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Jessica Chen Weiss

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Authoritarian Signaling, Mass Audiences, and Nationalist Protest in China

Jessica Chen Weiss

Abstract How can authoritarian states credibly signal their intentions in international crises? Nationalist, antforeign protests are one mechanism by which authoritarian leaders can visibly demonstrate their domestic vulnerability. Because protests in authoritarian states are risky and costly to repress, the decision to allow or stifle popular mobilization is informative. The threat of instability demonstrates resolve, and the cost of concession increases the credibility of a tough stance. The danger of instability and escalation increases foreign incentives to make concessions and preserve the status quo. This logic helps explain the pattern of authoritarian tolerance and repression toward nationalist protest. A case study of two U.S.-China crises shows how China's management of anti-American protests affected U.S. beliefs about Chinese resolve.

Domestic constraints and audience costs are said to give democracies an advantage over autocracies in international negotiations.¹ Democratic leaders often claim that their hands are tied by constituents or parliamentarians who will punish them at the polls for making concessions.² Although autocrats may be accountable to domestic elites,³ relative to democrats they have difficulty communicating these constraints to foreign observers credibly. When Chinese officials say foreign demands hurt “the feelings of more than a billion Chinese people,” or Middle Eastern diplomats claim that anger on the “Arab street” make compromise impos-

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1. Fearon 1994; and Schultz 2001.

2. See, for example, Schelling 1960; and Milner 1997.

3. See, for example, Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003; and Goemans 2000.

sible, such rhetoric is often dismissed as cheap talk. Most scholars have concluded that authoritarian leaders are disadvantaged in using domestic politics to signal their intentions internationally. Others argue that the internal politics of certain autocracies may be transparent and regularized enough for outsiders to infer that military, party, or bureaucratic elites will punish a leader caught bluffing.⁴ Yet the literature has not identified a specific mechanism by which authoritarian leaders can signal *ex ante* their domestic vulnerability. In democratic regimes, domestic opposition statements may serve this function.⁵

Nationalist, antiforeign street protests represent an analogous mechanism for authoritarian states—a costly signal by which authoritarian leaders can credibly invoke the pressure of public opinion and reveal domestic constraints on foreign policy. We often observe nationalist, antiforeign demonstrations on the streets of authoritarian regimes, even as other displays of popular sentiment are suppressed. In 1999, when North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) planes accidentally bombed the Chinese embassy in Yugoslavia, anti-American demonstrators stoned the U.S. embassy in Beijing and diplomatic properties around China. In October 2005, thousands of Syrians demonstrated against the United Nations (UN) investigation into the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. A month earlier, Iranian police gave protest permits to student associations demanding the resumption of uranium enrichment. In 2011, Vietnamese police looked on as protesters rallied outside the Chinese embassy and consulate, condemning Chinese actions in the South China Sea.

The phenomenon of antiforeign protest has not been systematically studied by social scientists. Indeed, some data sets on internal unrest explicitly exclude protests against foreign targets.⁶ There is wide variation in both the character of nationalist protest and the response of authoritarian governments. Some protests are orderly and focused; others are rowdy, violent, and critical of the regime as well as foreign targets. Governments choose to stifle, tolerate, stage-manage, and even manufacture street demonstrations. These choices have different consequences for the risk to the status quo, enabling authoritarian leaders to reveal information about their willingness to “go to the brink” in crisis diplomacy.

In bargaining terms, giving a “green light” to antiforeign protests sends a costly signal of resolve and generates a credible commitment to stand firm. By tolerating nationalist protests, authoritarian leaders reveal the status quo’s vulnerability to popular upset, akin to a “revolution constraint”⁷ on foreign policy that the leadership ignores at its peril. Hawkish protests make visible the domestic costs of concession, increasing the government’s incentive to stand firm and risk an international standoff rather than face the wrath of mobs at the palace gates. On the other hand,

4. Weeks 2008.

5. Schultz 1998.

6. Banks 2010.

7. Acemoglu and Robinson 2006.

giving a “red light” to nationalist protests signals that the government places high enough value on international cooperation to offset the cost of appearing unpatriotic before domestic audiences. If authoritarian leaders prevent protest in a manner visible to foreign governments—arresting activists the night before a rumored demonstration or dispersing protesters as they gather—the act of repression sends a costly signal of reassurance.

The argument rests on two mechanisms. First, nationalist protest is akin to a “threat that leaves something to chance,” to borrow Schelling’s phrase.⁸ In authoritarian states, nationalist protests can spin out of control, causing domestic turmoil and disrupting diplomatic relations. By tolerating nationalist protests and an appreciable risk of instability, the government demonstrates the importance it places on the issue, differentiating the government from one with a lesser concern. Second, because it is easier for the government to nip protests in the bud than suppress protests once they have spread, the escalation of street protests also locks in and enhances the credibility of an unyielding diplomatic stance.

At stake in managing nationalist protest is the effect on future diplomatic interactions as well as the proximate dispute. Even as nationalist protests enable the government to demonstrate resolve and commit to a tough stance in ongoing negotiations, the information revealed about the government’s preferences vis-à-vis the public has implications for deterring future challenges. Whether the government tolerates or nips protests in the bud, evidence of popular anger enables autocrats to demonstrate they are the “good cop”—moderate in comparison to “the street.” The threat to the status quo gives foreign governments an incentive to make concessions to avoid instability. By tolerating protests, the government makes its resolve to stand firm more understandable in light of domestic pressure. By nipping antforeign protests in the bud, autocrats demonstrate to outsiders that they are willing to spend domestic political capital for pragmatic diplomacy, reducing foreign concerns that domestic nationalism might jeopardize cooperation. As long as protests appear sincere rather than manufactured by the regime, both signals convey the specter of popular nationalism. “Rent-a-crowd” mobs in which protests appear insincere or manufactured by the government are the equivalent of cheap talk, revealing little about domestic constraints.

Existing theories have difficulty explaining the pattern of when autocrats allow versus repress nationalist protests. Antforeign protests are considered too costly or risky for the regime to repress, or else beneficial as a diversionary or “venting” strategy for social grievances. At the international level, existing theories tend to emphasize the diplomatic disadvantage of nationalist protests. Insofar as the “nationalist card” is considered a diplomatic tactic, the literature has not specified how nationalist protest—rather than public opinion or nationalist rhetoric—should affect bargaining.

8. Schelling 1960, 187.

Situating my argument within the bargaining literature, I develop a framework to explain the management of nationalist protest, focusing on the domestic and diplomatic trade-offs between allowing and repressing protest. I then discuss China's management of anti-American protest in two U.S.-China crises: the 1999 bombing of the Chinese embassy in Yugoslavia and the 2001 midair collision of a Chinese fighter jet and a U.S. EP-3 reconnaissance plane.

Nationalist Protest and Authoritarian Diplomacy

Conventional wisdom holds that dictators can make foreign policy freely, insulated from the public pressures that buffet elected politicians. For years, scholars and observers regarded the opaque, monolithic character of autocracies as a diplomatic advantage. Unlike democrats, autocrats could conduct state affairs without foreign observers “overhearing” domestic debates. Yet features that once seemed to put democracies at a disadvantage—particularly transparency, constraints on executive power, and vulnerability to domestic audiences—are now widely regarded as benefits to credible commitment and communication.⁹ Only recently has the pendulum begun to swing back, regarding certain autocracies as on par with democracies in crisis bargaining.¹⁰ Although not accountable to the citizenry via open and competitive elections, autocrats are no exception to the “two-level game” of strategic interaction between international and domestic politics.¹¹ In ordinary times, autocrats may be accountable to a “selectorate” or “winning coalition”¹² comprised of powerful elites in the military, party, or bureaucracy.¹³

Unlike institutional and elite-based mechanisms of authoritarian accountability, antiforeign demonstrations give potential force to protestors and ordinary citizens outside the elite, providing a visible, costly signal of the leadership's resolve and commitment to stand firm. In autocracies, nationalist protests pose a risk to the status quo. Diplomatically, nationalist protests can escalate into violence against foreign nationals and diplomatic property, creating an international incident and foreign demands unrelated to the dispute that prompted the protests. Domestically, protests can jeopardize stability for several reasons:

1. *Demonstration effects, tipping points, and information cascades.* Protests, once begun, can trigger the sudden realization that protest is acceptable, even safe, leading more people to join the protest. Once a critical mass has gath-

9. See Fearon 1994; Schultz 2001; Schultz and Weingast 2003; and Stasavage 2007.

10. Weeks 2008.

11. Putnam 1988.

12. See Shirk 1993; Roeder 1993; and Bueno de Mesquita et al. 1999.

13. Geddes 1999.

ered in the streets and authorities have not suppressed it, the protest can rapidly swell to a size unimaginable the day before.¹⁴

2. *Resource mobilization.* Protests beget protests by lowering the costs of collective action for groups with fewer resources, activating networks, and spreading protest techniques and repertoires from hard-core activists to previously passive groups and individuals.¹⁵
3. *Elite splits:* Protests may expose government weaknesses that were not previously apparent, revealing elite allies and fissures between hardliners and moderates.¹⁶

Nationalist protest is especially risky because it has the potential to shake the foundation of state legitimacy, particularly regimes relying on nationalist myth-making to bolster their popular credentials.¹⁷ Because nationalism promotes love of the nation, not love of the government, nationalist demands may advocate new policies, new leadership, and even a new regime to restore the national honor. In a worst-case scenario, protests may even topple the government.¹⁸

Repression is always costly, but dispersing an amassed crowd is more costly than hauling away a few “early risers” or warning off some “usual suspects” on the eve of a planned protest. More government resources must be mobilized to corral protesters and clear the scene without bloodshed. Suppression becomes more costly as protests attract domestic and international scrutiny, increasing the likelihood of international opprobrium and even sanctions. Domestically, even citizens who disagree with the protesters’ demands may defend the right to protest, including liberals who favor political reform and participation. The reputational costs of suppression thus increase once protests begin, varying with their perceived legitimacy.

