Riots in China: a Preliminary Assessment

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ABSTRACT

Once a few weeks have passed since the anti-Japanese riots in China, the time has perhaps come to carry out a preliminary assessment of these events. The underlying dispute which prompted them, and the details on many of the disturbances, have already been reported extensively by the media, and instead we will pause and reflect on some related aspects together with the prospects for the future of Sino-Japanese relations and security in the wider East-Asian Region.

Keywords: China, Japan, territory, islands, riots, nationalism, protests.
THE NATIONALIZATION OF THREE OF THE ISLANDS: PROVOCATION OR APPEASEMENT?

The first issue we may discuss is the ultimate meaning of the event which prompted the protests, namely the decision by Tokyo to buy three of the islands from their current owners, thus preempting their announced purchase by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government. Here we find two completely contradictory accounts, on the one hand the official Chinese posture saw it as an attempt to reinforce Tokyo's control over this disputed territory and strengthen its claim on the islands. On the other, as we have noted, it was designed at least in the short run to prevent Tokyo Governor Ishihara from developing them, building civilian infrastructure such as a light tower and a fishermen shelter.

This brings us to the balancing act which Tokyo has been trying to follow for decades, insisting that the Islands are Japanese while preventing the country's citizens from visiting them and blocking their economic development. It is a policy which may be seen as avoiding provocative gestures towards Beijing and leaving an open door to some sort of agreement with China, and one which for these same reasons has come under increased domestic pressure. It is difficult to know with certainty what the Japanese Government expected from the purchase of the three islands, other than in the short term trying to avoid Ishihara from seizing the initiative, and it may not matter that much since at the end of the day how it was interpreted by Beijing may be more important. However, both possibilities lead to the same conclusion. If Beijing saw it as a step toward stronger control over a disputed territory, it made sense for China to react as she did. On the other hand, if the Asian giant saw it as a sign of weakness and a measure designed to appease her, it also made sense to push Japan to grant further concessions. Thus, we can see how Tokyo was and remains in a difficult spot whatever her ultimate intentions and whichever way Beijing interpreted them.

WIDER HOSTILITY BETWEEN BOTH COUNTRIES

It would be most unfair to portray the whole of the Chinese population as engaged in the violence directed at Japanese nationals and enterprises. A majority refrained from joining in and we even heard some voices calling for calm. However, it would be unrealistic to go to the other extreme and see the attacks as the work of a tiny minority of radicals, which was clearly not the case. Furthermore, many Chinese, while not directly taking part in the events, supported those who did and saw nothing wrong in ‘teaching a lesson’ to Japan.
All this is a reflection of a deeper trend, regardless of the conflict over the Senkaku Islands there certainly is a high degree of animosity between the two countries. This may often, although not always, be hidden behind diplomatic niceties, politically correct language, and growing trade and investment links, but it is there, and is not disappearing anytime soon. Furthermore, some factors seem to militate against better bilateral relations. At the government level, these include Taiwan's key strategic role, which neither Beijing nor Tokyo are forgetting. For both China and Japan it is essential in terms of national security to prevent the other side from controlling Formosa. On the other hand, at the popular level, we can see a growing "fatigue", that is a tendency to show less restraint when referring to one's neighbor, and a lower mental barrier to contemplating the use of force against it. This is a gradual development, but one difficult to arrest in both China and Japan.

THE IMPACT OF DEMOCRATIZATION AND POLITICAL LIBERALIZATION

It is often said that democracies do not fight each other, and history is witness (with a few exceptions) to this assertion. It may therefore be tempting to conclude that the way to ultimate put to rest the possibility of a shooting war in East Asia would be to wait for China to become a democracy. To reinforce this, we could add that it would also be desirable to see a more open and representative Japanese political system. The problems with this view are manifold, and include at least the following factors:

China may take a long time to become a democracy. Despite impressive social and economic changes, and smaller but still noteworthy political transformations, since 1979, China remains a dictatorship and the Communist Party is eager to keep it that way. The fall of the Soviet Union only reinforced the Chinese leaders' suspicions of any steps in the political front.

It is open to debate whether such a large and diverse country would hold together under a democratic regime. Fear of secession may act as a significant obstacle to moves toward democracy and is indeed often cited by Chinese when discussing future political scenarios for the country.

