On 1 May 2016, hundreds of angry Vietnamese marched through central Ho Chi Minh City, upending the meaning of International Workers’ Day. Rather than celebrating the global brotherhood of labor in its struggle against capitalist exploitation, they took to the streets to protest the damage inflicted on their own workers’ state by proletarians from the neighbouring workers’ state. Nationalism trumped internationalism.

The immediate cause of the protest was fish. Over the previous month, tons of dead fish had washed up on the shores of central Vietnam. The culprit was easy to identify: the Ha Tinh steel plant owned by a Taiwanese conglomerate and built by thousands of mainland Chinese migrant workers. After an incompetent cover-up, it emerged the plant had flushed something into the water that killed sea life for kilometres around. The fate of fish alone would not have caused so many to risk arrest and persecution by marching through Saigon; this case of industrial malpractice became a national scandal because, in just one incident, it touched so many of Vietnam’s “red button” issues: food safety, poor government accountability, massive corruption, and the influx of migrant labour. Some banners read “clean water, clean government” but the protest gained its emotional power because of the involvement of China—through a “Chinese” Taiwanese company and its Chinese workers.

Demonstrations occur more frequently in Vietnam than most people realize, but they are generally small-scale complaints about village land confiscation. Those protesters usually take care to assert their loyalty to the ruling Communist Party and focus their anger on particular officials. Anti-China protests attract a different kind of participant: urban, better educated, nationalistic—and disenchanted with one-party rule. The num-
ber of both protests and protestors has been increasing recently, prompted by news of incidents in the South China Sea spread via the Internet.

China provokes strong reactions in Vietnam. The two cultures are so similar (particularly when compared with Vietnam’s other neighbours in Cambodia and Laos) that the emotions could be dismissed as, to borrow Dickens’ phrase, a case of “narcissism of minor difference.” However, these differences are crucial to the modern Vietnamese sense of self and also to a legacy of decades of struggle over the nature of the Vietnamese state.

In the eyes of anti-China protesters, Vietnamese diplomacy and compromise towards Beijing are not the wise actions of a weaker state against the stronger, but evidence of cowardice, if not treason. The implicit message, amplified by anti-communist exiles in the United States and elsewhere, is that the interests of the “Vietnamese nation” differ from those of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) because of the long-standing and intimate connections between it and its bigger brother to the north. For those of a certain outlook, “China” becomes a cypher for “communist.” For the CPV, to doubt the patriotism of its leadership is literally a crime.

Vietnam’s first significant grass-roots anti-China street protests took place in late 2007 after Beijing announced a new local government structure to administer the disputed Paracel and Spratly Islands in the South China Sea. Angry bloggers spread word of unauthorized demonstrations in front of both the Chinese Embassy in Hanoi and the consulate in Ho Chi Minh City. For the first time, social media allowed citizens to bypass the barriers to discussion imposed on state-censored media. Even though the protests supported the country’s territorial claims, the Communist Party regarded them as a threat. It could not, however, be seen to suppress public expressions of patriotism. Instead members of the official Youth Union (dressed in matching T-shirts) were sent to take part in, take over, and then disband the protests.

Two weeks after the demonstrations began, Vietnam’s Information Ministry held a conference at which the head of the Press Department of the Communist Party’s Central Propaganda and Education Commission declared that “it’s all right that some bloggers have recently showed their patriotism, posting opinions about the Paracels and Spratly archipelagos on their weblogs. But some have sparked protest, causing public disorder and affecting the country’s foreign affairs.” Separating legitimate expressions of patriotism from threatening demonstrations of anti-communism is an awkward problem for the Vietnamese leadership.