Nationalist protests are also more difficult for the regime to suppress than protests that advance the interests of a particular group. Under the guise of patriotism, nationalism provides a protective layer against government suppres-

14. See Schelling 1978; Kuran 1991; and Lohmann 1994.

15. Tarrow 1998.

16. O’Donnell and Schmitter 1986.

17. See Snyder 1991 and 1993; and Van Evera 1994.

18. In the absence of cross-national data on antiforeign protests, I examined Archigos (1875–2004), which records twenty-nine cases in which leaders were ousted by protests. Goemans, Gleditsch, and Chiozza 2009. Four of these were partly antiforeign: the 1956 revolution in Hungary, where an anti-Soviet uprising caused the government to collapse (and precipitated a Soviet invasion); the 1979 revolution in Iran, where anti-American protesters deposed the shah; the 1972 riots in Madagascar against neocolonial agreements with France, which pushed President Philibert Tsiranana out of office; and the 1992 ouster of Azerbaijani President Ayaz Mutalibov, when protesters demanded tougher government action against Russia and Armenia in Nagorno-Karabakh. Given selection effects, even this number is striking. Governments tend not to allow high-risk protests and are likely to placate those that occur. Moreover, these four are cases where protests were the proximate cause of leadership turnover; there are likely more cases where antiforeign protests led to instability, followed by a military coup or foreign takeover.

sion, making it more costly for the government to use force to disperse protests. Protesters seeking sympathy have often used the legitimacy of nationalist protest to their advantage. In China, antiforeign protesters often chant, “Patriotism is not a crime!” Moreover, using force against patriotic demonstrations is more likely to backfire, because security forces are more likely to side with the protesters. In Iran, for example, the 1979 revolution succeeded in large part due to elements in the military that turned their back on the pro-American shah.¹⁹

Assuming that repression costs escalate implies that antiforeign protests are unlikely to “fizzle out” without satisfaction in the form of foreign concessions or a positive change in the status quo. That is, the government cannot assume that demonstrators will eventually disperse, regardless of the outcome. This assumption is reasonable in the short term, particularly during the initial “rapid diffusion” phase of the protest cycle.²⁰ Over the long term, protests may subside as exhaustion sets in. I thus adopt a relatively instrumental view of protest. Although some demonstrators will satisfy their appetite for protest after participating briefly, the experience will whet others’ appetite for protest, stirring them to continue pressing their demands. That protestors act instrumentally holds even if nationalist protest is a mask or outlet for antigovernment grievances. Nationalist protests may be attractive to domestic dissidents because the risk of repression is lower than protests that confront the regime directly. In an insincere protest, protesters are still unlikely to disperse without achieving their objectives, in this case domestic concessions rather than foreign policy demands.²¹

Protestors may participate for different reasons, including thrill-seeking and blowing off steam, but many also seek to effect policy change. Individuals may rationally protest to inform or manipulate government perceptions of popular opinion as supporting their preferred outcome.²² To protest purposively is rational if the private benefit of shifting the status quo, multiplied by the probability that the individual’s action will be decisive, exceeds the private costs of participating.²³ Because one individual’s decision to participate increases the likelihood that others join in, the private risk and cost of action also diminishes as demonstrations grow in size, providing relative safety in numbers.

19. For example, Telhami 2002, 73.

20. Tarrow 1998, 141.

21. If both the home and foreign government believe that nationalist protesters’ anger is purely domestic—and cannot be assuaged with diplomatic measures—then protests, while instrumental, do not signal resolve or generate bargaining leverage.

22. Lohmann 1993; this logic appears to fit the 2012 demonstrations by Wukan villagers, which alerted central authorities to grievances over a land dispute with local officials, enabling higher-level leaders to broker a compromise with villagers. On the regime-strengthening character of localized protest, see Lorentzen 2005; and O’Brien 1996.

23. As such, participants will tend to be relatively extreme in their valuation of the issue and/or beliefs about their ability to influence the outcome.

Authoritarian Responses to Nationalist Protests

In managing nationalist protests, autocrats weigh the risk to the status quo against the cost of using force or coercion to prevent citizens from gathering in the street. Figure 1 illustrates a stylized universe of possible protests defined by these two dimensions. The dashed line represents the set of protests for which the government is indifferent between tolerance and repression. Below the dashed line, the government allows protests because repression is more costly than the expected damage to regime stability. Above the dashed line, the government squelches potential protests that are relatively easy to repress but carry a high expected risk. As the government incorporates the potential diplomatic benefits of nationalist protest in its calculus, the set of protests that the government is willing to allow expands.

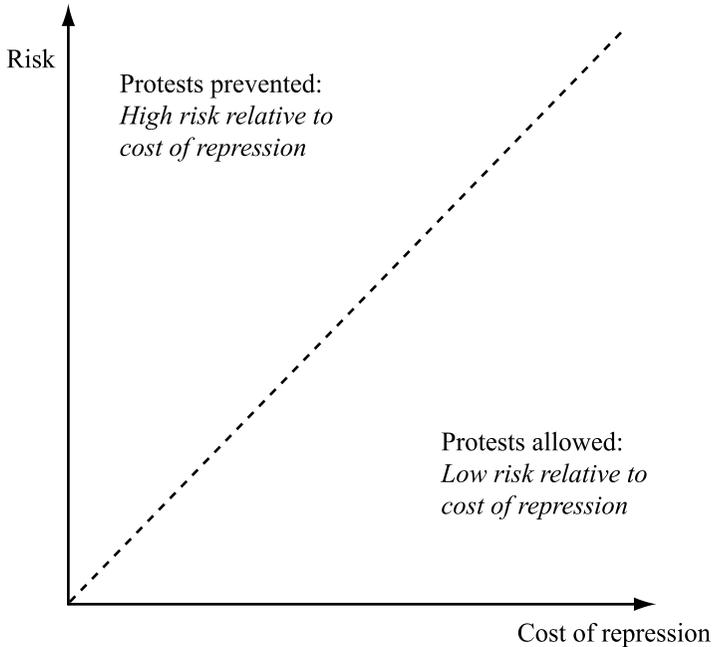


FIGURE 1. *The authoritarian government's domestic calculus*

Allowing antforeign protests enables autocrats to signal resolve and credibly commit to a tough diplomatic stance. First, because some risk exists that protests will accelerate and force a revision of the status quo, the government demonstrates that it cannot ignore public opinion. Even if the government initially allows

them, protests could get out of hand. At worst, protests could turn against the government, grow too large for state security to disperse, or generate such support that state insiders—even police or military units—may defect and disobey orders to suppress the protests. The decision to run this risk, however small, enables the government to signal resolve, differentiating it from a government that cares less about the international dispute.

The risk of domestic and diplomatic instability motivates foreign governments to show leniency at the bargaining table under certain conditions. The threat that leaves something to chance requires that the potential outcome be worse than the status quo. This holds when the cost to the foreign government of chaos, instability, and even state failure is prohibitively high. Foreign fears of instability need not require the threat of revolution or even a titular change of leadership. Large-scale protests can alter the balance of power between hardliners and doves within the reigning elite, pushing the regime to take a more hawkish stance. If nationalist protests are perceived to be more hawkish than the government's position,²⁴ then foreign governments may conclude that making compromises in the short run will bolster a friendly regime in the long run.

Even if the foreign government desires regime change—perhaps believing that a new government would be more moderate or democratic than the incumbent regime—the transition costs may be too high. Stability may trump the desire for regime change in the context of economic interdependence (such as “mutually assured financial destruction” in contemporary U.S.-China relations) or geostrategic objectives such as the containment of religious fundamentalism. Nontraditional security threats such as terrorism, piracy, and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction often give foreign actors a vested interest in the stability and governance of small and weak states, not just large and powerful states. Antiforeign protests also need not target an adversary. Nationalist protests may be more influential within an alliance or hierarchical relationship, where the foreign or patron state has a stake in bolstering its ally or client.

H1 (Signaling resolve): Nationalist protests signal resolve and reveal an authoritarian government's vulnerability to popular nationalism by demonstrating a “threat that leaves something to chance.”