Even if, in the long run, a democratic China and a politically more open and liberal Japan, may be a guarantee against military adventures, the path toward such scenario would still be fraught with perils and an increased likelihood of falling prey to the temptation to resort to force. A Chinese leadership less secure in its power and more in need to retain social and political legitimacy may be more prone to trying to occupy the Senkaku Islands. Conversely, a Japanese administration more in tune with the growing popular mood may be less shy about deploying the full might of the country's military in their defense and if necessary recovery. Insulation from the people's will is not the hallmark of democracy, rather the contrary, but it may facilitate coexistence, at least in the short run. This shows how narratives of democratization are often too
simplistic, as seen this last year in North Africa and the Middle East: elections do not always bring democrats to power, and popular majorities do not always long for peace.

PROTESTS, DICTATORSHIP, AND SOCIAL CONTROL

This brings us to an issue which has already been discussed by a number of observers but which nevertheless merits careful attention, namely the interplay between decentralized popular protests in China and government policy. In other words: were the attacks spontaneous, tolerated, or sponsored by the government? And, to what extent do they reinforce the future political legitimacy of the regime, or instead threaten to undermine it?

These are of course complex questions, with no simple one-sentence answers. To begin with, we can note that China does not usually allow mass protests unless either at least condoned by the regime, or carefully circumscribed to the local arena and not aimed at Communist party rule as such. Thus, over the past decade, we have seen a growing number of local protests over issues such as corruption or the environment, with varying degrees of tolerance. The red lines seems to be general criticism of the party (criticizing a given official can be acceptable, but not party rule), ‘sensitive’ (or core) issues such as Tibet or Taiwan, and any attempt to coordinate local dissent or protests into a nationwide movement (whatever the issue at stake).

Applying these criteria we can see that protests against Japan would involve one of the red lines (Taiwan), albeit in support of Beijing’s position, while crossing the third one, in view of the nation-wide scope of the protests. It could be said, on the other hand, that while taking place all over China there is no hard evidence of the protests having been coordinated. It is difficult to ascertain the degree to which the authorities launched the protest or to which they simply let them proceed undisturbed. The dynamics between popular protests and political legitimacy is always complex, both in democracies and totalitarian states. Playing the Japan card is of course tempting for Beijing, whose sole claim to legitimacy rests in social order and harmony, unification and expansionism, and high economic growth. When order and harmony are under growing stress, and the economy begins to show the first symptoms of a deep structural malise, the time may have arrived to let some steam off, albeit in a carefully calculated manner, since it may otherwise turn against Beijing. The risk to the regime is greater than it seems, it is not just a matter as some observers have noted of running the risk of seeing the population grow used to mass protests (of a scope not often seen in the last three decades), but also of infusing it with some expectations that it may be unable to fulfill. In effect, Beijing seems to be promising to get the Senkaku Islands on a plate, a goal which while not impossible to deliver if Japan folds, China may be unable to secure if her neighbor decides to fight. As noted by Hugh Bicheno in his unofficial history of the Falklands War, territorial conflicts may be useful to ‘distract the masses’,
but ‘it creates an issue others will exploit to question the nationalist credentials of whoever is refraining from recovering the lost lands.’

BRINGING HONG KONG AND TAIWAN CLOSER TO CHINA

Although the size of demonstrations in Taiwan was much smaller than in China, it is no coincidence that Chinese nationalists on both sides of the Strait have devoted their energies to Japan and the Senkaku Islands over the summer. President Ma may be sensing that economic trouble ahead in China threatens to demolish one of the premises of his administration, namely the view that Formosa’s economic wellbeing rests on closer links with the Continent. If the impressive economic growth rates seen in the PRC for the last three decades come to an end, proponents of an Anschluss will have to come up with an alternative narrative.

At the same time, Japanese national security requires that Taiwan not be in the hands of any hostile power, while any attempt to preserve the island’s de facto sovereignty requires (together with rearmament, in both its military and moral strands) a strengthening of trade and investment links with maritime democracies. Therefore, it is likely that Taipei and Tokyo will be looking at each other closely over the coming years.