A perfect example of the risks of protest came in May 2014 when China’s deployment of the HS-981 oilrig into disputed waters near the Paracels prompted another round of street protests. These protests were initially tolerated by the Vietnamese government as the government was also infuriated by the Chinese move. However, groups with other grievances took advantage of the breakdown of order. In a few places, gangs rampaged

through industrial parks, venting their anger on factories displaying signs in Chinese characters (even though most of them, ironically, were Taiwan or Singapore-owned). There were even reports of military units being placed on the bridges leading into Ho Chi Minh City to prevent protestors from reaching the metropolis. The most violent protests targeted around five thousand Chinese migrant workers at the Ha Tinh steel plant. At least five were killed by locals angry about the presence of so many foreigners in a place where well-paid jobs were hard to find.

These episodes had local triggers that were clearly underpinned by antipathy towards China and to some extent, Chinese people. And, they illustrated to an alarmed Communist Party how a “good” nationalist protest can swiftly evolve into something more threatening.

The leadership of the CPV found itself in a particularly difficult position because it had deliberately chosen to use public opinion as a diplomatic weapon. It sent Vietnamese and international reporters out to sea with the coastguard ships that were confronting their Chinese rivals. The pictures they broadcasted showed small Vietnamese vessels being rammed and sunk by larger Chinese ships. It was a media-friendly metaphor for Vietnam’s David and Goliath struggle. Coverage of angry protests on land was also useful to the Vietnamese leadership’s efforts to convince Beijing that it could not be seen to back down in the confrontation.

The approach seemed to work. On 15 July, after weeks of hostile headlines in the international media, China brought the crisis to a swift end by announcing the withdrawal of the oilrig a month earlier than planned. Neither country’s leadership wanted the crisis to continue and both worked swiftly to restore normal relations. For the CPV, this was simply a pragmatic way to manage the country’s most important relationship. For the most extreme nationalists, it was more evidence of betrayal.

Just three months later, on 16 October, Vietnam dispatched a very high-level military delegation to Beijing. Official press reports noted that the two sides discussed ways to “manage public opinion” on the South China Sea issue. At the end of the same month, the two communist parties held their tenth “theory seminar” in the Vietnamese highland resort town of Dalat to share “experiences in building a socialist country under rule of law.” Politburo members responsible for ideology and propaganda led each side’s delegation: Liu Qibao on the Chinese side and Đinh Thế Huynh on the Vietnamese. Reading between the lines, the agenda focused on limiting the influence of hostile nationalism on both sides of the border. Normal business had resumed.

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These episodes reveal the difficulties that the Communist Party of Vietnam has in managing nationalist opinion. In many ways, they are the same problems faced by their Chinese comrades on the other side of the border. Jessica Chen Weiss has argued that in China, the authorities have many factors to assess before deciding whether to allow a nationalist protest. A key consideration is whether the protest can be used as a signal to a diplomatic adversary. Streets filled with angry citizens emphasize the message that any government retreat would have severe domestic consequences. However, empowering such sentiment limits the leadership’s freedom to maneuver and repressing it later can be politically costly; “the government must weigh the potential benefits of tolerating street demonstrations against the risk to stability,” she argues.

A Vexed History

Vietnam and China have had a vexed history over the past half-century. Initially, relations were good: after the 1949 revolution in China, the communist leaderships on both sides of the border found common cause. China supported the Vietnamese communists throughout their wars with regimes backed by France (1946–1954) and by the United States (1965–1975). In the 1950s, it was common for nationalists in the communist half of Vietnam (“North Vietnam”) to praise China. At the time, the U.S.-backed government in Saigon (“South Vietnam”) was trying to discredit the Hanoi authorities by linking them with Beijing. Hanoi responded by defending China’s support for Vietnamese nationalism and contrasting it with Saigon’s dependence on France and the United States.

The political scientist Kosal Path has argued that the “northern” anti-Chinese narrative only dates to about 1965, when Vietnamese intellectuals in North Vietnam started to write about Vietnam’s supposed “history of resistance to Chinese aggression.” According to Path, the change was precipitated by concerns in North Vietnam that the extremism unleashed during the Cultural Revolution in China might take hold in Hanoi. To guard against such a possibility, the CPV began to encourage a degree of anti-Chinese sentiment in the North, although not to the extent that had become normal in the South. This became stronger after Beijing opened contacts with the United States in 1972. As it became obvious that North Vietnam would win the war, Chinese support for the war waned, and it started to oppose Vietnamese unification. In response, Hanoi slowly transferred its allegiance to Moscow and appropriated the theme of steadfast patriotic resistance to Chinese aggression.