Nationalist protests enable autocrats to claim credibly that they cannot maintain the status quo or meet foreign demands. Protests allow autocrats to generate domestic costs of backing down, an alternative means by which leaders can generate “audience costs” during negotiations. Conventionally, domestic audiences are said to punish their leaders for failing to follow through on public threats or other escala-

24. Hawkish protesters may support the government's stated position but demand more immediate or escalatory action to achieve that outcome.

tory steps, a claim that has generated theoretical and empirical controversy.²⁵ Rather than requiring audiences to sanction leaders for bluffing, in this situation it is the cost of suppressing protests that gives the authoritarian leadership an incentive to stand firm. These costs are not paid if the leadership stands firm, creating incentives to take a hawkish stance. If nationalist protesters see progress toward their objectives, they will more readily disperse without blaming the government.²⁶

Nationalist protests serve as a commitment device even when the government has the capacity to repress protests. Although the domestic security apparatus may be powerful enough to suppress large-scale demonstrations, protests push the government to toughen its diplomatic stance and thereby placate patriotic protesters. If the government stands firm, the foreign government bears the costs of escalation, either in lost cooperation (at best) or a spiral of military hostilities (at worst). By increasing the likelihood that the authoritarian government refuses to give way, risking conflict, nationalist protests give foreign governments an incentive to show lenience at the bargaining table.

H2 (Hawkish commitment): Nationalist protests raise the government's cost of concession, increasing the credibility of an unyielding diplomatic stance.

The specter of antiforeign protests also offers a cooperative function. Because it is costly for authoritarian leaders to nip protests in the bud, although not as costly once protests have gained steam, the decision to repress protests sends a costly signal of reassurance to foreign observers. By stifling demonstrations before they can grow large, dispersing crowds as soon as they gather, or detaining activists on the eve of a rumored protest, autocrats generate resentment among would-be protesters and leave themselves vulnerable to charges of being soft on foreign policy. If apparent to outside observers, these preemptive actions telegraph the government's willingness to reach agreement despite domestic criticism. For example, Jordan suppressed pro-Iraqi demonstrations in 1996 and all protests in 1998, following the decision to sign a peace treaty with Israel and strengthen ties to the United States. As Lynch writes, "the regime's strategic decision to curtail its relations with Baghdad as part of its renewed alignment with the United States and Israel . . . contributed directly to the crackdown on public freedoms in that period."²⁷ By nipping protests in the bud, autocrats convey their willingness to

25. See Smith 1998; Schultz 1999; Guisinger and Smith 2002; Sartori 2002; Slantchev 2006; Snyder and Borghard 2011; Downes and Sechser 2012; and Debs and Weiss 2012.

26. Although autocrats may justify concessions through propaganda, their ability to massage opinion is limited by alternative information sources, particularly among citizens who care intensely enough to "see through" official reportage. Sudden shifts in messaging are more effective at signaling the end of government lenience than persuading citizens that diplomats have wisely backed down. For experimental evidence of framing effects and audience costs in the democratic context, see Levendusky and Horowitz 2012.

27. Lynch 2006, 95, 114.

cooperate with foreigners and insulate diplomatic negotiations from domestic pressures.

H3 (Credible reassurance): Nipping nationalist protests in the bud sends a costly signal of the government’s willingness to cooperate with the foreign government.

Observable Implications

The theory holds that authoritarian leaders benefit internationally by revealing the existence of nationalist public opinion. When apparent in street protests, nationalist sentiment poses a risk to the status quo and creates conditional costs of backing down. For the first hypothesis, we should find evidence that the greater the perceived risk, the greater the signaled resolve. Convincing foreigners of the risk to stability and the cost of repression is a critical task for a government seeking to use nationalist protests for diplomatic advantage. In particular, success depends on foreigners being able and willing to distinguish between “sincere” and “manufactured” protests, illustrated in Figure 2.

		<i>Citizens</i>	
		Mobilize	Not mobilize
<i>Government</i>	Allow	1. Sincere protests	2. Manufactured protests
	Not allow	3. Stifled protests	4. No protests

FIGURE 2. *Sincere versus manufactured protests*

In sincere demonstrations, participants are self-motivated, self-chosen, and largely self-organized, even if their plans have been vetted by government authorities. Protesters continue to mobilize and demonstrate until the government responds to their demands or forcibly curtails their activities. In manufactured protests, participants are selected, organized, and motivated by the government (whether by

monetary reward or mandate). Sincere protests are often described as “spontaneous” by government officials and protest organizers, who both wish to differentiate protests from insincere “rent-a-crowd” mobs. Sincere protests carry a risk to the government and are costly to repress, unlike manufactured protests, which are likely to be dismissed as “cheap talk.”

Of course, reality is not cleanly divided between sincere and manufactured protests. Stage management reduces but does not eliminate the potential for protests to get out of hand—participants or bystanders may hijack the rally and literally seize the microphone for other objectives. For diplomatic purposes, the actual risk and cost of curtailment is less important than the perceived danger to the status quo and difficulty of restoring order. The more that outsiders believe that the government is vulnerable to public pressure and will stiffen its diplomatic stance to pacify protesters, the more that popular demonstrations strengthen the government’s bargaining position.

An additional implication of the signaling hypothesis is that nationalist protests should have a lingering effect on foreign beliefs over time, insofar as they reveal information about the government’s vulnerability to public opinion. In subsequent negotiations over similar disputes, foreign decision makers should show heightened sensitivity to nationalist sentiment and the constraints placed on the government’s public negotiating position.²⁸

For the hypothesis on credible commitment, the evidence should show that street protests raise the domestic costs of concession, putting pressure on the government to stand firm or increase its demands. Like audience costs, the costs of defying protesters are challenging to observe directly because of selection effects.²⁹ Just as democratic leaders are more likely to “go public” with their threats when they are prepared to stand firm, so are authoritarian governments more likely to allow protests when they are prepared to take a tough diplomatic stance, placating protesters and minimizing the need for coercion. If protests are effective at producing foreign concessions, moreover, the government can claim victory. Either way, the government avoids the cost of repression. Nonetheless, we can find indirect evidence that the government would have paid costs for backing down by examining domestic and foreign perceptions. This is one of the primary advantages to qualitative analysis. If domestic and foreign observers cite ongoing street protests as a primary reason to expect the government to stand firm, this should increase our confidence in the commitment mechanism. Likewise, for the third hypothesis, the evidence should show that domestic and foreign observers viewed the government’s curtailment of protests as indicating diplomatic flexibility.

Table 1 summarizes the observable implications that structure the case study, noting for each prediction the degree of certainty.³⁰ Highly certain implications

28. Particularly when the actors involved see the situations as similar. See Mercer 2005.

29. Schultz 2001.

30. Van Evera 1997.

TABLE 1. Hypotheses and observable implications

<i>Hypothesis</i>	<i>Observable implications</i>	<i>Degree of certainty</i>
<p><i>General proposition:</i> Authoritarian leaders benefit internationally by revealing the existence of nationalist public opinion, which when manifested in street protests poses a risk to the status quo and creates conditional costs of backing down.</p>	<p>Foreign and government diplomats refer to popular sentiment during negotiations.</p> <p>Government officials cite effects on diplomatic relations as motivation to allow or prevent protests.</p> <p>Government officials understand risks that nationalist protests pose to the status quo.</p> <p>Foreign leaders express concern about dangers posed by nationalist protests.</p> <p>Subsequent, similar interactions are influenced by information revealed about a government's vulnerability to popular nationalism.</p>	<p><i>Low:</i> Popular sentiment may affect negotiations and diplomatic positions even if officials do not refer to it.</p> <p><i>Low:</i> Government officials have strategic incentives to hide their role in allowing protests (and emphasize their role in curtailing protests when demonstrating reassurance).</p> <p><i>High:</i> If government officials are unaware or dismissive of risks, or see risks as unconnected to foreign policy choices, protests do not signal resolve.</p> <p><i>Low:</i> Foreign leaders may recognize risks but not voice explicit concern.</p> <p><i>High:</i> If decision makers regard situations as similar but protests have no effect on subsequent interactions, then signal of resolve was unsuccessful; however, foreign leaders may not refer to previous situations but still utilize information revealed, including decision to avoid actions that might arouse nationalist anger and precipitate crisis.</p>
<p><i>H1 (Signaling resolve):</i> Nationalist protests demonstrate a "threat that leaves something to chance," signaling resolve and an authoritarian government's vulnerability to popular nationalism.</p>	<p>Foreign leaders express concern about dangers posed by nationalist protests.</p> <p>Subsequent, similar interactions are influenced by information revealed about a government's vulnerability to popular nationalism.</p>	<p><i>Low:</i> Popular sentiment may affect negotiations and diplomatic positions even if officials do not refer to it.</p> <p><i>Low:</i> Government officials have strategic incentives to hide their role in allowing protests (and emphasize their role in curtailing protests when demonstrating reassurance).</p> <p><i>High:</i> If government officials are unaware or dismissive of risks, or see risks as unconnected to foreign policy choices, protests do not signal resolve.</p> <p><i>Low:</i> Foreign leaders may recognize risks but not voice explicit concern.</p> <p><i>High:</i> If decision makers regard situations as similar but protests have no effect on subsequent interactions, then signal of resolve was unsuccessful; however, foreign leaders may not refer to previous situations but still utilize information revealed, including decision to avoid actions that might arouse nationalist anger and precipitate crisis.</p>

H2 (Hawkish commitment):

Nationalist protests raise a government's cost of concession, increasing the credibility of an unyielding diplomatic stance.

Government leaders consider costs of defying protesters in setting foreign policy.

Foreign leaders are more inclined to make allowances for government in light of popular protests.

