June 1, 2011, at http://english.vietnamnet.vn/fms/society/8634/1-more-vietnam-ship-harassed-by-foreign-vessels.html (accessed February 10, 2014). You Ji’s sources report that the cutting of the cable was ordered by the PLA’s Xisha Surveillance Unit, but for safety reasons rather than aggression. You Ji, “The PLA and diplomacy,” 251fn79. This suggests the protagonists were members of the maritime militia (海上民兵), conducting operations under PLA command – an interpretation supported by the passive role the Fisheries authorities ascribe to themselves in their account of events. See Fisheries, ZHYYN [2012, 62.

165 Hu’s “Scientific Development” concept had been enshrined in the party’s constitution at the 17th CCP Congress, and his signature “New Historic Missions” for the PLA were by then well established. See Heath, China’s New Governing Party Paradigm, 89-90, 109; James Mulvenon, “Chairman Hu and the PLA’s ‘New Historic Missions’,” China Leadership Monitor, no. 27 (2009).

166 Baidu News full-text searches for Bo Xilai + South China Sea {薄熙来 南海}, and Zhou Yongkang + South China Sea {周永康 南海} brought up 133 and 192 results respectively, none relevant to the South China Sea issue. Conducted June 23, 2016.
The PRC’s Foreign and Defense Ministries did not respond to foreign reporters’ requests for comment on Vietnam’s accusations that day. But with no scheduled press conference until May 31, the statement on May 28 was almost certainly an *ad hoc* response to the rapidly growing international media coverage rather than an attempt to draw domestic attention towards the issue. Public demand for South China Sea information is cyclically lower on weekends, so if the state’s aim was to draw public attention to the event then it could have made the statement either on the preceding Friday or the following Monday.

In Chinese: 正常海洋执法监察活动.

MFA, “Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hong Lei’s remarks.”

The closest the MFA seems to have come to this type of language was in a general comment on June 14 that “China is defending its own legitimate rights” (维护自己的正当权益). MFA press conference (Hong Lei), June 14, 2011.


News of Dai’s meeting was republished at least 85 times under headlines to this effect. See Appendix 5.


That evening, tightly scripted reports on the meeting were pushed out across commercial and state-run media platforms. “Dai Bingguo huijian Yuenan lingdaoren teshi Hu Chunshan (Dai Bingguo meets Vietnamese leadership’s special envoy Ho Xuan Son),” CCTV Xinwen Lianbo (Network News), June 26, 2011. The report ran again under the same title later that evening on CCTV Evening News.


Notes – Chapter 5


183 Liao, “Zhongguo zhuliu meiti,” 60.

184 By the end of August, online search activity on the South China Sea was back where it began before the wave arrived, with the BSI just under 2,000.

185 Gary King, Jennifer Pan and Margaret Roberts, ”How censorship in China allows government criticism but silences collective expression,” American Political Science Review 107, no.2 (2013): 17-18. This reading accords with the paper’s core argument that CCP censorship is primarily geared towards forestalling real-world mobilization rather than criticism.

186 From the perspective of a Xinhua employee tasked with accurately transmitting top leaders’ statements, the extreme voices released online created a requirement for China’s official media – such as the People’s Daily and Xinhua – to clarify the conciliatory intent of the CCP leaders. According to Liao, the clarifications “quieted the speculations of popular public opinion,” and prevented the possible intensification of the dispute and even potential “loss of control.” Liao’s analysis strongly supports the idea that the “audience costs” the party-state incurred demonstrated the sincerity of its commitment to peace and stability, but Liao makes no reference to nationalist voices as in any way useful. Liao, “Zhongguo zhuliu meiti,” 60-61.

187 CCTV, “Dai Bingguo huijian.”

188 One such example is found a month later, when the PRC’s ambassador to ASEAN pointed out that the South China Sea dispute “relates to the Chinese people’s national sentiments” as part of an argument urging Southeast Asian countries not to make trouble in the South China Sea. Tong Xiaoling, “Bu neng rang Nanhai wenti yingxiang Zhongguo-Dongmeng youhao hezuo de daju (Don’t let the South China Sea issue affect the overall situation of China-ASEAN friendship),” Renmin Ribao (People’s Daily), July 21, 2011, at http://pdap.mfa.gov.cn/chn/mthd/xwbd/t843876.htm (accessed July 25, 2016).

189 According to one industry insider, Liu Changle, founder and CEO of Phoenix Television, which owns the iFeng news portal, was a supporter and ally of Bo Xilai. The same source, an editor at a rival news platform, also alleges Bo paid the company for favourable coverage. Interview #12/07, Beijing, October 2012.


191 Given the numerous channels by which binding censorship orders can be issued to online platforms, if any senior leaders had opposed the relaxation of restrictions on public discourse at
this time, they probably could have issued instructions to commercial websites to continue censorship.

392 As a senior state news worker focused on international affairs noted, semi-official media sensationalism from sources like the Huanqiu Shibao and hawkish PLA commentators may contradict the MFA's diplomatic purposes at some points, but be useful at other times. Interview #13/06, Beijing, October 2013. Indeed, a Huanqiu online editor said that while MFA officials are often unhappy with the paper's content, it also publishes articles in coordination with the Ministry. Interview #13/12, Beijing, November 2013.
Chapter 6

1 As noted in Chapter 3, declarative actions may be highly provocative, but this appears to stem from their implications for other states’ legal claims, or the future real-world (demonstrative and coercive) actions that they foreshadow. This is not to discount the significance of declarative actions, but if acted upon, they will appear as separate data points.

2 "Jinyibu guanxin haiyang renshi haiyang jinglüe haiyang, tuidong haiyang qiangguo jianshe buduan qude xin chengju (Further attend to, understand and strategically plan the oceans, constantly achieve new results in advancing the construction of a maritime power)." Renmin Ribao (People's Daily), August 1, 2013, 1.


4 See, for example, Lei Ming, "Haiyang yishi yu guojia anquan (Maritime consciousness and state security)," in Lei Ming ed., Nansha Zigu Shu Zhonghua (The Spratlys Have Belonged to China Since Ancient Times) (Guangzhou: Guangzhou Junqu Silingbu Bangongshi, 1988), 288-301.


6 Haijun Siling Bu, “Guanyu ‘Nansha Qundao wenti xueshuxing taimaohui’ de qingkuang baogao (Report on the situation of the ‘Academic Symposium on the Spratly Issue’),” in Nansha Wenti Luwen Ziliao Huibian (Compendium of Essays and Materials on the Spratly Issue) (Beijing: Haijun Xueshu Yanjusuo, 1988), 16. Reviewing the operation in August of the same year, the People’s Daily announced a “learn from the soldiers and officers of the Spratlys initiative” with the aim of “arousing the patriotism and bitter fighting spirit of the broad masses of soldiers and officers.”

7 The character for sea (海) is, for example, did not rate a mention, in the programmatic 1994 document, “Aiguo zhuyi jiaoyu shishi gangyao (Outline on the implementation of patriotic education),” CCP Central Committee, August 23, 1994, at http://www.lyfls.com/lib/pdf/8011922.PDF (accessed December 5, 2016). For an example of the attempt to link patriotic education with elevation of maritime consciousness see Huang, “Jiaqiang haiyang quanyi yishi,” 16.


Notes – Chapter 6

10 Both stated that to prevail in the intensifying “international struggle over maritime rights” the state was not only strengthening its legislation, law enforcement and resource surveys, but also “powerfully elevating the whole nation’s territorial awareness and maritime rights defense awareness.” SOA, ZGHYNJ 2002, 26.


12 “Woguo yifa chachu ’wenti ditu’ (Our country investigates and punishes ‘problem maps’ according to law),” Renmin Ribao (People’s Daily), September 24, 2003, 11; “Gei cehui yi ba falüde biaochi (Giving mapping a legal yardstick),” Renmin Ribao (People’s Daily), December 6, 2007, 14.

13 SOA, ZGHYNJ 2005, 188.

14 SOA ZGHYNJ 2007, 5; SOA, ZGHYNJ 2009, 8.


18 The stated aim was “markedly increasing the nation’s maritime consciousness through continuous, large-scale, multi-faceted propaganda, with social activities involving the whole of society as the vehicle, with media publicity reports as the intermediary, constructing maritime consciousness propaganda platforms, proactively propagating maritime knowledge, deeply excavating maritime culture, channeling (引领) public opinion to pay attention to hot maritime issues, stimulating the whole society’s consciousness of the oceans, attention to the oceans, good treatment of the oceans, and sustainable exploitation of the oceans.” Gu Ruizhen, “Xinwen beijing: weihe yao sheli ‘Quanguo Haiyang Ri’? (News background: why establish ‘National Maritime Propaganda Day’?),” Xinhua, July 18, 2008, at http://news.xinhuanet.com/newscenter/2008-07/18/content_8570482.htm (accessed November 4, 2016).


21 Peng Xiaomei, “Haijun shaojiang: Liaoning Hao shang wu zuozhan renwu, yao jinxing yuanhai shiyan (Navy Rear Admiral: no combat tasks for Liaoning yet, need to conduct far-seas testing),”


24 In Chalmers Johnson’s account, the CCP’s efforts in mobilizing China’s peasantry for war against Japan were so successful that they tied the party to an unprecedented mass national consciousness, paving the party’s path to power. Chalmers Johnson, Peasant Nationalism and Communist Power: The Emergence of Revolutionary China 1937-1945 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1962).

25 Anne-Marie Brady, Making the Foreign Serve China (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 43-50. See also Mao’s interviews with foreign journalists such as James Bartram and Anna Louise Strong that appear in his Selected Works.


