

These Anti-Japan Protests Are Different

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Recent images of anti-Japan demonstrators in Chinese cities bring back memories of thousands of Chinese marching past my balcony on Beijing's main boulevard, where I lived at the time, in April 2005. Seven years ago, tens of thousands of Chinese took to the streets in cities across the country to denounce Japan in the largest display of people power since the Tiananmen demonstrations in 1989. But this time is different.

Back in 2005, as in recent days, the protests were mostly peaceful. The atmosphere in Beijing was more reminiscent of a carnival than a hardcore protest. But then, like now, this rather benign picture was ruptured by reports of angry Chinese protesters attacking Japanese citizens, smashing Japanese shop windows and overturning Japanese cars.

Seven years ago the anti-Japan protests were sparked by Chinese opposition to Japan's bid for a United Nations Security Council seat and the Japanese government's approval of a history textbook that downplayed Japan's wartime atrocities. This time the protests erupted after the Japanese government purchased three of five uninhabited East China Sea islands -- which Japan calls the Senkaku and China calls the Diaoyu Islands.

The Japanese government made the purchase to deter Tokyo's hardline, ultra-nationalist mayor from buying the islands himself. (The islands have been privately owned since 1972, when the United States handed them over to Japan.) But from Beijing's viewpoint Japan took a decisive step to assert sovereignty over the islands, to which both China and Japan lay claim. Beijing promptly sent six maritime enforcement vessels to patrol the area. Not only is the emotionally charged issue of sovereignty at stake: The islands' surrounding waters are believed to be rich in oil and gas deposits.

Although the current demonstrations are smaller than in 2005, this time around the outpouring of anti-Japanese sentiment in China could have much more serious consequences.

First, outrage over Japanese history textbooks cannot ignite an armed conflict. But in the tense situation at present there is a genuine risk of a maritime incident. Vessels under the command of various law enforcement agencies from both China and Japan have been dispatched to the disputed waters in defense of sovereign territory. China's state-run national radio announced on Monday that 1,000 fishing vessels are also on their way.

China last week took its own decisive step and unilaterally announced baselines to formally demarcate its territorial waters in the area. From China's viewpoint, demarcation legally places the disputed islands under Chinese administration and entitles Beijing to decide which vessels traverse its waters. When one recalls the diplomatic crisis following the collision of a Chinese fishing trawler and Japanese coast guard vessel two years ago, one can only surmise that in this volatile atmosphere another maritime incident could lead to the use of force.

Second, the political situation in Beijing is much tenser today than it was seven years ago, when Hu Jintao had already ruled as China's top leader for three years. Today the Chinese Communist Party is preparing to transfer power to a new generation, but various factions among Party officials are evidently gridlocked and unable to agree on a number of crucial issues. These include how to deal with the disgraced Chongqing party secretary Bo Xilai and who should be chosen for the all-powerful Politburo Standing Committee.

Because consensus has not yet been reached among China's past, present, and future leaders, each of whom have a degree of influence, a date for the Party Congress has not even been announced. Intense political wrangling continues. Many jockeying for a place on the Politburo Standing Committee could favor China taking a tougher stance against Japan.

An incident involving Japan would be detrimental both for Mr. Hu and for Xi Jinping, the man groomed to be China's next top leader. In the Chinese political context it is difficult to criticize an adversary on domestic issues, but one can undermine an opponent if he has mismanaged an international incident. Neither Mr. Hu nor Mr. Xi can propose a conciliatory solution to the present stand-off with Japan. They would be accused of weakness and betrayal of China's national interests.

Third, dissatisfaction with social injustice, the wealth gap, corruption and rising inflation is much deeper and more pervasive than seven years ago. Already in 2005 the Communist Party leadership lived in a state of existential anxiety, fearful of losing power as a result of citizens taking to the streets demanding a more competent and fair government.

Today the collapse of the Soviet Union haunts China's leaders more than ever. That's because the economy is slowing and growth is the foundation of their legitimacy. In 2005, China's economy was still growing at an annual rate of about 10%. Today, with growth under 8%, anti-Japanese protesters could in a flash turn into anti-government demonstrators opposing factory closures and demanding work. Moreover, anti-Japanese sentiment could in the long run damage robust economic ties between the two countries.

Lastly, social media enables Chinese citizens not only to express their views, but also to engage in dialogue in a manner which was unimaginable seven years ago. In 2005, I was astounded that 10 million online signatures had been gathered for a petition opposing Japan's Security Council bid. Today, more than 300 million Chinese have social media accounts. People power combined with the mobilizing power of the social media could prove highly destabilizing in China and for its relations with Japan.

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