Foreign perceptions of government's domestic constraints diminish once protests end or are controlled.

H3 (Credible reassurance):

Stifling nationalist protests sends a costly signal of reassurance and interest in cooperation.

Government leaders incur popular resentment by preventing street protests.

Foreign leaders acknowledge the difficulty of stifling popular anger and quelling street protests.

Foreign leaders link repression of protests to the desire for diplomatic flexibility in pursuing cooperation.

High: If government officials are unaware or dismissive of domestic costs of backing down and having to repress protests, protests do not credibly commit government to hawkish stance.

Low: Although protests may enhance hawkish credibility, foreign government may counterescalate; on *average*, protests make terms of a negotiated settlement more favorable.

High: If foreign leaders see government as identically constrained in the presence and absence of protests, the theory fails; protest curtailment reduces, but not necessarily eliminates, perceived constraints.

High: If curtailment of protests is not domestically costly, repression does not send a credible signal of reassurance.

Low: Foreign leaders may recognize but not verbally acknowledge government's efforts to curtail protests.

High: If foreign leaders believe government repression of antifeign protests is driven purely by domestic considerations, curtailment of protests does not send a signal of reassurance.

are unequivocal; the theory is falsified if no evidence of the predicted outcome is found. Most predictions are probabilistic, however, meaning the theory cannot be ruled out even if the implied outcomes are not observed.

Methods

A detailed tracing of events is the most appropriate method of assessing whether government decision makers acted and reacted in a manner consistent with the theorized mechanisms. As difficult as it is to discern motives in the democratic decision-making process, it is even more so in autocracies, particularly during crises defined by a limited timeframe for response and a typically circumscribed set of participants in the decision-making process. Without records of internal deliberations, observations by officials and analysts with privileged access can serve as reasonable proxies, recorded in oral interviews, written analysis, and personal memoirs. Ideally, we seek government statements that its intention in allowing protests was to justify an unyielding diplomatic stance and signal the government's vulnerability to popular nationalism. But government leaders are unlikely to make such statements publicly. The more the government appears to have stirred up antiforeign protests, the more foreign observers should discount their sincerity. To the extent that government leaders refer to protests publicly, we expect them to emphasize the spontaneity and sincerity of popular protests.

Different types of evidence help shed light on the government's motivations and how foreign leaders perceived its actions, increasing confidence in the specified mechanisms. To infer motivations, the evidence should show that diplomatic factors were important in the government's calculus to allow or repress protests. We should find evidence that the government understood the domestic risks and costs of nationalist protest and sought to reveal these domestic constraints to foreign observers. To trace the diplomatic impact of nationalist protests, we should also find that foreign decision makers updated their beliefs about the government's domestic constraints and the risk of escalation.

As both a tough and easy case, China presents a useful plausibility probe. On the one hand, China is a relatively strong authoritarian state. Foreign observers may doubt that popular protests pose a sufficient risk to convey resolve or generate sufficient momentum to be costly for the government to repress. On 4 June 1989, the Chinese government demonstrated its willingness and ability to put down nationwide protests.³¹ As Pickering and Kisangani note, "Tiananmen Square should serve as a cautionary tale for those peddling ideas about the weakness of single-party regimes."³² If we still find evidence of domestic and foreign concerns about

31. Note, however, that the theory expects patriotic, antiforeign protests to be more costly to repress than prodemocratic protests.

32. Pickering and Kisangani 2010, 481.

China's vulnerability to nationalist protests and the difficulty of defying popular opinion, we should have greater confidence in the theory.

In other ways, China is a relatively easy case. Because nationalist revolution and popular rebellion are central themes in Chinese history, China may be more susceptible to street protest than countries where military coups or assassinations are more common modes of regime instability. Since nationalism is widely considered a pillar of the Chinese Communist Party's legitimacy, nationalist protests are more likely to be destabilizing in China than in a "tinpot" or "bandit" dictatorship.³³ Foreign governments are also more likely to be invested in the stability of a nuclear-armed and economically indispensable nation. Although weak and failing states have drawn equal concern in an era of transnational terrorism and proliferation, U.S. officials may place greater emphasis on stability in China and U.S.-China relations than less strategically important states. As Nye writes, "Bill Clinton was basically right when he told Jiang Zemin in 1995 that the United States has more to fear from a weak China than a strong China."³⁴ U.S. observers have pointed to the dangers of instability, fragility, and nationalism in China as reasons for moderation in U.S. policy.³⁵ Even one of the most famous proponents of *realpolitik*, former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, argues that "a prudent American leadership should balance the risks of stoking Chinese nationalism against the gains from short-term pressures."³⁶

The case study draws on primary and secondary sources in Chinese and English, including personal interviews, public statements, and published memoirs. Between 2006 and 2011, I conducted 129 open-ended interviews in China and the United States, including eight Chinese and thirteen U.S. officials, current and former, forty-three Chinese experts and intellectuals, and sixteen protest participants. To protect their identities, I quote them anonymously unless granted permission for attribution.³⁷

Case Study: China's Management of Anti-American Protest

I investigate two episodes where popular outrage against American actions threatened to erupt in street demonstrations across China. When U.S. planes acciden-

33. Wintrobe 2000.

34. Nye 2010, 151.

35. Shirk 2007, 269.

36. Kissinger 2001, 148. Although rapprochement with China is perhaps Kissinger's greatest accomplishment, a personal stake in U.S.-China relations does not necessarily imply concern for domestic instability.

37. Recognizing that institutional affiliations, personal preferences, and the passage of time may affect perceptions and recollections, I cross-referenced the information gained through interviews against written sources as much as possible.

tally bombed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade during a NATO air strike in 1999, killing three Chinese journalists and wounding twenty others, the Chinese government allowed anti-American protests. When a U.S. reconnaissance plane and Chinese fighter jet collided in April 2001, killing the Chinese pilot and forcing the U.S. EP-3 aircraft to make an emergency landing inside China, the government forbade anti-American demonstrations. Many analysts have examined the 1999 incident for insight into Chinese crisis diplomacy and the impact of popular nationalism, but few have juxtaposed it with other incidents when the Chinese government forbade nationalist demonstrations. Contrasting a “zero” and a “one” mitigates the problem of drawing inferences from only those cases in which the government allowed protests.

The embassy bombing and EP-3 incidents are similar along several dimensions, giving credence to the comparison. These similarities include factors that are idiosyncratic to the U.S.-China relationship, the sudden onset of each crisis, and the resulting public outcry in China. Only two years separate the incidents, allowing us to control for state capacity and political leadership on the Chinese side—Jiang Zemin was China’s leader in both cases. Both episodes have been characterized as “near crises” by the authors of the International Crisis Behavior Project: conflicts in which “each involved actor perceives a threat to basic values and a finite period for response but not an increased probability of military hostilities.”³⁸

The comparison illuminates how diplomatic incentives can affect the domestic management of nationalist protests. The Chinese government faced different bargaining environments when the two incidents occurred. In both cases, the diplomatic stakes were asymmetrical: higher for China in 1999 and higher for the United States in 2001. In China’s view, the embassy bombing was the third in a series of provocations meant to test China’s mettle.³⁹ When the plane collision occurred, by contrast, China’s leaders were more concerned about jeopardizing the fragile relationship with the hawkish new administration of President George W. Bush. Taking U.S. resolve into account, China was also more concerned that protests would backfire in 2001 than in 1999. Responsibility for the embassy bombing clearly lay with the United States, which U.S. officials acknowledged from the outset, even if the Chinese side deemed the initial level and solemnity of U.S. apologies insufficient. In 2001, by contrast, the United States was convinced that the Chinese pilot was at fault on technical grounds and concerned for the EP-3 crew. Having begun to establish a positive footing with Washington, China sought to reduce the perception that China posed a threat to the United States. In short, China stood to gain more by showing resolve and taking a tough position in 1999

38. Wilkenfeld 2006, 111.

39. First was the U.S.-led war in Kosovo over the objections of China and Russia, which in China’s view set a troubling precedent for intervention in secessionist disputes. The second was President Clinton’s refusal to sign an agreement on China’s entry into the WTO during Premier Zhu Rongji’s visit to Washington.

than in 2001, increasing the expected benefit of allowing protests after the embassy bombing relative to the plane collision.

In both episodes, the domestic management of public opinion appeared to influence foreign perceptions of Chinese resolve and diplomatic intent. By allowing anti-American protests in 1999, the Chinese government communicated its determination to stand up to the United States as well as domestic demands to take a tougher foreign policy stance. By repressing nationalist protests in 2001, the Chinese government sent a costly signal of its intent to keep U.S.-China relations on an even keel. Despite domestic accusations that the government was being too soft, Chinese leaders signaled that the incident should not impede progress in bilateral relations.

In addition, the dynamics of the embassy bombing protests support our expectations about the credibility and persistence of the signal. Protests that appeared spontaneous and volatile on the first day of the crisis were more credible than protests that appeared stage-managed thereafter. Orchestration reduced the amount of information sent by prolonged protests and the perceived constraints imposed by public opinion. Nonetheless, the signal of resolve and the government's vulnerability to nationalist opinion persisted in shaping foreign beliefs over at least the next two years, shaping U.S. perceptions during the 2001 crisis.