27 For examples of the impact of these developments on PLA thinking, see Yue, Jundui Zhengzhi, 165-173; and the composition of the cases examined Sheng Peilin, Wang Lin and Liu Ya eds., Yulunzhan 100 li: jingdian anti pingxi (100 Examples of Public Opinion Warfare: Appraisal of Classic Cases) (Beijing: Jiefangjun Chubanshe, 2005).

28 Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, Unrestricted Warfare (Beijing: PLA Literature and Arts Publishing House, 1999), translation by FBIS, 7, at https://www.oodaloop.com/documents/unrestricted.pdf (accessed December 4, 2016). As a PLA textbook put it, high technology had made the idea that “war is the extension of politics” more prominent. Yue, Jundui Zhengzhi Gongzuo, 166.

29 Yue, Jundui Zhengzhi Gongzuo, 170.


31 More than six months after the concept’s introduction, state media reported major new “research and training” initiatives on the Three Warfares. Chen Hui, “Zhongguojun jundui kaizhan yulunzhan xinli zhanfan yanjiu he xunlian (Chinese Military Initiates Public Opinion, Psychological, and Legal Warfare Research and Training),” Xinhua, June 21, 2004, at http://news.xinhuanet.com/mil/2004-06/21/content_1538252.htm (accessed December 4, 2016). Although the formulation appeared in the 2003 Regulations under “wartime political work,” one of the earliest conclusions was that success in such non-kinetic ventures would depend on constant work during peacetime. And indeed, as shown below, PRC public opinion warfare on the South China Sea has been geared towards the avoidance of real-world military conflict.

32 Wang Zijun, “Shilun Wujing yulunzhan zhanfa yunyang (Testing the application of public opinion warfare tactics in the People’s Armed Police),” Keji Shijie (World Science and Technology), no.13 (2012): 47. This wording is repeated near-verbatim in Zhang Jimu, “Shixi yulunzhan yu xuanchuangzhan zhi qubie (Hypothetical analysis of the differences between public opinion warfare and propaganda war),” Junshi Jizhe (Military Correspondent), October 25, 2012; and Sheng, Wang
and Liu, *Yulunzhan*, 1. The only substantial difference is the latter’s omission of “influence the enemy’s judgment of the situation.”


38 Xiao and Li, “Haishang weiquan,” 102.

39 See the special issue of *Military Correspondent* published in July 2012, available in the CNKI database.

40 Liu Zhifu and Zhang Heweii, “Guoji yulun douzheng shi zonge guoli jingzheng de zhongyao zhanxian (The international public opinion struggle is an important front in the competition of comprehensive national power),” *Qiushi (Seeking Truth)*, no.3 (2013), at http://www.qstheory.cn/zxdk/2013/201303/201301/t20130129_208906.htm (accessed December 4, 2016).

41 “At present, fast-breaking incidents on the maritime frontier are increasing, domestic attention is high, and the difficulty of handling it is great. This not only puts high demands on the country’s economic and military ‘hard power,’ it also puts even higher demands on ‘soft powers’ such as morals, law, public opinion and response mechanisms. It can be said without any exaggeration that every breaking incident on the maritime frontier is a kind of test of China’s comprehensive national power.” Zhang Xuegang, “Zhongguo bianhai xingshi yu zhengce xuanze (Developments and policy choices on China’s maritime frontier),” *Dangdai Guoji Guanxi (Contemporary International Relations)*, no.8 (2012): 16-17.

Notes – Chapter 6

43 Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi provided an authoritative definition of public diplomacy with CCP characteristics in a 2011 article in Seeking Truth: “using all kinds of broadcast and exchange methods to introduce that country’s national conditions and policies to audiences abroad, and introduce that country’s diplomatic programs and relevant measures to domestic public, with the aim of obtaining the understanding, identification and support of domestic and foreign publics, winning people’s hearts and popular sentiment, establishing the positive image of the country and government, creating a beneficial public opinion environment to safeguard and promote the country’s fundamental interests.” Yang Jiechi, “Nuli kaituo Zhongguo tese gonggong wajiao xin jumian (Strive to open up a new situation of public diplomacy with Chinese characteristics),” Qiushi (Seeking Truth), no.2 (2011), at http://www.gov.cn/jrzg/2011-02/16/content_1804163.htm (accessed September 14, 2016).


45 Yang, “Nuli Kaituo.”

46 “In public diplomacy work the government plays more of an organizational and promotional role, mainly through the activities of media, NGOs, think tanks, academic institutions, famous persons and the general population.” Yang, “Nuli Kaituo.”


49 The possibility that such shows of “national will” or “unified thinking” could be seen by foreigners as self-righteous, or petulant, or engender negative images of brainwashing, has rarely if ever been addressed in PRC literature. Indeed, it may even be basically unspeakable (or nonsensical) within the CCP ideological system. For example, domestic “cohesion” (凝聚力) is assumed to be a soft power asset, attractive to outsiders, and never ominous, homogenizing, or in any way off-putting. Any such perceptions can simply be dismissed as ill-intentioned “anti-China” bias. See Lauren Gorfinkel and Andrew Chubb, “When foreigners perform the Chinese nation: televised global Chinese language competitions,” in Ruoyun Bai and Geng Song eds., Chinese Television in the Twenty-First Century: Entertaining the Nation (Oxon: Routledge, 2015), 126-127.

50 “As social resources, these public opinions and sentiments provide Chinese policymakers with opportunities to take action (行动的机会), and as social support they provide motivations for action (行动的意愿).” Zhang Shiming, “Gaige shiqi yangxiang Zhongguo duiwai zhengce de ruogan guonei yinsu (Several domestic policies affecting China’s foreign policy in the reform era),” Haerbin Gongye Daxue Xuebao (Journal of Harbin Industrial University) 8, no.5 (2006): 31. A 2012 Beijing Youth Daily article noted: “This intense [in foreign affairs] interest is in fact an important diplomatic resource which, if guided and integrated, can certainly play a positive role in China’s actions on the international stage,” Cai Fanghua, “Gongzhong dui guoji shiwu de xingqu ye shi zhongyao de wajiao ziyuan (Citizens’ interest in foreign affairs is an important diplomatic resource),” Beijing Qingnian Bao (Beijing Youth Daily), March 11, 2012, at http://bjyouth.ynet.com/3.1/1203/11/6873444.html (accessed August 7, 2016).
Yang, "Nuli kaituo." Yang made clear that the CCP's increased attention to public diplomacy from 2009 onwards was based in part on the assessment that Chinese society's economic and social development was increasing the levels of attention and involvement of the public in PRC foreign affairs. He did not mention the long-running state-wide efforts to raise public attention on the maritime domain as a source of this new situation.

Yang, "Nuli kaituo." The biggest risks emerge when diplomacy requires compromise. As Wang Fang argues: "Adjustment of objectives is the most sensitive issue, because it relates to the state's core interests and will face strong domestic public opinion pressure. For this, public opinion risk management is required, to establish mechanisms of persuasion and soothing of public sentiments." Wang Fang, "Jiyu Nanhai zhengduan de guojia gongguan fangshi tantao (A discussion of national public relations methods based on the South China Sea issue)," Lilun yu Gaige (Theory and Reform), no.4 (2015): 75.

"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." So said former Australian Foreign Minister Bob Carr at the 2011 Lowy Institute Poll launch. As one PRC author has observed, "in recent years many politicians, foreign policy-makers, and international relations scholars expressed little positive sentiment about public diplomacy; they have come to know that irrational public opinion can bring about disastrous outcomes for the country." Zhang Diyu, "Minyi, yulun yu guojia duiwai juece de xuanze (Popular sentiment, public opinion and national foreign policy choices)," Shijie Zhishi (World Affairs), no.20 (2012): 14-22, as quoted in Repnikova, "Domestic factors:"


As Chen Po-chi observes, the party-state "temporarily indulged free cyber speech" to allow a wave of popular nationalist mobilization to swell against what it regarded as anti-China forces, before taking the lead to wind it back once China's objectives were achieved. Chen Po-chi, "Cyber Public Diplomacy as China's Smart Power Strategy in an Information Age: Case Study of Anti-Carrefour Incident in 2008," International Journal of China Studies 3, no.2 (2012): 189-217.


Zhenlibu, "Hulianwang xinwen."

Zheng and Fan, "Wangmin zifa yulun."


Major decisions setting the medium- and long-term direction of policy in this area are probably taken at the level of the Propaganda and Ideological Work Leading Small Group, or the CCP Politburo. See Shambaugh, "China's propaganda system."

Online news industry executives interviewed in 2012 listed these five agencies as routinely issuing guidance for the handling of online news and comment platforms. Besides the CPD and SCIO, the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC, 网信办, formerly known as the State Internet Information Office, SIIO), has been an increasingly powerful player shaping online news content since 2012. The Ministry of Public Security's Internet Police (网警) and municipal-level governments’ Internet Administration Offices (网管办), notably those of Beijing where the five major online news sites are based, also issue internet censorship orders. Authorities' guidance on sensitive foreign policy issues almost invariably orders the issue to be downplayed. No interview subject recalled receiving any state guidance to actively relax censorship on foreign policy issues.
One pointed out that such an order would be redundant, since commercial news operations naturally want to allow user comments where permitted. Interviews #12/05, #12/06, and #12/07, Beijing, October 2012, #13/12, Beijing, November 2013; #16/02 and #16/03, Beijing, April 2016. For an up-to-date account of PRC internet censorship in the Xi Jinping era, see Christopher Cairns, “Fragmented authoritarianism? Reforms to China’s internet censorship system under Xi Jinping,” paper presented at American Political Science Association meeting, Philadelphia, September 3, 2016, at http://www.chrismcairns.com/uploads/3/0/2/2/30226899/cairns--_reforms_to_chinas_internet_censorship_system_under_xi_jinping.pdf (accessed October 22, 2016).

