

# **Nationalist Protests, Government Responses, and the Risk of Escalation in Interstate Disputes**

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*While the existing literature emphasizes that elites often have incentives to pander to nationalist sentiment, much less attention has been paid to elite efforts to subdue popular nationalism, either to avoid unwanted domestic instability or international escalation. This article examines how different governments respond to nationalist protests and the resulting effects that such protests have on the risk that interstate disputes will escalate to armed conflict. We argue that government responses to nationalist protests tend to vary in patterned ways across regime types. Nationalist protests present particular dangers in weakly institutionalized democracies, where demonstrations often pose serious threats of instability but are difficult or costly for the government to subdue, tempting or forcing leaders to escalate to appease domestic critics. We illustrate the theory with four cases representing a range of regime types: Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, and the Philippines.*

## INTRODUCTION

Why and when does popular nationalism increase the risk of international conflict?

Nationalism is often cited as a cause of war,<sup>1</sup> inflaming passions and impeding compromise over territories made “indivisible” by heated rhetoric.<sup>2</sup> An influential set of arguments holds that elites may stoke the flames of nationalism to rally domestic support or divert domestic frustration, limiting their ability to compromise with foreign rivals and making war more likely.<sup>3</sup> Much less

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Stephen Van Evera, “Hypotheses on Nationalism and War,” *International Security* 18, no. 4 (Spring 1994): 5-39.

<sup>2</sup> Stacie E. Goddard, *Invisible Territory and the Politics of Legitimacy: Jerusalem and Northern Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Jack Snyder, *Myths of Empire* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991); Edward D. Mansfield and Jack Snyder, “Democratization and the Danger of War,” *International Security* 20, no. 1 (Summer 1995): 5-38; Edward D. Mansfield and Jack Snyder, *Electing to Fight: Why Emerging Democracies Go to War* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2007). For an empirical challenge to this literature, see Vipin Narang and Rebecca M. Nelson, “Who Are These Belligerent Democratizers? Reassessing the Impact of Democratization on War,” *International Organization* 63, no. 2 (April 2009): 357-79.

attention has been paid to elite fears of nationalist sentiment and the conditions under which political leaders tighten, rather than loosen, the leash on popular nationalism.<sup>4</sup>

Although nationalism is often regarded as a source of legitimacy for incumbent elites, nationalist movements can also provide opposition groups cover to mobilize and challenge the government.<sup>5</sup> Nationalist protests can also devolve into violence against foreign interests, inviting cross-border retaliation. Diplomatically, nationalist protests can both signal resolve and tie the government's hands by pressuring the government to act aggressively abroad.<sup>6</sup> Elites seeking to preserve international cooperation and flexibility may be keen to quash protests that create unwanted pressure for escalation.<sup>7</sup>

Recent tensions in territorial disputes underscore the importance of understanding when elites are likely to encourage or repress popular nationalism. In 2012, claims to the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands brought China and Japan to the brink of armed conflict, with nationalist protests in both countries calling for more vigorous policies to defend their nation's sovereignty. In 2011, Thai forces crossed the border with Cambodia amid protests calling for the defense of Thai sovereignty over a disputed temple complex. Island disputes have also sparked armed

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<sup>4</sup> Exceptions include Erica Strecker Downs and Phillip C. Saunders, "Legitimacy and the Limits of Nationalism: China and the Diaoyu Islands," *International Security* 23, no. 4 (Winter 1998-99): 114-46; and Jessica Chen Weiss, "Authoritarian Signaling, Mass Audiences, and Nationalist Protests in China," *International Organization* 67, no.1 (January 2013): 1-35.

<sup>5</sup> Jack Snyder, "Nationalism and the Crisis of the Post-Soviet State," *Survival* 35, no. 1 (1993): 16; John Breuilly, *Nationalism and the State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 19.

<sup>6</sup> Weiss, "Authoritarian Signaling."

<sup>7</sup> The desire to avoid policy "lock-in" has been a key critique of audience cost theories. See, e.g., Jack Snyder and Erica D. Borghard, "The Cost of Empty Threats: A Penny, Not a Pound," *American Political Science Review* 105, no. 03 (August 2011): 437-56.

clashes between China, Vietnam, and the Philippines, with protests condemning China’s “illegal occupation” of islands and shoals in the South China Sea. Beyond Asia, in 2013 members of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood held demonstrations calling for the “destruction of Israel,”<sup>8</sup> and Albanians in Kosovo protested normalization with Serbia.<sup>9</sup> Shortly before Russia’s annexation of Crimea, Ukrainians tore down statues of Lenin to protest Russia’s influence.<sup>10</sup>

Yet images of nationalist demonstrations and vitriolic slogans mask variation in governments’ willingness to encourage or restrain nationalist mobilization. Leaders weigh the possible benefits of fomenting nationalist protests or allowing them to continue—such as rallying domestic political support, attracting international attention, and signaling resolve to foreign rivals—against the dangers that protests demanding hardline foreign policies will undermine the government’s authority, degenerate into anti-foreign violence, and limit foreign policy options. Leaders also consider the consequences of preventing or subduing nationalist protests—including the domestic costs of appearing unpatriotic and the risks that repression will backfire—against the benefits of preserving diplomatic flexibility and reassuring international audiences. Even when governments conclude that repression is the best course of action, their ability to curtail nationalist protests varies widely.

This article examines how governments respond to nationalist protests and the resulting effects of those protests on interstate disputes. We argue that the risks nationalist protests pose to a government, the cost and ease of repressing them, and the consequent impact of such protests on international conflict all tend to vary in patterned ways across regime types. In established

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<sup>8</sup> “Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood Stages Anti-Israel Rally,” *Associated Press*, 10 May 2013.

<sup>9</sup> Fatos Bytyci, “Protesters fight police as Kosovo approves Serbia deal,” *Reuters*, 27 June 2013.

<sup>10</sup> Serhy Yekelchuk, “In Ukraine, Lenin finally falls,” *Washington Post*, 28 February 2014.

democracies, protests are common and costly to repress. They may influence foreign policy through the filter of elections but seldom directly threaten to push the incumbent out of office or overturn the political system. In autocracies, public protests are typically forbidden or nipped in the bud, as the cost of repression is usually low relative to the risk that demonstrations will create opportunities for opposition forces to mobilize and set the stage for broader unrest. Nationalist protests present special risks in regimes that are neither robustly democratic nor firmly autocratic. These include weakly institutionalized democracies that lack reliable norms and institutions to ensure respect for electoral results, as well as “electoral authoritarian” systems dominated by one party, often in part through electoral fraud and intimidation.<sup>11</sup> In regimes without strongly embedded mechanisms for peaceful political change, protests often seek to topple incumbents rather than demand progress on specific issues. Yet incumbents without a firm authoritarian grip on power often lack the means to subdue potentially destabilizing demonstrations.

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<sup>11</sup> Most regime type typologies similarly distinguish between established and weakly institutionalized (or “flawed”) democracies and between electoral authoritarian (or “competitive authoritarian”) regimes and autocracies with little or no electoral character. See, e.g., Marc Morjé Howard and Philip G. Roessler, “Liberalizing Electoral Outcomes in Competitive Authoritarian Regimes,” *American Journal of Political Science* 50, no. 2 (April 2006): 367; Matthijs Bogaards, “How to classify hybrid regimes? Defective democracy and electoral authoritarianism,” *Democratization* 16, no. 2 (2009): 399-423; Larry Diamond, “Elections without Democracy: Thinking about Hybrid Regimes,” *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 2 (April 2002): 24-27. Electoral authoritarian systems differ from weakly institutionalized democracies primarily in the extent to which elections are free and fair, as opposed to serving as instruments of authoritarian rule. Weakly institutionalized democracies generally also have more robust checks and balances and respect for basic freedoms. Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Andreas Schedler, *Electoral Authoritarianism: The Dynamics of Unfree Competition* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2006).

Protests that are difficult for a government to repress and threaten to spin out of control can have mixed effects on international conflict. Such demonstrations may increase the risk of war, either because they degenerate into violent xenophobic riots and precipitate foreign retaliation, or because they threaten regime stability and prompt insecure elites to appease demonstrators with a show of force. However, such protests may also decrease the risk of war by giving the government greater credibility in demanding foreign concessions.<sup>12</sup> The net effect on conflict depends on which of these competing effects dominates.

Our argument proceeds in two stages. We first analyze the factors driving government decisions to foment, allow or repress nationalist protests and then consider the resulting effects of protests on the risk of international conflict. We focus in particular on how regime type impacts both government handling of nationalist protests and the resulting dangers of escalation. After elaborating our argument, we examine how four states with regimes ranging from autocratic to democratic—Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, and the Philippines—have dealt with nationalist protests and the international effects of their responses.

## NATIONALIST PROTESTS, GOVERNMENT RESPONSES, AND RISKS OF ESCALATION

### **Deciding to Foment, Allow or Repress Protests**

Government decisions on how to handle nationalist protests reflect calculations about the domestic and international benefits and hazards of fomenting, allowing or repressing them. Governments may instigate or allow nationalist protests to boost their popularity and rally

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<sup>12</sup> Such leverage depends on a host of factors, including foreign beliefs that concessions would defuse the situation.

citizens behind the flag, helping divert public attention from domestic grievances.<sup>13</sup> They may also permit nationalist protests to signal diplomatic resolve by letting the domestic “audience costs” of compromise rise.<sup>14</sup> Chinese acquiescence in anti-American and anti-Japanese demonstrations in recent years is a prime example.<sup>15</sup> Nationalist protests can confer diplomatic leverage when foreign rivals believe nationalist pressure makes it difficult for the government to back down. Such protests can also broadcast and draw attention to their state’s grievances, magnifying international pressure on foreign rivals to compromise.<sup>16</sup> These potential benefits may appeal to governments that lack other sources of popular legitimacy and means of attracting attention or signaling resolve.

Nationalist protests can threaten incumbent elites as well. Opposition groups often utilize nationalist appeals to criticize the government and undermine its legitimacy.<sup>17</sup> Even if demonstrators initially appear friendly to incumbent policies and interests, demonstrations can evolve into accusations against incumbent leaders of failing to protect the national interest. They can grow in size, spawn wider unrest, and jeopardize regime stability, especially when the government is weak and unpopular, when demonstrations are independently organized and

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<sup>13</sup> See, e.g. Perry Link, “Beijing’s dangerous game,” *New York Review of Books*, 20 September 2012.

<sup>14</sup> Weiss, “Authoritarian Signaling.”

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> On the use of public protests to mobilize international support for domestic dissidents, see Clifford Bob, *The Marketing of Rebellion: Insurgents, Media, and International Activism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); and Jacqueline M. Klopp and Elke Zuern, “The Politics of Violence in Democratization: Lessons from Kenya and South Africa,” *Comparative Politics* 39, no. 2 (January 2007): 130-31. The use of protests to attract international support in internationalized disputes has been comparatively unexplored.

<sup>17</sup> Opposition groups are often more nationalistic than the incumbent leadership. Jack Snyder and Karen Ballentine, “Nationalism and the Marketplace of Ideas,” *International Security* 21, no. 2 (Autumn 1996): 8.

linked to broader disaffection, and when alternative avenues for political change are foreclosed. Even when they do not demand the ouster of incumbent elites or spin out of control, nationalist protests may increase the latent risk of political instability by setting precedents for demonstrations on wider issues, fostering networks, and lowering barriers to collective action for other aggrieved individuals and groups.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, protests can complicate diplomacy and raise unwanted risks of escalation. They can devolve into attacks on foreign nationals or property or their local ethnic kin,<sup>19</sup> inviting possible foreign retaliation or intervention,<sup>20</sup> or they can push a government to act aggressively abroad—a possibility discussed below.

Curtailing or subduing protests can deter prospective participants and reduce the risk that street protests get out of hand, but repression is also costly. Cracking down on nationalist mobilization can provoke a domestic backlash, undermine a government's patriotic credentials, and invite criticism on human rights grounds. The costs of repression vary according to the degree of loyalty and control elites enjoy over the relevant security forces, the political strength of the opposition, and the domestic laws and norms pertaining to peaceful assembly and political participation. Demonstrators whose demands resonate with broader public opinion are more

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<sup>18</sup> Sidney G. Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Valerie J. Bunce and Sharon J. Wolchik, "Favorable Conditions and Electoral Revolutions," *Journal of Democracy* 17, no. 4 (October 2006): 10-12.

<sup>19</sup> On the targeting of local ethnic groups as proxies, see Donald L. Horowitz, *The Deadly Ethnic Riot* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), 175-78.

<sup>20</sup> For example, after the 2012 Benghazi attacks in Libya, U.S. marines were put on alert for possible intervention if protests threatened U.S. citizens in neighboring Egypt. In 1915, anti-American riots prompted U.S. intervention in Haiti, and Russia has sought to justify its intervention in Ukraine partly by claiming that radical Ukrainian protesters threatened harm to ethnic Russians. Nick Cumming-Bruce, "At U.N., Russia Points to Ultrnationalist Threats in Ukraine," *New York Times*, 3 March 2014.

costly to subdue or ignore than those who represent fringe views. Diplomatically, repressing protests can help defuse interstate tension but risks conveying a lack of resolve to foreign rivals.

Power relations at home and abroad affect how governments handle nationalist protests, though not in neatly predictable ways. Domestically, rising challengers sometimes give incumbents incentives to rally popular support by fomenting or permitting “friendly” nationalist rallies and increase the cost of repressing opposition-led protests. At the same time, the risk of permitting protests rises when a strong domestic challenger can exploit them for its own advantage. Internationally, a weak state may accept greater domestic risks from protests to gain leverage against stronger foreign rivals, but relative weakness might also make a government more reluctant to instigate or allow anti-foreign protests that demand tough action against a mightier foe.