The 1999 Embassy Bombing

On 8 May 1999, two U.S. bombers dropped five precision-guided bombs on the Chinese embassy in Yugoslavia during a NATO air strike. As the news reached China, students in Beijing sought permission to demonstrate outside the U.S. embassy.⁴⁰ The Chinese leadership convened an emergency meeting, deciding on "a policy of persuasion rather than coercive prevention [toward protests] . . . to give guidance to the youth and students, and to prevent chaos or the loss of control."⁴¹ State television denounced the bombing as a "barbarian act."⁴² Tens of thousands of students took part in anti-American demonstrations in cities across China. In Chengdu, the residence of the Consul General was set ablaze. Besieged inside the U.S. embassy, Ambassador Sasser told reporters by telephone: "This whole thing could spin out of control. We're just hoping that the police can continue to control them."⁴³ An urgent message from U.S. personnel inside the embassy stated that protesters were likely to breach the compound. If Chinese security forces

40. According to various accounts, the Beijing Public Security Bureau and university authorities granted permission. See, for example, Zhao 2003, and Wu 2006.

41. See Wu 2005, 4, and 2006, 362.

42. CCTV, 8 May 1999. Available at <http://www.cctv.com/specials/kosovo/990508/n5.htm>, accessed 25 July 2012.

43. "Chinese in Belgrade, Beijing Protest NATO Embassy Bombing," *CNN* (Internet ed.), 9 May 1999.

did not intervene, U.S. officials warned, the Chinese government would have an international incident on their hands.⁴⁴

Nearly twenty-four hours after the bombing, President Clinton told television reporters that the bombing was a “tragic mistake.”⁴⁵ U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright personally delivered a letter of apology to the Chinese embassy in Washington, D.C.⁴⁶ The next morning, protests grew in number as more organized demonstrations took place and word spread that protests had official support. By the afternoon, the government began to rein in the protests. On the third day, the Chinese government suspended talks with the United States on human rights and nonproliferation. President Clinton apologized again, both on camera and in a letter to Chinese President Jiang Zemin. Universities and work units were instructed to wind down the protests.⁴⁷ On 14 May, Clinton and Jiang spoke by telephone. Clinton expressed his regrets, promised an investigation, and reaffirmed his commitment to bringing bilateral relations back to normal.⁴⁸ U.S. investigators found a “concatenation of errors” in explaining the mistaken targeting of the Chinese embassy.⁴⁹ On 30 July, the United States agreed to pay \$4.5 million in compensation to the victims of the bombing and their families. In December, China agreed to pay \$2.8 million for damages to U.S. diplomatic facilities, and the United States agreed to pay \$28 million for damages to the Chinese embassy in Belgrade.⁵⁰

To Allow or Not Allow Protest: Chinese Motivations

Without access to internal deliberations, it is difficult to assess China’s motivations conclusively. We do know that nationwide large-scale demonstrations did not erupt without the Chinese leadership’s knowledge and forbearance. Nationalist protests were initially sincere; the government’s actions were primarily reactive rather than proactive. The government recognized the risks of permitting protests, particularly with the approaching Tiananmen anniversary on 4 June. Numerous interviews and reports suggest that government officials, from university authorities to police on the street, acknowledged the danger that anti-American

44. Author’s interview with former U.S. official at the National Security Council, 23 March 2009, Washington, D.C.

45. “Remarks on Departure from Tinker Air Force Base, Oklahoma, and an Exchange with Reporters,” 8 May 1999. Available at (<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=57545>), accessed 25 July 2012.

46. “Letter to Minister of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China,” 8 May 1999. Available at (<http://secretary.state.gov/www/statements/1999/990508.html>), accessed 25 July 2012.

47. *South China Morning Post*, 12 May 1999.

48. “Chinese and U.S. Presidents Held Phone Conference,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 14 May 1999. Available at (<http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjdt/2649/t15797.htm>), accessed 25 July 2012.

49. Suettinger 2003, 375.

50. Campbell and Weitz 2006, 342.

protests might get out of hand.⁵¹ If anti-American protests posed such a great risk in 1999, why did the Chinese government not stifle them preemptively? A number of scholars and observers have pointed to the cost of repression. After the bombing had created “visible martyrs,” it would have been “too hazardous for the government to try to disallow student protests altogether,”⁵² and “if the students were not allowed by the police or the military to vent their anger . . . students would turn hostile on them, accusing them of being unpatriotic.”⁵³ From a domestic standpoint, the government faced a no-win situation in responding to popular mobilization. To allow protests might jeopardize government control and create instability, but to forbid protests would foster resentment and undermine regime legitimacy.

Against the backdrop of this domestic dilemma (consistent with the line of indifference between repression and tolerance in Figure 1), the Chinese government appears to have gambled on the international benefit of allowing protests and signaling resolve. According to the deputy director of an influential Shanghai research unit, “A minority viewed the bombing as intentional, an attempt to test China’s reaction to this kind of military strike. The majority, including me, did not believe that it was an accident,” but instead blamed a conspiracy in the Pentagon and CIA for seeking to punish China for providing Slobodan Milosevic with intelligence and logistical support.⁵⁴ Doubting that U.S. precision-guided bombs would have accidentally struck only the portions of the Chinese embassy responsible for assisting Milosevic, most Chinese believed the bombing was meant “to probe the Chinese government’s reaction to international crises, especially sudden accidents, as well as its mass reaction, public opinion, and related policies.”⁵⁵ Widespread conviction that the bombing was intentional pressured the Chinese government to signal China’s mettle in the face of perceived U.S. bullying. With the risk to stability and the cost of stifling protest appearing equally unattractive, the international benefits of signaling resolve appear to have tipped the scales in favor of allowing protests.

Diplomatic Impact: Signaling Resolve with Limited Leverage

The protests conveyed China’s resolve to stand firm against the United States. Despite government permission, the sincerity of public anger and the government’s vulnerability to domestic outrage was apparent to U.S. observers. With evidence on the streets, the government’s vulnerability to public opinion could not be easily dismissed, giving credibility to President Jiang’s later claim that “the outrages of 1.2 billion people are beyond any possible containment.”⁵⁶ A closer tracing of events illustrates the correspondence between foreign credulity and the apparent risk and

51. See also Zhao 2003, 14.

52. Perry 2002, xiv.

53. Wong and Zheng 2000, 337.

54. Author’s interview with Chinese expert on U.S.-China relations, 10 April 2007, Shanghai, China.

55. *Nanfang Zhoumo*, 11 May 1999, quoted in Shirk 2007, 218.

56. Wu 2006, 363.

difficulty of curtailing protests. When protests first erupted, U.S. officials recognized the government's complicity in steering them, but they also understood that popular anger was strong and volatile enough to challenge the government's handle on the situation. As a senior diplomat in the U.S. embassy recalled:

This thing got out of control. The government and the Foreign Ministry did not realize how determined and angry these people were ... at the United States, but also, as it went on, partially directed at the Chinese government. That's when I think the government decided that the better part of wisdom was to join the students and try to bus them over there to the American embassy. Because who knows? They might have stopped in Tiananmen and said bad things about the government.⁵⁷

After the first day, the Chinese government took additional measures to stage-manage the demonstrations.⁵⁸ As the government asserted more control, the perceived risk and cost diminished. Stage management dampened the signal of resolve, reducing the information that foreigners could glean from the ongoing protests. On television, Vice President Hu Jintao stated that the government "firmly supports and protects" all legally approved demonstrations, stressing that "we must prevent overreaction, and ensure social stability."⁵⁹ Working through party organizations, the government choreographed the next three days of demonstrations. The effect of increased control was palpable to U.S. observers. On the second day, the White House press secretary said that "it is considerably calmer at this point."⁶⁰ As orderly protests continued, U.S. alarm that the situation might get out of control faded to suspicions that the protests were manufactured. On the third day, Ambassador James Sasser told reporters: "We may go to bed early and get a good night's sleep."⁶¹

Stage management also relaxed the commitment effect of protests on China's bargaining position, even as the curtailment of protests eliminated any additional leverage the government might have sought by linking the bombing to other issues. Once the United States apologized and the Chinese government stood firm—halting bilateral talks on human rights and nonproliferation and threatening to obstruct a U.N. Security Council vote on a peacekeeping mission to Kosovo—curtailing the remaining protesters was relatively easy.⁶² Once protests ended, the

57. Author's interview with senior U.S. diplomat, 12 March 2009, Washington, D.C.

58. As with China's motivations in allowing the protests on the first day, it remains unclear whether the growing risk of domestic instability or the diminishing return for bilateral relations (given U.S. apologies and recognition of Chinese resolve) was more influential in the government's decision to take control of the protests.

59. Transcript available at (http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/europe/jan-june99/china_statement_5-9.html), accessed 25 July 2012.

60. *Associated Press*, 10 May 1999.

61. *Associated Press*, 11 May 1999.