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A critical moment came in January 1974, when Chinese forces invaded and occupied the western half of the Paracel Islands (in the north of the South China Sea), capturing the Vietnamese marines garrisoned there and defeating a small South Vietnamese naval force. This battle, which took place a few days before the Têt festival, was portrayed as a great patriotic confrontation by the Saigon government—a rallying point for a regime that was increasingly threatened by a renewed offensive on land from the “Chinese-backed” communists. The sea battle only reinforced a feeling of national violation. The returning sailors and released marines were splashed across the national media as heroes in the Vietnamese nation’s perpetual struggle against China. Weeks later, the Saigon government deployed marines on several of the Spratly Islands (in the southern part of the South China Sea) to prevent China from seizing them as well. By then, attitudes towards China had begun to shift in Hanoi too. Even before they seized Saigon, communist forces took over the South Vietnamese garrisons on the Spratlys to prevent China from seizing the islands.

It should be clear, even from this abbreviated history, that these events made the islands a focus for national identity during a time of tumultuous change in Vietnamese society. For the dying anti-communist regime, they became a site of heroic sacrifice. In its narrative, the Paracels were seized by the Chinese allies of their communist enemies. Evidence of collusion between the two, in particular their diplomatic dealings in the 1950s, was—and still is—offered as proof of the treacherous nature of the communist regime. For the communists, their subsequent role in protecting the islands from Chinese advances allows them to claim that, by standing firm, they were and still are the most effective defenders of the national interest.

It is now a mainstream Vietnamese view that China poses a clear threat to the country and the nation. The South China Sea is seen as the frontline in an existential struggle. Vietnam also has territorial and maritime disputes in the same region with the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia, but those disputes generate just a tiny fraction of the emotion induced by disputes with China.

**China’s Story**

The islands have played a similar role in modern Chinese identity formation, although the history is more convoluted. Briefly, nationalists in southern China first took an interest in offshore islands in 1909 in the context of disputes with Japan. The Qing authorities annexed the Paracels in June of that year but lost interest in them almost immediately afterwards. Chinese attention only returned in the late 1920s as rivalry with both Japan and France intensified. In mid-1933, when France publicly annexed several of the Spratly Islands, demonstrations broke out in the streets of several major cities, and national debate was seized by the perceived need to defend these pieces of “Chinese territory” from foreign invasion.

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9 Bill Hayton, “The modern origins of China’s claims in the South China Sea,” *Modern China* forthcoming.
However, an examination of newspapers and official documents from this time makes clear that hardly anyone in China even knew where these islands were! In fact, the Chinese Government had to ask the French and American governments for maps to find out which islands had been annexed. In many newspaper articles, journalists, politicians and experts confused the Paracels (which China had previously claimed) with the Spratlys (which it had never claimed) and sometimes even the Taya Islands, which lie just off the Chinese coast.

Nonetheless, over the subsequent decade the Chinese government became convinced that it had a long-standing right to claim all the islands south of its coast, almost as far as Borneo, 1,500 kilometers away. The struggle to “recover” those islands (even though there was no evidence that they had ever been under Chinese administration previously), particularly after the Second World War, became a nationalist *cause célèbre* for another regime facing communist advance. Being seen to recover the ancestral land from the predations of the imperialist became a badge of honour for the Chinese Nationalists under Chiang Kai Shek. The Chinese expedition to claim the islands in late 1946 was a moment of particular celebration. Later, after the success of the 1949 revolution, the Chinese communists felt the need to assert their own patriotic defence of the islands with innumerable articles and even at least one feature film.

