

# Nationalism in China's South China Sea Policy: Delicate Trade-Off Between Sovereignty Protection and Stability Maintenance



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**Abstract** This chapter examines the different roles of nationalism in the maritime standoff between China and the Philippines and Vietnam in the past decade and explores the main reasons behind China's quite different tactics of manipulating the nationalism to legitimize and support its actions in the disputes waters of the SCS. It points out that the nature of the dispute (territorial integrity or maritime interests) and Chinese leaders' trade-off between sovereignty protection and stability maintenance are the determining factors of China's manipulation of nationalism in the SCS dispute. In order to verify this argument, it analyzes China's use of nationalism in its three major standoff with the Philippines and Vietnam in the SCS in 2012, 2014 and 2019, respectively. It finally predicts that China's response to the SCS dispute would continue to be influenced by the rising nationalism amid the COVID-19 pandemic. However, due to the high pressures on domestic development and the top priority of the stability maintenance in the SCS, China is more likely to restrain the nationalism in the SCS dispute.

**Keywords** China · Nationalism · South China Sea dispute · The Philippines · Vietnam

## 1 Introduction

There has been intense debate over the growing nationalism and China's assertive behaviour in the SCS since the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century.

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<sup>1</sup> See Andrew Scobell (2018). The South China Sea and U.S.–China rivalry. *Political Science Quarterly*. 133(2), p. 201; Cheng Chwee Kuik (2017). Explaining the contradiction in China's South China Sea policy: structural drivers and domestic imperatives. *China: An International Journal*. 15(1), p. 163.

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First of all, whether China has been assertive towards the SCS dispute in the past decade are debated intensively. In the Western narrative, China has transformed from a low-key, gradualist approach towards the SCS to increasingly muscular actions in the disputed waters since 2009.<sup>1</sup> However, the reality is that China used military coercion in the 1990s, when it was weaker than in other periods, but chose not to use military coercion when it grew stronger.<sup>2</sup> In some circumstance, China has actually exercised considerable self-restraint.<sup>3</sup> In addition, from Chinese perspective, China has been forced to take coercive measures to react to the aggression from both the claimant states and external actors, the USA in particular, in the SCS. Second, whether nationalism contributes to China's assertive behaviour in the SCS or not are controversial. Some scholars conclude that rising popular nationalism/state nationalism promotes China's increasing assertiveness over the SCS dispute,<sup>4</sup> while others argue that there is no evidence that the Chinese government would give in to the popular pressure when conducting its assertive policy in the SCS.<sup>5</sup> This book chapter, therefore, conducts an in-depth case study of the complicated role of nationalism in China's assertive SCS policy in the twenty-first century.

Firstly, there are many manifestations of China's assertive policy in the SCS, such as the military exercise, land reclamation, economic and diplomatic sanctions. But in essence, as Kuik concluded, if "status quo" means preserving rather than changing the extant situation, China's growing assertive behaviour towards the territorial and maritime disputes in the South and East China Seas over the past few years has given rise to the impression that Beijing is becoming a "revisionist" rather than a "status quo" power.<sup>6</sup> Given this, this book chapter points out that the maritime standoff between China and ASEAN claimant states represents the highest level of China's assertiveness over the SCS dispute as either side or both want to change the "status quo" by employing coercion.

Secondly, given the fact that the nationalist sentiment has grown so fast in China in the past decade, it is unsafe to deny the effects of nationalism on China's diplomacy,<sup>7</sup> the SCS dispute in particular. Meanwhile, the role of nationalism in China's policy towards SCS cannot be overstated as the nationalism has been effectively

<sup>2</sup> Ketian Zhang (2019). Cautious bully reputation, resolve, and Beijing's use of coercion in the South China Sea. *International Security*. 44(1), p. 119.

<sup>3</sup> See Zhou Fangyin (2016). Between assertiveness and self-restraint: understanding China's South China Sea policy. *International Affairs*. 92(4), p. 870.

<sup>4</sup> See Cheng Chwee Kuik (2017). Explaining the contradiction in China's South China Sea policy: structural drivers and domestic imperatives. *China: An International Journal*. 15(1), pp. 175–177; Zhou Fangyin (2016). Between assertiveness and self-restraint: understanding China's South China Sea policy. *International Affairs*. 92(4), p. 881.

<sup>5</sup> See Richard Q. Turcsányi (2018). *Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea: power sources, domestic politics, and reactive foreign policy*. Berlin: Springer Nature, p. 161.

<sup>6</sup> See Cheng Chwee Kuik (2017). Explaining the contradiction in China's South China Sea policy: structural drivers and domestic imperatives. *China: An International Journal*. 15(1), pp. 163–165.