62. Even so, according to Zhao 2003, officials had to threaten a group of students with disciplinary action to prevent them from continuing to the U.S. embassy, suggesting that repression would have been even costlier without diplomatic satisfaction.

government could no longer credibly invoke the difficulty of managing popular anger as a constraint on other issues. U.S. officials warned China not to take advantage of the crisis and refused to make concessions on China's entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO) or UN Security Council negotiations over Kosovo. On 12 May, when the streets were quiet, U.S. Trade Representative Charlene Barshefsky asserted that "it is very dangerous for China, in any way, to link the tragic events in Yugoslavia with WTO accession . . . The only possible rationale in China's mind for the notion that leverage has shifted . . . is that U.S. negotiators will feel guilty. Negotiations don't involve guilt."⁶³ Apparently recognizing that the United States would stand firm, the Chinese government refused to continue the WTO negotiations until the crisis was resolved.

The case illustrates that nationalist protests can be an effective signal of resolve even when leverage is limited. In allowing protests, China sought to demonstrate to the United States that China could not be bullied, its embassy bombed with only token regrets. Despite initial U.S. statements of "regret," Chinese officials were angered by what they saw as insufficient remorse for what some believed was a conspiracy to test China's mettle. Clinton's initial condolences were given in remarks to reporters during a tornado site visit and emphasized the need for NATO to "stay the course" in Yugoslavia. At stake for China was not whether the United States would say "sorry" but the level and sincerity of those apologies, symbolizing U.S. recognition of the importance of China's interests. According to Kurt Campbell, then-deputy assistant secretary of defense for East Asia, "the overriding desire initially inside the National Security Council was not to lose momentum or international support for the Kosovo campaign . . . [U.S.] policy makers likely underestimated how intensely China would respond to the attack."⁶⁴ Campbell concludes that the protests helped focus the attention of top-level policymakers on the "Chinese dimension," prompting U.S. officials to "show more remorse in public and spare no effort . . . to head off the crisis."⁶⁵ After the protests on 8 and 9 May, Clinton apologized in a formal letter and unsuccessfully attempted to reach Jiang by phone.

The increasingly staged appearance and curtailment of the protests reduced any additional leverage the Chinese government might have gained. As U.S. Trade Representative Barshefsky noted:

There was always this feeling on my part that the protests were orchestrated, simply because of the way in which they started, and then the way in which they abruptly ended. That made for very good theater and also increased bargaining leverage somewhat, though it's easy to misgauge by how much, because the U.S. was contrite almost immediately. But the protests demonstrated that China would stand up to the U.S.—period. China understood where

63. *Knight Ridder*, 12 May 1999.

64. Campbell and Weitz 2006, 335–36.

65. *Ibid.*, 337.

its national interests lay, and if it meant collision with the United States, particularly under such circumstances, then so be it.⁶⁶

Her remarks underscore that resolve and leverage are distinct and separable. Although the heavy-handed orchestration of the protests limited the extent to which China gained leverage, the protests helped signal that China, despite its eagerness to join the WTO, would not be “bullied.”

The 2001 EP-3 Incident

On 1 April 2001, an American EP-3 reconnaissance plane and a Chinese F-8 fighter jet collided over the South China Sea, killing the Chinese pilot and forcing the U.S. plane to make an emergency landing in mainland China. After the U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM) announced the incident on its website, requesting that China “respect the integrity of the aircraft and the well-being and safety of the crew,”⁶⁷ Chinese Assistant Foreign Minister Zhou Wenzhong met with U.S. Ambassador Joseph Prueher and blamed the collision on a “sudden turn” by the U.S. aircraft. Prueher rejected the Chinese version of the events as “physically impossible” in light of the EP-3’s limited maneuverability.⁶⁸ On 2 April, President Bush demanded access to the American crew and said that “failure of the Chinese government to react promptly to our request is inconsistent with standard diplomatic practice, and with the expressed desire of both our countries for better relations.”⁶⁹ President Jiang responded by demanding that the U.S. side bear full responsibility for the incident and stop reconnaissance flights near China. Bush toughened his stance, stating “We have allowed the Chinese Government time to do the right thing. But now it is time for our service men and women to return home.”⁷⁰

On 3 April, the Chinese leadership met and “issued clear guidelines, policies, and objectives for the handling of the incident . . . to engage in a resolute struggle against the erroneous behavior on the part of the United States as well as [to] strive for an early resolution of the event.”⁷¹ News of the collision was broadcast by the Chinese media in a restrained manner, following Propaganda Department guidelines. Despite popular anger over the “martyred” pilot and U.S. surveillance, the Chinese government repressed street protests. According to a People’s Liberation

66. Author’s interview with Barshefsky, 23 February 2009, Washington, D.C.

67. Blair and Bonfili 2006, 380.

68. Keefe 2001, 5.

69. “Remarks on the United States Navy Surveillance Aircraft Incident in the South China Sea,” 2 April 2001, available at (<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=45667>), accessed 25 July 2012.

70. “Remarks Calling on China to Return the United States Military Crew and Surveillance Aircraft,” 3 April 2001, available at (<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=45675>), accessed 25 July 2012.

71. Zhang 2006, 396.

Army (PLA) colonel, “If the university authorities hadn’t stopped the students from taking to the streets, there would have been demonstrations everywhere.”⁷²

On 4 April, as President Jiang left for Latin America, he reiterated that the United States should apologize and do something to benefit the development of bilateral relations.⁷³ That day, Secretary of State Colin Powell formally expressed his “regret” in a letter to Vice Premier Qian.⁷⁴ On April 5, Prueher and Zhou met and drafted a five-step plan to resolve the crisis.⁷⁵ On 11 April, Prueher delivered a formal letter stating that the United States was “very sorry” for the loss of life and aircraft and for the unapproved entering of China’s airspace. On 12 April, the U.S. aircrew left China. Meetings to discuss responsibility for the collision, how to prevent future incidents, and the return of the U.S. aircraft began on 18 April. On 3 July, the disassembled EP-3 aircraft left China aboard a Russian cargo plane.

To Allow or Not Allow Protests: Chinese Motivations

The evidence suggests that China’s desire to reassure the new Bush administration motivated the decision to stifle nationalist protests during the EP-3 crisis. According to a senior Chinese foreign policy advisor, the government was tempted to hold large public rallies, but “Jiang was clear from the beginning about not doing anything to negatively impact the long-term relationship with the U.S.”⁷⁶ A month before the collision, Vice Premier Qian had visited Washington to establish a positive footing with the Bush administration. According to former ambassador Wu Jianmin, “The visit was successful. Afterward, the U.S. side replaced the aggressive formulation ‘strategic competitor’ with ‘not strategic partners, but not irreconcilable enemies.’”⁷⁷ Seeking to protect this fragile warming of relations, “China’s leaders did not want the airplane collision to derail U.S.-China relations,” said a Shanghai analyst. “In contrast with the embassy bombing, the midair collision occurred shortly after Bush had taken office. Qian Qichen had visited the United States and things were going all right.”⁷⁸

China’s incentive to show resolve was also reduced by doubts over which side was at fault. Within China, “the majority of international relations scholars believed that the air collision was an accident, not the U.S. fault like 1999,” the Shanghai analyst recalled. “A minority of scholars even criticized the pilot, Wang Wei, for perhaps even causing the accident.”⁷⁹ Given this uncertainty, China concluded that

72. Shirk 2007, 236. See also Zhao 2003, 13–14.

73. *Renmin Ribao*, 5 April 2001, 1, author’s translation.

74. Secretary Colin L. Powell, “Remarks Following Meeting with King Abdullah of Jordan,” 4 April 2001, available at <http://2001-2009.state.gov/secretary/former/powell/remarks/2001/2006.htm>, accessed 25 July 2012.

75. Keefe 2001, 7.

76. Quoted in Shirk 2007, 236.

77. J. Wu 2007, 324.

78. Author’s interview with expert on U.S.-China relations, 10 April 2007, Shanghai, China.

79. *Ibid.*

it was less important to signal resolve than to prevent hawks in the Bush administration from seizing on the incident. “It was never clear that the Chinese government at the highest levels wanted that [EP-3] incident to occur,” said a senior U.S. intelligence analyst. “There was a lot of nervousness on the Chinese side about what direction the administration was going, [so] when the incident occurred, I think they had to be worried that if [their response] were to become overly nationalistic, with students in the streets, it might have shifted the debate within the administration.”⁸⁰

The crew and plane also provided China with an alternative source of bargaining leverage. By continuing to detain the crew, the Chinese government could passively escalate the crisis, imposing costs on the U.S. side while running an increased risk that the United States would retaliate. The Chinese government made clear that it would not release the crew until the United States had expressed some form of apology. By preventing anti-U.S. protests, the Chinese government tempered its stance vis-à-vis the United States, giving Bush administration officials reason to refrain from labeling the incident a “hostage crisis.”

Diplomatic Impact: Credible Signal of Reassurance

The Chinese government’s decision to prevent protests after the EP-3 collision sent a credible sign of reassurance, a signal that was received by the United States. John Keefe, special assistant to Ambassador Prueher during the crisis, wrote: “We also saw a Chinese government acutely sensitive to public opinion about this incident . . . University students wanted to hold demonstrations to vent their anger. The government forbade them from taking such action [and] repeatedly stressed . . . that this event should not be seen as a major affair in U.S.-China relations.”⁸¹ According to Western media reports, police detained protesters who put up anti-American posters in front of the U.S. embassy on 4 and 5 April.⁸² On 5 April, according to Dennis Blair (then PACOM chief) and David Bonfili, “for the first time, it appeared that China was more interested in solving the problem than it was in holding to its version of the collision and attempting to extract an admission of responsibility from the United States.”⁸³

U.S. officials interpreted China’s restraint as evidence of a sincere interest in maintaining stable relations. As a senior U.S. intelligence analyst recalled, “recognizing that there was some danger to the nascent relationship with the new Bush administration, they [China’s leaders] worked very hard to keep that nationalism in check. They orchestrated in 2001 an extremely successful PR campaign [to] mourn the Chinese pilot without bringing people to the streets . . . to allow an

80. Author’s interview with senior U.S. intelligence official, 12 March 2009, Washington, D.C.

81. Keefe 2001, 10.

82. *Agence France Presse*, 5 April 2001.