62 Like the propaganda and ideological work system more generally, external propaganda involves a wide array of actors, from policy areas education, culture and the arts, and information and technology. Shambaugh, “China’s propaganda system,” 47-50.

63 See the CCP General Secretary’s work reports to the 2002 16th Party Congress (Part IX), 2007 17th Party Congress (Part XI); 2012 18th Party Congress (Part XI).


65 Jervis, Logic of Images, 120-128.

66 Jervis, Logic of Images, 132.

67 Jervis, Logic of Images, 135-137. Jervis notes a United States diplomat’s description of the use of a “quasi-disavowable channel” in suggesting the idea of de-escalation to the North Vietnamese side.

68 Besides the party leadership’s determination to prevent the PLA becoming a political actor in its own right, the emphasis on secrecy within China’s traditional strategic culture may also have made the PLA disinclined to engage in major external publicity efforts.

69 Unlike the CCP’s external propaganda system, in the military context, “external propaganda” (对外宣传, or 外宣) does not imply foreign audiences as the primary target. The PLA external propaganda system targets all audiences outside the military, which includes both domestic and foreign audiences.


72 Lee, “China’s ‘Three Warfares’, 215. For a detailed narration of the genesis of this new external propaganda organ by its founding director, see Yang Dingyu, “Qinli Zongzheng Duwai Xuanchuan Ju de zuijian he chengli (Personal experience of the organization and establishment of the General Political Department’s External Propaganda Bureau),” in Qiangjun Zhi Lu, Di Ba Juan (The Road to a Strong Army, Volume B), (Beijing: Jiefangjun Chubanshe, 2009), at http://news.xinhuanet.com/mil/2010-03/19/content_13204944.htm (accessed July 4, 2013).

Erica Chenoweth and Kurt Schock, "Do contemporaneous armed challenges affect the PLA’s bureaucratic control of the military against the PLA’s immediate associates, or spur adversaries to harden their position."

Tian Junli and Yang Zurong, "Suzao Zhongguo jundui lijianghao guoji xingxiang, xin shiqi wojun waixuan gongzuoshuping (Shaping a positive international image of the Chinese military: assessment of our military’s external propaganda work in the new era)," Jiefangjun Bao (PLA Daily), November 1, 2012. Interestingly, the PLA Navy’s South Sea Fleet held "public opinion warfare backbone cadre" training sessions as early as 2005, four years before the all-army external propaganda corps was formed. "Nanhai Jundui peiyu yulunzhan gugan (South Sea Fleet trains public opinion warfare backbone cadres)," Junshi jizhe (Military Correspondent), no.11 (2005): 60.


For a range of examples, see SSC "Are the hawks actually the PLA elite," December 5, 2013. One exception illustrates the general rule. In July 2010, General Ma Xiaotian, appears to have made a statement on US-Korean military exercises in the Yellow Sea that was subtly tougher than the position the MFA had outlined. This apparently resulted in a minor shift in the MFA’s rhetoric to match the PLA commander’s. However, by November, the tougher position had been dropped. This case is detailed in Fravel, "The PLA and national security."

As Dai Xu stated in a lecture to his alma mater, the PLAAF Political Academy in Shanghai: "being involved in many secret work units, writing a lot of internal reports, providing a lot of internal reference material to the highest leaders, on one hand doing internal work, on the other doing external work, I have always firmly grasped the two: there is nothing off-limits in thinking, but propaganda is subject to discipline. This is the most precious thing I learned at PLAAF Political Academy." See Chubb, "Propaganda, not policy."

For example, to my knowledge, no PLA external propaganda expert has spoken in favour of the "nationalization" of the military – a key ideological touchstone that to some extent pits party control of the military against the PLA’s bureaucratic interests and operational effectiveness.

The importance of irrational commitment as an aspect of the PLA’s image is encapsulated in a 2013 lecture delivered at National Defense University. Reflecting on the relationship between military and diplomacy, the speaker, identified as Colonel Wang, surmised: "You can be as reasonable as you can be, reasonable to the ends of the earth, in this world if you don’t have a military and national defense force that is unreasonable, (不讲理) your reasonableness is empty."
The lecture was published in Ma Shasha, Nanhai Huoyao (South Sea Dynamite), (Hong Kong: Neimu Chubanshe, 2014), and can be found online at http://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MzA4MjE4ODYzOQ==&mid=402475121&idx=2&sn=5d7d76b285c25a2a289ffe7e656c98c&scene=1&srcid=0227u0DSQZLndJKeRJsxP2rM&from=singlemessage&isNewApp=1&scene=1&sqclid=0#wechat_redirect (accessed September 19, 2016).


“Radical flanks” can bring discredit on their moderate associates, or spur adversaries to harden their position. Erica Chenoweth and Kurt Schock, "Do contemporaneous armed challenges affect the

85 Besides refraining from making inflammatory statements, PLA propaganda experts have on occasions expressed surprisingly dovish views. For example, in March 2013, as China sought to stabilize relations with Japan, Rear Admiral Yin Zhuo, who had previously talked of China’s ability to inflict a rapid defeat on Japan in a war over the Diaoyu Islands, argue “China and Japan would both benefit from cooperating, and both lose from competing.” Zhang Lin, “Yin Zhuo: wo bu tongyi ‘Zhong-Ri bi you yi zhan’ (Yin Zhuo: I disagree that China and Japan must have a war),” Yangcheng Wanbao (Yangcheng Evening News), March 9, 2013, at http://www.10yan.com/2013/0309/30225.shtml (accessed October 22, 2016).


87 The “hawks” were unexpectedly absent from public discourse during the September 2010 tensions over the Diaoyu Islands, despite frequently discussing the issue earlier in the year. See Johnston, “How new and how assertive,” 27fn61. In June 2013, CASS academic Ye Hailin asserted to a Washington think tank analyst: “You assume that the government can silence some hawkish general if they don’t like what he’s saying. Wrong. He may have a million followers on his personal blog. He can embarrass the leadership if he likes.” Jeff Smith, Cold Peace: China-India Rivalry in the Twenty-First Century (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2013), 63. Although it is not clear which “hawkish general” he had in mind, the claim is questionable. Luo Yuan, one of the best-known hawks, immediately closed his blog when ordered to do so in 2010. He also spoke publicly of his desire to open an account on Weibo, which he considered a crucial “public opinion battlefront,” but waited several years until authorized to do so. See Zhang, “Yingpai Luo Yuan”; Tan Lu, “’Yingpai’ jiangjun Luo Yuan de weibo zhanchang (‘Hawkish faction’ general Luo Yuan’s weibo battleground),” Beijing Qinngian Bao (Beijing Youth Daily), December 11, 2013, A16; “Luo Yuan shaojiang weibo fa ‘zhandou xiwen’ cheng jiang wai han guoquan nei cheng guozej (Maj-Gen Luo Yuan launches ‘call to arms’ on weibo, says will defend state interests abroad and punish traitors at home),” Renmin Wang (People’s Daily Online), February 25, 2013 at http://theory.people.com.cn/n/2013/0225/c40531-20586460.html (accessed September 17, 2016).

88 Examples of this “reflection” claim include: “Stomp around and carry a small stick,” US State Department Cable #10BEIJING383, February 12, 2010, via Wikileaks; and Shirk, Fragile Superpower, 100. The newspaper’s circulation is quoted at 2.4 million, but this only equates to less than 2 copies for every 1,000 citizens. Liu Ting, “Huanqiu Shibao toutan toubiao yanju (Study on Huanqiu Shibao lead headlines),” Beijing Wenxue (Beijing Literary Studies), April 28, 2015, at http://www.bfwx.org/a/wenxue/wenxue/2015/0428/3699.html (accessed August 7, 2016). This relatively low popularity is borne out in the survey research carried out for this project, where less than 1% of respondents named the paper as a source of their information about China’s maritime disputes. Chubb, Exploring China’s Maritime Consciousness, 20. Thus, we can only really say it “reflects public opinion” to the extent that “public opinion” refers to the views of that slice of the population that is sufficiently patriotic and attentive to foreign affairs to choose the Huanqiu Shibao due to their appreciation of its editorial line.

90 "I’m appointed by the Communist Party, so it can influence me. My tone is in line with the Communist Party. I will never turn against the party. We live in the same system. We have many similar understandings, sentiments and values." (Huang, "Global Times editor.") One likely instance of the state commandeering the Huanqiu Shibao was its editorial denouncing press freedom – which Hu has argued China needs more of – following the controversy over the liberal-leaning Southern Weekend’s new year editorial in 2013. See David Bandurski, "Web users attack press censorship," China Media Project, January 8, 2013, at http://cmp.hku.hk/2013/01/08/30467/ (accessed August 7, 2016). In the May 25, 2016 MFA press conference, spokesperson Hua Chunying stated that the Huanqiu/Global Times’ editorials have no official standing.

91 In 2008, after scholar Yan Xuetong argued that conciliation towards Taiwan would lead to independence, the paper was reportedly forced to publish two articles rebutting Yan’s argument. “PRC: A Taiwan policy ‘hawk’ recants,” US State Department cable #08BEIJING2645, July 7, 2008, via Wikileaks. Another rapid backflip occurred in early 2013, when the Xi administration began to pursue improved ties with Japan after several months of tensions. The Huanqiu and Global Times had frequently raised the possibility of war with Japan, but this disappeared suddenly in early 2013, replaced with a casually dismissive attitude to the prospect of war. See Chubb, "Radar incident obscures Beijing’s conciliatory turn toward Japan," China Brief 13, no.4 (2013): 9. Later that year, the paper’s editorials on October 28 and 30 said the prospect of "military conflict is becoming more and more real" and called for "preparing for the worst," but then on November 5 said the "outbreak of a full-scale war has been largely ruled out." A more recent example was its subdued treatment of the US Navy’s "freedom of navigation" patrols near Chinese outposts in the South China Sea from late 2015. Commercial imperatives ought to have taken this news as an opportunity to raise the possibility of Sino-US conflict, a certain selling point. Yet, on the contrary, Huanqiu Shibao editorials repeatedly assured readers that the US activities were not a threat. See author, "Why was China’s response to the US patrols so mild?” Fletcher Forum, December 19, 2015, at http://www.fletcherforum.org/home/2016/9/6/why-was-chinas-response-to-us-south-china-sea-patruls-so-mild (accessed November 4, 2016).


