

Lessons for the EU from the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands Crisis

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What happened in China?

Since April 2012, China witnessed a series of violent public protests against the Japanese decision to purchase the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, followed by a diplomatic row between Beijing and Tokyo (and, occasionally, Taipei). Anti-Japanese rallies were reported in eleven Chinese cities, including Beijing, Shanghai, Hong Kong, Qingdao, Harbin, Chengdu and Shenzhen. The demonstrators smashed Japanese-made cars, destroyed Japanese restaurants, stores and factories, burned Japanese flags and chanted anti-Japanese slogans. These events caused serious damage for investors and companies from both countries. Reacting to those demonstrations, Panasonic and Canon suspended production in their Chinese factories. Chinese businessmen and tourists had to cancel their trips to Japan, while many Japanese left the mainland. The airlines from both countries cut seats, cancelled flights and postponed the opening of new routes. Tensions continued in the following months and escalated in September 2012.

Background to the Chinese public protest

The tensions between China and Japan resulted from a dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. Public protests in China erupted when the Japanese government unveiled plans to acquire the three islands from their private Japanese owner in April (eventually acquiring them in September 2012). Activists from China and Japan

From April until October 2012, China witnessed a series of public protests against the Japanese purchase of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. Besides providing further evidence of growing Chinese nationalism, this unrest is interesting for other reasons relevant to EU policy. The Beijing leadership, which is traditionally perceived as the only source of foreign policy decisions in China, faces a changing domestic constellation. Domestic opinion increasingly constrains Chinese foreign policy, and it becomes obvious that foreign policy decision-making in Beijing is not insulated from larger social developments. Even if foreign policy decisions in China are still made without direct input from civil society, the influence of social forces on Chinese foreign policies has to be taken seriously. The EU thus might want to reconsider its approach to China: as long as EU concerns about human rights are met with a rather uncompromising attitude by the Chinese political elites, Brussels should double its efforts to reach Chinese civil society.

setting sail towards the islands contributed to the escalation of the conflict. The Chinese government sent patrol ships into the theatre to reaffirm Chinese claims to sovereignty over the islands. The Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands are located between the northeast coast of Taiwan, at the eastern coast of China and southwest of

Japanese Okinawa, covering an area of just seven square kilometres. Three of them are just barren rocks, and five can be described as islets rather than islands. None of them are inhabited. Currently, they are under Japanese control. However, China and Taiwan claim that the territories have been part of China/Taiwan since ancient times, while questioning the legitimacy of Japanese ownership. The first reason for the political salience of this issue is the islands' proximity to the strategically important shipping lanes, which makes them significant for delimitations of maritime boundaries. Second, besides abundant fish stocks, it is suspected that there are rich oil and gas reserves in the vicinity and the surrounding seabed. Last but not least, besides the strategic and economic importance, the islands have a strong symbolic value as disputes over their sovereignty evoke very strong national feelings in China, Japan and Taiwan. Rows over the islands already erupted during the 1970s and 1980s. As in the case of those earlier clashes, also in 2012, Beijing again suppressed demonstrations. Although originally, the Chinese leadership tacitly tolerated popular protests, by the end of October 2012, it opted for suppressing the demonstrations, not wanting to put at risk economic and political relations with Japan.

What has changed in Chinese foreign policy?

At first sight, it looks like the political dynamics of Chinese foreign policy making has not changed - the decisions are taken by a highly centralised Chinese government without public constraints. However, a closer look at the protests in China and the government's reaction reveals two general tendencies. First, nationalism in China has been on the rise in recent years. Impressive Chinese economic development gave a boost to national self-esteem, and popular sentiments against the historical Western and Japanese domination of China have been increasing. Nationalist sentiments in the population fill the void left by the declining ideological power of Chinese communism and bolster the legitimacy of the ruling elites. Second, traces of a Chinese civil society have been developing in recent years, which the Chi-

nese leadership is unable to ignore. Thus, Chinese foreign policy has to take into account domestic opinion more and more, even when those run counter to the official line.

While the influence of civil society on public policy is not comparable to Western societies, the Chinese leadership is increasingly forced to take public opinion into account. Chinese foreign policy is undergoing pluralisation, with the number of governmental and semi-governmental actors involved in policy-formulation expanding. Chinese leadership is progressively engaging in a dialogue with a host of experts and think tanks. Also, Chinese society is becoming better educated and is enjoying more and more access to new sources of information over the internet. The Chinese are able to overcome government's barriers to freedom of speech. Chinese people increasingly voice their political demands, thus fundamentally changing the relations between state and society. While the state still exercises control over access to information, it has to accommodate current social and technological changes. Wu Hailong, China's ambassador to the EU, recently explained to European Voice that, in order to meet public demands, a 'majority of government offices have put up official websites, launched online forums and set up spokesperson positions. More than 50,000 government workers have opened microblogs under official auspices'.