83. Blair and Bonfili 2006, 382.

outlet for public sentiment without making it overtly anti-American.”⁸⁴ Although the crisis strained relations, “The Sino-American relationship might have suffered more if the two governments had not focused on the overall well-being of their relationship and relatively quickly settled the crisis.”⁸⁵ Had China allowed anti-American protests while holding the crew and plane, both sides would have had more difficulty reaching the face-saving compromise of the “two sorrys” in the Prueher letter. Even without anti-American demonstrations, the Bush administration faced criticism for expressing regret over a collision that China appeared to have caused.⁸⁶ On the Chinese side, with street demonstrations the government would have been hard-pressed to maintain a flexible position, resist calls to prosecute the U.S. crew, and accept “sorry” in lieu of a formal apology.

Persistence of the Diplomatic Signal

One of the most striking findings from the EP-3 crisis is how sensitive American officials were to Chinese nationalism in the absence of street protests. U.S. officials understood the difficulty of managing public anger and interpreted Chinese restraint as a signal of cooperative intent. What made this signal credible was partly China’s actions during the crisis—detaining would-be protesters and restraining domestic reporting—but also the lingering impression of the embassy bombing protests. Had demonstrations appeared wholly manufactured in 1999, U.S. officials should have been more dismissive of Chinese efforts to restrain protests in 2001. Instead, they credited the Chinese government with working “very hard” to leash popular anger, suggesting that U.S. officials interpreted Chinese actions through the lens of the previous crisis.

Alternative Explanations

Three alternative views merit discussion. In the first, “unhelpful constraints,” the government reacts defensively to grassroots mobilization, forced by public outrage to allow antiforeign protests lest citizens turn on the government. In the second, “domestic benefits,” the government allows or encourages nationalist protest to let citizens vent frustration and participate in regime-strengthening rituals. In the third, “elite divisions,” hawkish critics within the government foment nationalist protests to strengthen their position in internal power struggles, providing an opening for public opinion to influence foreign policy. These explanations share a

84. Author’s interview with senior U.S. intelligence official, 12 March 2009, Washington, D.C.

85. Zhang 2006, 412.

86. Robert Kagan and William Kristol called the episode a “profound national humiliation,” warning that “American capitulation will also embolden others around the world.” *Weekly Standard*, 9 April 2001.

focus on the government's domestic incentives; insofar as nationalist opinion affects foreign policy, the consequences are largely seen as detrimental and unintended. My theory differs in that international as well as domestic incentives affect the government's cost-benefit calculus. The potential costs and constraints of nationalist protest can benefit a government's diplomatic objectives in current and future negotiations. And how tightly nationalist sentiment ties the government's hands depends on how protests are managed—the domestic constraints on foreign policy are endogenous.

Unhelpful Constraints

In this view, the costs of defying popular sentiment and the risks to stability create a dilemma for the government between tolerance and repression.⁸⁷ When protests are allowed because repression is too costly or risky, leaders become “captives of the sentiments they have cultivated [which] probably reduces their own flexibility on these issues.”⁸⁸ Nationalist sentiment is detrimental to rational diplomacy, “constraining the ability of China's elite to coolly pursue China's national interest.”⁸⁹ In this view, the 1999 crisis taught the leadership how unhelpful the protests were, motivating them to prevent protests in 2001.⁹⁰

I agree that nationalist protests are costly to repress and make diplomatic compromise more difficult for the government. However, whereas these scholars stress nationalist protests' negative impact on long-term cooperation and smooth diplomatic relations,⁹¹ I emphasize that short-term, tactical escalation may also be desirable when a government seeks to demonstrate that it will not be pushed around. Cooperation may be the end goal, but on what terms? As Putnam notes, domestic constraints improve the distributive consequences of an agreement, even if the likelihood of reaching an agreement is diminished.⁹² Moreover, if protests were only detrimental to cooperation, serving only to “alienate” foreign observers,⁹³ we would not see the concern and willingness to accommodate Chinese nationalism that U.S. officials showed in 1999 and 2001.

Second, this vein of scholarship implies that China was equally constrained by public opinion in the two crises. As Gries says, “during the protests about the 1999 Belgrade bombing and the 2001 spy plane collision, popular nationalists severely restricted the range of political options open to those who make decisions about the Party's foreign policy.”⁹⁴ Likewise, Wu notes that “in times of

87. See, for example, Gries 2004; Johnston and Stockmann 2007, 194; and Shirk 2007.

88. Oksenberg, Swaine, and Lynch 1999, 520.

89. Gries 2005, 255.

90. See, for example, Xinbo 2007; and Zhao 2004, 266.

91. See, for example, Christensen, Johnston, and Ross 2006.

92. Putnam 1988, 440.

93. Oksenberg, Swaine, and Lynch 1999, 520.

94. Gries 2004, 134.

diplomatic crisis, such as the spy-plane collision in 2001 and the embassy bombing in 1999, people's spontaneous online responses might complicate the situation and impede a smooth resolution in China's interest."⁹⁵ Whereas these analyses suggest that nationalism imposes a constraint exogenous to the government's own actions, I suggest that the costs of defying popular nationalism are greater when the government allows protesters to mobilize. The costs of defying public opinion were greater in 1999 because of the decision to allow protests in the first place, whereas by repressing protests in 2001 the government gained more room to maneuver, facilitating the "tactical flexibility"⁹⁶ that enabled a relatively smooth resolution to the crisis.

Domestic Benefits

A second set of alternatives holds that autocrats may allow or encourage nationalist protests to bolster their domestic standing. Venting analogies portray protests as a physical release of frustration, a "safety valve" for pressure in society,⁹⁷ whereby foreign targets provide a scapegoat or distraction for grievances against the regime. As Zheng claims, "Thanks to the anti-Western demonstrations, the leadership did not need to worry about the tenth anniversary of the June-Fourth Incident . . . it enabled the Chinese leadership [to label] any form of dissent and opposition as unpatriotic [at] a time of mounting external threat."⁹⁸ Others see antiforeign protest through the lens of nationalist mythmaking, as one form of "public demonstrations of nationness."⁹⁹ Even if demonstrations are clearly manufactured by the regime, some suggest that ritualized performances may strengthen authoritarian rule, fostering complacency and "compliance through enforced participation in rituals of obeisance that are transparently phony."¹⁰⁰

While nationalism in the form of propaganda, historical mythmaking, and rhetoric may augment regime legitimacy,¹⁰¹ few observers of Chinese politics argue that nationalist protests have the same unmitigated benefit. Even those arguing that the 1999 protests diverted attention from the Tiananmen anniversary also emphasize the risk to social stability.¹⁰² Even authorized protests may "invite transgressions"¹⁰³ and turn against the regime. Chinese protesters often subvert official symbols and rituals.¹⁰⁴ Public demonstrations raise the likelihood that citizens realize the extent to which others share their private disgust with the

95. X. Wu 2007, 185.

96. Zhao 2004, 271.

97. Shen 2007.

98. Zheng 2000, 14. See also Fewsmith 2008, 220–21.

99. Tilly 2002, 97.

100. Wedeen 1999, 6.

101. See Zhao 2004; and He 2009.

102. Zheng 2000, 15.

103. Wedeen 1999, 5.

104. Wasserstrom 1991.

regime: “it is only when this hidden transcript is openly declared that subordinates can fully realize the full extent to which their claims, their dreams, their anger is shared.”¹⁰⁵ Unlike nationalism, nationalist protests are not a “sort of laughing gas”¹⁰⁶ the state administers to distract public attention from socioeconomic grievances.

Whereas venting analogies imply that citizens and the government derive act-contingent utility from nationalist protests, the domestic benefit of protest is outcome contingent. Nationalist protests may enhance regime legitimacy if the government is willing and capable of responding “sympathetically yet shrewdly to the grievances expressed.”¹⁰⁷ In 1999, the government helped ameliorate public anger by pointing to U.S. apologies, halting negotiations on the WTO and other issues, and promising an investigation into the bombing. Yet many protesters were dissatisfied with the curtailment of protests rather than pleased to have vented their frustrations.¹⁰⁸ Other participants felt they had been manipulated by the government.¹⁰⁹ Such anecdotes suggest that the domestic benefits of nationalist protest are far from assured, even if the diplomatic outcome is favorable. Had the United States been unwilling to make such extensive efforts to pacify Chinese anger and taken a tougher stance—publicly chiding China for supporting Milosevic or giving China an ultimatum on the WTO rather than allowing talks to be postponed—China might have had to soften its stance, absorbing the diplomatic humiliation in order to move forward with other priorities. In this counterfactual, protests would have been domestically damaging rather than beneficial.