94 Interview #16/02, Beijing, April 2016.

95 In a recent example of the site’s responsiveness to guidance from above, Huanqiu Wang reported that a phone call between Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen and US President-elect Donald Trump had been scheduled, but quickly deleted the story when instructed. See tweet by Beimeng Fu, December 2, 2016 https://mobile.twitter.com/BeimengFu/status/804812301410765376/photo/1 (accessed December 3, 2016).

96 The Huanqiu Shibao usually carries two editorials, the Global Times one.

97 The clearest indications of the different nature of the two newspapers are that (1) the Chinese tabloid has advertising on nearly every page, while the English paper often has none at all; and (2) the Chinese tabloid is paywalled, while the English paper is freely available. The latter’s financial loss for 2009-2010 was reportedly ¥20 million; subsequent financial information is not readily available, but with a circulation of only around 100,000, wages of around US$35,000 a year for approximately 20 foreign staff, and almost no advertising, it seems safe to conclude that it has remained primarily state-funded. "Xinhua She Yangshi zheng zhaobing maihma, Zhongguo da waixuan tisheng ruanshili (Xinhua and CCTV in recruitment drive, China’s big external propaganda


99 Anne-Marie Brady, “China’s foreign propaganda machine,” Journal of Democracy 26, no. 4 (2015): 54. Funding for the project was announced at a massive ¥45 billion (US$6.6 billion), but one researcher reports Chinese experts saying this figure was “impossible.” Nonetheless, the true amount is surely still a massive figure. Yamada Ken’ichi, “China’s focus on external publicity: the impact of changing media policy at home and abroad,” NHK Broadcasting Studies, no. 9 (2011): 192fn5. It appears that external propaganda was a personal priority of Hu’s, with a 2004 Central Committee document titled “Opinions on Strengthening and Improving Foreign Propaganda Work under the New Situation” laying the groundwork for the strategy whose implementation was stepped up from 2009. On the 2004 document, see Lee, “China’s ‘Three Warfares’,” 206.


101 Cai, “The Global Times.” This information is confirmed independently in Fish, “Why we need to stop.”

102 CCTV Xinwen Lianbo (Network News), February 19, 2016. Optimistic conspiracy theorists have suggested the episode was part of a “high-level smear” (高级黑) by subversive CCTV editors intent on making Xi look bad. However, the footage had been broadcast throughout the day on CCTV’s news channel, leaving ample time for Xi’s supporters to have it edited out, or at least not included in the authoritative flagship 7pm bulletin.

103 Collins, “C-Escalation,” 2.

104 Or, perhaps more precisely, defending against the possibility of a lack of public support hampering the prospective war effort, as is believed to have happened to the US in the Vietnam War. Luo Yuan wrote in 2013, “there is something on this earth that is more awesome (厉害) than aircraft carriers, and that is popular will.” Popular will, he wrote, “can carry boats, and it can also overturn them, and ‘boats’ includes aircraft carriers.” Luo Yuan, “Mei hangmu ruo jin Huanghai jiang jinu Zhongguo minyi (US aircraft carrier will inflame Chinese popular will if it enters Yellow Sea),” Huanqiu Shibao (Global Times), November 29, 2010, at http://world.huanqiu.com/roll/2010-11/1298536.html (accessed August 9, 2016). Luo’s statement appears rhetorical at first glance, but behind it lies a widespread, even orthodox viewpoint that a militaristic fighting will is an important source of real military power. Dai Xu takes a similar position, arguing that that militaristic mass nationalism is “the only thing [the United States] cannot defeat.”

105 Putnam, “Diplomacy and domestic politics”; Schelling, Strategy of Conflict, 21-52; Schelling, Arms and Influence, 35-91. On “forbidden zones” (禁区) see Li Kaisheng, “Zhongguo waijiao yao shanyong wangluo yulun (Chinese diplomacy must be adept at using online public opinion),” Xuexi Yuekan (Study Monthly), no. 8 (2010), at http://www.21ccom.net/articles/zgyj/ggzhc/article_2010090217606.html (accessed August 9, 2016). In this vein, the Huanqiu Shibao’s Hu Xijin argues that making public opinion a tool of Chinese diplomacy “means that if the American government wants to persuade China to make some concessions, ask them to persuade the Chinese people first.” Shan Renping, “Xian zhengfu ‘ruanruo’, Nanhai gefang yulun de tongbing (Accusations of government ‘weakness’ the common ill public opinion on all sides of South China Sea),” Huanqiu Shibao (Global Times), October 29, 2015, at


108 As encapsulated in the quote attributed to Deng Xiaoping in a 1987 discussion with Japanese counterparts: “In regard to China-Japan relations, reactions among youths, especially students, are strong. If difficult problems were to appear still further, it will become impossible to explain to the people. It will become impossible to control them. I want you to understand this position which we are in.” Quoted in Weiss, Powerful Patriots, 1. Another example of PRC officials linking popular nationalism to the threat of escalation is noted in Reilly, Strong Society, 147.

109 David Lampton, Testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, March 10, 2011, at http://www.uscc.gov/Hearings/hearing-chinas-narratives-regarding-national-security-policy (accessed September 17, 2016). Susan Shirk writes, “Every foreign policy official I have interviewed describes him- or herself as feeling under increasing pressure from nationalist public opinion.” Shirk, Fragile Superpower, 100. Similarly, Jakobson and Knox report that “in all of the authors’ interviews, netizens were described as a new pressure group that has, at a minimum, an indirect yet increasingly felt—or perceived—impact on foreign policy formulation.” Jakobson and Knox, New Foreign Policy Actors, 44.

110 As noted above, Susan Shirk, a former US State Department official, has often cited PRC officials as stressing the influence of popular nationalism on Sino-American and Sino-Japanese relations. However, as recently as of 2011 she was comparatively dismissive of the influence of public opinion on China’s South China Sea policy. Susan Shirk, “Can China’s political system sustain its peaceful rise?” lecture at London School of Economics, May 16, 2011, at http://www.lse.ac.uk/newsAndMedia/videoAndAudio/channels/publicLecturesAndEvents/player.aspx?id=999 (accessed September 17, 2016).

111 State Department, “China seeks reduction in surveillance ship activity.”


113 “Beijing’s brand ambassador: a conversation with Cui Tiankai,” Foreign Affairs 92, no.4 (July/August 2013): 10-17.

114 Fu and Wu, “South China Sea.” As the case study below will show, China’s on-water response was already being implemented before the incident became public, and Fu’s own public comments during the crisis actually triggered a much greater public response than the original incident.

115 “Don’t take peaceful approach for granted,” Global Times, October 25, 2011, at http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/680694.shtml (accessed September 13, 2016). Another similar example was “Vietnam underestimates China’s will to protect sovereignty,” Global Times,
Still, salient aspects of China’s strategic culture place a high value on nationalist criticism, the speakers may themselves subscribe to such estimations of the influence of nationalism on China’s policy. Still, salient aspects of China’s strategic culture place a high value on nationalism on China’s policy.

E.g.:  
- March 2, 2012: “Every government has to consider its people’s will and bow to it in some circumstances. China faces the same problem…”  
- May 9, 2012: “A more determined response will receive wide support from the Chinese public. If the standoff escalates into a military clash, the international community should not be completely surprised.”  
- December 12, 2012: “Japan needs to be clear that China will not retreat in the face of its provocations. The Chinese public will not allow such a retreat.”  
- December 24, 2012: “If China’s marine surveillance aircraft is downed… the public will expect a Japanese jet to be taken down.”  
- January 10, 2013: “We believe that if Japan starts using tracer bullets, it will definitely trigger a military confrontation between China and Japan. Chinese people will certainly ask the government to send naval and air forces to retaliate.”  
- January 11, 2013: “Chinese society is tired of simple verbal protests toward Japan. The Chinese people hope the country will carry out actions against Japan’s provocations. China’s sending fighter jets to the islands reflects Chinese public opinion. A military clash is more likely. We shouldn’t have the illusion that Japan will be deterred by our firm stance. We need to prepare for the worst.”  
- February 26, 2016: “The US’ provocative signals have seriously increased Chinese people’s sense of urgency to strengthen the country’s military capabilities. When US military vessels and warplanes intruded into the 12-nautical-mile territorial seas around China’s islands and reefs, Chinese people have reasons to believe their country should not remain indifferent even if its military might is still inferior to that of the US. On issues concerning national sovereignty, the Chinese military will follow the will of its people.”  
- July 12, 2016: “Chinese people will firmly support our government to launch a tit-for-tat counterpunch.”


Interview with Beijing-based diplomats from Vietnam (#13/19; #16/05), Philippines (#12/10; #13/18) and US (#13/22; #13/23), Beijing, November 2012, November 2013 and April 2016.

The preceding chapters have suggested skepticism is warranted regarding the idea of bottom-up influence on PRC policy in the South China Sea. However, given the MFA usually bears the brunt of nationalist criticism, the speakers may themselves subscribe to such estimations of the influence of nationalism on China’s policy. Still, salient aspects of China’s strategic culture place a high value on
deception, as does the CCP’s dialectical policymaking philosophy. Lenin is quoted as describing diplomatic promises as “like pie crust made to be broken.” Stalin took the position that “a diplomat’s words must have no relation to actions – otherwise what kind of diplomacy is it? . . . Good words are a concealment of bad deeds. Sincere diplomacy is no more possible than dry water or iron wood.” Quoted in Jervis, Logic of Images, 69-70. As Schelling pointed out, “an observer can seldom distinguish with confidence the consciously logical, the intuitive, or the inadvertent use” of strategic moves. Schelling, Strategy of Conflict, 27.

