With tensions continuing to mount in the South and East China Seas over the disputed Senkaku and Spratly islands, John Chisholm analyses the domestic and foreign policy factors fuelling the rhetoric

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As 2013 drew to a close, the tensions between Japan and China showed no signs of abating, and this appears unlikely to change in 2014. Indeed, both sides have ratcheted up the tensions, resorting more and more to flag-waving nationalism. The Senkaku Islands have provided the catalyst, but there is much more to this issue than a dispute over a handful of islands, oil deposits or not.

It is impossible to look at this dispute in isolation. Both countries have "a past", and it is one dripping with poison. Japan has traditionally seen China as its economic hinterland, a place from which raw materials that are scarce in Japan could be sourced. This manifested itself in outbreaks of warfare, imperialism and the stripping away of territories such as Korea that had been part of the Chinese Empire. Japanese rule was brutal, and through the first half of the 21st Century the Chinese suffered hugely at the hands of the Japanese.

Japan's defeat in the Second World War could have provoked a major change in attitude, but it did not. The treatment meted out to a defeated Japan by the United States was tolerant, and policy was geared towards rebuilding Japan economically and politically. This gained greater importance when China became Communist in 1949. Although there were quite stringent clauses placed in the new Japanese constitution, particularly regarding the role of the military, the whole issue of "war guilt" was never really addressed as it was in Germany. Instead, Japanese society was able to honour its war dead that included alleged war criminals, and massage its history to minimise Japanese imperialism and militarism, but focus on honour and patriotism.

China, too, has a reserve of resentment over its dealings with Europeans, the US and Japan following their 19th and 20th Century imperialist designs on Chinese territories or resources or later ideological conflicts. It has only been natural for an economically strong, increasingly self-confident China to assert itself, therefore. But this self confidence does not stretch so far as to dispense with the nationalist card when needed. In any conflict with Japan in particular, these nationalist tensions are likely to bubble to the surface very quickly.

This has not been helped by the more recent economic history of the two countries. Japan is the original Asian Tiger, a seemingly unstoppable economic power in the 1960s and 1970s. Unfortunately the tiger is now looking old and threadbare. Years of economic stagnation and increasing regional competition have sapped Japan's economic strength. In a period of relative decline it is almost axiomatic that a country will try and mask that feeling of insecurity by resorting to wrapping itself in the flag, and Japan has proven no different. The increasing use of military forces abroad – under UN mandates of course – has added greater impetus to the idea that Japan is still strong and has punched below its weight in foreign affairs for some time.

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Protestors in both Japan and China have condemned each other's claims on the islands

The Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe, is an unrepentant nationalist. His decision to visit the numerous Second World War memorial shrines over the last week of December 2013 has only underlined this, along with raising tensions with China by doing so. His decision to respond to China's claims to the Senkaku islands by wrapping himself in the flag and indulging in naval and air confrontations have placed him out on a limb and made it difficult for natural allies like Australia and South Korea to give him full-blooded support. Even the United States, which has outwardly been supportive of Abe's

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tough stance against Beijing, is privately worried over where their ally may be taking them. So far, attempts to rein him in have proved to have limited effect.

But Abe has a domestic agenda which has, in effect, trapped him into adopting this "tough guy" approach. His constituency on the political right would quickly desert him if he proved to be anything other than firm with China. His overall stated aim is to amend the constitution. This plays well with the increasingly vocal nationalists, who see the constitution as having been "forced" on Japan and is a symbol of post-war humiliation. Indeed, it is perfectly possible that Abe is quite deliberately ratcheting up the tension with Beijing in order to rally further support, allowing him to amend the constitution in light of what could be portrayed as a crisis forced on Japan.

China too has an agenda. But where Japan has been slipping into relative economic decline, China is very much on the upward slope. It has already displaced Japan economically, and has vast amounts of natural and human resources. It has been expanding its trade and aid connections into Central Asia and Africa, a foreign policy shift markedly different from its traditional interest in immediate neighbours. It has altered its military doctrines to match, ditching the antediluvian "people's war" strategy and pouring more resources into the air force and navy. The PLAN's first carrier is currently working up in the South China Sea, and this only underlines the Chinese commitment to increase their capability to undertake expeditionary warfare.

Traditionally, Beijing has valued stability. With the exception of Taiwan, which it sees as a rebel province, the focus has been on economic growth and not rocking boats. But that seems to have changed. Although China has always claimed large swathes of the North and South China seas, this has rarely been accompanied by serious efforts to enforce those claims. But now things appear to be different. The growth of the PLAN and the PLAAF have allowed the Chinese leadership to think about taking a more robust approach to enforcing these claims. The capability is now there, and is only going to grow as time goes on.