The multiple factors bearing on government decisions to foment, allow or repress nationalist protests militate against a parsimonious explanatory model. Nevertheless, it is possible to discern patterned differences across regime types, because both the risks of fomenting or allowing protests and the costs of repressing them vary in significant ways across domestic political systems.

In autocracies, the risks of allowing protests are high. Without productive peaceful outlets for political dissent, any opening for public protests is potentially explosive as an opportunity for collective action that could challenge or destabilize the regime.<sup>21</sup> If not nipped in the bud,

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<sup>21</sup> Timur Kuran, “Now Out of Never: The Element of Surprise in the East European Revolution of 1989,” *World Politics* 44, no. 1 (October 1991): 7-48; Susanne Lohmann, “The Dynamics of Informational Cascades: The Monday Demonstrations in Leipzig, East Germany, 1989-91,” *World Politics* 47, no. 1 (October 1994): 42-101. Protests against localized malfeasance, however, can serve as “fire alarms” for central authorities to learn about

nationalist demonstrations can attract a broad range of aggrieved citizens under a common banner, accusing the incumbent leadership of failing to defend the national interest. Given the violent fates that often await such leaders after their ouster, autocratic leaders have powerful incentives to repress demonstrations against national policies or systemic problems.<sup>22</sup> These risks usually outweigh the perceived diplomatic gains or diversionary value of nationalist protests as a “safety valve” for pent-up grievances.<sup>23</sup> Autocratic governments generally can repress demonstrations more easily than other regime types due to relatively strong control over security forces, weak domestic norms protecting the rights of free speech and assembly, and low vulnerability to opposition groups—though even autocrats can find demonstrations difficult and costly to repress when they face serious challenges from other elites or when protests tap into broad public grievances.<sup>24</sup> For these reasons, autocracies repress most protests, fomenting or allowing them to proceed very selectively when the authorities believe they can keep demonstrations under control.

Electoral authoritarian governments are likely to instigate or allow nationalist protests with somewhat greater frequency. As in autocracies, protests carry high risks of latent instability and are generally disfavored. Yet competition for votes sometimes gives incumbents incentives

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local grievances. Peter Lorentzen, “Regularizing Rioting: Permitting Public Protest in an Authoritarian Regime,” *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 8, no. 2 (2013): 127-58.

<sup>22</sup> Giacomo Chiozza and H.E. Goemans, *Leaders and International Conflict* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

<sup>23</sup> By contrast, democratic leaders may allow or encourage diversionary protests without incurring as much risk to regime stability.

<sup>24</sup> See Brian Lai and Dan Slater, “Institutions of the Offensive: Domestic Sources of Dispute Initiation in Authoritarian Regimes, 1950-1992,” *American Journal of Political Science* 50, no. 1 (January 2006): 113-126.

to stir nationalism, and repression is more costly than in autocracies, because it undermines incumbents' claims to democratic legitimacy, however frail those claims may be. These costs are apt to be particularly high in election years.<sup>25</sup> Electoral authoritarian governments are most apt to instigate or abet "friendly" nationalist protests when they face a significant or rising opposition and believe they can effectively control the demonstrations (typically because their partisans are leading the rallies).<sup>26</sup> Without a significant opposition, the risks of instigating or permitting protests are seldom worth bearing. Without government control, protests could swing to the opposition or create unwanted friction with foreign rivals—a particular risk to weak states confronting stronger ones.

Electoral authoritarian leaders often repress opposition-led and independent nationalist protests and have ample incentives to do so, even at high costs, when they believe protests will escalate quickly and threaten incumbents' positions in power.<sup>27</sup> Exceptions are only likely to

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<sup>25</sup> See Christian Davenport, "From Ballots to Bullets: an Empirical Assessment of How National Elections Influence State Uses of Political Repression," *Electoral Studies* 16, no. 4 (December 1997): 517-40 (finding that authoritarian regimes reduce repressive behavior in election years).

<sup>26</sup> For a discussion of these dilemmas in post-Soviet Russia, see Graeme Robertson, *The Politics of Protest in Hybrid Regimes: Managing Dissent in Post-Communist Russia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010) (emphasizing leaders' efforts to manage protests by permitting but seeking to control and channel them in ways conducive to incumbent interests).

<sup>27</sup> See Emilie M. Hafner-Burton, Susan D. Hyde and Ryan S. Jablonski, "When Do Governments Resort to Election Violence?" *British Journal of Political Science* 44, no. 1 (January 2013): 149-79 (discussing this in the context of post-election protests).

occur when a strong opposition drives up the costs of repression and when incumbents believe they will retain the capacity to subdue protests that begin spinning out of control.<sup>28</sup>

Weakly institutionalized democracies may face similar incentives to stir nationalism for electoral gain, but they are more likely to tolerate independent or opposition-led nationalist protests that they fear may undermine their domestic or international interests. The risks of allowing such protests are high, because public trust in political institutions is typically low in weakly institutionalized democracies, and electoral avenues for change are often obstructed.<sup>29</sup> In such conditions, protests can threaten regime stability by spreading, immobilizing the country, and even precipitating attempted coups or revolutions.

Nevertheless, repressing protests is difficult and costly. Leaders of weakly institutionalized democracies depend more than their authoritarian counterparts on liberal legitimacy and function in systems with stronger legal and institutional protections for protesters. In addition, the security services tend to be more independent than in authoritarian regimes.<sup>30</sup> Both of these factors impose “institutionalized constraints” that limit the government’s capacity

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<sup>28</sup> This is consistent with research suggesting that governments may respond more moderately to opposition groups making severe demands. Scott Sigmund Gartner and Patrick M. Regan, “Threat and Repression: The Non-Linear Relationship between Government and Opposition Violence,” *Journal of Peace Research* 33, no. 3 (August 1996): 273-87.

<sup>29</sup> See Patrick M. Regan and Errol A. Henderson, “Democracy, Threats and Political Repression in Developing Countries: Are Democracies Internally Less Violent?” *Third World Quarterly*, 23, no. 1 (February 2002): 119-36 (arguing that “semi-democracies” tend to face greater threats than democracies or autocracies for this reason).

<sup>30</sup> Indeed, many hybrid regimes feature civilian leaders struggling to assert control over security forces that governed in the past. See Terry Karl, “The Hybrid Regimes of Central America,” *Journal of Democracy* 6, no. 3 (July 1995): 80.

to use repressive force,<sup>31</sup> especially when the protesters have their own connections to the security services. Consequently, governments keen to subdue protests may be unable or unwilling to do so, even when protests put regime stability at great risk.

Established democracies are the most likely to allow protests, as the risks they pose tend to be modest, and the costs of repression are high.<sup>32</sup> Social movement theorists note that protest is so commonplace in established democracies that it “may lose its power to inspire challengers and to impress antagonists and authorities.”<sup>33</sup> Demonstrations draw attention to issues that the opposition may use against the government in future elections but rarely challenge regime stability by threatening to overturn the political system. Repressing protests is costly, since governments derive much of their legitimacy from respecting rights such as free speech and assembly, and citizens can challenge government action in courts, in the media, and at the polls.

This analysis yields theoretical expectations beyond the prediction that protest tolerance will increase from the autocratic to democratic end of the regime spectrum. The most interesting implications lie toward the center of the spectrum. We expect weakly institutionalized democracies to be the most likely to allow or abet nationalist protests that could undermine regime stability. We also expect to see a heightened incidence of such protests in electoral authoritarian systems when incumbents face meaningful opposition challenges. These potentially destabilizing protests tend to have the greatest effects on international conflict.

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<sup>31</sup> Hafner-Burton et al, “When Do Governments,” 157.

<sup>32</sup> See, e.g., Christian Davenport, “Multi-Dimensional Threat Perception and State Repression: An Inquiry into Why States Apply Negative Sections,” *American Journal of Political Science* 39, no. 3 (August 1995): 683-713.

<sup>33</sup> David S. Meyer and Sidney Tarrow, eds., *The Social Movement Society: Contentious Politics for a New Century* (Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), 4.

## Effects on the Risk of Conflict

Nationalist protests can raise or reduce the risk of interstate conflict. They can raise the domestic costs of diplomatic compromise and pressure governments to appease protesters by acting aggressively abroad or reneging on agreements to resolve or set aside a territorial dispute. They can also escalate to spasms of provocative anti-foreign violence. By the same token, however, protests that threaten to spin out of control or force the government to the brink of conflict can convince foreign governments to back off and thereby diminish the chance of conflict.<sup>34</sup> As the difficulty of repression and threats to regime stability rise, protests become more credible as signals of a government's resolve and commitment to an aggressive stance.

Leaders' decisions to appease protest demands by adopting aggressive or uncompromising policies abroad are driven by a number of considerations, including the size and composition of protests and the expected effects of international escalation, but their calculations are apt to vary across regime types. Leaders of weakly institutionalized democracies are most likely to perceive the need to follow hawkish policies to appease domestic critics, since protests carry high risks to regime stability but are often prohibitively costly to repress. The severe fates that often await deposed leaders of "mixed" regimes create additional incentives to assuage popular demands.<sup>35</sup> Leaders of electoral authoritarian regimes are typically better able to quash nationalist protests and avoid unwanted pressure to escalate, but incumbents may eschew repression when faced with a significant electoral challenge.

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<sup>34</sup> See, e.g., Geoffrey Blainey, *The Causes of War* (New York: Free Press, 1988).

<sup>35</sup> H. E. Goemans, "Fighting for Survival: The Fate of Leaders and the Duration of War," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 44, no. 5 (October 2000): 555-579.

In autocratic systems, protests are relatively easy to suppress and therefore unlikely to force the government's hand if authorities nip them in the bud. When allowed to grow in size and scope, however, protests may threaten incumbent autocrats by galvanizing broader unrest and dissatisfaction with the government's nationalist credentials. During windows of protest, autocrats may also face strong incentives to adopt more aggressive foreign policies.

In established democracies, protests are costly to repress but tend not to threaten the ouster of incumbent politicians. Although democratic leaders may also face diversionary incentives to escalate when protesters air domestic grievances,<sup>36</sup> nationalist protests are seldom regarded as serious threats to regime stability in robust democracies. Although nationalist protests may pressure the incumbent party to take a hard line, the worst outcome for an incumbent that resists protest demands is electoral defeat. Given the relatively mild costs of losing office and the low sensitivity of democratic leaders' tenure to the international outcome,<sup>37</sup> nationalist protests are relatively unlikely to force democratic leaders into unwanted conflict.

H1. *Nationalist protests are more likely to lead a government to adopt aggressive or uncompromising policies abroad in weakly institutionalized democracies than in other regime types.*

Our argument that the risk of protest-driven escalation is highest in weakly institutionalized democracies is consistent with scholarship emphasizing that nationalism is most

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<sup>36</sup> Christopher Gelpi, "Democratic Diversions: Governmental Structure and the Externalization of Domestic Conflict," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 41, no. 2 (April 1997): 255-82.

<sup>37</sup> Alexandre Debs and H. E. Goemans, "Regime Type, the Fate of Leaders, and War," *American Political Science Review* 104, no. 3 (August 2010): 430-45.

likely to raise the danger of war in states lacking robust democratic sources of legitimacy or a strong autocratic grip on power. Van Evera argues that such states are the “most dangerous,” having added incentives to stir nationalism to boost their legitimacy and stay in power.<sup>38</sup> Mansfield and Snyder similarly argue that invoking foreign threats is a “common expedient for hard-pressed leaders who seek to shore up their legitimacy.”<sup>39</sup> However, since leaders often fear the domestic and international repercussions of nationalist protests and try to repress them, the difficulty of repressing demonstrations is often as important as leaders’ desire to stir nationalism in generating risks of conflict.

In some circumstances, the difficulty of subduing nationalist protests can also dampen the risk of conflict. Governments that appear unable to control protests easily and face strong incentives to appease demonstrators with belligerent foreign policies can more credibly claim that their hands are tied in diplomatic negotiations and that foreign concessions are necessary to avert major domestic instability or conflict. Leaders of weakly institutionalized democracies are apt to have the greatest credibility in claiming to foreign rivals that they face such constraints, especially when protests are organized by a strong political opposition. Leaders of electoral authoritarian regimes and autocracies have greater capacity to repress protests, making it harder to claim that they are genuinely constrained and that protesters must be appeased. To impose credible diplomatic constraints, protests must generate appreciable risks of spinning out of control and threatening regime stability—dangers that usually prompt authoritarian leaders to nip protests in the bud. In established democracies, protests tend to have less credibility as

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<sup>38</sup> Van Evera, “Hypotheses on Nationalism and War,” 33.

<sup>39</sup> Mansfield and Snyder, *Electing to Fight*, 9.

diplomatic constraints, as leaders can resist popular demands without fearing a coup or revolution, even if their popularity declines.

H2. *Foreign rivals are more likely to regard nationalist protests as credible constraints on governments of weakly institutionalized democracies than in other regime types.*

The net effect of nationalist protests on conflict depends upon the strength of these countervailing effects. Do protests provide sufficient diplomatic leverage with foreign rivals to offset the aggravated risk of anti-foreign violence and foreign policy belligerence? Foreign perceptions and willingness to compromise vary widely, making decisions to foment or allow such protests a risky bet for governments seeking diplomatic leverage.<sup>40</sup>

Foreign rivals are more likely to compromise diplomatically when a government appears genuinely constrained than when it appears to have orchestrated protests or allowed rallies it could easily have subdued or ignored. Similarly, when protests descend into anti-foreign violence, a foreign rival is more likely to respond with restraint when it believes that the government wished but was unable to repress protesters. Foreign governments are apt to be much less sympathetic when they believe the government allowed or encouraged anti-foreign violence it could easily have prevented.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> A full treatment of foreign perceptions and responses is beyond the scope of this paper, but important factors include relative power, stakes, and resolve.