123 Jervis points out that uncertainty regarding thresholds can deter all sides from pushing the limits of ceasefire agreements. Jervis, Logic of Images, 127-128.

124 PLA researchers Xiao Xunlong and Liu Shouqi describe public opinion warfare as a ‘special weapon’ characterized by “great permeability, offensive use, and deterrence” in the international struggle over maritime rights. Xiao and Li, “Haishang weiquan,” 99. Another military researcher Gao Yitian writes that the Chinese public can help instill in foreign audiences the message that “we don’t wish to offend anybody, but whoever interferes or threatens us will have their hopes dashed (都会落空).” Gao Yitian, “Guojia anquan zhanlì chouhua hujuan weiquan he weiwén xiangelongyi (National security strategic planning calls for unity of rights defense and stability maintenance),” Shijie Zhishi (World Affairs), no.16 (2011): 65.

125 As Schelling notes, what is needed for effective brinkmanship is not commitment, but “a danger that can be appreciated.” Schelling, Arms and Influence, 104.


127 As Schelling wrote: “if we scale down the risk to us, we scale it down to [the adversary] too.” Schelling, Strategy of Conflict, 192.

128 Weiss, Powerful Patriots, 223. “Large-scale protests are a stronger signal of resolve than small-scale demonstrations, which in turn communicate more than online comments.”


130 Or, restated in the terms of prospect theory, raising the risk of even worse losses can help pull an adversary out of the “domain of loss,” in which they and are more likely to engage in risky behaviour.

131 As Jervis notes, the key challenge for an ambiguous signal is to “attract sufficient attention to be studied by the receiver and interpreted as the sending actor intended.” Jervis, Logic of Images, 132.


135 In late 2016, following new Philippines President Duterte’s strong pro-Beijing overtures, the PRC moderated its position somewhat, tolerating Filipino fishing activities. It has not, as of December 2016, withdrawn its ships from the shoal. “Pinoy fishermen say they can fish in...
Notes – Chapter 6


136 Award, Philippines v. China, 418.


139 Sutter and Huang, “China’s toughness.”

140 Philippines government records of its earlier interactions with Chinese fishing boats at the shoal presented to the UNCLOS arbitral tribunal also suggest a progressive hardening of the PRC position even before 2006. Award, Philippines v. China, 322-325.

141 Zhao, “Foreign policy implications,” 549-550; Ross, “The problem with the pivot,” 73-75, 80.


143 Fisheries, ZGHYNJ 2009, 159-160.


147 SOA, ZGHYNJ 2010, 126; SOA, ZGHYNJ 2012, 176
first boarded the Chinese ships. The Tanmen office then rapidly passed the issue on to CMS.

The situation had been communicated via Beidou SMS message to the Tanmen Village Border Defense Control Station’s command office just as the Philippine soldiers first boarded the Chinese ships. The Tanmen office then rapidly passed the issue on to CMS.

Notes – Chapter 6
Kennedy and Erickson, “Model maritime militia.” The instruction to the CMS ships to proceed to the area appear to have been issued sometime between 1pm and 2pm, based on Liu Cigui’s statement that the CMS ships took three hours to arrive after being ordered to the scene, and the Philippines Navy’s official report stating that the CMS ships were first sighted around 4.10pm. Phoenix, “Liu Cigui, Bohai yiyou”; “Memorial of the Philippines, Volume IV,” Philippines v. China, Permanent Court of Arbitration case 2013-19, Annex 77, at http://www.pcadocs.com/pcadocs/The%20Philippines%27%20Memorial%20-%20Volume%20IV%20%20Annexes%2061-102%20.pdf (accessed December 4, 2016). Chinese interviewees with experience in the PRC policymaking system have expressed the view that an incident of this kind would probably have been rapidly passed up to the CMC.


163 Alternatively, this decision to block the arrests may have been intended to prevent escalation by nipping the incident in the bud.

164 If Bo Xilai or his allies had been players in South China Sea policy, then this would be more likely, but there is no sign that they were. As noted in Chapter 5, there is no record of either Bo Xilai or Zhou Yongkang making public mention of the South China Sea issue since 2005.

165 Unlike Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao has shown no intention of maintaining a central role in elite politics in his retirement. As such, if Hu had favoured a low-key diplomatic-only handling of the incident, he probably could have borne the cost to his political reputation. Xi Jinping, in comparison, would have had more reason to want to establish his tough credentials and prevent the possibility nationalist-framed attacks.


168 Protecting fishing: see MFA press conferences, April 11, April 12, April 13, April 24, 2012. Demands for withdrawal: MFA press conferences, April 16 and April 18, 2012. The April 16 demand for withdrawal was in answer to a question about a coercive PRC operation against a Filipino archaeological ship, tacitly confirming such an action had occurred.

169 "Liang Guanglie jiu Huangyan Dao duizhi biaotai: junfeng xingdong genju waijiao xuyao (Liang Guanglie states position on Huangyan Island standoff: military's actions are according to diplomatic

170 MOD press conference (Geng Yansheng), April 26, 2012. The spokesperson declined to answer when asked for specifics of this cooperation with civilian maritime agencies.


175 Spokesperson Hong Lei responded to a question about Chinese state-run travel agencies suspending tours to the Philippines by expressing concern for the safety of Chinese residents of the Philippines. MFA press conference (Hong Lei), May 10, 2012.


177 MFA press conference (Hong Lei), May 23. The official English translation was “China took stronger administrative measures in light of the Philippines’ recent provocative moves in waters off the Huangyan Island.”

178 In previous cases where China took assertive actions, such as those examined in Chapter 5, the MFA either refrained from commenting, or actively reframed them as “normal activities.”


180 “Guofangbu: Guangzhou Junqu he Nanhai Jiandui deng budui jinru zhanbei zhuangtai de baodao bu shushi (MOD: reports that units including Guangzhou Military Region and South Sea Fleet have entered a state of war preparation are untrue),” MOD, May 11, 2012, at http://news.mod.gov.cn/headlines/2012-05/11/content_4366513.htm (accessed August 24, 2016 via Archive.org). The only MFA press conference transcript from this period that does not record an explicit call for a diplomatic solution was May 10.

181 Reports appeared just before midday on the online news platforms of Huanqiu and CCTV: Li Zongze, "Fei zuida junjian yu Zhongguo haijianchuan zai Nansha duizhi, shitu daibu Zhongguo yumin (Philippines largest warship in standoff with Chinese marine surveillance ships in South China Sea, attempted to detain Chinese fishers)," Huanqiu Wang (Global Times Online), April 11, 2012, at http://world.huanqiu.com/roll/2012-04/2599802.html (accessed December 5, 2016); Sun Yinbing, "Fei junjian shitu daibu 2 ming Zhongguo yumin, yu Zhongguo haijianchuan zai Nansha duizhi (Philippines warship attempts to arrest 2 Chinese fishers, in standoff with Chinese
Notes – Chapter 6

marine surveillance ships in Spratlys),” CCTV, April 11, 2012, at http://news.cntv.cn/20120411/109541.shtml (accessed August 13, 2016). The CCTV story’s byline lists the translator as belonging to “Online Network News” (网络新闻联播翻译), though it is not known whether this unit has any affiliation with the authoritative department that produces the Network News and Evening News bulletins. The third report appeared just after 2pm from central news agency CNS’s Manila correspondent.

182 Fu and Wu, “South China Sea.” According to the two officials: “Almost instantly, images of the arrested Chinese fishermen being stripped to the waist and exposed to the scorching sun on the deck made headlines on print and digital media in China, triggering off an outcry among the Chinese general public. China was thus forced to take countermeasures, making urgent diplomatic representations to the Philippines, and sending marine surveillance ships and fishing administrative ships to the waters around Huangyan Island.” But the CMS ships had in fact arrived the previous afternoon, long before any media coverage began. The Philippines Navy’s official version of events states that the CMS ships arrived around 4.10pm, and a Xinhua report states they arrived around 5pm. See PCA, “Memorial of the Philippines, Volume IV,” Annex 77; and “Chinese fishing boat returns after stalemate with Philippine Navy,” Xinhua, April 18, 2012, at http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/video/2012-04/18/c_131535352.htm (accessed October 29, 2016).


184 CCTV Wanjian Xinwen (Evening News), April 11, 2012. In addition to the MFA spokesperson’s comments, the CCTV bulletin also announced that the SOA had “rapidly dispatched” ships that “raced to the scene, and conducted on-scene protection of our fishing boats and personnel.”

185 Most of these bulletins were based on the MFA spokesperson’s remarks, including the demand that the Philippines withdraw its ships. On April 16, CCTV reported, suggestively, that Defense Minister Liang Guanglie had recently toured the Guangzhou Military Region to inspect mobilization work for border and coastal defense, and national defense. There, the report said, “he emphasized that border and coastal defense was at the front line of defending sovereignty and maritime rights.” CCTV Wanjian Xinwen (Evening News), April 16, 2012.


