

The Flame of Chinese Nationalism

The Communist Party can't entirely control what it's helped create. That poses a risk to China, and the world.

BY JESSICA CHEN WEISS

September 18 will mark 83 years since Japanese troops crossed into northeastern China, beginning the last chapter in China's self-described "national humiliation" at the hands of foreign powers. Memories of war with Japan remain raw in China. More than half of Chinese expect another conflict with their neighbor to the East. Since February, the Chinese government has announced three new annual memorial days to commemorate China's struggle against Japanese militarism. Meanwhile, China's propaganda machine has been operating at full speed since August, when TV networks were instructed to feature more patriotic content to celebrate China's resistance against Japan in World War II.

So why haven't there been any major nationalist protests in China since 2012, when the largest wave of anti-Japanese protests to date flooded Chinese cities to commemorate the Sept. 18 anniversary? It's because explosions of popular nationalist anger are only selectively allowed. In May 2013, protesters who condemned Japanese proposals to revise the peace clause in its constitution were dispersed before they could reach the Japanese embassy. In December 2013, after Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe visited Yasukuni Shrine, which commemorates 14 A-class war criminals among Japanese war dead, protests in China were reportedly aborted due to government pressure. Even when Vietnamese protests against China's activities in the South China Sea escalated to violence in May 2014, killing several Chinese workers, Chinese media coverage was relatively muted and anti-Vietnamese protests failed to materialize.

This isn't an innovation of recent vintage. After Japan arrested a Chinese trawler captain near the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in Sept. 2010, Chinese authorities prevented

large-scale anti-Japanese demonstrations from taking place on the charged Sept. 18 anniversary days later. And popular demonstrations have never been allowed over the issue of Taiwan, which Beijing considers a rogue province and is perhaps the issue of greatest concern to Chinese nationalists.

There can be tangible benefits to letting protests go forward. Just as the U.S. president sometimes blames Congress for tying his hands, so too do Chinese leaders point to nationalist sentiment and popular protests to justify their tough stance and refusal to compromise. Claims about the pressure of public opinion on Chinese foreign policy are more credible when the streets of Chinese cities are filled with demonstrators demanding that their government take a tougher stance.

Examples abound of street protests enabling the Chinese government to show resolve. After U.S. planes bombed the Chinese embassy in Kosovo during NATO airstrikes in 1999 -- which U.S. authorities insist was unintentional -- anti-U.S. demonstrations across China conveyed domestic outrage, substantiating the government's determination to stand up to the United States. (The Chinese government stepped in to control the demonstrations on the second day, but only after the U.S. embassy was nearly overrun and the consul general's residence in the western city of Chengdu was set afire.) When Japan's bid for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council gained momentum in 2005, anti-Japanese demonstrations helped strengthen Chinese opposition to Japan's candidacy by showcasing popular anger over then-Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's repeated visits to the Yasukuni Shrine. In September 2012, popular anger over Japan's purchase of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea resulted in widespread demonstrations and online commentary calling for tougher measures -- even war -- to kick Japan out of the islands, reinforcing Beijing's opposition to the sale.

Yet it is not easy for the Chinese government to turn nationalist anger on and off without real cost to its own legitimacy. Every time Chinese

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authorities step in to nip a protest in the bud, they do so at substantial cost and risk to the government's patriotic credentials. It is often unclear which is the lesser hazard: the danger to stability of allowing nationalist protest, or the legitimacy cost of stifling it. Even when the size of a potential protest appears small, the government faces a dilemma, knowing that repression can alienate nationalists and drive mobilization underground, while unchecked protests can escalate into broader unrest. Absent other avenues for political participation, "a single spark can start a prairie fire," as

Chinese Communist Party Chairman Mao Zedong famously noted.

But Chinese authorities have themselves created the conditions that make the prairie particularly flammable. Collective memories of Japanese wartime atrocities in China, coupled with the Chinese education curriculum's focus on Japan, have helped nurture patriotism and nationalist convictions among new generations of Chinese youth. As a result, even without the aid of new propaganda, real anti-Japanese sentiments exist that leave the government vulnerable to charges of hypocrisy when it tamps down on protests while also claiming to defend the nation's interests. The more the Chinese government appears responsible for seeding nationalist sentiment, the less believably it can play the good cop in resisting extremist popular opinion. And while the marketplace for ideas in China has become more pluralistic and commercialized over the last three decades, censorship remains prevalent. Given limited channels for political mobilization, citizens may seize the opportunity presented by nationalist protests to advance other objectives.

The hazards created by these protests aren't limited to Beijing. Nationalist protests

could destabilize China or force authorities to freeze on a hardline position. These are both shared risks, ones that outside actors have an incentive to mitigate -- perhaps by tempering their public stance on sensitive questions and helping Beijing save face on high-profile issues. As former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger notes: "A prudent American leadership should balance the risks of stoking Chinese nationalism against the gains from short-term pressures." After the 2001 collision between a Chinese fighter jet and American EP-3 reconnaissance plane, for example, the Bush administration agreed on a face-saving compromise by conveying American remorse without admitting responsibility.

So far, the Chinese government has managed to ride the proverbial tiger of nationalism without being thrown. But the global community should not be fooled by the recent calm. With several hundred million Internet and cell phone users and the rapid growth of social media, which often spreads nationalist sentiment far and fast, it's becoming more difficult for China to say "no" to nationalist protests. A public reared on patriotic education and determined to restore China's standing in the world -- whether under this government or another one -- is not as predictable or firmly under party control as outsiders might imagine.

AFP/Getty Images

China's Social Media Underground

Fake terrorism threats, online dissidents, and smear campaigns by bogus accounts -- it's all part of Twitter's Chinatown.

BY BETHANY ALLEN-EBRAHIMIAN

The date was June 4, 2014. In Hong Kong, tens of thousands of residents would soon be converging to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the crackdown on anti-government protests in Beijing's Tiananmen Square that may have killed hundreds