<sup>41</sup> In some cases, violent anti-foreign attacks will provoke foreign intervention even when the government is not complicit in allowing nationalist protests, particularly when they originate in ungoverned spaces that national authorities are unable to control. Still, the host government's perceived acquiescence or complicity is likely to remain a key consideration in limiting the scope of foreign intervention to isolated strikes rather than regime change.

In 2012, for example, China allowed scores of anti-Japanese protests to signal Chinese opposition to Japan's planned purchase of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. Although some protests devolved into anti-Japanese violence, Japanese officials persisted in believing that China would curtail protests without first taking hawkish measures in the East China Sea to appease nationalist pressures.<sup>42</sup> It was not until a series of close encounters around the disputed islands that both governments recognized the growing risk of a maritime accident and the need for compromise. In a less autocratic context, such demonstrations might have been more credible.

H3. *Foreign rivals are more likely to pursue accommodative policies and refrain from conflict escalation when they regard a government as genuinely constrained.*

The difficulty of repression and threat to regime stability are subjective judgments that create room for divergent assessments. From a host government's perspective, the best scenario is to appear to face high costs of repression and foreign policy constraints while in fact having considerable control and flexibility. The worst scenario is to encounter genuine challenges and constraints while facing foreign incredulity.

## EMPIRICAL APPROACH AND CASES

Because the relationship between regime type, government responses to nationalist protests, and interstate escalation is complex, qualitative case studies are best suited to assess and illustrate our arguments. We examine attempted or actualized nationalist protests in states

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<sup>42</sup> Jessica Chen Weiss, *Powerful Patriots: Nationalist Protest in China's Foreign Relations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

spanning a range of regime types: Vietnam (autocratic), Cambodia (electoral authoritarian), Thailand (weakly institutionalized democracy), and the Philippines (established democracy).<sup>43</sup> We also leverage over-time variation within each regime, as we expect incumbents' incentives to foment, allow, or repress protests to vary with the strength of the opposition and popular backing for nationalist demands. We observe sixteen episodes of attempted or actualized nationalist protest: Thailand (2008, 2010-11, 2013), Cambodia (2003, 2009, 2010, 2013, 2014), Vietnam (2007, 2011, 2012-13, 2014), and the Philippines (2011, 2012, 2013, 2014).<sup>44</sup> For each episode, we examine whether and why the government fomented, allowed or repressed nationalist demonstrations; whether the government took aggressive toward foreign rivals to appease the protesters; whether foreign rivals regarded the government as credibly constrained; and whether they offered any diplomatic concessions.

We use Southeast Asian cases for several reasons. Contemporary interstate war is rare but most likely to erupt in regions such as Southeast Asia, where territorial disputes are rife. Moreover, Southeast Asia offers rich variety in regime types, including states in various stages of

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<sup>43</sup> The most common regime type metrics support this classification. Between 2003 and 2013, Vietnam had the most autocratic Polity IV score (-7 throughout) and lowest aggregate Freedom House (FH) score for political rights and civil liberties (ranging from 7 to 11). Cambodia was next (Polity=2; FH=15-17), and the Philippines was the most consistently democratic (Polity=8; FH =28-36). Thailand's scores dropped sharply after the 2006 coup (Polity=9 to -5; FH=38 to 18) before returning to moderately democratic scores from 2008-2013 (Polity=4-7; FH=21-27).

<sup>44</sup> This is the universe of significant nationalist protests in these states concerning interstate disputes from 2003-2014. We do not discuss anti-American protests in the Philippines, which focus on bilateral cooperation rather than a dispute, but they support our argument that democratic governments routinely permit protests and usually are not compelled to take hardline policy positions as a result (as evidenced by strengthening U.S.-Philippine defense ties).

nation-building and democratization, which represent “most likely” cases for the argument that legitimacy-seeking leaders will foment nationalism to gain public support and embroil their states in international conflict. If that phenomenon occurs widely, we should expect to find evidence of it in Southeast Asia. Conversely, a finding that even legitimacy-seeking Southeast Asian leaders frequently seek to repress nationalist protests would provide strong evidence supporting our claim that leaders often regard popular nationalism as a threat, not just an opportunity.

Although China features prominently in our discussion of the South China Sea disputes, it does not constitute one of our cases, because no significant efforts to mobilize anti-Vietnamese or anti-Philippine public protests have occurred in China in recent years. When Chinese citizens have spewed nationalist invective at Hanoi or Manila, they have done so primarily through the internet. Chinese nationalists have focused their public demonstrations against Japan and other powers, and recent academic studies have examined these in depth.<sup>45</sup> This paper moves beyond the case of China to explore how other governments respond to nationalist protests and their effect on interstate disputes.

Our cases span four major regime types. Vietnam is autocratic, ruled by the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV), which provides public goods for economic growth while denying political rights that would facilitate opposition challenges.<sup>46</sup> Cambodia has an electoral

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<sup>45</sup> See Weiss, *Powerful Patriots*; and James Reilly, *Strong Society, Smart State: The Rise of Public Opinion in China's Japan Policy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

<sup>46</sup> Mary Gallagher and Jonathan K. Hanson, “Authoritarian Survival, Resilience, and the Selectorate Theory,” ed. Martin Dimitrov, *Why Communism Didn't Collapse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 185-204. Elected National Assembly members choose the president, prime minister, and cabinet, but real power lies in the CPV Central Committee and Politburo, and opposition groups like the pro-democracy *Viet Tan* network are

authoritarian regime, as regular elections occur within a system dominated by strongman Prime Minister Hun Sen and the incumbent Cambodian People's Party (CPP). The CPP faces few constraints from a weak judiciary, National Assembly, and CPP-dominated bureaucracy and has used violence and intimidation to weaken opposition parties,<sup>47</sup> winning national elections by large margins in 2003 and 2008 before a stronger-than-expected opposition showing began eroding its lead in 2013.

Thailand has many democratic features, including multiple political parties, regular elections, and relatively well-developed judicial, legislative, and bureaucratic checks on executive power. However, numerous military coups have punctuated its slow process of democratization,<sup>48</sup> including a 2006 coup followed by military rule until early 2008. During the period relevant for our protest observations, between 2008 and the most recent coup in May 2014, Thailand was best characterized as a weakly institutionalized democracy. By contrast, the Philippines is best classified as an established democracy. Governance problems abound, including the excessive power of landed elites, "crony capitalism" and corruption, and occasional repression of political dissent.<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, since the 1986 "People Power" protests and end of

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banned and repressed. See, e.g., "Human rights activist detained in Vietnam on 'terrorist' charge," *CNN*, 30 April 2012.

<sup>47</sup> See Duncan McCargo, "Cambodia: Getting Away with Authoritarianism?" *Journal of Democracy* 16, no. 4 (October 2005): 98-112; Kheang Un, "Cambodia: Moving Away from Democracy?" *International Political Science Review* 32, no. 5 (2011): 546-62.

<sup>48</sup> Nicholas Farrelly, "Why democracy struggles: Thailand's elite coup culture," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 67, no. 3 (2013): 281-96.

<sup>49</sup> See Björn Dressel, "The Philippines: How Much Real Democracy?" *International Political Science Review* 32, no. 5 (2011): 529-45.

Ferdinand Marcos's military regime, democracy has grown relatively deep roots with robust opposition parties, regular elections, significant judicial and legislative checks and balances, an active press, and strong norms of freedom of assembly and expression.<sup>50</sup>

We expect to observe significant variation across and within our country cases. Our analysis suggests that Vietnam's government will try to repress nationalist protests most consistently—especially when the risk of domestic opposition mobilization appears—but may tolerate protests on occasion to signal resolve or garner international attention. We expect the Cambodian government to foment or permit nationalist protests with somewhat greater frequency, especially when the CPP faces substantial electoral competition. We expect that the Thai government will usually be unable or unwilling to subdue nationalist demonstrations, even when they pose serious political threats. We seldom anticipate repression in the Philippines.

We also expect to observe variation in the international effects of nationalist protests. Our first hypothesis suggests that the Thai government is most likely to take aggressive or uncompromising action abroad to placate nationalist protesters.<sup>51</sup> Our second hypothesis implies that foreign rivals are most likely to see Thailand as credibly constrained by nationalist protests but to discount protests in Vietnam and Cambodia—believing they can be easily subdued—and view Philippine demonstrations as relatively weak constraints on foreign policy. Our final

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<sup>50</sup> See Donald K. Emmerson, "Minding the Gap between Democracy and Governance," *Journal of Democracy* 23, no. 2 (April 2012): 65-68. Huge public demonstrations helped force President Joseph Estrada to resign in 2001, but even that controversial transfer of power was peaceful. See Carl H. Landé, "The return of 'People Power' in the Philippines," *Journal of Democracy* 12, no. 2 (April 2001): 88-102.

<sup>51</sup> Absent very large protests threatening the ouster of incumbent elites, we expect nationalist protests in the Philippines to be relatively unlikely to compel the government to take belligerent acts abroad, but since some past protests have had major political impacts in the Philippines, it presents a relatively "tough case" for our argument.

hypothesis leads us to expect that foreign rivals will be more likely to compromise in the face of protest-driven escalation by Thailand than the other three countries.

#### THAILAND AND CAMBODIA: THE DANGERS OF NATIONALIST PROTESTS

Situated between the autocratic and democratic poles of the spectrum, the cases of Thailand and Cambodia help illustrate that nationalist protests are particularly likely to affect interstate conflict when embattled incumbents foment or allow nationalist protests. In Thailand's weakly institutionalized democracy, leaders have been pressured by large-scale protests in 2008, 2010-11, and 2013 to adopt more aggressive and uncompromising foreign policies than they would have otherwise chosen. At the same time, large protests have led foreign observers to regard the Thai government as credibly constrained, helping Thailand win some modest concessions from Cambodia.

In Cambodia's electoral authoritarian regime, when leaders have felt threatened by an increasingly viable electoral opposition, they have tolerated or even encouraged nationalist demonstrations. In 2003, anti-Thai demonstrations erupted into a spasm of violence that appeared to surprise CPP leaders and led to a Thai threat of armed intervention before the CPP brought them under control and defused the crisis. The CPP swiftly quelled anti-Thai demonstrations several years later, and it has tried to subdue anti-Vietnam protests embedded in larger anti-government opposition rallies since the 2013 national elections. The Cambodian case helps illustrate that while leaders may sometimes benefit by fanning the flames of popular nationalism, they are also eager to prevent protests from triggering or forcing unwanted escalation. It also illustrates that foreign observers are unlikely to view a government able to

repress protests as credibly constrained. Cambodia's protests have thus raised risks of conflict without winning concessions from its neighbors.

### **Nationalist Protests in Thailand**

Nationalist protests emerged in Thailand as the country's politics crystallized around two feuding factions named for the colors they wear at frequent public protests—"red-shirts" loyal to the populist former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra against "yellow-shirts" associated with the traditional pillars of Thai politics, including Bangkok-based elites, military officers, and key figures in the Royal Palace.<sup>52</sup> After the military ousted Thaksin in 2006, red-shirts won a December 2007 election and returned to power. Soon thereafter, yellow-shirt protesters attacked the incumbent red-shirt government for failing to defend Thai sovereignty. Protesters again challenged the government in 2011 and 2013, pressuring incumbent leaders to adopt hardline policies, but with different international effects.

#### COMPELLING FOREIGN POLICY CHANGE: 2008 PROTESTS ON PREAH VIHEAR

The protests concerned a dispute surrounding the temple of Preah Vihear near the Thai-Cambodian frontier. The International Court of Justice (ICJ) awarded the temple to Cambodia in 1962 but did not clearly resolve the status of an adjacent 4.6 square kilometer strip of land. That strip's significance to Thailand owes to a sense of historical injustice, as Thai nationalists believe

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<sup>52</sup> See Thitinan Pongsudhirak, "Thailand since the Coup," *Journal of Democracy* 19, no. 4 (October 2008): 140-53; and James Ockey, "Thailand in 2006: Retreat to Military Rule," *Asian Survey* 47, no. 1 (January/February 2007): 133-40.

the temple rightly belongs to Thailand pursuant to a 1904 Franco-Siamese treaty.<sup>53</sup> In 2001, Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen requested that UNESCO inscribe the temple on the World Heritage List, but Thailand objected. After unsuccessful bilateral negotiations, Cambodia again requested inscription in 2007. Thailand again demurred, but after further talks and Cambodian revision of its application to acknowledge the disputed adjacent strip of land, the two sides signed a June 2008 joint communiqué in which Thailand agreed to support Cambodia's bid.

Yellow-shirts responded by organizing a small nationalist rally near the temple and large street protests in Bangkok. They were led by the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD)—a powerful yellow-shirt group backed by conservative urban elites with strong ties to the media, the military, and the Royal Palace—which had demonstrated since May against the red-shirt government of Prime Minister Samak Sundravej. The PAD accused Thai Foreign Minister Noppadon Pattama of treason and of “selling the country” to Cambodia,<sup>54</sup> and an estimated 10,000 protesters moved to the streets of Bangkok.<sup>55</sup> Similar yellow-shirt protests had precipitated the 2006 military coup against Thaksin, and as protesters marched on Government House, calling Samak a puppet for Thaksin and demanding his resignation, concerns mounted

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<sup>53</sup> See John D. Ciorciari, “International Decisions: Request for Interpretation of the Judgment of 15 June 1962 in the Case Concerning the *Temple of Preah Vihear (Cambodia v. Thailand)*,” *American Journal of International Law* 108, no. 2 (April 2014): 288-95.