188 The head of the Philippines Northern Luzon Command, the unit responsible for Scarborough Shoal, stated that as of 8 p.m., April 23, Yuzheng-310 was located 8nm southeast of the shoal, and Haijian-71 was 12nm away from the Philippines Coast Guard ship. “Chinese ships remain at Scarborough Shoal, says Alcantara,” Zambo Times, April 25, 2012, at https://web.archive.org/web/20120427010315/http://www.zambotimes.com/archives/46753-Chinese-ships-stay-at-Scarborough-Shoal,-says-Alcantara.html (accessed August 16, 2012). In another example of lax information control, on April 23 the Communist Youth League’s official newspaper reported, citing local media, that two Philippines warships and an anti-submarine
aircraft were "heading for Huangyan Island." This was promptly refuted by the Commander of the Philippines Navy, as well as the PRC embassy in Manila, but not before it created a sensation across commercial news sites and social media. Chen Xiaoer, "Feilubin jie wailiao taixia Zhongguo Nanhai quanyi (Philippines enlists outside help to challenge China's South China Sea rights)," Zhongguo Qingnian Bao (China Youth Daily), April 23, 2012, 3. Gao Fei and Zhao Jiemin, "Fei jungfang fouren xiang Huangyan Dao haiyu zengpái jiānchuí feijī (PHL military denies sending ships and aircraft towards Huangyan Island)," Xinhua, April 24, 2012, at http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2012-04/24/c_123025235.htm (accessed August 16, 2016). A detailed account of this perplexing PRC media coverage, and online reactions from Chinese readers, can be found at SSC, "Comfortable with their mistresses," April 26, 2012.


200 "Sheping: chang ci mocai, Zhong-Fei bu dongwu shi qiji (Editorial: if frictions continue, non-use of force between China-Philippines will be a miracle)," Huanqiu Shibao (Global Times), May 9, 2012, at http://opinion.huanqiu.com/1152/2012-05/2702998.html (accessed August 24, 2016). The following day's editorial declared, "If the Philippines' warships dare to fire a shot, the Chinese Navy will definitely punish them severely, and they will be buried under the sea floor." "Sheping: Feilubin diaomen yue gao, lianmian jiang shuai de yue zhong (Editorial: the more shrill the Philippines' tone, the more face it will lose)," Huanqiu Shibao (Global Times), May 10, 2012, at http://opinion.huanqiu.com/1152/2012-05/2709058.html (accessed August 24, 2016).


202 On the careful thinking behind this PLA Daily commentary, see Gao Jiquan, "Fahui guoji shiping."


207 CCTV's flagship news bulletin on April 11 carried prominent Bo Xilai-related news and made no mention of Scarborough Shool. China's five biggest commercial news portals also placed the Bo developments above Scarborough Shool. CCTV, Xinwen Lianbo (Network News), April 11, 2012.

208 The SOA, as noted above, was trying to use the media to raise its profile, though it is not clear why it would have favoured further escalation once the standoff was in place, as that would have rendered its unarmed patrol boats irrelevant, not to mention putting them in grave danger. The publication of at least one prominent media article apparently criticizing the policy status quo in late April was consistent with an attempt by sub-state actors to use public opinion to push the leadership to adopt a tougher stance. The piece, by PLA external propaganda expert Luo Yuan, even
claimed to “reflect the will of the Chinese public. However, the target of Luo’s criticism was in fact the nonexistent policy of withdrawing China’s maritime law enforcement ships, as reported on April 23-24, so it may simply have been a product of the inaccurate information provided by the PRC’s embassy in Manila. Alternatively, Luo’s article may also have been seeking to project the PLA’s image of readiness to fight, a basic task of public opinion warfare. The fact that the article was translated and published in English on the main web news platform of the SCIO (CCP Central External Propaganda Office) supports this reading. Luo Yuan, “Troubled waters call for decisive action,” China.org.cn, April 27, 2012, at http://www.china.org.cn/opinion/2012-04/27/content_25255245.htm (accessed September 18, 2016). Another possible example of sub-state pressure was the Huanqiu’s release on May 2 of a poll finding nearly 80% of Chinese people supported a military response to Scarborough Shoal. The centre’s survey results are usually restricted to paying customers, but this poll was released for free. “Huanqiu Shibao: jin 8 cheng Zhongguo minzhong zhichi wuli huiji Nanhai tiaoxin (Global Times: nearly 8 in 10 of the Chinese masses support military retaliation against South China Sea provocation),” Shenzhen Weishi (Shenzhen Satellite TV), May 5, 2012, at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TIZXg_aSGLQ&feature=related (accessed May 10, 2012, now unavailable). Once again, however, there are signs that China’s diplomats did not find this inconvenient. The MFA spokesperson answered a question on the poll result on May 3, reiterating the call for diplomatic negotiations, and this was included in the official transcript. Answering (or perhaps even pre-arranging) this question, which appears to have come from a Hong Kong journalist, drew attention to the contrast between the apparently warlike preferences of the population and relatively moderate policy shifts that were underway, ramping up ship numbers at the shoal, and imposing informal economic sanctions. MFA press conference (Liu Weimin), May 3, 2012.

Following the seasonal low around Chinese New Year, the BSI value began to increase in late February 2012 after the Philippines invited foreign bidding for energy concessions in the Reed Bank and a tough PRC response branding the move “illegal.” Sensationalist media presentation of MFA spokesman Hong Lei’s comment that “no country, including China, has claimed sovereignty over the entire South China Sea” also contributed to the public’s demand for information (see SSC, “Ours before, still today, more so in the future,” March 8, 2012). Sino-Vietnamese friction over China’s detention of Vietnamese fishing crews in the Paracel Islands helped sustain the public’s demand for information through most of March, before Beijing announced a high-profile project to raise “map consciousness” regarding the South China Sea. The ASEAN summit’s discussion of the South China Sea was also heavily reported in early April. See Appendix 5.

See Appendix 5. With the Gazprom story as a leading headline across commercial news sites on April 10, the South China Sea BSI value rose about 50 per cent to 4,800, just as the initial events were unfolding at Scarborough. These observations of relatively high, and rising, public attention levels might suggest a desire to avoid nationalist criticism could have contributed to the initial decision to confront the Philippines. However, given that the primary target of nationalist ire at that point was Vietnam, if the CCP’s decisionmakers had wanted to avoid a standoff at Scarborough Shoal while deflecting nationalist criticism or diverting public attention towards foreign policy controversies, they could have focused on making a tough rhetorical response to the Vietnamese aspect of the issue, allowing the China-Philippines fishing issue to stay in the background.

As Figure 6.5 shows, in the first quarter of 2012 the index’s average daily value was around 1,800, down from 3,000 in the fourth quarter of 2011, and nearly 5,000 through the middle part of that year.

See SSC, “Their bottom line is Beijing’s second ring road,” October 20, 2011. The South China Sea BSI was around 3,000 in October 2011, when the Philippines seized a group of dinghies in the Spratly Islands, attracting widespread commercial media attention. On that occasion, China did not escalate the situation, but instead defied nationalist public opinion and handled it diplomatically.

The People’s Daily on March 21 (page 9) had featured an illustrated splash on “regular rights defense patrols,” with pictures from a Xinhua photographer who accompanied the mission. See also Rong Shoujun, “Gaoqing zutu: benwang jizhe zhii Zhongguo Hajiian Nanhai xunhang (High-res

204 The term Huangyan Island (黄岩岛) first registered in the BSI database in late February 2009 after the Philippines Baselines Act laid claim to the territory. Despite the rising tensions in the South China Sea over the preceding years and months, Scarborough Shoal had not been a well known aspect of the dispute before 2012. Not surprisingly, then, the BSI for Huangyan Island immediately increased twentyfold. Another indication of this general unfamiliarity with the object of the standoff is that early state media headlines mistakenly referred to the events as taking place in the Spratly Islands (e.g. Sun Yining, “Fei junjian shitu daibu”). The feature had at that point only been mentioned in the People's Daily twice since 2009, and 24 times ever.

205 Bill Bishop, “Today’s China readings,” Sinocism, May 10, 2012, at https://sinocism.com/?p=4684 (accessed October 31, 2016). The hashtag was eventually dislodged from the top of the list by a video report from a provincial TV reporter embedded with the Fisheries Administration who landed on the disputed reef to “re-plant” the five-star red flag at Scarborough Shoal. The change from the movement of Chinese warships, to the journalist’s vainglorious mission, typified the media agenda’s turn away from suggestions of impending military confrontation, and towards assuring readers that China was already in control of the tiny territory. “Zhongfei Huangyan Dao duizhi: Dongfang Weishi jizhe zai Huangyan Dao zhujiao chongxin chashang wuxing hongqi (CHN-PHL standoff: Oriental Satellite TV reporter re-plants five-star red flag on the main rock of Huangyan Island),” Dongfang Weishi (Oriental Satellite TV), May 10, 2012, at http://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XMzkzOTgxNDaw.html (accessed August 18, 2016).

206 A petition proclaiming the Chinese people “absolutely will not tolerate” the Philippines’ “attempts to seize our territory” and “piratical acts” was signed at least 12.7 million times, at http://infoapp.3g.qq.com/g/s?id=AVM-LLmyogI1x7dFLz-Nk4N&aid=express_index&action=1 (accessed October 10, 2015, unavailable at time of writing).

207 Documented in SSC, “Small-scale protests in Manila, even smaller-scale protests in Beijing.” May 18, 2012.

208 Anecdotally, some Chinese friends of the author who do not normally follow the South China Sea issue made contact to express concern that China might be about to use force.


210 As noted in Chapter 5, survey results, both from this project and others, suggest most Chinese urban citizens consider guiding public displays of patriotic fervour is an appropriate policy for handling the dispute.

211 MFA press conference (Hong Lei), May 9, 2012; MFA press conference (Hong Lei), May 10, 2012. Interview #12/10, Beijing, November 2012; interview #13/18, Beijing, November 2013.