China can thus pursue its aims, and has the reserves of historical resentment to rally people behind it. Complex foreign policy statements do not necessarily play well to a country still exceptionally rural and poorly educated. Historical appeals against an old enemy, conjuring up bitter memories and playing on new slights (both real and imagined) work a hell of a lot better. But it is not just the Senkaku islands. The Spratly islands have long been subject to Chinese claims (and they are also partly claimed by Vietnam, Malaysia and the Philippines) as well as resurrecting the long dormant claim to the Indian state of Arunchal Pradesh, which was a cause of short but potentially dangerous clashes in the 1960s between China and India, and additional flashpoints could come in 2014, like the Second Thomas Shoal.

There is also concern over doctrine. During the Cold War, both sides tried to clamp down on "adventurism" by their respective militaries. Macarthur was dismissed by Truman for this type of offence and, despite the tendency of American generals to make bellicose statements to the press, risk-taking that could provoke war was discouraged. This does not seem to apply to the PLA. Here, a culture of aggression, brinkmanship and provocation seem to be encouraged. Promotions and appointments seem to be taken by men who are prepared to "stand up to the foreign imperialists", with the PLA infused by nationalist rhetoric. It may also reflect the looser control that the Communist Party has over the PLA, understandable given the more central role that the PLA played in establishing communism in China, as opposed to the USSR where the Red Army

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At bay: a Japanese Coast Guard vessel uses water hoses to turn back a Taiwanese fishing boat near the Senkaku islands

was clearly a creation of the Bolsheviks and civilian control was clear from day one.

But could the tension grow so great as to spill over? It is difficult to see how either side could simply climb down without an unthinkable loss of face. It is possible that China will only go so far in enforcing its claim: the 2013 establishment and policing of their Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) may hold some clues. Announcing the establishment of an ADIZ over the Senkaku islands outwardly looked like an extremely hostile act, guaranteed to provoke Japan and her allies (it overlapped the South Korean ADIZ which prompted protests from Seoul). But the US immediately responded by flying two unarmed B-52 bombers over the area, and ignored the Chinese. It was what one commentator called "a big middle finger" to Chinese pretensions. Beijing protested, but did absolutely nothing. No jets were scrambled, no Chinese fighters buzzed the USAAF planes, no bullets were fired across the noses of them – all tactics that would be familiar to anyone who had studied Soviet harassment of US and British aircraft during the Berlin Airlift.

So is the ADIZ simply posturing? The answer must lie somewhere between yes and no. The ADIZ is a fact on the ground (or in the air?) and underlines further Beijing's territorial claims and ambitions. Yet, by announcing its existence but not being able to enforce it, it makes the Chinese look a little foolish.

When historians considered the origins of the First World War, the outbreak of which we commemorate this year, the initial approach was to look at foreign affairs – what German historians termed "the primacy of foreign policy". But in the 1960s this was turned on its head, and "the primacy of domestic policy" pushed it aside, looking at the pressures on leaders from within their own countries that compelled them to act in a certain way. We have already seen, with Shinzo Abe, the effect this seems to have been having on Tokyo. But is there a similar issue in China?

It is certainly the case that China is a more closed society, and not a democracy, so there is arguably less need for the Chinese leadership to resort to creating a crisis to garner support. China is also increasingly confident economically, so is less in need of the nationalistic palliatives to cushion the pain of relative economic decline. But there is a broader factor than simply popular support. The Chinese leadership needs to retain a degree of legitimacy. In a system which is corrupt, labelled as "crony capitalism", with the PLAN being a massive stakeholder in the economy but with a growing affluent and educated middle class, the Communist Party leadership has to prove that it is "for" something; after all, it is hardly Marxist and revolutionary any longer, with no commitment to a capitalism-free New Jerusalem. Instead, it has helped create a new bourgeoisie.

It would not be long before this social group started to demand serious reforms, some of which would prove unwelcome to the party apparatchiks. The system already adopts a system of repression – controlling information, cracking down on free speech, no independent judiciary and so on. It has also developed the culture of compensation – keeping economic rewards coming, keeping the potentially restless bourgeoisie sated with economic trinkets. It is hard not to see the new, aggressive foreign policy as the third part of a three-card trick: distraction. This is a common tactic by dictatorships of all stripes, and is often cloaked in nationalism. Usually this is directed against an internal ethnic or political minority but this looks unacceptable to the Chinese who like to portray a harmonious Confucian state. But an overseas enemy…?

So distract the potentially dangerous, bind them to you by projecting their dissent towards an external target. Demonising the Japanese will work for the peasantry, by portraying them obstructing China's natural desire to recover lost territory and securing her rightful place in the sun. If all this sounds depressingly familiar, then it should. Japan seems willing to play the game, and both sides benefit as long as it does not come to shooting. The domestic gallery will applaud, even bay for blood. But things like this have a tendency to run out of control, as they did a century ago.

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