<sup>54</sup> Pavin Chachavalpongpun, “Embedding Embittered History: Unending Conflicts in Thai-Cambodian Relations,” *Asian Affairs* 43, no. 1 (March 2012): 89-90. Noppadon soon resigned.

<sup>55</sup> David Batty, “Police and anti-government protesters clash in Bangkok,” *The Guardian*, 20 June 2008.

over another coup.<sup>56</sup> Fearing that possibility, Samak quickly backed off his initial threat to disperse the protests by force.<sup>57</sup>

Samak publicly called the demonstrators “insane” and accused the PAD of risking war,<sup>58</sup> but his government was deeply vulnerable to the yellow-shirts and their political and military allies. Samak sent the police to confront protesters briefly in mid-June, resulting in clashes and some injuries to demonstrators,<sup>59</sup> but used force sparingly and allowed the protests to continue. Thai officials later explained that Samak was reluctant to use violence against protesters or invoke the country’s 2005 Emergency Decree, fearing that either move would prompt the military to come out of the barracks and seize power.<sup>60</sup> Unable to subdue the protests, Samak sought to appease them by withdrawing Thai support for the UNESCO inscription.<sup>61</sup>

Cambodia pressed ahead, and on July 7 the World Heritage Committee unanimously agreed to inscribe the temple.<sup>62</sup> The Cambodian government hailed a national victory that helped

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<sup>56</sup> See “Thousands of Thai protesters push past police to PM’s office,” *Agence France Presse*, 20 June 2008. U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates expressed the same concern. Andrew Gray, “US tells Thailand it wants democracy, not coup,” *Reuters*, 1 June 2008.

<sup>57</sup> “Thailand backs off threat of using force to disperse protesters,” *Associated Press*, 1 June 2008.

<sup>58</sup> Nopporn, “Cambodia PM.”

<sup>59</sup> Batty, “Police.”

<sup>60</sup> “Pad Protests Challenge Pm Samak’s Authority, Patience,” U.S. Embassy Bangkok, Cable 08BANGKOK2405 (26 August 2008), ¶6, <http://www.cablegatesearch.net/cable.php?id=08BANGKOK2546>.

<sup>61</sup> “Thailand withdraws support for Khmer’s Preah Vihear temple,” *The Nation* (Thailand), 1 July 2008. The Democrat Party later launched impeachment proceedings against Samak, partly to capitalize on the groundswell in nationalism created by the protests.

<sup>62</sup> UNESCO World Heritage Committee, *Decisions adopted at the 32nd Session of the World Heritage Committee* (Québec, Canada), 7 July 2008, 32 COM 8B.102.

Hun Sen's Cambodian People's Party win a landslide electoral victory a few weeks later.<sup>63</sup> In Thailand, more than 2,000 PAD protesters descended on Preah Vihear, clashing with local Thai villagers who feared the dispute would jeopardize their livelihoods.<sup>64</sup> Hundreds of Thai troops deployed in the area, ostensibly to provide security. Cambodia also sent hundreds, and on July 15 they arrested three Thai civilians trying to plant their flag at the temple site. Several dozen Thai troops occupied a pagoda in an area claimed by Cambodia, and tensions rose steeply over the next several days as both sides deployed additional troops and military equipment to the area.<sup>65</sup>

Samak condemned the Thai protesters for "trying to ignite a conflict" and lamented that "now the troops on both sides are confronting each other,"<sup>66</sup> but military leaders weakly controlled by the civilian leadership were receptive to protest demands. In a July 18 conversation with U.S. officials, Cambodian Deputy Prime Minister Sok An said the Cambodian government had "sympathy for the difficult position of the Samak government and recogni[zed] that Preah Vihear had become excessively politicized in Thailand."<sup>67</sup> He added his concern "that the Thai government's hands may be tied in dealing with its strong and relatively independent military,"<sup>68</sup> which bore close links to the yellow-shirt movement and gave the nationalist protests much of

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<sup>63</sup> Ker Munthit, "Border stand lifts Cambodia vote," *Associated Press*, 28 July 2008; Daniel Ten Kate, "Hun Sen Wins Cambodian Election and Probably Expands Majority," *Bloomberg*, 28 July 2008.

<sup>64</sup> Nopporn Wong-Anan, "Cambodia PM says Thai border row getting worse," *Reuters*, 17 July 2008.

<sup>65</sup> "Troop build-up at hill-top temple," *BBC News*, 17 July 2008.

<sup>66</sup> "Temple Dispute Escalates at Cambodia-Thailand Border," *Associated Press*, 17 July 2008.

<sup>67</sup> "Preah Vihear: Tension Unlikely to Dissipate Without Change in Bilateral Dynamic," U.S. Embassy Phnom Penh, Cable 08PHNOMPENH581, 18 July 2008, <http://www.cablegatesearch.net/cable.php?id=08PHNOMPENH581>.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

their political clout. A Constitutional Court ruling that any bilateral border pact would require parliamentary approval added importance to the yellow-shirt protests, which made such approval highly unlikely.<sup>69</sup> The Thai government, vulnerable to the opposition and reliant on democratic legitimacy to govern, thereafter sought to appease the protesters by taking a hawkish policy line on Preah Vihear.

Seeing that the Thai government could not easily back down, Cambodia compromised diplomatically. At Thailand's request, Hun Sen agreed to postpone a complaint to the UN Security Council and request for an emergency Council meeting.<sup>70</sup> Cambodia also refrained from taking the issue back to the ICJ—an option Thailand opposed—and assented to Bangkok's demands for further bilateral negotiations.

Cambodian concessions helped dampen escalation but did not avert conflict entirely. During clashes in October, three Cambodian soldiers and one Thai soldier died, several on each side were wounded, ten Thai troops were reportedly captured, and the Thai Royal Air Force put its entire fleet of fighter jets on standby for possible evacuation of Thai nationals from Cambodia. Hard-line policies also did not save Samak. Yellow-shirt demonstrators continued to challenge his government until late 2008, when Samak was ousted and replaced by Abhisit Vejjajiva, a leader most yellow-shirt leaders supported. Abhisit appointed as foreign minister Kasit Piromya, a prominent nationalist, defender of the PAD protests, and advocate of an

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<sup>69</sup> “Preah Vihear: Thai MFA Briefs on Talks with Cambodia,” U.S. Embassy Bangkok, Cable 08BANGKOK2303, 30 July 2008, <http://thaicables.wordpress.com/2011/07/18/08bangkok2303-preah-vihear-thai-mfa-briefs-on-talks-with-cambodia/> (in which a U.S. official agreed that “the Thai side appears to be significantly constrained”).

<sup>70</sup> Ek Madra, “Cambodia, Thailand agree more temple talks,” *Reuters*, 24 July 2008.

uncompromising position on Preah Vihear.<sup>71</sup> Yellow-shirt protests subsided, and the border dispute entered a stalemate.

#### RESURGENT THAI PROTESTS, 2010-11

Nationalist protests again erupted in Thailand in 2010, when yellow-shirts began to turn on Abhisit and demand tougher action on border negotiations.<sup>72</sup> In January 2011, after Cambodian forces arrested two Thai nationalists near the temple grounds, approximately 2,000 yellow-shirt protesters returned to the streets in Bangkok, calling Abhisit “a big disappointment” and demanding his resignation and a tougher stance on Preah Vihear.<sup>73</sup> Abhisit sought to subdue the protests by enacting a new security law,<sup>74</sup> but he was unable to stem the momentum toward armed conflict.

During the first week of February, military clashes erupted, involving gunfights, Thai shelling, and alleged Thai military incursions across the border. Both sides accused the other of firing first, and several soldiers and civilians were killed in several days of sporadic fighting. The risk of war was serious enough to prompt UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon to appeal to

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<sup>71</sup> Nirmal Ghosh, “Grumbles over cabinet picks,” *Straits Times* (Singapore), 20 December 2008.

<sup>72</sup> Puangthong R. Pawakapan, *State and Uncivil Society in Thailand at the Temple of Preah Vihear* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2013), 80-81.

<sup>73</sup> “Thailand ‘yellow shirts’ stage new street protests,” *BBC News*, 25 January 2011; “PAD Protest,” *The Nation* (Thailand), 2 February 2011. Large red-shirt protests occurred during Abhisit’s tenure but focused on restoring democracy rather than nationalist demands.

<sup>74</sup> See, e.g., “Thailand imposes tough security law ahead of protests,” *Reuters*, 7 February 2011.

both sides for a “cessation of hostilities and to exercise maximum restraint.”<sup>75</sup> Many observers held the yellow-shirt protests largely responsible,<sup>76</sup> and one of Thailand’s most noted political analysts accused the PAD of “political brinkmanship” by raising the “drumbeat of war.”<sup>77</sup> Although the Abhisit government insisted that it would not attack Cambodia to appease yellow-shirt protesters,<sup>78</sup> Cambodian leaders and international observers regarded the situation as veering dangerously close to war.<sup>79</sup>

Cambodian officials were somewhat less sympathetic to Abhisit’s predicament than they had been toward the red-shirt Samak government, perhaps partly because yellow-shirt support had helped him assume power. They believed the protests constrained Abhisit but that he and his subordinates tended to “take advantage of the complexity of their politics” to avoid serious negotiations.<sup>80</sup> The 2011 Thai military incursions led Cambodia to lessen their investment in

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<sup>75</sup> “Statement attributable to the Spokesperson for the Secretary-General on Cambodia-Thailand,” United Nations (6 February 2011), available at <http://www.un.org/sg/statements/?nid=5080>.

<sup>76</sup> Sok An interview; “Thailand’s yellow shirts: eat talk, pray, revolt,” *Economist*, 24 February 2011; International Crisis Group, “Waging Peace: ASEAN and the Thai-Cambodian Border Conflict,” *Asia Report no. 215* (December 2011), 27; Voranai Varijaka, “The plague of fanaticism,” *Bangkok Post*, 6 February 2011.

<sup>77</sup> Thitinan Pongsudhirak, “Where is the PAD going this time with its protests?” *Bangkok Post*, 8 February 2011.

<sup>78</sup> “Thailand, Cambodia to meet UN over ‘real war,’” *ABC News*, 10 February 2011.

<sup>79</sup> See, e.g., “Thailand-Cambodia border dispute: UN calls for truce,” *BBC News*, 14 February 2011 (noting the Security Council president’s “great concern” over the fighting); “Hun Sen calls clashes with Thailand ‘war’” *CCTV* (China), 10 February 2011.

<sup>80</sup> Author’s interview with Phay Siphon, Senior Advisor to Prime Minister Hun Sen, Phnom Penh, Cambodia, 25 July 2011.

bilateral talks and request international assistance over Thai objections.<sup>81</sup> When Thailand resisted an Indonesian offer to dispatch observers to the area, frustrated Cambodian officials returned to the ICJ, which soon agreed to Cambodia's request for a reinterpretation of its 1962 verdict and ordered both states to withdraw troops in the temple area.<sup>82</sup>

Cambodia's change of diplomatic tack reflected convictions that prior compromises had failed to moderate Thai policies.<sup>83</sup> Cambodia's behavior is also consistent with expectations that a foreign rival is only likely to make concessions it expects to help defuse nationalist pressure. Importantly, the 2011 episode showed that Cambodia was willing to take more assertive foreign policy measures toward its stronger Thai neighbor under certain conditions. Although the power differential was clearly a factor in Cambodian decision-making, it does not explain the shift in Cambodia's behavior from 2008 to 2011.

### RESUMED PROTESTS IN 2013

In 2011, Abhisit lost an election to red-shirt leader Yingluck Shinawatra, Thaksin's sister, who promised a more conciliatory policy toward the border dispute. However, that policy came under challenge in 2013, when the ICJ issued its interpretation of the 1962 judgment. The court awarded part of the disputed 4.6 square kilometers to Cambodia but leaving part subject to further negotiation. In the days surrounding the verdict, thousands of yellow-shirt demonstrators rallied amid a series of broader protests calling for Yingluck's ouster. Some accused her of conspiring with Thaksin to "sell our country and our territory" to Cambodia and implored her not

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<sup>81</sup> Author's interview with Deputy Prime Minister Sok An, Phnom Penh, Cambodia, 28 July 2011.

<sup>82</sup> Puangthong, *State and Uncivil Society*, 84-86.

<sup>83</sup> Interview with Sok An; interview with Phay Siphon.

to comply with the judgment.<sup>84</sup> Although the protests soon turned back to domestic grievances, they made any compromise over the remaining territorial issues dangerous for the Yingluck administration.<sup>85</sup>

Cambodian leaders again compromised diplomatically. They enjoyed positive relations with Yingluck and her exiled brother Thaksin (whom Hun Sen had appointed an economic advisor in 2009) and agreed not to insist on prompt renewal of border talks, because: “we don’t want the Thai extremists to use this issue to [further] pressure the government of Ms. Yingluck.”<sup>86</sup> Cambodian authorities regarded continuing Thai protests as credible policy constraints on her administration and did not hold her responsible, again showing how protests in weakly institutionalized democracies can sometimes produce foreign concessions.