<sup>7</sup> Numerous scholars have discussed the rising influence of nationalism on China's foreign policy ever since the early 2000. See Suisheng Zhao (2000). Chinese nationalism and its international orientations. *Political Science Quarterly*. 115(1), pp. 1–33; Tianbiao Zhu (2001). Nationalism and Chinese foreign policy. *China Review*. 1(1), pp. 1–27.

managed by Chinese government.<sup>8</sup> In fact, although strong nationalist sentiment in the public put more constraints to decision-making in China's foreign policy, it is hardly ever decisive as the Chinese government has a legion of resources and means to change public opinion to meet its policy needs.<sup>9</sup> Hence, this book chapter holds that nationalism does have influence on China's SCS policy in the Xi era, but it plays a contradictory role in the SCS dispute. Sometimes, the territorial disputes are aggravated by the popular nationalism in Chinese society, whereas in other circumstance the nationalism failed to escalate the tensions.

Thirdly, nationalism would not automatically interfere in China's SCS policy as it is state-centric.<sup>10</sup> Instead, it has been manipulated by Chinese authority to sever its internal and external goals such as consolidating regime legitimacy, diverting public attention away from domestic problems and promoting the peaceful rise of China. Therefore, whether the nationalism functions in the SCS dispute depends on Chinese authority, which mainly refers to its trade-off between sovereignty and stability in the SCS. It is more likely that the nationalism would promote China's assertive policy towards the SCS if protecting sovereignty become the top priority of the Chinese government. Otherwise, the effects of the nationalism would be minimal.

Fourth, nationalism could be measured by various indicators such as military deterrence, protests against foreigners and provocative reports from media. In this study, I use the reports and commentaries from both Chinese official media such as People's Daily and leading social media to indicate the nationalism sentiment in Chinese society.

Given the above assumptions, this chapter conducts an empirical study by comparing the role of nationalism in two typical maritime standoff between China and the Philippines and Vietnam in 2012, 2014 and 2019, respectively. The main body is divided into five parts, in which the first part briefly introduces the major debates over the nationalism and China's assertive policy towards the SCS and the research design of this study. Following the introduction, the two subsequent sections discuss the different effects of nationalism on the maritime standoff between China and the Philippines and China and Vietnam. Then, it analyzes the main reasons behind them, which refers to the nature of the dispute and Chinese leader's delicate trade-off between sovereignty and stability in the SCS. In the conclusion, it summarizes the main findings and predicts the long-term influence of the rising nationalism in China's SCS policy in the light of the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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<sup>8</sup> According to Suisheng Zhao, the Chinese leaders have made use of nationalism to rally public support, but they realize that, if allowed to persist unrestrained, nationalist sentiments could jeopardize the overarching objectives of political stability and economic modernization on which the CCP's legitimacy is ultimately based. See Suisheng Zhao (2005). China's pragmatic nationalism: is it manageable? *Washington Quarterly*. 29(1), p. 132.

<sup>9</sup> Frances Yaping Wang, Brantly Womack (2019). Jawing through crises: Chinese and Vietnamese media strategies in the South China Sea. *Journal of Contemporary China*. 28(119), p. 716; Kai Quek, Alastair Iain Johnston (2018). 'Can China back down? Crisis de-escalation in the shadow of popular opposition'. *International Security*. 42(3), pp. 7–36.

<sup>10</sup> See Suisheng Zhao (2005). China's pragmatic nationalism: is it manageable? *Washington Quarterly*. 29(1).

## 2 Nationalism and Maritime Standoff Between China and the Philippines

Since the two military clashes with Vietnam in the SCS in 1974 and 1988, respectively,<sup>11</sup> China has largely used non-militarized coercive tools to deal with the illegal activities made by ASEAN claimant states.<sup>12</sup> The maritime standoff between the warships, law enforcement agencies, maritime militia and fishermen (includes the armed fisherman), therefore, became the highest level of tensions in the SCS. After the end of the Cold-War, there were three major maritime standoff between China and the Philippines and Vietnam. In April 2012, there was the most serious maritime standoff between China and the Philippines in the *Huangyan* Island (also called Scarborough Shoal by the Philippines), where is a major disputed water between the two states since the 1990s. During this maritime crisis, China utilized the media to instigate a mass nationalism and thus to enhance the legitimacy of its activities and force the Filipino government bend to its will.<sup>13</sup> According to Chinese former Deputy Foreign Minister Fu Ying, the reports and photographs of Chinese fishermen who were abused by the Philippine soldiers in the *Huangyan* Island in the front page of Chinese newspapers and online media on 11 April, the day after the Philippine Navy gunboat harassed Chinese fishermen who were conducting normal fishing inside the lagoon of the *Huangyan* Island, caused a lot of angry reaction in Chinese society.<sup>14</sup> For instance, China's state broadcaster China Central Television (CCTV) released two videos of the maritime standoff between Chinese Marine Surveillance ships and the Philippines warship in the *Huangyan* Island on 11 April. In the first video, it showed that the Philippines warship *Gregorio Del Pilar* harassed the Chinese fishing boats and two Chinese Marine Surveillance ships came to rescue the Chinese fishermen. In the second video, it interviewed Chinese analyst who criticized the Philippines' provocation against Chinese fisherman in the *Huangyan* Island.<sup>15</sup> In the following

