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# TIME TO TAKE A DEEP BREATH IN EAST ASIA

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## Time to Take a Deep Breath in East Asia

Although most China and Japan experts in the West believe the two nations will once again return to the negotiating table in order to resolve their [dispute](#) over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, the conditions for a perfect storm of military confrontation still exist. In recent months the administration of President Barack Obama has sent first Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and then Defense Secretary Leon Panetta, to Tokyo and then to Beijing, to try to defuse tensions in the East China Sea, as Washington has become increasingly concerned that its defense treaty ties to Japan would drag it in to conflict with the People's Liberation Army Navy in order to defend Japan's territorial claims. And more recently, most Chinese and Japanese leaders have avoided extremely inflammatory speeches, instead criticizing each other loudly, but not calling for direct confrontation.

A military conflict between the two countries would undoubtedly greatly harm their economies, and that of Taiwan (a lesser player, but not a bystander in this conflict) and the world as well—something nobody wants. Yet the danger of a very destructive military conflict between two of the globe's most powerful militaries remains. Here are some of the key sources of kindling that may yet be used to stoke the fires of nationalistic conflict in East Asia this year:

**Both China and Japan are focused on domestic politics more than international economics for the near future.** Japan's democracy, still reeling from the 2011 earthquake and ensuing nuclear disaster, and resulting government leadership resignations and sustained popular protests against government economic planning and its reliance on nuclear power, is being led by Premier Yoshihiko Noda, a Democratic Party of Japan leader who can not afford major crises and more potential votes of no-confidence in the Diet. Noda needs stable foreign relations in order to focus on internal political conflict. China's authoritarian government, led by Communist Party general secretary Hu Jintao, is preparing for the 18th Party Congress in October 2012, in which formal reins of power will be handed over to current Vice-President Xi Jinping. Once-in-a-decade leadership transition periods are not a good time for Chinese leaders to be seen as flexible or complacent in the shadow of potential conflict with foreign powers.

On its face, the Chinese government seems to be politically stronger than its Japanese counterpart. It demonstrated enormous strength at all levels last week in simultaneously

## Time to Take a Deep Breath in East Asia

encouraging, facilitating, and then tamping down popular protests against Japan in cities across China, and yet Chinese leaders could very likely be heaving a collective sigh of relief as they reflect upon the outcome. Chinese history has shown that popular protests over perceived foreign aggression can bring down Chinese governments, as students and others disaffected with the state's harsh policies and corruption can create disorder using foreign affairs as a reason to rally larger—and even more nationalistic—parts of Chinese society to their cause.

In early September 2012, Chinese local party leaders displayed this delicate dance as they tried to strike a balance: pragmatically stealing the fire of protesters who threatened greater violence and at the same time organizing demonstrators so that each could have their chance to parade before the Japanese diplomatic outposts and shout slogans before being hustled along in order to allow the next group to move in. The Shanghai police told Japanese business [Uniqlo](#) to put up a banner saying China owned the Diaoyu Islands, hoping that this would dissuade protestors from stoning the popular clothing stores. Meanwhile, across town, the [government](#) forcefully kept protesters away from the Japanese consulate, perhaps concerned they might once again be forced to pay for any damages caused there, as after similar protests in 2005. The Shanghai government is obviously very skilled at controlling popular protest—likely an artifact of the Shanghai Expo in 2010—but can all Chinese local leaders be counted upon to be so skilled at balancing popular outrage and public order?

The Beijing government has also had a massive upgrade in both domestic security forces, technology and nonlethal weapons dealing with street protests, coming from the Beijing Olympics in 2008, and yet other developments in Beijing have made protest logistically even easier than before. In the 1980s and 1990s, most protesting Chinese college students found it very difficult to leave their campuses in Northwest Beijing (Haidian District) and travel the nearly 10 miles to the foreign embassies in Eastern Beijing (Dongcheng and Chaoyang Districts). When they marched from their campuses across Beijing, their movements gave the municipal police many hours of preparation time. Now, students can simply jump on the No. 10 subway line and be demonstrating outside the Japanese embassy within the hour. And more and more potential protestors in China now have access to their own personal cars, motorcycles, and mopeds. Most commentators have noted that China's microblogs (weibo) have made it easier for

## Time to Take a Deep Breath in East Asia

people to mobilize for collective action, but China's prosperity and urban development have also made the basic logistics of popular protest in China's cities much simpler.

**Both Japanese and Chinese publics are increasingly visibly hostile to each other, and the third public involved, the American public, is not even paying attention.** Chinese people love Japanese goods and have warmly welcomed hundreds of thousands of Japanese students, scholars, and businessmen, and millions of Japanese tourists, since the 1970s. Similarly, Japan has warmly welcomed hundreds of thousands of Chinese students, scholars, and businessmen, and in recent years, increasingly more tourists. And yet between the two publics there is a violent history that will not be forgotten. Japanese 20th century imperialism, and the “Pan-Asianism” of the 1920s and 1930s that subordinated the emerging Chinese public as an inferior below the more militarily and economically advanced Japanese empire, still stings among the Chinese survivors of Japanese military atrocities. And through the marvels of modern education, it stings still among their descendants. On September 18, 2012—the 81st anniversary of the 1931 Japanese invasion of China at Mukden—saw the current Chinese government welcoming widespread popular protests against Japan as a state-sanctioned “upgrade” from the usual day of merely attacking Japan in the classroom. Meanwhile, in Japan, citizens watched the occasionally violent and destructive protests in China and lamented the “terroristic Chinese” and their unshakable animosity toward all things Japanese.