**Building on Rock**

This, I would argue, is why the fate of tiny, virtually uninhabitable rocks and reefs has become so important to both regime and people in China and Vietnam. My research has shown how the claims were constructed by governments and activists decades ago to justify a newly-found sense of attachment to the islands. In both countries, the struggle to claim the islets became bound up with the process of constructing new national identities. China’s claim emerged because of its conflict with imperial powers during a period when the country was torn by ideological and geographical divisions. Vietnam’s claim was also asserted in the midst of a civil war and against an enemy which seemed to pose an existential threat.

In both countries, claims that were constructed during struggles for national independence subsequently became markers of belonging as fragile, post-colonial states attempted to forge unity after decades of division. The claims evolved into public expressions of national identity. It is no surprise that they became imbued with cultural and political power. For their advocates, historical evidence is less important than emotional certainty.

Particular historical narratives are critical foundations of the legitimacy of the communist parties in both Vietnam and China. Until the late 1980s, they both claimed to be leading their peoples on a revolutionary road to liberation. After that, both communist parties discovered the need to compromise with capitalist countries and subsequently become more capitalistic societies in themselves. Their claims to national legitimacy had to shift away from the struggle for socialist utopia towards delivering material benefits to their people in the present and to telling a story of national salvation in which
they saved their countries from foreign invasion and oppression.

The occupation of the islands is now part of both parties’ victory narratives and the importance of completing that victory—by “recovering” the remainder of the islands for the nation—is reinforced daily in school lessons and the official media. And yet neither party is willing to risk war to force the issue to conclusion. The territorial claim is a journey without end.

The communist parties in China and Vietnam promote and manipulate national sentiments to one end above all: to remain in power. Nonetheless, they are not entirely cynical in their endeavours. After years of exposure to their own nationalist narratives, they no doubt believe it to be true. The problem for the region is that the “official histories” propagated by each side are mutually exclusive. The claims are framed in terms of rights to entire archipelagos: claims to all of the Paracels and all of the Spratlys. My own research has shown that there is little evidence to support such exclusivist positions. The South China Sea has always been a shared domain.

Recent developments, in particular, China’s siege on the Philippine base at the Second Thomas Shoal in 2013–2014 and its ongoing blockade of Scarborough Shoal reveals that leadership in Beijing is intent on occupying more territory. It apparently remains convinced that China is the rightful owner of every feature within the U-shaped line that has been printed on Chinese maps since 1948. This sense of entitlement is derived from an unfounded historical narrative that emerged episodically during the first half of the twentieth century. It is now imperative for peace in the South China Sea that China is directly challenged to provide verifiable evidence for its claim.

Despite the certainty they express domestically, no government is sufficiently confident of its historic claim to ask an international court to rule on the territorial questions at the heart of the South China Sea disputes. To lose in such a public forum would unsettle public opinion with unpredictable consequences. It is much easier for regimes to act as if they are continuing along a journey towards eventual victory. In both countries, the fate of the Paracels and the Spratlys is used to generate popular support for the ruling party—but it is risky. Do the two communist parties intend to permanently maintain their populations on the edge of nationalist anxiety in order to remain in power and signal their diplomatic resolve to their adversary? If the levels of popular passion become too high, it can result in demands for total victory and then criticism of the party for failing to deliver it.

Perhaps the parties believe this is a viable strategy, but both countries, and the region more widely, also need a stable and peaceful South China Sea in order to develop and prosper. This will require de-escalating the disputes. Managing a process through which rival governments recognize that their claims are not exclusive and that others may also have rights will be politically difficult and time-consuming. It will, however, remove the key source of conflict and unlock the problem of how best to share the limited resources of the sea.
Given how much national pride has been invested in these tiny islets, it is unreasonable to expect any of the claimants to abandon those they currently occupy. And if none will be given up voluntarily then none can be peacefully ‘recovered’ by any claimant. The best hope for a peaceful future in the South China Sea, therefore, is to maintain the status quo—despite vocal criticism from those who march in the streets. All the Southeast Asian claimants have informally reached the same conclusion. China has not, and that is why it poses the largest threat to peace and security in the South China Sea.

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