212 The story began by declaring: “The Chinese people are enraged by the offensive behavior of the Philippines over the Huangyan Island dispute...” and went on to suggest at least three times that China may use military force. Interestingly, it accused the Philippines government of “tr[ying] to
use domestic sentiment as a weapon against China.” If this was the perception in Beijing – and there is little reason to doubt that it was – this may well suggest China was seeking to do the same. “China outraged by Philippines’ provocation over Huangyan Island,” Xinhua, May 10, 2012, at http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2012-05/10/c_1231110109.htm (accessed October 31, 2016). Another Xinhua English story the same day drew attention to the PLA Daily’s slightly less explicit editorial: “China’s military newspaper warns Philippines of Huangyan Island incident,” Xinhua, May 10, 2012, at http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2012-05/10/c_131579618.htm (accessed October 27, 2016).


216 Notably, the MFA appears to have been the only agency to refer to domestic public opinion in official remarks – comments that, as noted, effectively told domestic citizens they were agitated, and projected these sentiments to the world. This suggests that, rather than being the result of hawkish sub-state actors pushing for a military solution, the wave of nationalism that emerged at this time complemented the MFA’s diplomatic work.

217 Mabasa, “DFA halts talks.”

218 Award, Philippines v. China, 418. On May 3, the Philippines military announced that China had increased its patrol boat presence from 3 to 4 ships, along with 10 fishing boats, making a total of 14 PRC ships, the highest number since the standoff began. Romero, “Chinese boats crowding shoal”; AFP, “China sends more ships.”

219 Romero, “Philippine officials: Pinoys can fish”; AFP, “Filipino-Chinese ocean comradery fades.”


221 The MFA repeatedly made clear that it considered the demonstrations to have been incited by the Philippines government’s “hardline statements.” The apparent shortcomings in the PRC’s understanding of Philippine society and politics are noted by Jay Batongbacal, “The 2012 Scarborough Shoal standoff: a Philippine perspective,” China Studies Journal, no.10 (2013): 106.


223 MFA press conference (Hong Lei), May 8, 2012; MFA press conference (Hong Lei), May 9, 2012; MFA press conference (Hong Lei), May 10, 2012.

224 A May 10 quasi-official commentator article in the People’s Daily, stated China’s demands as: “The Philippines must withdraw its boats from the Huangyan area, refrain absolutely from harassing Chinese fishing boats, and even more so from interfering with Chinese law enforcement boats performing their duties.” The article concluded by urging the Philippines not to take the situation to its limits, but to leave a margin of error (势不可使尽，事不可做绝). Zhong Sheng, “Feilibin dang you zixi zhi ming (Philippines should have the wisdom of self-knowledge),” Renmin Ribao (People’s Daily), May 10, 2012, 3, at http://paper.people.com.cn/rmbh/html/2012-05/10/nw.D110000renmrb_20120510_1-03.htm?div=-1 (accessed November 6, 2016).

225 As Qin Hong argued: “To draw back the bow, to show but don’t use, is the best method of making the problem return to peaceful channels… facing this type of opponent, we have sufficient wisdom,
and sufficient means, to win without fighting, to make the other side back down." Qin Hong, "Miandui Feilübin, women you zugou de shouduan (Facing the Philippines, we have sufficient means)," *Renmin Ribao Haiwai Ban (People’s Daily Overseas Edition)*, May 8, 2012, 1. See also Francois-Xavier Bonnet, "Geopolitics of Scarborough Shoal," IRASEC discussion paper no.14 (2012), 5.

226 As two PLA researchers put it, China’s public opinion warfare “both deterred Philippines public opinion, and interacted with domestic public opinion” (对菲舆论威摄, 也互动国内舆论). Hua and Yu, "Huangyan Dao shijian," 26.


229 See MFA press conferences (Hong Lei), May 14, and May 15, 2012. This is discussed at SSC “There are cocoons in my ears!” May 28, 2012. On May 2 also, the MFA spokesperson fielded a question on a *Huanqiu* poll that purportedly found nearly 80% of respondents supported military action over the issue.


231 Bodeen, “Trade, public anger sharpening.”

232 Asked about Luo’s article by a reporter, Aquino replied: "We don’t think that at this stage they (China) will engage in any military activities . . . It is clear that it is to nobody’s benefit and there are a lot of repercussions if any military force happens to be employed here. So we think that is more a statement that lacks substance. Not indicative of the real intentions." Willard Cheng, "PNoy believes China won’t take military action vs PH," ABS-CBN News, April 29, 2012, at http://news.abs-cbn.com/nation/04/29/12/pnoy-believes-china-won%E2%80%99t-take-military-action-vs-ph (accessed October 31, 2016).


235 The first deleted Weibo (microblog) post on Scarborough Shoal to be captured by Weiboscope, a Hong Kong University program to identify censored content from a sample of 10,000 accounts, was captured on April 27. It was a declaration of war on behalf of “the people of Huizhou.” The Weiboscope project is explained in Fu, Chan and Chau, “Assessing censorship on microblogs.” While nationalist attacks on the government’s foreign policy in general, and the MFA in particular, are quite normal on the PRC internet news sites, criticism of the military and questioning of the correctness of China’s claims are less common. Before April 26, however, both of these kinds of expressions featured in the top comments on the largest discussion threads on leading news portals, suggesting an absence of guidance from authorities. See SSC, “Comfortable with their mistresses.”


237 As noted in Chapter 5, before 2011, it is not clear how well the relevant state departments understood the magnitude of the effect that assertive actions and rhetorical posturing could have on public opinion in the era of South China Sea nationalism. But by April-May 2012 it appears to have been well understood.
Notes – Chapter 6

238 "Nanhai huigang yumin jiangshu zao Feilübin shibing feifa xirao xijie (Returned South China Sea fishers narrate details of harassment by Philippine soldiers)," Renmin Wang (People's Daily Online), http://news.qq.com/a/20120417/000854.htm (accessed September 19, 2016); Zhao Yeping and Xia Guannan, "Hainan yumin: you Yuzheng shouhu, women zai Huangyan Dao shengchan hen anquan (Hainan fisherfolk: with the Fisheries Administration ships' protection we are very safe working at Huangyan Island)," Xinhua, May 12, 2012, at http://www.hq.xinhuanet.com/news/2012-05/12/content_25220665.htm (accessed September 19, 2016).


244 See author, “Are China’s most extreme nationalists.”


246 Non-strategic explanations can broadly be grouped into four kinds:

1.) Safety valve: The “safety vale” explanation holds that the state allows nationalist sentiments to burst forth for fear of the future consequences of suppressing them. This is unconvincing in the Scarborough case, where the authorities abruptly began to quell the nationalist movement at the peak of its fury by increasing censorship and preventing street protests around May 10-11. If the state was afraid of suppressing extreme nationalism, Beijing should have been disinclined to crack down at this time, when nationalist sentiments were at their most intense.

2.) Diversion: Channeling the wave of public sentiments onto the issue could still have been a diversionary ploy, even if the policy shifts on the water in April and May were not. But the brevity of the Scarborough Shoal wave, and the fact that it was wound down immediately
once China achieved its deterrent objectives, contradicts such an interpretation. In addition, while the achievements of China’s policy shift seem significant when viewed from outside China, they were probably much less impressive from the perspective of PRC nationalist audiences, essentially amounting to: i) PRC law enforcement and fishing vessels not being attacked or harassed by the Philippines at Scarborough Shoal; ii) avoiding the ignominy of large-scale worldwide anti-China demonstrations; and iii) forestalling the re-ignition of the issue, by convincing Aquino to discourage domestic activism over the issue in the Philippines. Viewed in this light, it is far from clear just how much “nationalist legitimacy” the party actually stood to gain from diverting attention towards this limited set of achievements.

3.) **Coincidence:** The wave of nationalism could have been an incidental byproduct of the state taking a tougher stance, and the domestic media operating on their commercial imperatives. This scenario requires an assumption that the PRC did not anticipate the domestic public’s response to its own shift in rhetoric. The idea that the channeling and popular sentiments towards the issue was non-strategic is also strongly contradicted by the strong efforts of CCP diplomacy and external propaganda to draw foreign attention towards these public sentiments.

4.) **Incapacity:** This interpretation would view the state as simply incapable of holding back the media frenzy, and the ensuing increase in the flow of popular sentiments towards the issue. This is highly unlikely given the central role of the MFA website’s account of Fu Ying’s May 7 meeting with the Philippine charge d’affaires in sparking the media frenzy. It was released a day after the meeting, and since the meeting had taken place behind closed doors, the authorities were under no obligation to publicize it at all. Furthermore, the CCP showed during the crisis that it was able to lower the level of public agitation by moderating its own rhetoric, and that it could prevent nationalist mobilizations outside the Philippines embassy.


248 Repnikova, “Domestic factors.”

249 Farris. “Gu Kailai found guilty.”

250 See King, Pan and Roberts, ”How censorship in China allows government criticism.”


252 CCTV, “Lan jiang weishi.”

253 CCTV, “Shen qing shouhu.”

254 “Zhongguo jin qi jiang wancheng Nansha bunen daojiao jianshe (China will soon complete part of its Spratly island-reef construction),” CCTV Xinwen Lianbo (Network News), June 16, 2015; “Woguo zai Nanhai kaigong jianshe liang zuo daxing dengta (Our country starts work on constructing two large lighthouses in the South China Sea),” CCTV Xinwen Lianbo (Network News), May 27, 2015. State television in 2012 also drew greater attention to CMS’s “regular rights defense patrols,” which began in 2007. See CCTV, “Xunhang Nanhai.”

255 The party line, when it came out, nearly 48 hours after the Vientamese rioting began, elided any linkage between the violence and the South China Sea issue, and emphasized the actions the Vietnamese party-state was taking to make amends. The case is detailed in Chubb, “China’s information management.”
See Chubb, “Why was China’s response.” MFA and state media drew attention to the action, sparking outrage among many citizens, and censorship of extreme anti-US expression. However, given the typical frequency of US FONOPs is only two or three per year, the MFA’s well-publicized demand that America “immediately correct its mistakes” was apt to create the impression of US compliance.