This may be the root of the problem of nationalism in East Asia: the Chinese public is a phantom public in the eyes of Japanese, and the Japanese public is a phantom public in the eyes of Chinese. Neither public believes the other public is capable of exerting any rational, civilizing, or restraining force upon their governments or their militaries. This is why a Chinese person can be friends with a Japanese in China, and yet participate in protests against Japan. And this is why Japanese can act the same toward Chinese. Each values the individuals they meet. Each knows that their governments and militaries have the ability to protect them from each other's governments and militaries. And yet fundamentally what they distrust is each other's publics: the “phantom public” menace. One of the main causes of this must be education. [Education systems](#) in both countries obscure and distort history, leading to further antagonism, by claiming that each other's peoples are inherently bad and inferior. Chinese point to the racism of Tokyo governor

## Time to Take a Deep Breath in East Asia

Shintaro Ishihara—who famously declared that in order reduce crime in the capital “we should fingerprint all Chinese”—and use that to stereotype all Japanese. Japanese point to the violence directed at Japanese by a small number of people in China and use that to stereotype all Chinese.

The situation is not helped by the fact that the 800-pound “gorilla in the room”—the United States Navy—is commanded by democratically-elected American leaders who represent an American public that is not only largely unaware of what is going on in the East China Sea, but also believes it has no responsibility to resolve the dispute. Fortunately, American political and military leaders are foresighted and pragmatic and actively trying to mediate and bring Tokyo and Beijing back to the table of peaceful negotiation. But of course in this era of globalization both the Japanese and Chinese publics can see very clearly the enormous disconnect between the strategies and actions of America’s leaders and the true values and intentions of the American public. The Chinese and Japanese publics both know that the American public is mainly focused on domestic economics, and to the extent that they are focused on foreign affairs they are mainly concerned about the Middle East or the Eurozone. With the recent visits of Clinton and Panetta to Tokyo and Beijing, Chinese and Japanese military and political leaders know exactly what American leaders are thinking. But Chinese and Japanese publics must wonder: “If push comes to shove,” will the American military and its civilian leaders become involved in yet another conflict overseas? This is indicative of the third source of kindling that may stoke nationalist fires of conflict in East Asia: the relationship between publics and their militaries.

**The Chinese and Japanese publics have an extremely romanticized view of the capabilities and effectiveness of their enormous militaries. The American public has a clearer view of its military, but it increasingly values bringing its military home and away from foreign conflicts.** The rising number of troops and weapons in East Asia in recent decades has been followed by a rapid proliferation of think tanks in the United States, Japan, and China that were created to answer a key question: When will China replace the United States as the major military power in Asia? An avalanche of official white papers, and RAND-style private consulting studies, followed by a blizzard of academic and policy related security briefs and reports, have carpeted the Internet with countless assessments and scenario reports designed to address this question. And yet very few of these studies actually take into account that sustained

## Time to Take a Deep Breath in East Asia

military conflict actually requires the mobilization of publics. We must wonder: Will the national populations of East Asia actually support armed conflict with each other?

An American scanning the microblogs of China and the chat rooms of Japan can see instantly that the Japanese and Chinese publics have a highly romanticized and unrealistic understanding of the nature of modern warfare and the capabilities of their own militaries. To watch a popularly-produced Chinese music video entitled [“Flatten Tokyo”](#) (跨平东京) is to have a glimpse in to a highly emotional, symbolic, and charged view of national militaries. To the extent these views reflect the views of the common person in China, they suggest a massive disconnect with reality. The [Chinese blue-water navy](#) is still in its infancy, and will not be sinking the Japanese navy any time soon. And although so far much more restrained, [Japanese protestors](#) against China in Tokyo show a similar lack of connection to reality when they call on the Japanese government to “sink all Chinese boats.” It seems unlikely that the PRC military, a nuclear power, would not meet such an attack on unarmed, patriotic civilians with escalating violence.

I would argue that the hidden danger here is that Chinese and Japanese military officers may have come to share the same sentiments and views as their national publics and decide that they do indeed have the muscle to “teach the other a lesson.” In fact, it is not clear at all that either military has the knowledge to wage war on any practical level. No Japanese soldier, from the lowest private to the highest general, has any personal experience in combat, although many have had experience training with American counterparts. The Chinese People’s Liberation Army’s top generals were junior officers when China invaded Vietnam in 1979 to force that country to back down from its invasion of Cambodia. That war is perceived as ending in a draw, with China withdrawing after making its point.

In contrast, America has hundreds of thousands of veterans who have served in combat situations all around the world, and its commanding generals in Washington, D.C., are almost exclusively drawn from the ranks of successful field commanders. Chinese and Japanese senior commanders have only a demonstrated capacity to do well in war games and exercises, or to be good students of strategy, tactics, and political education. We have only to look at the grim history of the early

## **Time to Take a Deep Breath in East Asia**

stages of America's involvement in World War I, or of World War II, to see how ineffective mere military education and exercises can be. History shows that wars have a steep learning curve, and moving up that curve costs tens of thousands of lives. The American public may be very ignorant of most things foreign, but it does grasp the simple truth that national militaries require experienced soldiers. It is very unlikely—as reflected in the videos and the posters and the slogans of Chinese and Japanese protestors—that the publics of China and Japan are aware of this simple fact, nor is it known if they are even interested in the type of sustained foreign conflict that would generate the level of experienced soldiery necessary to become a true superpower. Let us hope that Chinese and Japanese soldiers take a more sober view of the dangers of conflict than their respective national publics do.