### **Nationalist Demonstrations in Cambodia**

In Cambodia, nationalist protests have demanded hardline policies toward both Thailand and Vietnam. The government fomented anti-Thai demonstrations during the run-up to Cambodia’s 2003 national elections, when the ruling CPP sought to solidify its electoral

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<sup>84</sup> Thomas Escritt and Amy Sawitta Lefevre, “Thailand Braces for Trouble as U.N. court backs Cambodia in border row,” *Reuters*, 11 November 2013.

<sup>85</sup> See, e.g., Noelen Arbis, “Preah Vihear Ruling Another Test for Yingluck’s Legitimacy,” *CogitAsia*, 12 November 2013 (arguing that Yingluck had “little maneuvering room.”)

<sup>86</sup> Cheang Sokha and Kevin Ponniah, “Cambodia ‘won’t rush’ Thais,” *Phnom Penh Post*, 18 November 2013.

dominance but still faced significant challenges from domestic opposition parties.<sup>87</sup> After its electoral lead and authoritarian grip on power widened in 2003 and 2008,<sup>88</sup> the CPP repressed anti-Thai protests, but it has wavered on trying to subdue anti-Vietnamese protests that have emerged since mid-2013, when a revitalized opposition captured nearly 45% of the vote. The Cambodian case thus shows variation within an electoral authoritarian system consistent with expectations that greater electoral vulnerability makes incumbents more likely to instigate or tolerate protests, even when those protests raise risks of escalation and are not perceived by rivals as credible constraints. It also shows how incumbent leaders' incentives to quash protests grow as negative international repercussions become evident.

#### OUT OF CONTROL: THE 2003 ANTI-THAI DEMONSTRATIONS

The spark for the 2003 demonstrations was unusual—alleged remarks by a popular Thai actress that the iconic Khmer temple of Angkor Wat belongs to Thailand. Prime Minister Hun Sen responded angrily in a televised address, saying the Thai actress was “worth less than a blade of grass at Angkor.”<sup>89</sup> His remarks made the front page of Cambodian papers and inflamed

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<sup>87</sup> The CPP took power by force in 1997, ending a UN-brokered power-sharing deal with the royalist party Funcinpec. In the 1998 national elections, the CPP won 41% of the popular vote, compared to 32% for Funcinpec and 14% for its other main domestic rival, the Sam Rainsy Party.

<sup>88</sup> The CPP won 47% of the vote in 2003, versus 22% for Sam Rainsy and 21% for Funcinpec, and expanded its lead in 2008 (58% versus 22% for Sam Rainsy, its lone significant challenger).

<sup>89</sup> Cambodia Human Rights and Development Association, “Monitoring Report on Riots Against the Thai Embassy in Phnom Penh from 29-31 January 2003,” [http://www.bigpond.com.kh/users/adhoc/publication/riot\\_29\\_01\\_03/monitoring\\_riot\\_report.htm](http://www.bigpond.com.kh/users/adhoc/publication/riot_29_01_03/monitoring_riot_report.htm).

public anger,<sup>90</sup> tapping into frustration at perceived Thai condescension to Khmers and historical encroachment on Cambodian land.

On January 29, thousands of Cambodians protested in front of the Thai Embassy in Phnom Penh. After a false rumor circulated that a Thai mob had killed several Cambodians, violent riots erupted. Khmer youths burned down Thai-owned businesses and the Thai Embassy. Thailand withdrew its ambassador, sealed the border, suspended bilateral cooperation, and put its armed forces on alert. Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra told Hun Sen that unless Cambodian authorities subdued the protests within 90 minutes, he would send Thai troops to do so, illustrating the risk that anti-foreign violence may precipitate foreign intervention.<sup>91</sup> Thailand did dispatch military aircraft to evacuate several hundred Thai civilians.

The slow response of Cambodian police and the participation of the “pagoda boys”—a youth group loosely affiliated with the CPP—led many Thai and international observers to conclude that the CPP had encouraged or acquiesced in the attacks as a “political ploy” in advance of July 2003 elections.<sup>92</sup> The CPP had consistently repressed previous public protests, usually concerning labor rights and land reform,<sup>93</sup> suggesting that it could do so again. A senior Thai military officer asked: “Without [Hun Sen’s] consent how could such a thing happen in

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<sup>90</sup> Alexander Hinton, “Khmerness and the Thai ‘Other’: Violence, Discourse, and Symbolism in the 2003 Anti-Thai Riots in Cambodia,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 37, no. 3 (October 2006): 446.

<sup>91</sup> “Whose Angkor Wat?” *Economist*, 30 January 2003.

<sup>92</sup> See, e.g., “Hun Sen’s Poll Ploy Backfired,” *The Nation*, 3 February 2003; Seth Mydans, “Cambodia feels threatened; Thailand’s strength annoys a ravaged land,” *New York Times*, 3 February 2003 (citing an “article of faith” among foreign observers that Hun Sen’s instigation or complicity was required for such violence).

<sup>93</sup> Kheang Un, “Cambodia in 2012: Beyond the Crossroads?” *Asian Survey* 53, no. 1 (January/February 2013): 144.

Cambodia, where he has nearly absolute power and full control of the military?”<sup>94</sup> Thaksin added, “We are a victim of complications in Cambodian politics...Someone tried to stir a sense of nationalism....”<sup>95</sup> Cambodian opposition leader Sam Rainsy added: “If Phnom Penh wanted to prevent such violence, it could have done so”<sup>96</sup> and compared Hun Sen to “a child who plays with fire,” stirring nationalism for electoral gain.<sup>97</sup>

The Cambodian government soon restored order, apologized, sacked the local police chief, made more than 150 arrests, and offered compensation for the damage.<sup>98</sup> That reaction showed that the government had the capacity to control and disperse the protests rapidly. It also suggested that CPP leaders were caught off guard by the pace and scale of the violence.<sup>99</sup> Government spokesman Khieu Kanharith confessed: “We did not expect this to go this far.”<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> *Bangkok Post*, 6 February 2003. Foreign Minister Surakiart Sathirathai also accused Cambodian authorities of arousing anti-Thai sentiment and encouraging the demonstrations. Mark Baker, “Shaken Thais not ready to forgive,” *The Age* (Australia), 6 February 2003.

<sup>95</sup> Seth Mydans, “Face that Stirred the Cambodian Riots,” *New York Times*, 1 February 2003.

<sup>96</sup> Mark Baker, “Hun Sen accused of inciting anti-Thai riots,” *The Age* (Australia), 1 February 2003.

<sup>97</sup> John Aglionby, “Cambodian prime minister apologises for anti-Thailand riots,” *The Guardian*, 31 January 2003.

<sup>98</sup> “Cambodia Apologizes to Thailand Over Riot,” *New York Times*, 31 January 2003. Cambodia paid Thailand roughly \$6 million in March for embassy repairs and pledged more for damaged hotels and businesses. “Thailand, Cambodia restore diplomatic relations,” *Bahrain News Agency*, 12 April 2003.

<sup>99</sup> Hinton, “Khmerness and the Thai ‘Other,’” 451-54. This is a view shared by Sam Rainsy and U.S. State Department officials. See Agionby, “Cambodian prime minister” (in which Sam Rainsy says Hun Sen “did not expect it to go so far and it got totally out of control”); and U.S. State Department, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, *Report to the Congress on the Anti-Thai riots in Cambodia on January 29, 2003* (14 May 2003) (accusing the CPP of incompetence and mishandling of the crisis).

<sup>100</sup> Mydans, “Face that Stirred.”

Hun Sen attempted to limit the diplomatic damage by blaming the riots on “a handful of extremists” and arguing that he acted as swiftly as possible to control the rioters without shooting on them.<sup>101</sup> Tensions subsided after the Cambodian apologies,<sup>102</sup> but not before Thailand threatened a military intervention that Cambodia’s leaders did not wish to confront. The episode won Cambodia no international sympathy. The U.S. government publicly condemned the violence,<sup>103</sup> and international media coverage uniformly painted the episode as an “international embarrassment”<sup>104</sup> that would “carry a huge price tag for Cambodia”<sup>105</sup> in political and economic terms.

The 2003 debacle shows that while leaders in electoral authoritarian states sometimes have incentives to stoke nationalism, especially around elections, doing so can backfire if protests descend into anti-foreign attacks and invite foreign retaliation. In addition, nationalist protests generate no meaningful international leverage or sympathy when foreign observers believe the government fomented them or can subdue them at little cost.

#### QUELLED ANTI-THAI PROTESTS IN 2009 AND 2010

Anti-Thai nationalism resurfaced several years later amid the territorial dispute over Preah Vihear. In July 2009, on the first anniversary of Thailand’s incursion into the temple area,

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<sup>101</sup> “Cambodia blames ‘extremists’ for riots,” *BBC News*, 3 February 2003.

<sup>102</sup> Thaksin later said the Cambodian government “underestimated the situation which resulted in the delay of them tackling the problem.” “Cambodia-Thailand ties on the mend,” *The Star* (Malaysia), 5 February 2003.

<sup>103</sup> U.S. State Department, Daily Press Briefing, 30 January 2003.

<sup>104</sup> Richard C. Paddock, “Rumor of Thai Actress’ Words Salted a Wound,” *Los Angeles Times*, 3 February 2003.

<sup>105</sup> “Cambodian ‘incompetence’ in anti-Thai riots,” *CNN*, 3 February 2003.

Cambodian nationalists sought to organize a rally in Phnom Penh. The government clamped down swiftly, with riot police dispersing the protesters. In July 2010, protesters again planned a “Day of Anger” demonstration in Phnom Penh “expressing hate and demanding that Thai soldiers withdraw” from Preah Vihear.<sup>106</sup> Four days before the planned demonstrations, Cambodian officials banned the rally, citing public safety concerns.<sup>107</sup> The organizers proceeded, but on the day of the event, 150 riot police and soldiers—more than the number of protesters—broke up the demonstration.<sup>108</sup>

Cambodian leaders repressed the demonstrations for diplomatic and domestic reasons. They feared that facilitating protests could exacerbate tensions with Thailand and raise the likelihood of conflict, especially since Thai leaders said they would hold the Cambodian government responsible. Before the July 2010 demonstrations, Deputy Prime Minister Suthep Thaugsuban said “Cambodia organised the Day of Anger because the government there wants to strengthen feelings of patriotism.”<sup>109</sup> Prime Minister Abhisit also accused the Cambodian government of playing “psychological warfare” in advance of UNESCO meetings—suggesting a Cambodian effort to broadcast popular grievances and mobilize international sympathy.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Kim Yuthana and Thet Sambath, “Police quash anti-Thai gathering,” *Phnom Penh Post*, 16 July 2010.

The “Day of Anger” was a reference to an annual holiday in Cambodia in which survivors express grievances against the Khmers Rouges.

<sup>107</sup> “Cambodia Bans Rally Against Thailand,” *Thai-ASEAN News Network*, 15 July 2010.

<sup>108</sup> Kim and Thet, “Police quash anti-Thai gathering.” See also “Cambodians Hold Anti-Thai Protest in Phnom Penh,” *NTD Television*, 16 July 2010, video available at <http://ki-media.blogspot.com/2010/07/cambodians-hold-anti-thailand-protest.html>.

<sup>109</sup> “Anupong visits border troop positions,” *The Nation* (Thailand), 14 July 2010; and “Suthep: Day of Anger won’t harm ties,” *Bangkok Post*, 14 July 2010.

<sup>110</sup> “PM: Unworried over Cambodia’s Day of Anger event,” *MCOT Online News*, 14 July 2010.

Whether these Thai statements were instrumental or sincere, Cambodian officials moved to block the demonstrations. By the eve of the event, Abhisit and Suthep expressed confidence that the protest would not affect overall bilateral ties,<sup>111</sup> and Suthep later thanked his Cambodian counterparts publicly for preventing the rally.<sup>112</sup>

The CPP also stopped the anti-Thai protests to prevent opposition groups from using them as springboards for broader demonstrations. The organizer of the July 2010 protests was Rong Chhun of the Cambodia Watchdog Council—a Norway-based organization representing trade unions and affiliated civil society groups, with connections to the opposition Sam Rainsy Party (SRP). A high-level Cambodian official reportedly met with organizers before the protests were banned, warning them not to use the Day of Anger as an opposition-party platform.<sup>113</sup>

Although the opposition continued to criticize the government for failing to win undisputed sovereignty over Preah Vihear, the CPP leadership was much more secure than it had been in 2003, having won the 2008 elections by a landslide. Cambodian officials saw little need for public protests over Preah Vihear, as the temple issue was already salient and the public was strongly behind the government.<sup>114</sup> Protests also offered Cambodia little potential leverage against Thailand, because Thai officials had made clear that they believed Cambodia could control them easily. Yet grassroots protests carried significant risks of provoking Thai escalation and domestic unrest. The government thus had strong incentives to subdue them and could do so at an acceptable cost given the CPP's strong domestic control and the relative normalcy of such repression in Cambodia.

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<sup>111</sup> “PM: Unworried.”

<sup>112</sup> “Govt praises Phnom Penh for stopping Day of Anger,” *Bangkok Post*, 16 July 2010.

<sup>113</sup> “Plan to Hold an ‘Anger Day’ Against Thai Invasion,” *KI-Media*, 29 June 2010.

<sup>114</sup> Interview with Son Soubert, 25 July 2011, Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

## A NEW THREAT: ANTI-VIETNAMESE PROTESTS IN 2013 AND 2014

A more challenging set of nationalist protests arose in Cambodia in 2013, this time focused on Vietnam, which Cambodian nationalists have long accused of encroaching on Cambodian territory and sovereignty. That sentiment resurfaced as part of larger demonstrations led by the opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) after the controversial July 2013 national elections. The protests focused largely on domestic grievances—such as allegations of CPP election-rigging, corruption, and environmental and human rights abuses—but also featured prominent anti-Vietnamese themes.