Beauchamp-Mustafaga et al., “China signals resolve.”


At the time of writing, other current examples of compelling, but non-mobilizing, propaganda on the South China Sea include postage stamps featuring imagery of the PRC’s ostentatious new lighthouses in the Spratly Islands, and ongoing recycling of imagery of the H-6K bomber above disputed reefs as stock footage in reports mentioning the new aircraft, such as in CCTV’s story on the 2016 Zhuhai Air Show. CCTV Xinwen Lianbo (Network News), November 5, 2016.
Chapter 7

1 Based on dozens of interviews, Feng Zhang in 2016 found a broad consensus among PRC scholars and policy analysts regarding the key assertive policies in the South China Sea, particularly the artificial island-building project in the Spratly Islands. Zhang identified a group of “moderates,” but they were distinguished not by opposition to assertive policies, but by the view that China should clarify its ambiguous claims. Feng Zhang, “The fight inside China over the South China Sea,” Foreign Policy, June 23, 2016, at http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/06/23/the-fight-inside-china-over-the-south-china-sea-beijing-divided-three-camps/ (accessed November 18, 2016).

2 According to a Chinese academic with contacts in journalism, restrictions on reporting on the South China Sea issue eased significantly from 2012. Interview #16/07, China, April 2016. On the censorship side, my own interviews with news portal executives indicated no appreciable change between 2012 and 2016. Interviews #12/06, China, October 2012; #16/03, China, April 2016.

3 Interview #14/04, Australia, April 2014.


5 As Jervis points out, even where value trade-offs are necessary, policymakers have a psychologically-determined tendency to avoid recognizing them. The emphasis on resolving contradictions in the PRC’s governance might make its policymakers extra susceptible to this. Robert Jervis, Perception and Misperception in International Politics (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 140-142.

6 Gries, Steiger and Wang, “Popular nationalism”; Reilly, “A wave to worry about?”. You Ji characterizes the initiation of the patrols as part of a “one-plus” response aimed at deterring further provocation. You Ji, “Deciphering China’s maritime security policy,” 6. While agreeing that signaling resolve to other disputant states was a factor, Fravel characterizes China’s assertive response to (incorrect) perceptions of the Japanese island purchase as a major blow to the PRC’s legal claim, and an attempt to take advantage of the CCP’s internal strife at the time. Fravel, “Explaining China’s escalation,” 31.


8 The first wave of mobilization followed after a group of Hong Kong-based activists sailed to the disputed islands, landed, and were promptly detained and repatriated by Japanese authorities. Such voyages are routinely prevented by Hong Kong authorities, or intercepted by Mainland patrols. On this occasion, however, PRC central media even broadcast live updates on the activists’ progress, and heavily covered their (inevitable) arrest. This leaves little doubt that permitting the voyage was intended to channel domestic attention towards the issue, and warn Japan against the island purchase.

9 PRC maritime policy officials had foreshadowed increased patrols around the Diaoyu Islands several months earlier. Yu Jianbin, “Lixing xunhang, xuanshi zhuquan (Routine patrols, proclaiming sovereignty),” Renmin Ribao (People’s Daily), March 21, 9, at http://politics.people.com.cn/GB/1026/17442756.html (accessed November 15, 2016); “China to step up patrol in disputed islands: report,” AFP, March 20, 2012, at http://news.asiaone.com/News/AsiaOne+News/Asia/Story/A1Story20120320-334521.html (accessed November 17, 2016). These public comments were made four weeks before Tokyo Mayor Ishihara announced his plan to purchase the islands, and so may have been unrelated to Japan’s actions. However, Ishihara had reportedly opened negotiations on the issue in December 2011, so the PRC may have become aware of the plan before Ishihara’s announcement. If so, then the PRC officials’ comments, made to separate media outlets two days apart, may have been an attempt to warn Tokyo not to allow the plan to go ahead. See “Senkaku snafu laid to broad miscalculation,” Kyodo, November 20, 2012, at http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2012/11/20/national/senkaku-snafu-laid-to-broad-

10 Other candidate cases of “grassroots deterrence” include the 2008 movement, which is seen to have deterred biased Western media reporting and French support for the Dalai Lama, and the 2010 Diaoyu Islands incident, in which the PRC sought to deter Japan from prosecuting the detained captain under its domestic law.

11 This case illustrates the usefulness of the channeling/risk management framework. An analysis focusing on a resolve/reassurance dichotomy would find the state’s management of domestic sentiments to be a demonstration of reassurance, as citizens’ attempts to organize street protests were suppressed. Yet it was intense official rhetoric and extremely high state media publicity – channeling – that created the impetus for protests in the first place. The 2005 popular protest and petition movement against Japan’s UN Security Council (UNSC) bid is a particularly interesting example of apparent strategic channeling aimed at third parties. As Shi Yinhong points out, the PRC had no intention of accepting Japanese UNSC membership, and could have used its veto power to torpedo the plan if necessary. However, because the Japanese bid was part of a broader UN reform package that enjoyed widespread support in the General Assembly, wielding the veto alone would have risked isolating China within the UN. The protest movement helped convince the United States to abandon its support for the proposed reform package, which scuppered Japan’s bid. See Weiss, Powerful Patriots, 142.

12 The 2001 Sino-American EP-3 incident appears to fit this pattern. Weiss has examined the signal of de-escalatory reassurance the PRC generated by suppressing latent street protests, but the case also involved significant state publicity towards the issue, suggesting an analysis based on simultaneous channeling and risk management may be useful. See Weiss, “Authoritarian signaling,” 22-25.


14 International Crisis Group sources say the operation was authorized by the Maritime Rights Leading Small Group, on which the MFA is represented by its Boundary and Ocean Affairs Department, which is concerned with sovereignty matters, rather than its Asian Affairs Department, which has country-specific expertise. Stirring Up the South China Sea (III): A Fleeting Opportunity for Calm, International Crisis Group, Asia Report no.267 (May 2015): 10. This was also the assessment of Vietnamese diplomats interviewed in 2016. Interview #16/05, Beijing, April 2016. On the narrow interests driving the state-owned oil companies behind the operation, see Erica Strecker Downs, “Business and politics in the South China Sea: explaining HYSY-981’s foray into disputed waters,” China Brief 14, no.12 (2014): 6-8. One problem with the idea that the PRC was taken by surprise is that Vietnam had previously sent ships to oppose PRC drilling in a similar area in 2007 (see Chapter 4). However, the 2014 operation was sited less than 24nm from Triton Island, which PRC decisionmakers might have thought would make it less provocative to Vietnam; or perhaps none of the members of the Maritime Rights LSG was even aware of the events back in 2007.

15 The first collisions occurred on May 2, the day after the rig was moved into the area. Wang Min, letter to United Nations Secretary-General, UNGA document A/68/887, May 22, 2014; Le Hoai Trung, letter to United Nations Secretary-General, UNGA document A/68/870, May 7, 2014.

16 Earlier operations of the gargantuan, nationally symbolic HYSY-981 rig had been made into compelling domestic propaganda. E.g. CCTV, Xinwen Lianbo (Network News), May 9, 2012; CCTV, Wanjian Xinwen (Evening News), May 8, 2012.
relations?” from student experiments to the real world in political science, military affairs, and international crisis decisionmaking. S

Alex Mintz, Steven Redd and Arnold Vedlitz, “Can we generalize from student experiments to the real world in political science, military affairs, and international relations?” Journal of Conflict Resolution 50, no.5 (2006): 757-776.

A RAND Corporation report defines escalation dominance as “a condition in which a combatant has the ability to escalate a conflict in ways that will be disadvantageous or costly to the adversary while the adversary cannot do the same in return, either because it has no escalation options or because the available options would not improve the adversary’s situation” (emphasis added). The fact that the PRC was already implementing its unilateral drilling operation, and sought to continue to do so without sparking conflict, meant that its situation would not have improved with the introduction of further escalatory risks from public opinion on the Chinese side. As such, the situation appears to fit the above definition. Forrest Morgan, Karl Mueller, Evan Medeiros, Kavin Pollpeter and Roger Cliff, Dangerous Thresholds: Managing Escalation in the 21st Century (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2008), 15.

Ciorciari and Weiss, “Nationalist protests,” 575. Vietnam has permitted anti-China protests over the South China Sea issue numerous times since 2007. Nhung Bui finds that the Vietnamese government’s “channeling” of popular nationalism was aimed at fostering pro-government sentiment, rather than anti-China feelings. She argues Vietnam was “compelled” by public opinion to respond strongly and publicly, and sought unsuccessfully to prevent the instability. Nhung Bui, “Managing anti-China nationalism in Vietnam: evidence from the media during the 2014 oil rig crisis,” The Pacific Review; (online 2016).


Ciorciari and Weiss, “Nationalist protests,” 573-577. The authors examine the different incentive structures for democracies, hybrid regimes, and autocracies in managing anti-foreign street protests. However, the consequences of the degree of similarity and difference between a channeling state and its target remain largely unexplored.

Weiss, Powerful Patriots, Chapter 8.


Political psychologists have have made used crisis simulations in experimental research to explore the role of gender, political views, message tone and other factors in the psychology of crisis decisionmaking. See Rose McDermott, “Experimental methods in political science,” Annual Review of Political Science 5, no.1 (2002): 55-56; Dominic Johnson, Rose McDermott, Jon Cowden and Dustin Tingley, “Dead certain: confidence and conservatism predict aggression in simulated international crisis decision-making,” Human Nature 23, no.1 (2012): 98-126. Many of these experiments have used university students as subjects, but US military officers have been the sample population in at least one. Alex Mintz, Steven Redd and Arnold Vedlitz, “Can we generalize from student experiments to the real world in political science, military affairs, and international relations?” Journal of Conflict Resolution 50, no.5 (2006): 757-776.
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