<sup>11</sup> There are two naval battles between China and Vietnam in the SCS, one is the *Yongle* Island skirmish in 1974 in *Xisha Islands* and another one is the *Chigua* Reef skirmish in 1988 in *Nansha* Island.

<sup>12</sup> According to Ketian Zhang, China engaged in military coercion in the SCS in the 1990s, refrained from coercion from 2000 to 2006, and resumed non-militarized coercion after 2007. See Ketian Zhang (2019). Cautious bully reputation, resolve, and Beijing's use of coercion in the South China Sea. *International Security*. 44(1), p. 117.

<sup>13</sup> François-Xavier Bonnet (2012, November). Geopolitics of Scarborough Shoal. Irasec's Discussion Papers (14), p. 5.

<sup>14</sup> *Fu Ying: wo ceng qin li Huangyan dao shi jian, you xie hua bi xu yao shuo* [Fu Ying: I experienced the Huangyan island incident personally, I have to say some words]. *Sina News*. (2021, March 15). <https://news.sina.cn/2021-03-15/detail-ikkntiam1745372.d.html>.

<sup>15</sup> *Shi pin: zhong guo yu chuan zao fei lv bin jun jian xi rao: zhong guo hai jian fu Huangyan dao bao hu wo yu chuan yu min* [Video: Chinese fishing boats was harassed by the Philippines warships: Chinese marine surveillance ships came to the Huangyan island to protect the Chinese fishermen. CCTV. (2012, April 11). <http://news.cntv.cn/china/20120411/120233.shtml>; *Wo hai jian chuan yu fei lv bin jun jian nan hai dui zhi* [Maritime standoff between Chinese maritime surveillance ships and the Philippines warships]. CCTV. (2012, April 11). <http://news.cntv.cn/military/20120411/121022.shtml>.

two days, both the national medias mainly including People's Daily, Xinhua News Agency, Guangming Daily and the local medias in Southern China such as Southern Urban Daily, and the mainstream online media—Sina, Sohu, Netease voiced support for government policy of sending another two fishery administration ships to the *Huangyan* Island to protect the Chinese fisherman and forcing the Philippine warship to withdraw from the island. The People's Daily even sent a clear warning sign that China would not allow any further actions taken by the Philippines to violate China's sovereignty in the SCS; otherwise, the Philippines would pay a heavy price on 13 April.<sup>16</sup>

But despite China's tough stance on the standoff, the Philippines escalated the tensions by conducting military exercise with the USA in the SCS, sending more ships to the disputed water, and claiming to appeal the dispute to the international court. China, therefore, took a large range of actions to retaliate against the Philippines. One of them was the use of the national media and online media to spread rumours of preparation for war against the Philippines.<sup>17</sup> Soon after the live-fire and landing attack training between the American and Philippine navy in the Palawan Island and the deployment of the Philippine warships and anti-submarine warfare aircraft in the *Huangyan* Island on 21 and 22 April, China's Global Times, which is known for its frequently nationalistic tone, threatened to give the Philippines a lesson by preparing for a small sea war with the country.<sup>18</sup> It is coincide with Chinese Defense Minister Liang Guanglie's claims that any military action will be based on the needs of diplomacy and Chinese Defense Ministry spokesman Geng Yansheng's statement that the armed forces have vowed to "fulfil their duty" to safeguard China's territory in the SCS on 24 and 26 April, respectively.<sup>19</sup> In the meantime, the Global Times claimed to make the Philippine President Benigno Simeon Aquino III look like a fool in front of everyone and give a lesson of failure to the Philippine society.<sup>20</sup> Except the war warning to the Philippines, China's People's Daily also blamed the Philippines for escalating the tensions, warned the Philippines not to play fire by inviting the USA

<sup>16</sup> *Ren min ri bao*: jie jue nan hai wen ti bu neng zhi kao yi zhi shou [People's Daily: solving the SCS issue can not rely on one hand]. *Global Times*. (2012, April 13). <https://world.huanqiu.com/article/9CaKrnJuWF9>.