Opposition leader Sam Rainsy had long stirred nationalist ire toward Vietnam, calling CPP leaders “*yuon* (Vietnamese) puppets” to criticize their close historical ties to Hanoi,<sup>115</sup> threatening to expel Vietnamese immigrants, pressing for a harder line on border demarcation talks, accusing Vietnam of trying “to swallow our land,”<sup>116</sup> and uprooting border demarcation posts in protest.<sup>117</sup> In July 2013, he returned to the border area and accused the CPP of “protect[ing] the invading Yuons.”<sup>118</sup> Post-election protests soon included anti-Vietnamese slogans against “*yuon* animals” or “*yuon* dogs.”<sup>119</sup> Unlike the small protests that the CPP dispersed in 2009 and 2010, these anti-Vietnamese protests were embedded in large rallies that enjoyed significant domestic and international backing and featured demands for human rights,

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<sup>115</sup> See, e.g., Stew Magnuson and Kay Kimsong, “On Campaign Trail, Sam Rainsy Pledges to Oust Vietnamese,” *Cambodia Daily*, 21 July 1998. Some consider the term *yuon* derogatory.

<sup>116</sup> Sok Hemara, “Sam Rainsy Rails Against Loss of Land in US Talk,” *VOA Khmer*, 3 June 2010.

<sup>117</sup> Meas Sokchea, “VN Slams Sam Rainsy for Border Post Stunt,” *Phnom Penh Post*, 4 November 2009.

<sup>118</sup> May Titthara, “At border, Rainsy plays old tune,” *Phnom Penh Post*, 26 July 2013.

<sup>119</sup> “Cambodia protests unmask anti-Vietnam views,” *Al-Jazeera*, 24 January 2014.

democracy, and the ouster of the Hun Sen government. In this context, subduing anti-Vietnamese protests would have been costly, playing into opposition criticisms that the government is anti-democratic and unduly beholden to Hanoi. The CPP allowed protests to continue for an extended period—reflecting Hun Sen’s weaker political position and the country’s shift back toward more competitive electoral authoritarian rule.

In January 2014, the CPP changed tack after protesters and sympathetic garment workers clashed with police outside Phnom Penh, looting and destroying a number of Vietnamese businesses in the process. Those attacks triggered the most significant use of force by the government since the protests began months before. Police opened fire, killing five protesters and injuring or arresting many others.<sup>120</sup> In February, demonstrators reportedly shouted “yuon” before killing a Vietnamese-Cambodian man. CPP officials promptly criticized the opposition for inciting “racism” and responded to Vietnamese demands for an investigation by pledging to investigate and prosecute the offenders.<sup>121</sup> A subsequent exchange of head-of-state visits and trade and investment talks showed that CPP actions successfully avoided a rupture with Vietnam.<sup>122</sup>

In July 2014, new protests erupted after a Vietnamese official made controversial remarks about Vietnam’s historical ownership of Kampuchea Krom—an area around the Mekong Delta once within the Khmer Empire. More than 100 Buddhist monks and other

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<sup>120</sup> Peter Maguire, “Cambodia’s People Power,” *The Diplomat*, 20 January 2014.

<sup>121</sup> “Cambodia Vows to Bring Perpetrators of ‘Racist’ Killing to Justice,” *Radio Free Asia*, 20 February 2014.

<sup>122</sup> Indeed, the episode likely reinforced ties between the Hun Sen government and Vietnamese leadership. Murray Hiebert and Phuong Nguyen, “Cambodian Regime Realigns Its Foreign Relations,” *YaleGlobal Online*, 18 February 2014.

demonstrators gathered by the Vietnamese Embassy, demanding an apology before police used batons to disperse them.<sup>123</sup> Thousands of demonstrators rallied again in August, burning Vietnamese flags, and Cambodia initially rebuffed Vietnamese demands to stop them. A Ministry of Interior spokesman said, “Cambodia is different than Vietnam,” emphasizing that Cambodia “adheres to...democracy” and “allows freedom of expression” and that the protests would not affect government policy.<sup>124</sup> However, Cambodia reversed course days later, ordering a halt to protests and expressing “regret” for the acts of “extremists” after Vietnam’s Prime Minister called on Phnom Penh to act<sup>125</sup>—a clear indication that he believed Cambodia was capable of repressing the protests.

Smaller demonstrations resurfaced in October, with some protesters threatening to burn the Vietnamese embassy,<sup>126</sup> but a Cambodian government spokesman insisted: “We are resolved not to let a small group of extremists...incite divisive relations between the two nations.”<sup>127</sup> Authorities sent riot police to control further demonstrations and arrested three participating monks in November, instilling fear in others and quelling the protests.<sup>128</sup> Again, no serious rift occurred between Phnom Penh and Hanoi.

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<sup>123</sup> “Khmer Krom monks clash with Cambodian police over Hanoi statement,” *Radio Free Asia*, 7 July 2014.

<sup>124</sup> “Cambodia defends flag burning protest as “freedom of expression,” *Radio Free Asia*, 15 August 2014.

<sup>125</sup> “Cambodia Orders Halt to Anti-Vietnamese Protests After Flag-Burning Incident,” *Radio Free Asia*, 19 August 2014.

<sup>126</sup> Mech Dara, “Demonstrators Threatened to Burn Vietnamese Embassy,” *Cambodia Daily*, 6 October 2014.

<sup>127</sup> “Cambodia stands firm in relations with Vietnam,” *Radio Voice of Vietnam*, 24 October 2014.

<sup>128</sup> See, e.g., “After Arrests, Fear Permeates Outcast Pagoda,” *Cambodia Daily*, 14 November 2014.

The Cambodian case shows that electoral authoritarian regimes sometimes have incentives to foment or allow nationalist protests to rally public support or demonstrate democratic credentials. However, it also shows that such protests can get out of hand and descend into anti-foreign violence. When protests have jeopardized Cambodia's relations with its larger neighbors, the authorities have ultimately shown the willingness and capacity to repress protests rather than acceding to demonstrators' demands, which helps explain why neither Thailand nor Vietnam has viewed the Cambodian protests as imposing credible foreign policy constraints or offered meaningful diplomatic concessions.

#### VIETNAM AND THE PHILIPPINES: THE LIMITED DANGERS OF ANTI-CHINA PROTESTS OVER THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

Rising tensions over conflicting maritime claims in the South China Sea have been accompanied by popular efforts in Vietnam and the Philippines to oppose Chinese "aggression". Although both Vietnam and the Philippines have witnessed nationalist protests against China, these two cases illustrate that the impact of nationalist protests on foreign relations can be muted despite the very different political regimes in which they arise.

Nationalist protests in autocratic Vietnam have posed a relatively high latent risk to regime stability, but their impact has been circumscribed by the government's willingness and ability to repress them.<sup>129</sup> The Vietnamese government swiftly subdued anti-China protests in 2007, and although it was more lenient in permitting small-scale anti-China protests in the

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<sup>129</sup> Public protests in general—often related to domestic land disputes—are rare in Vietnam and almost always swiftly repressed. See, e.g., "Vietnam land clash: Arrests after police evict hundreds," *BBC*, 25 April 2012; "Vietnam Tightens Land Seizure Law after Farmers Protest," *Bloomberg*, 9 December 2013.

summer of 2011, the window of opportunity was forcefully shut once the two governments reached a diplomatic understanding about the importance of “guiding public opinion.” Anti-Chinese protests in 2012 and 2013 were quickly and effectively curtailed. In 2014, as China pressed its maritime claims more assertively, Vietnam allowed the largest anti-China protests to date but swiftly repressed them after demonstrations descended into violent riots, stemming the damage to Sino-Vietnamese relations. Although Chinese and Vietnamese vessels continued to face off in the South China Sea, the Vietnamese government carefully sought to avoid actions that might justify a Chinese military response.

Nationalist protests in the democratic Philippines also have not significantly constrained the government’s foreign policy, but for different reasons. In the Philippines, public protests are common, and unless they are exceedingly large, they do not raise significant risks of regime instability.<sup>130</sup> Anti-China demonstrations have been relatively small and organized by groups affiliated with the incumbent leadership, posing little political threat or constraint on the government’s foreign policy. Rather than pushing the government to take a harsher stance against China, anti-China protests in 2011, 2012, and 2013 are better seen as supportive of the Aquino administration’s already tough position against China.

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<sup>130</sup> Small, usually peaceful protests occur regularly on issues such as the U.S. military presence, official corruption, and economic hardship. See, e.g., “‘Pork-barrel’ politics spark protests in Philippines,” *BBC News*, 27 August 2013; “Anti-Obama protesters clash with police,” *Associated Press*, 26 February 2014; “‘Yolanda’ survivors hold protest, demand more assistance,” *Philippine Inquirer*, 9 January 2014.

## Anti-China Protests in Vietnam

Despite Vietnam's general willingness to crack down on anti-China protests that may jeopardize relations and risk conflict,<sup>131</sup> a series of developments in the South China Sea aroused Vietnamese alarm in 2007, including China's detention of Vietnamese fishing boats near the Spratlys in April and naval exercises in the Paracels in November.<sup>132</sup> For Vietnamese nationalists, the final straw was China's creation of a new administrative region, Sansha, whose jurisdiction would include the Paracel and Spratly Islands.<sup>133</sup>

On December 9, 2007, a few hundred Vietnamese gathered near the Chinese embassy in Hanoi. "I don't think the government has ever allowed such protests in the past," said Vu Mao, former chairman of the national assembly's external relations committee.<sup>134</sup> Vietnamese netizens circulated plans to protest the following weekend, but the second round of protests met with

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<sup>131</sup> Vietnam repressed anti-China protests after nine Vietnamese fishermen were killed by Chinese patrols in the Tonkin Gulf in 2005. Alexander Vuving, "Strategy and Evolution of Vietnam's China Policy: A Changing Mixture of Pathways," *Asian Survey* 46, no. 6 (November/December 2006): 819.

<sup>132</sup> "Disputes in the South China Sea," *The Economist*, 13 December 2007. See also Thayer, "The Structure of Vietnam-China Relations," 20.

<sup>133</sup> China consolidated control over the Paracels in 1974 after defeating Vietnam in a series of naval clashes. John W. Garver, "China's Push through the South China Sea: The Interaction of Bureaucratic and National Interests," *The China Quarterly* no. 132 (December 1992): 1012; M. Taylor Fravel, "Power Shifts and Escalation: Explaining China's Use of Force in Territorial Disputes," *International Security* 32, no. 3 (Winter 2007/08): 44-83.

<sup>134</sup> Quoted in Roger Mitton, "For Hanoi, protests are okay - up to a point," *Straits Times*, 13 March 2008.

heavy police presence. Authorities prevented hundreds of protesters from reaching the Chinese consulate and embassy in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi and arrested several demonstrators.<sup>135</sup>

Fear of Chinese retaliation and the destabilizing effects of anti-China protests appear to have influenced the government's decision to curtail them.<sup>136</sup> The participation of democratic activists fed government concerns that anti-China rallies might turn against the ruling Communist Party. As one official told reporters: "It's alright some bloggers have recently showed their patriotism, posting opinions about the Paracels-Spratly archipelagos on their weblogs. But some have sparked protest, causing public disorder and affecting the country's foreign affairs."<sup>137</sup> According to Le Quoc Quan, a Vietnamese lawyer who had been imprisoned for alleged "activities to overthrow the People's government,"<sup>138</sup>

some students and I went to protest against China over the three islands....Even while shouting against Sansha, I still found something lacking.....Instead of choosing dictatorship, please choose democracy. Instead of choosing Communist ideology, please choose Vietnamese nationalism.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> "Vietnamese stage second anti-China rally over disputed islands," *Agence France Presse*, 16, December 2007.

<sup>136</sup> Alexander Vuving, "Vietnam: Arriving in the World—and at a Crossroads," *Southeast Asian Affairs* 2008 (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008), 389.

<sup>137</sup> "Vietnam must regulate blogs, say officials," *Agence France Presse*, 25 December 2007.

<sup>138</sup> "Free Le Quoc Quan," *The New York Sun*, 20 April 2007; "Vietnam dissidents use technology to stay ahead," *The Globe and Mail*, 6 December 2007.

<sup>139</sup> "Tam Sa và 8 Chữ Cho Việt nam," [Eight letters to gain 'position' and 'power'] 21 December 2007, <http://lequocquan.blogspot.com/2007/12/tam-sa-v-8-ch-cho-vit-nam.html>.

Over the next several months, Vietnam kept a lid on anti-China sentiment. One newspaper was suspended for supporting the “pure patriotism” of anti-China protesters in 2007.<sup>140</sup> When the Olympic torch passed through Hanoi, authorities arrested well-known blogger Dieu Cay for allegedly organizing anti-Chinese protests and two protesters for unfurling a banner depicting the Olympic rings as handcuffs.<sup>141</sup>

Despite the government’s efforts, anti-China sentiment continued to grow, sparked by a 2009 controversy over Chinese bauxite investments in the Vietnamese central highlands. With opposition to the project including retired war hero General Vo Nguyen Giap and several National Assembly representatives, the government promised regular reviews of the project and tightened requirements on Chinese workers.<sup>142</sup> Despite these concessions, the government continued to crack down on anti-China sentiment. In September 2009, two bloggers and a journalist were arrested and subsequently released for promoting a campaign to give away T-shirts that said “Stop bauxite. No China. The Spratlys and Paracels belong to Vietnam.”<sup>143</sup>

After Chinese patrol ships cut the cables of two Vietnamese survey ships in 2011, protesters took to the streets for several consecutive weekends between June and August 2011. The Vietnamese government’s lenience toward nationalist protests marked a distinct change

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<sup>140</sup> “Bauxite Bashers,” *The Economist*, 23 April 2009.