Protests intended for domestic consumption may still generate bargaining leverage, depending on foreign perceptions. If the home government believes that nationalist protests are purely cover for domestic grievances, it will not feel compelled to take hawkish diplomatic measures, weakening the commitment effect. Realizing this, the foreign government may decide concessions are pointless, reducing the home government’s bargaining leverage. But if nationalist protests shift public attention away from domestic issues toward the government’s performance on foreign affairs, protests may create incentives for the government to stand firm, strengthening the commitment effect. If the foreign government believes the government will follow through on its diversionary gambit, or that diplomatic concessions will ameliorate the government’s domestic predicament, then the foreign government has an incentive to concede to avoid conflict.¹¹⁰ In 1999, even though U.S. observers were aware of the Chinese government’s complicity in stoking nationalism and the diversionary benefit of allowing protests as the Tiananmen

105. Scott 1990, 223.

106. Quoted in Solt 2011, 822.

107. Perry 2010, 27.

108. Author’s interview with a researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, a party member and then-graduate student at People’s University, 19 July 2006, Beijing.

109. Zhao 2003.

110. See Smith 1996; Leeds and Davis 1997; and Clark 2003.

anniversary approached, the United States recognized China's resolve and sought to mollify Chinese anger.

Elite Divisions

A third set of explanations cites intra-elite conflict as playing a dominant role in shaping China's foreign policy during the two crises.¹¹¹ In this view, the impact of public opinion on Chinese foreign policy is conditional on a divided elite; when the elite is cohesive, public opinion is said to have a "sharply circumscribed" effect on public opinion.¹¹² My framework is more general: elite divisions are unnecessary for public opinion to influence policy or for domestic constraints to be credible. However, the framework can include elite rivalries, which may give rise to and be exacerbated by nationalist protests. Nationalism, according to a noted Chinese historian, "could force even moderate leaders to adopt radical policies and plunge the country into chaos. Moderate policies might be seen as making concessions to the 'imperial West,' giving hardliners an opportunity to increase their power."¹¹³ The bargaining advantage remains if foreign observers understand that protests will force a more hawkish policy or strengthen hawkish elites unless foreign concessions are made.

However, the evidence does not suggest that internal divisions were the primary factor driving the 1999 protests, or that elite cohesion was the reason protests were prevented in 2001. Although there is widespread agreement that the embassy bombing prompted internal criticism of President Jiang as too pro-American,¹¹⁴ leaked documents do not suggest that bureaucratic or factional elements facilitated protests to press Jiang to take a tougher stance.¹¹⁵ While we cannot rule out this possibility, a simpler explanation is that Jiang allowed protests to show both domestic and international audiences that he could be tough on the United States. Although we may never know the true balance of domestic and international motives in the Chinese government's decision to allow the 1999 protests, the diplomatic consequences of allowing protests are the same: demonstrating resolve.

In the EP-3 crisis, the lack of elite cohesion did not result in anti-American demonstrations. Some U.S. observers have noted that Chinese military officials tried to deflect blame for the collision by claiming that the EP-3 plane was responsible.¹¹⁶ If the military provided civilian leaders with misinformation, this may explain the discrepancy between China's initial escalation of the crisis and its later

111. See Fewsmith 2008; Lampton 2001, 257; and Shirk 2007, 257. On intra-elite accountability in international conflict, see Weeks 2012.

112. See Fewsmith and Rosen 2001; and Reilly 2012.

113. *South China Morning Post*, 18 December 2000.

114. See Shirk 2007; and Fewsmith 2008.

115. Nathan and Gilley 2002, 170.

116. Author's interview with a senior U.S. intelligence official in Washington, D.C., 12 March 2009; and Mulvenon 2002.

decision to resolve the crisis swiftly, once the technical impossibility of a “sudden turn” by the U.S. aircraft became clear. Despite incentives that PLA officers might have had to encourage protests, perhaps to avoid reprimand from the top leadership, the civil-military gap did not appear to influence the decision to repress—not allow—protests.

Conclusion

Authoritarian leaders can benefit internationally by managing nationalist protests to signal their diplomatic intentions. The specter of nationalist protests gives authoritarian leaders a visible mechanism to communicate the degree of domestic constraint on foreign policy. Because nationalist protests may cause domestic and diplomatic instability and are increasingly costly for authoritarian governments to suppress, the decision to allow protests signals resolve in international bargaining and makes it difficult to offer diplomatic concessions. Imagine an autocrat sitting down to negotiate with a democrat. The democratic leader can point to Congress or Parliament and say, “I can’t budge—they’ve got me pinned.” With antiforeign protesters in the streets, the autocrat can retort: “You might lose points at the polls, but I could be overthrown, exiled, or much worse. You have Congress, but I have mobs!” By contrast, the decision to repress nationalist protests sends a credible signal of reassurance and reduces the domestic cost of compromise.

Nationalist protests are not the only diplomatic tactic available to authoritarian leaders. They can also demonstrate vulnerability to pressure from hawkish voices through legislative elections and more informal ways of giving voice to elites that could constrain or sanction the incumbent. For example, the Muslim Brotherhood’s strong showing in Egypt’s 2005 parliamentary elections and Hamas’s victory in the 2006 Palestinian elections helped convince the Bush administration to shift the focus of democratization efforts away from immediate elections. Rather than press autocracies in the Middle East and North Africa to hold more competitive elections, the Bush administration instead emphasized building the rule of law and other democratic institutions, improving governance without giving political power to actors who might take foreign policy in a more hawkish direction. As a senior advisor to the Egyptian Foreign Ministry remarked:

When the United States needs Egypt to do things, the government says “back off” because we have a monster at home . . . Especially [with] elections, we risk instability and the strengthening of extremists . . . When we had our parliamentary elections, the Muslim Brothers won almost all the seats they competed for . . . That was a very clear sign that if you have free and fair elections, this is what you are going to get.¹¹⁷

117. Author’s interview, 23 June 2010. Cairo, Egypt. Note also the success of Islamic parties in the elections after Mubarak’s ouster.

Authoritarian regimes may hold elections for reasons that have little relation to scaring international observers with the foreign policy consequences of democratization.¹¹⁸ But election results may enable pseudo-democrats to demonstrate the extent of popular support for a more hawkish foreign policy, giving international actors incentives to reduce pressure on the incumbent leadership.

Anecdotes from other regions—including anti-U.S. protests in Pakistan, anti-Russian protests in Ukraine, anti-Thai protests in Cambodia, anti-Cambodia protests in Thailand, and anti-Chinese protests in Kyrgyzstan—suggest the theory is not restricted to China. We should expect nationalist protests to be an effective commitment tactic on issues where foreign observers understand that public opinion is more hawkish than the status quo ante. From Saudi Arabia to Pakistan, many of the world's remaining authoritarian regimes receive aid from the West in exchange for foreign policy concessions that are out of sync with popular opinion, including basing rights, cooperation on terrorism, and favorable access to oil and other natural resources. Despite the relative opacity of these regimes, foreign observers are often able to infer how moderate the incumbent autocrats are relative to the “street.” The more that street protests appear representative of prevailing public attitudes, the more legitimacy the government stands to lose by stifling demonstrations or making diplomatic concessions—and the more credibly the government can claim that its hands are tied. And because autocracies are not equally capable of anticipating and responding to popular mobilization, we should expect variation in the information revealed by nationalist protests and their foreign policy consequences. Where the government is relatively weak, the signal sent by protests is noisier, because observers cannot detect whether the protest occurred without the government's knowledge. When protests occur in weak autocracies, however, foreigners are more likely to believe that the government has no choice but to placate demonstrators with a tough diplomatic stance, so the commitment effect is stronger.

Although my focus has been on authoritarian regimes, antiforeign protests may also help democratic states gain bargaining leverage, but the mechanism is different. Because the cost of repressing protest is much higher in democracies than in autocracies, democratic leaders are less able to choose which protests to allow and which to prevent, reducing their value as a signal of the government's resolve. In this regard, democracies are like weak autocracies. Hawkish protests affect diplomatic negotiations not by signaling resolve but by communicating information about the electorate's preferences and tying the government's hands. Street protests convey intensity of citizen feeling that a public opinion poll might not reveal. The degree to which democratic protests lock in a hawkish diplomatic stance depends on factors such as the democratic incumbent's vulnerability to electoral challenge and whether protesters are partisans of the ruling or opposition party. These and other factors will affect whether antiforeign protests are more powerful diplomatic instruments for democracies or autocracies in international negotiations.

118. See, for example, Gandhi and Lust-Okar 2009; and Hyde 2011.

Nonetheless, the logic of antforeign protests as a mechanism that both autocrats and democrats can employ calls into question the use of audience costs to explain the democratic peace. If both types of regimes utilize domestic constraints to reveal information and communicate credibly, other factors must explain why democracies tend to settle disputes without force. Moreover, a common critique of audience costs and other hands-tying mechanisms is that decision makers may prioritize the need to maintain flexibility against the desire to enhance credibility.¹¹⁹ The bargaining logic of nationalist protest is sensitive to these trade-offs. When decision makers seek to retain flexibility, they can repress nationalist protests, signaling their interest in avoiding conflict.

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119. See Snyder and Borghard 2011; and Snyder and Diesing 1977, 215.

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