<sup>17</sup> In fact, the Chinese government also used other policy instruments. These include the economic punitive measures which is ranged from a stricter control on bananas exported by the Philippines to stopping Chinese tourists from traveling to the Philippines and the diplomatic influence and power on Cambodia (which is presiding over ASEAN in 2012) to block the production of an official communiqué (which would have mentioned the dispute over Scarborough Shoal) at the end of the ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting in Phnom Penh on July 16, 2012. See François-Xavier Bonnet (2012, November). Geopolitics of Scarborough Shoal. *Irasec's Discussion Papers* (14), p.5.

<sup>18</sup> *Ping lun cheng zhong guo yao gei fei lv bin yi jiao xun ling qi bei hou shi li ju sang* [The commentary claims that China should give the Philippines a lesson and frustrate the forces behind the country]. *Tencent News*. (23 April 2012). <https://news.qq.com/a/20120423/000799.htm>.

<sup>19</sup> Zhang Yunbi (27 April 2012). Military makes solemn vow on territory. *China Daily*. [https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2012-04/27/content\\_15154373.htm](https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2012-04/27/content_15154373.htm).

<sup>20</sup> *Huan qiu shi bao*: wu rang fei lv bin kong zhi nan hai mo ca jie zou [Global Times: don't let the Philippines lead the SCS dispute]. *Global Times*. (2012, April 25). <https://world.huanqiu.com/article/9CaKrnJvbyj>.

to involve in the dispute and reminded the Philippines of the serious consequences of the tensions in the SCS such as the loss of control on the standoff.<sup>21</sup>

Despite the fact that the outcry against the Philippines from the Chinese society was reduced after the end of the Philippines–US military exercise on 27 April, the standoff between the two countries was re-escalated in May. On the one side, the Philippines not only renamed the *Huangyan* Island but cleaned the Chinese constructions in the island, resulting in a new wave of anger from China. Soon after the Philippine coast guard destroyed the sovereignty stela and other Chinese constructions in the *Huangyan* Island, China's Vice Foreign Minister Fu Ying met with Alex Chua, Charge D'affaires of the Philippine Embassy in Beijing on 7 May. She said China was not optimistic about the situation and that China was prepared to respond to any escalation.<sup>22</sup> Later, China's People's Daily (including the overseas edition), Xinhua News Agency and CCTV published numerous articles and commentaries over the next two days reiterating China's sovereignty over the *Huangyan* Island, condemning the Philippines' illegal activities in the island, and warning the Philippines to stop provoking China. It is worth noting that China's People's Daily (overseas edition) vowed to safeguard the core Chinese national interests by using forces and appealed the government to prepare for a war against the military provocations from the Philippines.<sup>23</sup>

On the other side, the Philippines sent armed public service ships to the lagoon of the *Huangyan* Island to press the Chinese fisherman who returned to the *Huangyan* Island in 9 May to leave. This action caused a series concern over the safety of the fisherman from Chinese government as no Chinese ships protected the fisherman inside the lagoon. In order to force the Philippine ships to withdraw from the lagoon, China has not only promoted diplomatic consultation with the Philippine government but raised a new round of national resentment against the Philippines. The mouthpiece of People's Liberal Army (PLA)-PLA Daily warned the Philippines not to take away half an inch of China's territory on 10 May.<sup>24</sup> China's People's Daily also cautioned the Philippines against making a wrong decision of further provoking

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<sup>21</sup> *Ren min ri bao*: *fei ly bin dui nan hai sheng suo wang gu shi shi bu hui de cheng* [People's Daily: the Philippines ignore the facts of the SCS claims and can not get success]. *Tencent News*. ( 24 April 2012). <https://news.qq.com/a/20120424/000184.htm>; *Nan hai wen ti guo ji hua shi zhan lue duan shi xuan bu fan zhong guo wai jiao da chuan* [Internationalizing the SCS dispute is unwise and can not undermine China's diplomacy]. *Tencent News*. (26 April 2012). <https://news.qq.com/a/20120426/000281.htm>.

<sup>22</sup> Stan Grant and Paul Armstrong (10 May 2012). Tensions over disputed island appear to ease. *CNN*. <https://edition.cnn.com/2012/05/10/world/asia/china-philippines-dispute/index.html>.