From a military point of view, there is no point in holding on to the Senkaku Islands while conceding Taiwan to China, since a large part of their strategic value lies in their proximity to Formosa. The development of a true naval nuclear deterrent by China would increase even further the value of both Taiwan and the Senkaku Islands, since the East China Sea is, together with the South China Sea, an area that Chinese naval planners would like to see closed to outside interference in order to be able to safely operate ICBM-equipped submarines.

WERE THE PROTESTS PART OF A WIDER ECONOMIC WARFARE CAMPAIGN?

In addition to diplomatic facilities and private citizens, the target of many of the protests were Japanese owned or connected enterprises. There is a strong and apparent reason for this: they are visible. That is, if protesting against Japan, the easiest target are the well known brands or explicitly Japanese-related enterprises, such as restaurants. We can also note that there is a strong tradition in China of boycotting Japanese goods as a reprisal for real or imagined grievances, going back to the early XX Century.

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1 Hugh Bicheno, Razor’s Edge. The Unofficial History of the Falklands War, London, Phoenix, 2007, p. 64.
Calling that economic warfare may however be going a step too far. Not because Beijing has never engaged in it, it has, for example imposing a blockade on rare earths exports following an incident in the Senkaku Islands in 2010. However, on that occasion, although ultimately self-defeating (Japan and other countries have accelerated moves toward recycling, alternative technologies, strategic stockpiling, and exploration of additional sources from Russia to Vietnam) there was an industrial policy rationale behind it, namely attempts to move up the ladder and attract manufacturing of products from rare earths, instead of simply exporting the raw materials. On the other hand, however, attacking Japanese business may result in decreased FDI at a time when the Chinese economy is beginning to look fragile. We can also note that tourist flows from China to Japan have fallen sharply in the wake of the protests. Again, it is unclear to what extent this is the result of individual decisions or part of government policy.

STRIKING BACK, JAPAN’S TRUMP CARD

Although the summer has also been witness to landings by Japanese ‘activists’ in the Senkaku Islands, together with some minor incidents involving Chinese interests in Japan, there has not been any wide scale reprisal protests in reaction to the riots across the East China Sea. On the other hand, we have heard a lot of speculation over possible moves by Japanese corporations to redirect part of China-bound Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) to other Asian countries, a subject on which the Filipino press has been particularly eager to concentrate.

Concerning this, there are three factors that we must take into account. First of all, that even before this ‘hot’ summer in East Asia, a growing number of enterprises (not only Japanese) were already reconsidering and seeking to reduce their exposure to China, for a mix of business and political issues. The key word here is ‘reduce’, nobody is seriously talking of abandoning the Asian giant, but some companies have realized they were overreliant on a country prone to instability, whose economy may soon be heading south, and where the authorities seem intent on favoring domestic enterprises as one of the keys to transition from a low-wage economy to one providing more added value. Thus the expression ‘China Plus One’ strategy, meaning investing or sourcing components in China plus another Asian country, as a hedge against political and market risk.

Second, if riots against Japanese citizens and companies recur, it will be very difficult to make out simple prudent geographical diversification or even relocation from reprisals. It may just become a moot point why Japanese corporations gradually leave China if a culture of violence takes root there.

Third, a growing number of voices in Japan are wondering why Tokyo should keep providing economic support to China, in the shape of preferential loans, multilateral concessional lending, open access to consumer markets, and FDI, in the face of persistent territorial claims on Japanese territory. These voices have traditionally
been in the minority among the political class, and even less relevant in the bureaucracy, but in the turbulent waters of Japanese politics, with a number of new (or not so new but potentially more significant) actors, and the possibility of major realignments, successive administrations may find themselves under increased pressure not to appear ‘soft’ on China. Since that country is a major market for Japanese products, we can see how it may be easy to fall into tit-for-tat rounds of economic sanctions, popular decentralized boycotts, and reprisals. On the other hand, however, we should not underestimate the ability of political and bureaucratic elites to overcome popular opinion and keep providing financial support to old policies. We can see an example of this in a fellow island democracy, Great Britain, where a recent parliamentary vote in favor of real cuts to the European Budget does not seem to be likely to be translated into government policy in the short run.