<sup>141</sup> “Vietnam’s bloggers face government crackdown,” *Time.com*, 30 December 2008; “Vietnam Arrests Blogger for Reporting Torch Protests,” *Bangkok Post*, 28 April 2008; “Vietnam detains anti-China activists before torch relay,” *Agence France Presse*, 28 April 2008.

<sup>142</sup> Edward Wong, “China’s export of labor faces scorn,” *New York Times*, 20 December 2009; VietNamNet Bridge, “Bauxite mining in Central Highlands gets Politburo go-ahead,” 26 April 2009, <http://english.vietnamnet.vn/politics/2009/04/844234/>.

<sup>143</sup> John Ruwitch, “Vietnam bloggers arrested over China shirt protest,” *Reuters*, 5 September 2009.

from its prior efforts to tamp down anti-China sentiment. For Vietnam, the incidents reflected a pattern of increasing Chinese commercial and military activity in the South China Sea, leading Hanoi to condemn the “systematic acts by the Chinese side [that] aim at disputing an undisputed area.”<sup>144</sup> The Vietnamese government sought to halt this “escalation of China’s efforts to exercise and enforce its maritime rights,”<sup>145</sup> and allowing protests was a way to signal resolve despite Vietnam’s relative weakness. Vietnamese leaders may have also been emboldened by the belief that international actors—particularly the United States—would be willing to come to Vietnam’s assistance, given U.S. actions in 2010, including Secretary Clinton’s declaration of a U.S. “national interest” in the South China Sea.<sup>146</sup> Former government official Tran Cong Truc stressed that Vietnam should “help world opinion understand that if China’s wrongdoings are not prevented, they will keep escalating and being more aggressive, directly affecting the interests of countries in the region, not only Vietnam’s.”<sup>147</sup>

The Vietnamese government was initially loath to crack down, partly hoping that anti-China protests would communicate the extent of public outrage in Vietnam, and partly afraid of

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<sup>144</sup> “Regular Press Briefing by MOFA’s Spokesperson Nguyen Phuong Nga on June 9th, 2011,” [http://www.mofa.gov.vn/en/tt\\_baochi/pbnfn/ns110610145220#HArtqh2fGS9R](http://www.mofa.gov.vn/en/tt_baochi/pbnfn/ns110610145220#HArtqh2fGS9R); and John Ruwitch, “Vietnam allows second anti-China protest in Hanoi,” *Reuters*, 12 June 2011.

<sup>145</sup> Fravel, “China’s Strategy in the South China Sea,” 13.

<sup>146</sup> U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, “Remarks at the ASEAN Regional Forum,” 23 July 2010, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2010/07/145095.htm>.

<sup>147</sup> “Binh Minh 02 ship case: enough evidences to sue China!” VietNamNet Bridge, 2 June 2011, <http://english.vietnamnet.vn/en/print/politics/9022/binh-minh-02-ship-case--enough-evidences-to-sue-china-.html>.

appearing “anti-patriotic.”<sup>148</sup> Two protesters attributed the government’s forbearance to the changed diplomatic context. “This time, the Vietnam’s state wanted to show its attitude toward China through the protests. The Vietnam government did not want the marches to take place, but circumstances forced it to do so,” said one protester. The second agreed: “I think the authorities have eased up with the current protests. I am not surprised because this is a very special case....When the people protest peacefully, it can be beneficial for the authorities in coping with China’s expansion.”<sup>149</sup> Former president and retired general Le Duc Anh was quoted in the Vietnamese press as saying: “We have to trust our people to persistently struggle publicly. Making public information is the way to show agreement and the people’s power.”<sup>150</sup>

As protests continued, Vietnamese Deputy Foreign Minister Ho Xuan Son traveled to Beijing, where he and State Councilor Dai Bingguo issued a joint statement declaring “the need to steer public opinions along the correct direction, avoiding comments and deeds that harm the friendship and trust of the two countries.”<sup>151</sup> Both sides made symbolic concessions on conditions for steps toward a China-ASEAN code of conduct for the South China Sea.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> Interview with a Vietnamese Foreign Ministry Official, Hanoi, 8 August 2011.

<sup>149</sup> “Giới trẻ Việt Nam và các cuộc biểu tình chống Trung Quốc,” [Vietnamese youth and the protests against China] VOA Vietnamese, 1 July 2011, <http://www.voanews.com/vietnamese/news/vietnamese-youth-and-anti-china-protests-part1-124786154.html>.

<sup>150</sup> VietnamNet, “Top ranking general: If we frighten, we will lose sovereignty,” 14 June 2011, <http://english.vietnamnet.vn/en/special-report/9441/top-ranking-general--if-we-frighten--we-will-lose-sovereignty.html>.

<sup>151</sup> “Vietnam-China Joint Press Release,” *Communist Party of Vietnam Online Newspaper*, 26 June 2011; “Nations agree on talks to solve sea dispute,” *China Daily.com*, 27 June 2011.

<sup>152</sup> M. Taylor Fravel, “China’s Strategy in the South China Sea,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 33, no. 3 (2011): 17.

Although a few hundred protesters managed to gather for two more weekends in Vietnam,<sup>153</sup> Vietnamese authorities acted more decisively to arrest and disperse protesters on July 10 and 17.<sup>154</sup> Days later, China and ASEAN compromised on a set of guidelines for implementing a code of conduct in the South China Sea.<sup>155</sup> ASEAN agreed to “dialogue and consultations” in lieu of an explicit statement that members would consult before meeting with China.<sup>156</sup> In August, the Foreign Ministry announced that working-level negotiations between China and Vietnam had reached a preliminary consensus on principles, including “not take any action that may broaden and complicate disputes, and not to use force or threaten to use force in the process of dispute resolution.”<sup>157</sup> The agreement involved mutual concessions—“to solve bilaterally those issues which are solely related to Vietnam and China while those issues related to other parties should be put into discussion among concerned parties.”<sup>158</sup>

Despite this diplomatic breakthrough, demonstrations gained new life after Vietnam announced the results of an investigation sparked by a YouTube video of a protester being kicked in the face by a plainclothes officer. Although no evidence of police brutality was

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<sup>153</sup> “Anti-China demo in Vietnam despite clampdown,” *Agence France Presse*, 3 July 2011.

<sup>154</sup> “Police again break up anti-China demo in Vietnam,” *Agence France Presse*, 17 July 2011; *BBC Vietnamese*, 21 July 2011, [http://www.bbc.co.uk/vietnamese/vietnam/2011/07/110721\\_protesters\\_appeal.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/vietnamese/vietnam/2011/07/110721_protesters_appeal.shtml).

<sup>155</sup> “New guidelines on South China Sea give green light for China-ASEAN cooperation,” *Xinhua News Agency*, 22 July 2011.

<sup>156</sup> Patrick Cronin, ed., *Cooperation from Strength: The United States, China and the South China Sea* (Washington: Center for a New American Security, January 2012).

<sup>157</sup> Vietnam Foreign Ministry Spokesperson’s Statement, 3 August 2011, [http://www.mofa.gov.vn/en/tt\\_baochi/pbnfn/ns110805164907#tzYrD3lcmBE](http://www.mofa.gov.vn/en/tt_baochi/pbnfn/ns110805164907#tzYrD3lcmBE).

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*

officially found,<sup>159</sup> many protesters interpreted the suspension of officials involved as a green light, and demonstrations in Hanoi resumed.<sup>160</sup> Yet mainstream and even liberal Chinese media speculated that ostensibly anti-China protests were actually led by anti-government elements trying to undermine the Vietnamese regime. “Some people think that the Vietnamese government is actually most afraid that protesters will turn against the government, since most previous anti-China demonstrations were organized by anti-government organizations in Vietnam,” noted *Caijing*.<sup>161</sup> “When the dispute in South China Sea gradually subsided, the anti-China demonstrations in Vietnam did not stop,” said Vietnam expert Chen Minling, who asserted: “They are actually the accomplices (*bangxiong*) of external forces trying to subvert the Vietnamese regime.”<sup>162</sup> The Vietnamese Communist Party’s mouthpiece, *Hanoi Moi*, blamed the anti-China protests on “anti-state forces,” saying that “their conspiracy and intention has been to

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<sup>159</sup> VNA news agency, *BBC Asia Pacific*, 3 August 2011; *BBC Vietnamese*, 2 August 2011, [http://www.bbc.co.uk/vietnamese/vietnam/2011/08/110802\\_police\\_disciplined.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/vietnamese/vietnam/2011/08/110802_police_disciplined.shtml); *BBC Vietnamese*, 8 August 2011, [http://www.bbc.co.uk/vietnamese/vietnam/2011/08/110807\\_hanoi\\_protest.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/vietnamese/vietnam/2011/08/110807_hanoi_protest.shtml).

<sup>160</sup> John Ruwitch, “New Hanoi anti-China rally tests tolerance of protests,” *Reuters*, 7 August 2011; interview with a Vietnamese Foreign Ministry Official, Hanoi, 8 August 2011.

<sup>161</sup> “Yuenan Shizhou Baofa Jiuci Fanhua Youxing, Duo Wei Fan Zhengfu Renshi Zuzhi” [Nine anti-China protests happen in Vietnam in ten days, most of them organized by anti-government people], *Caijing*, 8 August 2011, <http://www.caijing.com.cn/2011-08-08/110802694.html>.

<sup>162</sup> “Shei Zai Cedong Yuenan Fanhua Youxing?” [Who is instigating the anti-China protests in Vietnam?], *Shijie Xinwenbao*, China Radio International, 23 August 2011, <http://gb.cri.cn/27824/2011/08/23/5190s3346664.htm>.

disrupt the great national unity, instigating national hatred [and] separating relations between Vietnam and China.”<sup>163</sup>

Hanoi authorities arrested dozens of protesters who gathered on August 21, the eleventh and final round of anti-China demonstrations, even though twenty five intellectuals posted a letter online condemning the protest ban as unconstitutional.<sup>164</sup> As Deputy Minister of Defense Lieutenant General Nguyen Chi Vinh concluded:

We have other ways to express our patriotism. Such mass gatherings do not lead to any result but affect political security not only in regards to foreign but also domestic policies. Such incidents should stop.<sup>165</sup>

In 2012 and 2013, small and sporadic anti-China protests were quickly contained by Vietnamese authorities. A group of Vietnamese protesters even joined anti-China protests in Manila because “they could not easily stage protests in their country because of state restrictions on such public assemblies.”<sup>166</sup> In January 2014, anti-China activists in Hanoi were dispersed by security forces after thirty minutes.<sup>167</sup> In February, a similar attempt to commemorate the 1979

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<sup>163</sup> “Hanoi warns anti-China protesters to stop,” *Agence France Presse*, 18 August 2011.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*; *Reuters*, 21 August 2011.

<sup>165</sup> “Vietnam seeks no outside help over China issues,” *Tuoi Tre* news, 28 October 2011, <http://tuoitrenews.vn/cmlink/tuoiitrenews/politics/vietnam-seeks-no-outside-help-over-china-issues-1.49570>.

<sup>166</sup> “Filipinos Protest China's Territorial Claims,” *Associated Press*, 24 July 2013.

<sup>167</sup> Trung Nguyen, “Vietnam Activists Protest Disruption of Anniversary Ceremony,” *VOA News*, 20 January 2014, <http://www.voanews.com/content/vietnam-activists-protest-disruption-of-ceremony-marking-south-china-sea-battle/1833911.html>.

Sino-Vietnamese War was obstructed, with activists alleging that aerobics and ballroom dancing activities had been specially arranged to block their path.<sup>168</sup>

After China moved an exploratory oil rig to waters near the Paracel Islands in May 2014, Vietnamese authorities once again permitted larger-scale anti-Chinese demonstrations. For the first time, state-run media reported on the largely peaceful demonstrations. In three provinces, however, violent riots damaged hundreds of foreign-invested factories, leaving at least three Chinese dead and causing many Chinese to flee the country. Chinese officials warned that the Vietnamese government bore “unshirkable responsibility” for the attacks and demanded that Vietnam take swift measures to prevent further violence and punish the perpetrators.<sup>169</sup>

Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung appealed for calm, warning via text message: “Bad elements should not be allowed to instigate extremist actions that harm the interests and image of the country.”<sup>170</sup> He also urged the protesters to “keep social order and security”<sup>171</sup>—a message echoed by the mayor of Hanoi in a message to Communist Party colleagues.<sup>172</sup>

Vietnamese authorities made more than 1,400 arrests to restore calm and reassure foreign

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<sup>168</sup> Marianne Brown, “Anti-China Protesters in Hanoi Mark Border War Anniversary,” *VOA News*, 16 February 2014, <http://www.voanews.com/content/anti-china-protesters-in-hanoi-mark-border-war-anniversary/1852347.html>.

<sup>169</sup> “China lodges solemn protest with Vietnam over deadly violence,” *People’s Daily*, 16 May 2014 (paraphrasing Wang); “China, Vietnam hold talks on recent anti-China violence,” *Xinhua*, 17 May 2014.

<sup>170</sup> “Vietnam PM Nguyen Tan Dung urges citizens to defend sovereignty against China,” *Nguoi Viet Online*, 16 May 2014.