<sup>23</sup> See *Ren min ri bao ping Huangyan dao dui zhi: ren wu ke ren jiu wu xu zai ren* [People's Daily commented on the standoff in the *Huangyan* Island: zero tolerance for the Philippines if there is no compromise]. *Tencent News*. (8 May 2012). <https://news.qq.com/a/20120508/000149.htm>.

<sup>24</sup> *Jie fang jun bao fa biao shu ming wen zhang: xiu xiang qiang zou zhong guo ban cun ling tu* [People's Liberal Army Daily published article: can't take away half an inch of China's territory]. *Tencent News*. (10 May 2012). <https://news.qq.com/a/20120510/000155.htm>.

China.<sup>25</sup> Meanwhile, Major General Luo Yuan reminded the Philippines not to smash a stone with an egg when he interviewed by CCTV,<sup>26</sup> which means that the Philippines would lost the war with China in a very high price. Li Jie, who is a research fellow at Chinese Naval Military Academic Research Institute analyzed that the recent military exercise conducted by the SCS fleet is a clear sign that China is preparing for the military conflicts with the Philippines.<sup>27</sup>

Eventually, the stalemate was eased in early June when the two countries withdrew their civilian vessels from the lagoon of the *Huangyan* Island. But China has still remained vessels outside the lagoon so as to protect Chinese fishing boats and safeguard its sovereignty and maritime rights. On 12 June, Liu Cigui, Director of Chinese State Oceanic Administration, inspected the sea forces and ordered them to firmly safeguard Chinese sovereignty over the *Huangyan* Island until winning the final victory.<sup>28</sup> Three days later, all the Philippine vessels were left on the pretext of the onset of the typhoon season, which indicates that the two months standoff between China and the Philippines on the *Huangyan* Island was temporarily ended.

Nonetheless, China worries about the loss control of the *Huangyan* Island due to the Philippines' continuing harassment (particularly with the USA) and the typhoon season in the SCS. In fact, although this island is, de facto, under the control of the China, the latter has actually not build any military facilities on the island and thus substantially enhancing its control over the island. Instead, the Chinese maritime surveillance vessels and fishery administration ships just blocked Philippines' access to the *Huangyan* Island by constructing a chain barrier across the entrance of the lagoon after the standoff and moved maritime patrol boats into waters near the island.<sup>29</sup> However, these Chinese vessels have to leave the island in the typhoon season, which could give an opportunity for the Philippines to occupy the island with the help of the USA. Given this, China were on high alert to guard against any retaliation from the Philippines targeting the *Huangyan* Island. Actually, China's People's Daily published two pieces of articles in early July in which the Philippines' defence

<sup>25</sup> *Ren min ri bao*: *Huangyan dao shi jian chong fen xian shi zhong guo de kuan guang xiong huai* [People's Daily: Huangyan Island incident clearly reflects China's great tolerance]. *Tencent News*. (9 May 2012). <https://news.qq.com/a/20120510/000109.htm>.

<sup>26</sup> *Luo yuan shao jiang*: *fei lv bin yu zhong guo dui kang shi yi luan ji shi* [Major general Luo Yuan: the Philippines' military confrontation with China is smashing a stone with an egg]. *Tencent News*. (9 May 2012). <https://news.qq.com/a/20120509/000336.htm>.

<sup>27</sup> *Zhuan jia cheng nan hai jian dui jin xing yan lian bu pai chu yu Huangyan dao ju shi you guan* [Experts said that the military exercise conducted by the SCS fleet is related to the *Huangyan* Island crisis]. *China News*. (10 May 2012). <http://www.chinanews.com/gn/2012/05-10/3877096.shtml>.

<sup>28</sup> *Guo jia hai yang ju zhang*: *dui huang yan dao wei quan dou zheng yao jian ding bu yi* [Director of State Oceanic Administration: firmly safeguard sovereignty on the *Huangyan* island]. *China News*. 12 June 2012). <http://www.chinanews.com/gn/2012/06-12/3957665.shtml>.

<sup>29</sup> Renato Cruz De Castro (2015). Facing up to China's realpolitik approach in the South China Sea dispute: the case of the 2012 Scarborough Shoal stand-off and its aftermath. *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*. 3(2), p. 174.



cooperation with the USA in the SCS and its efforts of internationalizing the SCS issue in ASEAN caused series concerns from China.<sup>30</sup>

### 3 Nationalism and Maritime Standoff Between China and Vietnam

There are two major maritime standoff between China and Vietnam in the *Xisha* Islands since the military conflicts in the late 1990s. One is the HYSY (*Hai Yang Shi You*) 981 standoff in 2014, also known as the 2014 China-Vietnam oil rig crisis, another is the *Wan'an Tan* standoff (Vanguard Bank standoff) in 2019. All the two incidents represent the worst China–Vietnam tensions in the SCS since the *Chigua* Reef skirmish in 1988 and attached deep concerns from the nationalists of the two countries.