Chinese public opinion has, until now, been mobilised mainly in a nationalistic context, something which Chinese leadership is presently willing to tolerate. Still, public sentiment is relevant not only when it motivates people to take certain actions against the government, but also when it performs in an indirect way by redefining Chinese "national interest". Not the demonstrations or protest directed against the government, but the growing public participation in creation of the discourse on national interest will transform the parameters under which China's foreign policy making takes place, leading to gradual de-centralisation of foreign policy making.

What are the implications for EU – China relations?

Chinese nationalism is mainly directed against Japan and the USA. Chinese public opinion recalls Japanese aggression from the 1930s up until the end of WW2, while the USA is considered as an economic rival as well as a strategic threat, which may amplify after the President Obama's recent 'pivot' to Asia. At the same time, Chinese perception of Europe is more favourable. According to opinion polls in China (J. Delhey and T. Graf: 2011), the EU is largely considered a 'partner' or even 'friend'. Those opinion polls reveal 'strong sympathy in China for Europe', and convey an 'overwhelmingly favourable image' of Europe among the Chinese public. Thus, at first glance, it appears that the rise of Chinese nationalism should not endanger EU – China relations. But still, if we take a closer look at the Chinese perception of the EU, we find one major issue to discredit the Europeans in the eyes of the Chinese: the promotion of human rights and democracy by the EU. According to recent polls, 70% of respondents perceive the promotion of democracy by the EU in the world, and, especially towards China, as 'being motivated by self-serving interests' (C. Welzel and T. Graf, 2011: 7). In other words, even if the Chinese view Europeans as more trustworthy and less aggressive compared to the US and Japan, the EU's agenda on democracy and human rights is generally perceived as an aggressive act.

Given the negative perception of the EU's promotion of its values among the Chinese citizens, the EU should be careful about trying to export its own normative framework to China, something that might quickly be interpreted as a form of cultural imperialism. As nationalism is currently providing a second source of legitimacy for the CCP after economic growth, Chinese elites cannot afford to be perceived as bowing to Western demands on democracy and human rights. Accordingly, Chinese authorities do not feel at ease with making concessions on issues such as the present embargo on arms sales to China or the EU's insistence on including a human rights clause during the negotiations of the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) launched in 2007 as they may be perceived as an undue Western influence. Rather than shaming China

for violations of human rights, the EU should attempt to engage China on an equal level. The increasing relevance of civil society to Chinese public policy making implies that a crucial element of European engagement with China has to be a sustained dialogue with civil society. That is, the EU should focus on developing links to Chinese civil society, while steering clear of alienating Chinese public opinion by being perceived as imposing Western norms. The EU-China human rights dialogue, initiated in 1996, was a first step in the right direction - the policy of engagement through a 'constructive dialogue'. However, these attempts to engage the Chinese leadership have produced mixed results. Despite small progress in some areas such as socio-economic development, continuing violations of human rights do occur, owing to a lack of progress in civil and political rights.

The EU, in an effort to bring to the table other actors besides high-ranking officials, introduced two more tracks to the dialogue in addition to the diplomatic level, which are expert seminars and technical co-operation projects. Still, exchanges between the academic and NGO communities within those seminars are not free from political inference and normative bias. The third tier, the technical co-operation projects, seems to be more successful in influencing Chinese society. Those projects directly engage with the different judicial institutions in China while not being subject to an excessive amount of Chinese political scrutiny. Chinese legal experts are thus increasingly exposed to the European legal system and its norms. Chinese students gain knowledge of European law in the China-EU Law School at the China University of Political Science and Law in Beijing. These initiatives obviously increase the awareness of certain groups of Chinese society of European rules and norms.

New channels for the EU's promotion of human rights and democracy in China

The EU should focus its efforts on initiatives that are similar to technical co-operation projects, and directly introduce European values and norms to various groups of Chinese society. The final

goal may be creation of the 'complex interdependence', which according to Keohane and Nye, in addition to the formal contact between the governments, involve informal relations between the members of the government as well as informal relations between different parts of the society and is characterised by a lack of hierarchy between the issues on the agenda of participants. Such an approach might involve an outsourcing of the EU - China dialogue on human rights and democracy to think tanks, NGOs, institutions of higher education and other civil society institutions, directly involving Chinese civil society. Even if Nye and Keohane considered the possibility of the creation of such channels between the democratic countries and pluralistic societies, while in China one will look in vain for freedom, independent voices or pluralism, there is already evidence that domestic public pressure cannot be neglected by Beijing leadership. As long as the EU is not able to expand its values in China with the carrot and stick approach, nor through bargaining with the Chinese government, nor through coercion, it has to further explore the growing possibilities of changing China from the bottom-up. For this reason the EU-China High Level People-to-People Dialogue (HPPD) whose first round was held on 18 April 2012 raises great hopes. HPPD's particular strength rests in the fact that it was not established under the banner of human rights promotion. Yet, with the aim of strengthening mutual exchange in education, research, culture and among youth, it will contribute to the

promotion of these values via the impact on the creation of the democratic imaginary within Chinese society.

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