<sup>171</sup> “Chinese Boats Evacuate Citizens From Vietnam After Protests,” *Bloomberg*, 19 May 2014.

<sup>172</sup> “Mayor in Vietnam capital calls for end to anti-China protest ahead of planned rallies,” *Associated Press*, 17 May 2014.

investors.<sup>173</sup> Although the Sino-Vietnamese dispute in the South China Sea continues, both governments were careful to prevent tensions over the oil rig from escalating to military conflict, and in July the Chinese government removed the controversial oil rig, asserting that it had completed its operation.

The Vietnamese case illustrates that the diplomatic context can create selective windows of opportunity for nationalist protests in autocratic regimes, opening when the government seeks to signal resolve and closing once a diplomatic agreement is reached or fears of instability outweigh anticipated benefits. Yet it also demonstrates that leaders of even stable autocracies are often quite fearful that nationalist protests will jeopardize domestic and diplomatic stability, curtailing demonstrations as soon as they begin to spin out of control and preventing nationalist sentiments from forcing international escalation. Vietnam's curtailment of each wave of anti-China protests was not simply a consequence of China's superior power. Vietnam demonstrated a willingness to take measures that angered China and risked escalation, such as conducting live-fire naval drills near disputed waters after the 2011 cable-cutting incident, passing a 2012 law claiming the Spratlys and Paracels, and holding goodwill games with Philippine troops in 2014 on a disputed island. The authorities' decision to subdue protests owed largely to domestic concerns—and perhaps also to the fact that protests did not prompt Chinese concessions.

The government's ability to repress protests quickly explains why Vietnamese leaders did not adopt markedly more aggressive or uncompromising policies toward China in response to the demonstrations. China's reaction to the protests illustrates the fact that when nationalist protests arise in autocratic regimes, foreign observers often doubt that they impose meaningful

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<sup>173</sup> “Anti-China riots in Vietnam ease after 1,400 protesters arrested,” *South China Morning Post*, 16 May 2014.

constraints on the government. Rather, foreign observers often suspect protests are a cover for domestic grievances or affairs staged by the government, as Chinese authorities did, and offer few if any diplomatic concessions.

### **Anti-China Protests in the Philippines**

In 2011, 2012, and 2013, protests in the Philippines have denounced Chinese actions in the South China Sea, but the demonstrations' small size and ties to the incumbent government have limited their independent influence on Philippine foreign policy and have been largely dismissed by Chinese observers as posing a credible constraint. Tensions between China and the Philippines increased sharply under the leadership of Benigno Aquino III, who was elected in mid-2010. In March 2011, Chinese naval patrol boats ordered a Philippine oil exploration vessel to stop its activities in waters they claimed belonged to China and reportedly threatened to ram the vessel.<sup>174</sup> In retaliation, the Aquino administration began referring to the South China Sea as the "West Philippine Sea".<sup>175</sup> In July, reports of Chinese deepwater drilling activities within the 200-nautical mile exclusive economic zone claimed by the Philippines sparked protests by Filipinos in the United States, Canada, Australia, and Manila. In the United States, the anti-China protests were spearheaded by the U.S. Pinoys for Good Governance, leading Chinese state media to dismiss the protests as organized by "pro-American" groups that had "received U.S.

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<sup>174</sup> Bonnie Glaser, "Tensions Flare in the South China Sea," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 30 June 2011, <http://csis.org/publication/tensions-flare-south-china-sea>

<sup>175</sup> "It's official: Aquino signs order on West Philippine Sea," *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 13 September 2012.

funding.”<sup>176</sup> Xinhua quoted one expert saying that “Vietnam's anti-China wave was more violent, more organized, while in the Philippines, it's organized by a few pro-American organizations and is not in great response.”<sup>177</sup>

In 2012, Filipinos again staged anti-China protests in Manila and around the world during an eight-week standoff between Chinese Marine Surveillance vessels and Philippine coast guard ships around Scarborough Shoal. Tensions erupted in April when two Chinese maritime surveillance ships blocked an attempt by sailors aboard the Philippines' largest warship to arrest Chinese fishermen. Manila replaced its warship with coast guard vessels, which stood off against the Chinese surveillance ships for two months. In retaliation, China reportedly increased restrictions on fruit imports from the Philippines.<sup>178</sup>

On May 11, 2012, Philippine protesters gathered outside of the Chinese embassy in Manila.<sup>179</sup> The protests in Manila were organized by a party with ties to the Aquino government, Akbayan, which had received substantial funding from Aquino's family and would win seats in the 2013 midterm elections with Aquino's endorsement.<sup>180</sup> Although protest organizers had

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<sup>176</sup> “Feilvbin De QinMei FanHua Jiyin, Wenhua Shou Mei Lao Yin, Wai Zhang Shou Mei Jiaoyu” [Philippines' nature of pro-American and anti-China: it is influenced by American culture and the foreign minister was educated in the U.S.], *Xinhua*, 28 October 2011; “Filipino-Americans to hold anti-China protests in US,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 29 June 2011.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> Carlyle A. Thayer, “Standoff in the South China Sea,” *Yale Global Online*, 12 June 2012, <http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/content/standoff-south-china-sea>.

<sup>179</sup> “Protest in Philippines over South China Sea stand-off,” *BBC News*, 11 May 2012.

<sup>180</sup> “China warns citizens ahead of Manila protest on Friday,” *Reuters*, 9 May 2012; “PNoy's sisters are among Akbayan's biggest campaign donors in 2010,” *GMA News*, 25 October 2010.

expected about 1,000 people, media reports suggested that only 200 to 500 people showed up.<sup>181</sup> Ahead of the protests, Beijing had warned Chinese citizens in the Philippines to stay indoors, and Chinese travel agencies suspended tours.<sup>182</sup> Chinese media noted the number of demonstrators peaked at 200, when boxed lunches were distributed to participants,<sup>183</sup> and reported the Philippine government's changing attitude toward the protests, saying that the cancellation of group tours had prompted the Aquino government to distance itself from the demonstrations.

The 2012 standoff ended when both sides withdrew in mid-June because of an impending storm.<sup>184</sup> Despite the mutual withdrawal of ships in June, China later established a permanent presence and control over access to the shoal. In July 2012, China also announced the establishment of Sansha City, with jurisdiction over the Paracel and Spratly Islands. Anti-China protests in Manila neither prevented the Aquino government from de-escalating the standoff, nor did they appear responsible for the government's 2013 decision to adopt a tougher diplomatic posture by taking the case against China to the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS) against Beijing's wishes. In January 2013, Manila declared that it would unilaterally

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<sup>181</sup> The BBC said reported that about 500 people participated, whereas Reuters put the number at 200. "Protest in Philippines"; "Anti-China protest in Philippines ends peacefully," *Reuters*, 11 May 2012.

<sup>182</sup> 中国多家旅行社暂停赴菲律宾旅游, *Xinhua*, 10 May 2012, <http://china.cankaoxiaoxi.com/2012/0510/36525.shtml>.

<sup>183</sup> "Feilvbing fanhua shiwei huigu: fa hefan shi ren zui duo," *Tengxun News*, 12 May 2012, <http://news.qq.com/a/20120512/000415.htm>.

<sup>184</sup> According to Bonnie Glaser: "Manila and Beijing reached an oral agreement to withdraw vessels from the area." Bonnie Glaser and Alison Szalwinski. "Second Thomas Shoal Likely the Next Flashpoint in the South China Sea," *Jamestown Foundation China Brief* XII, no. 13, 21 June 2013. However, Taylor Fravel notes that China never publicly acknowledged such an agreement. Taylor Fravel, "China's Island Strategy: 'Redefine the Status Quo,'" *The Diplomat*, 1 November 2012.

ask ITLOS to rule on the validity of China's "nine-dashed line." In May 2013, Manila lodged an official protest concerning Chinese actions near a second shoal, Second Thomas Shoal, accusing a Chinese flotilla, including two surveillance ships and a naval frigate, of surrounding a small group of Filipino marines and blocking their access to supplies.

On July 24, 2013, to mark the anniversary of China's establishment of Sansha City, worldwide protests against China were held once again, this time organized by the West Philippine Sea Coalition. Along with the Akbayan party, the coalition was led by numerous former senior officials, including from the military.<sup>185</sup> Although Chinese commentators speculated on their government backing, foreign ministry spokesman Raul Hernandez denied any role, stating: "These are not sanctioned by the government, but being in a democracy, people have a right to voice out their position on different issues."<sup>186</sup> Chinese media again focused on the relatively small turnout in Manila, particularly in contrast with the thousands of protesters who had turned two days before against Aquino's State of the Nation address. As the independent news magazine *Caixin* asked sardonically: "People who are anti-China are only a tenth of those who are anti-Aquino?"<sup>187</sup>

Protests returned in May 2014, with roughly 200 Philippine and Vietnamese demonstrators marching together in Manila, and riot police guarded the entrance to the Chinese

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<sup>185</sup> Zachary Keck, "Philippine Group Plans Global Anti-China Protests," *The Diplomat*, 18 July 2013; Hua Yi, "谁是菲律宾反华游行推手," *Cankao Xiaoxi (Reference News)*, 25 July 2013, <http://ihl.cankaoxiaoxi.com/2013/0725/245080.shtml>.

<sup>186</sup> "Gov't disowns anti-China rallies to be held worldwide," *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 19 July 2013.

<sup>187</sup> "Feilvbing 500ren fanhua naobie; fan ajinuo ren duo 10bei," *Caixun*, 25 July 2013, <http://international.caixun.com/wkp/20130725-CX03bvtf.html>.

consulate to prevent violent attacks akin to those in Vietnam.<sup>188</sup> However, the protests remained peaceful, as did similar Philippine demonstrations in June, and again they had little substantive effect on government policy or Sino-Philippine relations.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has sought to provide a more nuanced portrait of the relationship between popular nationalism, regime type, and risks of interstate escalation. Although leaders are sometimes tempted to fan the flames of nationalism, our analysis demonstrates that many incumbents also fear the domestic and international consequences of allowing popular protests. The case of Vietnam shows that even where feelings of historical victimization run deep, authoritarian leaders often see protests more as a threat than a convenient source of popular legitimacy or safety valve for domestic pressures. The same has often been true in Cambodia, though opposition challenges add to the incentives to manage protests or tolerate them in certain instances—and to suffer their domestic and international hazards. Thai incumbents have feared hostile nationalist protests as well; in general, leaders have allowed rallies to continue due to the high costs of repression rather than a desire to stir nationalism for political gain.

The evidence also supports our hypotheses on the international effects of nationalist protests. The Thai case illustrates that weakly institutionalized democracies are particularly susceptible to nationalist pressure to take or maintain hardline foreign policy positions, as Thailand did after its abrupt about-face concerning the temple of Preah Vihear in 2008. By contrast, protests did not force leaders to act aggressively abroad in Cambodia or Vietnam, where protests could be repressed at an acceptable cost, or in the Philippines, where demonstrations

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<sup>188</sup> “Hundreds join anti-China street protests,” *Agence France Presse*, 16 May 2014.

posed little threat to the government. As expected, we also see that foreign observers perceived the Thai protests as credibly constraining and offered occasional concessions, as Cambodia did in 2008 and 2013. Conversely, Thai officials held Cambodia responsible for fomenting nationalist demonstrations, while Chinese observers largely dismissed the challenges and constraints that protests posed for autocratic leaders in Vietnam or the leaders of the democratic Philippines. This comports with our expectation that foreign rivals will discount protests or threaten retaliation when they believe the government incited demonstrations or could easily subdue or ignore them.

Our findings have important theoretical and policy implications. They support the notion that popular nationalism presents special risks to international security in states where governments have neither robust democratic legitimacy nor firm authoritarian control. However, our analysis suggests that the high cost or difficulty of repressing demonstrations is often as important as elite efforts to stir nationalism in generating risks of interstate conflict. As such, leaders of weakly democratic states may be pushed more easily toward belligerence abroad, while their more authoritarian peers may have additional leeway to seek interstate peace due to their willingness and capacity to use repression domestically.

Understanding the domestic context surrounding popular nationalism is essential for grasping its international significance, since the impact of protests on interstate disputes hinges largely on beliefs about the constraints governments face. As our study suggests, divergent perceptions can lead to conflict, particularly when a government perceives itself as severely constrained but international rivals are incredulous. In such cases, the government may see aggressive action abroad as a matter of necessity, while rivals see it as a matter of choice and respond in kind. The risk of foreign incredulity is one reason why “crying wolf”—exaggerating

the threats that protests pose—is a dangerous strategy in an iterative dispute. The hazards of conflicting perceptions also reinforce the importance of learning about when and why protests present serious challenges to incumbent leaders. Among other things, future research should explore further how opposition groups use nationalism to undermine rather than buttress incumbents’ legitimacy and how the strength of opposition parties and composition of security services impact incumbents’ incentives and capacity to abet or subdue popular nationalism.

Our analysis also complicates the existing literature in another important way. We find that nationalist protests can diminish the risk of interstate conflict when foreign rivals believe the government is credibly constrained and elect to back down or compromise. This suggests something of a paradox. Nationalist protests have the greatest potential calming effects on interstate disputes precisely when they pose the greatest threats to domestic stability. By contrast, protests sometimes exacerbate risks of interstate conflict when they present little evident domestic risk, because protests that a government can easily repress or ignore are more likely to be met with foreign anger or retaliation. This only reinforces the need for scholars and policymakers to delve into the domestic dynamics of popular nationalism to understand its implications for international conflict.