The HYSY 981 standoff begun on 2 May 2014 when the state-owned China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) moved its more advanced oil rig to the 17 nautical South of *Zhongjian* Island in the *Xisha* Islands (called by the Vietnamese as Paracel Islands) which is occupied by China but claimed by Vietnam. In order to disturb China's oil exploration activities, Vietnam sent its coast guard vessels and diving frogman to the disputed waters on 4 May and started a confrontation with the Chinese vessels in the next day. In the following days, the standoff escalated to collisions between the vessels of the two countries. According to Chinese Foreign Ministry, there were as many as 63 Vietnamese vessels in the area at the peak, attempting to break through China's cordon and ramming the Chinese government ships for a total of 1416 times from 2 May to 7 June.<sup>31</sup> More seriously, Vietnam also condoned anti-China demonstrations at home from mid-May, which caused more than 300 Chinese casualties and heavy property losses.<sup>32</sup> The stalemate has not ended until mid-July when Chinese oil rig finished the oil exploration works and moved to Hainan Island.

In spite of the most serious confrontation between China and Vietnam in the SCS in the past three decades, the Chinese government effectively managed domestic nationalism on this dispute by using a manipulative tactic on media. First of all, compared with the strong anti-Philippines sentiments during the *Huangyan* Island standoff, there was less powerful anti-Vietnamese propaganda in China during the oil

<sup>30</sup> See *Ren min ri bao: jin ti fei jie dong meng wai zhang hui chao zuo nan hai wen ti* [People's Daily: remaining vigilant about the Philippines' efforts of hyping the SCS issue in the ASEAN foreign ministers' meeting]. *Tencent News*. (3 July 2012). <https://news.qq.com/a/20120703/000159.htm>; *Ren min ri bao: mei duan qi nei wu li zai ya zhou fa dong dui zhong guo leng zhan* [People's Daily: the US could not initiate Cold-War against China in the Asia in the near future]. *Tencent News*. (10 July 2012). <https://news.qq.com/a/20120706/000661.htm>.

<sup>31</sup> The Operation of the HYSY 981 Drilling Rig: Vietnam's Provocation and China's Position. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China. (8 June 2014). [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/zxxx\\_662805/t1163264.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1163264.shtml).

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.



rig crisis. On one hand, the national media like People's Daily published dozens of articles during the crisis, but none appeared in the front page. On the other hand, most of the reports were coping Foreign Ministry's statements rather than the nationalist outcry of escalating the standoff into a small-scale war.<sup>33</sup> It is obviously that the Chinese government delicately controlled the media reports in order to make the nationalists clam down and thus avoiding a strong anti-Vietnamese sentiment at home which could complicate the territorial dispute in the SCS.

Second, there was a milder response to the nationwide anti-Chinese riots in Vietnam during the oil rig crisis. Almost ten days after the maritime standoff started in the SCS, a large-scale and violent anti-China protests spread from the southern Ho Chi Minh City to the central and northern provinces in Vietnam and caused more than hundreds Chinese casualties. In spite of this most intense anti-China protest in Vietnam since normalization in 1991, China actually made great efforts to cool down the nationalist fever rather than reviving the xenophobia towards the Vietnamese. One of the clear signs is that the CCTV News (*Xin Wen Lian Bo*), which is the most important programme showing the official activities of Chinese top leaders and major global events, did not mention about the anti-Chinese riots in Vietnam even two Chinese citizens were tortured and killed by the Vietnamese protestors on 14 May. At the same day, People's Daily and Xinhua News Agency also did not report the outrage against Chinese in Vietnam in 14 May, only the nationalists' Global Times published an editorial condemning the Vietnamese rioters. It is not until the 15 May evening that China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi had an emergent call with Vietnam's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Pham Binh Minh, during which Wang strongly condemned the serious violent incident against foreign-invested companies in Vietnam, lodged solemn representations, and urged the Vietnamese side to take resolute and effective measures to immediately stop all violence and ensure the safety of Chinese citizens and property of Chinese companies in Vietnam.<sup>34</sup> However, it is a moderate response as Wang neither talked about the Chinese casualties nor demanded of punishing the perpetrator.

Five years later, another intense standoff between China and Vietnam was happened around the *Wan'an Tan*/Vanguard Bank in *Nansha*/Spratly Islands, which is known as *Wan'an Tan* incident. It was started on 3 July 2019 when the Chinese *Hai Yang Di Zhi* 8 exploration ship was sent to survey the seabed to the northeast of *Wan'an Tan*. However, the Chinese ship was harassed by the Vietnamese coast guard vessels. Since then, the most severe standoff between China and Vietnam in the SCS

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<sup>33</sup> In fact, a total of 36 articles were published by People's Daily during the 74 days of the crisis between 2 May and 15 July, none appeared in the front page and most copying the Foreign Ministry's statements. See Frances Yaping Wang, Brantly Womack (2019). Jawing through crisis: Chinese and Vietnamese media strategies in the South China Sea. *Journal of Contemporary China*. 28(119), p. 713.

<sup>34</sup> Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's regular press conference on 16 May 2014. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China. (16 May 2014). <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/cebe/eng/fyrth/t1156893.htm>.

since 2014 was begun and lasted for nearly four-months.<sup>35</sup> Both sides had mobilized vast resources from government, military, party, and media to fight against each other. Nonetheless, the way Vietnam and China had managed the crisis is different from the previous one as both countries tried to prevent the situation from getting out of hand.<sup>36</sup> In that case, both Vietnam and China had made conscious efforts to avoid an uncontrolled nationalism by either reducing public reports of the incident on the official and social medias or breaking up the protests.<sup>37</sup>

First of all, there is few news or comments about the maritime standoff between China and Vietnam in the SCS during the *Wan'an Tan* incident in Chinese society. In fact, the earliest reports of the *Wan'an Tan* incident published by Chinese official medias were not found until 18 September when both the CCTV and Global Times copied the statement released by Chinese Foreign Ministry. It was said that China required Vietnam to immediately stop its unilateral infringement activities while China would like to continue to work with the Vietnamese side to properly settle relevant issues through friendly consultations.<sup>38</sup> In the next day, People's Daily (Overseas Edition) published a commentary on how the Vietnamese unilateral oil and gas activities cause *Wan'an Tan* incident and why the bilateral negotiation is the only way to solve the issue and warning the external forces not to intervene, which

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<sup>35</sup> Actually, there are different narratives of the *Wanan Bank* incident from China and Vietnam. From Chinese source, the Vietnam should be blamed as it violated the DOC spirit (joint development) and conducted unilateral oil and gas activities in the disputed waters of the *Wanan Bank*. Moreover, the normal and legal geological exploration activities conducted by Chinese Haiyangdizhi 8 in the *Wanan Bank* was harassed by the Vietnamese coast guard vessels. But for the Vietnamese, Haiyangdizhi 8 illegally entered into the EEZ and continental shelf and the Chinese vessels operating in Block 06-01 to threaten Vietnam's drilling operations there. See Wang Daozhen, Cao Yaxiong (2020). *Wan an tan shi jian yu yue nan de nan hai zheng ce zou xiang* [Wanan Bank incident and the prospects of Vietnam's SCS policy]. *Dong nan ya yan jiu* [Southeast Asian Studies]. (4), pp. 21–22; Lye Liang Fook & Ha Hoang Hop (2019). The Vanguard Bank Incident: Developments and What Next? *ISEAS Perspective*. (69), pp. 2–3.

<sup>36</sup> Lye Liang Fook & Ha Hoang Hop (2019). The Vanguard Bank Incident: Developments and What Next? *ISEAS Perspective*. (69), p. 6.

<sup>37</sup> On Vietnam's part, the police apparently took swift action to break up a small group of protestors calling themselves the “No-U” group (the name deliberately chosen to oppose China's U-shaped nine-dash line map) that gathered outside the Chinese embassy in Hanoi on 6 August 2019.<sup>31</sup> This demonstration took place more than a month after the standoff started on 3 July. In contrast to 2014, the waves of anti-China protests started only about ten days after the Oil Rig 891 moved near to Triton Island on 2 May 2014. See Lye Liang Fook & Ha Hoang Hop (2019). The Vanguard Bank Incident: Developments and What Next? *ISEAS Perspective*. (69), p. 6.

<sup>38</sup> Sheng Yang. *Yue fang ying ting zhi dan fang mian qing quan huo dong* [The Vietnamese side should stop its unilateral infringement activities]. CCTV. (18 September 2014). <http://military.cctv.com/2019/09/18/ARTI3gdAx3QL5LVvV53fOC6190918.shtml>; Zhang Hui. *Wai jiao bu: zhong fang zai wan an tan you guan zuo ye wu ke fei yi, yuan yu yue fang xie shang chu li* [Foreign Ministry: Chinese operations in waters of the Wanan Bank are lawful, China would like to work with the Vietnamese side to properly settle relevant issues through consultations]. *Global Times*. (18 September 2014). <https://m.huanqiu.com/article/9CaKrnmTii>.

coincides with the Foreign Ministry's statement.<sup>39</sup> Except these brief reports of the diplomatic rhetoric, no other articles can be found in Chinese official medias during the maritime disputes in *Wan'an Tan*.

Second, even the social media was also censored by the Chinese government during the standoff between China and Vietnam in the SCS. For instance, the earliest reports of the *Wan'an Tan* incident appeared online was found on 23 July, almost 20 days after the beginning of the standoff. It first revealed that the standoff between the coast guard vessels of China and Vietnam in the waters of *Wan'an Tan* has lasted for more than one week.<sup>40</sup> Two days later, another article was published by the nationalist on Sohu, one of the main search engines and news Websites in China. Different from the previous one, this article not only criticized the Vietnam for invading Chinese waters but described in detail of the beginning stage and the new development of the standoff by using both Chinese sources and analysis from the American think tank.<sup>41</sup> Nearly one month later, a piece of article was appeared on Sohu, which concluded that no wars would be happened between China and Vietnam in the SCS and warned Russia not to cooperate with Vietnam in the oil and gas area.<sup>42</sup> It is the first article that called on the peaceful resolution of the *Wan'an Tan* crisis among the Chinese nationalists. Since then, no other articles can be found on Chinese medias until 18 September when both the official media and social media reported the statement released by Chinese Foreign Ministry.

Finally, China responded to the Vietnamese's provocation in the *Wan'an Tan* in a soft manner, which is different from the previous tough stance on the 2014 standoff. On one hand, China exercised self-restraint in the standoff with Vietnam and prevented the situation from getting worse. In practice, no collisions and clashes were happened between the two vessels during the *Wan'an Tan* incident. On the other hand, China has attempted to play the dispute down from the very beginning of the standoff. Actually, China not only imposed censorship to the medias of reporting the incident but expressed the clear sign of addressing the dispute through friendly consultation.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Lei Xiaolu. *Zhe cai shi jie jue wan an tan shi jian de zui jia xuan ze* [This is the best way to solve the *Wan'an Tan* incident]. *People's Daily Overseas Edition*. (19 September 2014). <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1645072300346971768&wfr=spider&for=pc>.

<sup>40</sup> *Wan'an Tan: zhong yue hai jing yi dui zhi yi zhou, zhong guo zai zi ji de di pan cai you zi ji shuo le suan* [*Wan'an Tan: one week after the standoff between the coast guard vessels of China and Vietnam, China has the final word to the oil and gas activities in its own waters*]. *Sohu*. (23 July 2014). [https://www.sohu.com/a/328798968\\_100083679](https://www.sohu.com/a/328798968_100083679).

<sup>41</sup> *Zhong yue nan hai dui zhi: zhong guo wan dun hai jing chuan kai jin wan an tan, nan hai bei zhan dao jiao bi xu hui gui zhong guo* [China-Vietnam standoff in the SCS: Chinese coast guard vessels arrived at *Wan'an Tan*, the occupied islands must be returned to China]. *Sohu*. (25 July 2014). [https://www.sohu.com/a/329291675\\_100083679](https://www.sohu.com/a/329291675_100083679).

<sup>42</sup> *Wan'an tan zhe yang shou hui: zhong fang ru zhu bian yue nan du zi kai fa wei gong tong kai fa, zhu bu gan zou wai bu shi li* [The return of *Wan'an Tan*: turning Vietnam's unilateral development to joint development by both sides, gradually moving away foreign forces]. *Sohu*. (9 August 9 2019). [https://m.sohu.com/a/332524587\\_100083679](https://m.sohu.com/a/332524587_100083679).

<sup>43</sup> See the above two parts of the media reports of the *Wan'an Tan* incident and the statement released by Chinese Foreign Ministry. See Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Geng Shuang's Regular Press

## 4 China's Trade-Off Between Sovereignty Protection and Stability Maintenance in the SCS

As mentioned before, China's very different tactic of using media to manage the nationalist sentiment to escalate/de-escalate the tensions in the SCS is first determined by the nature of the dispute. Generally speaking, the SCS dispute includes the territorial dispute which refers to the national sovereignty of the islands and reefs in the disputed waters of the SCS, and the conflicting maritime interests of these islands and reefs based on the principles of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Although both the territorial dispute and conflicting maritime interests are the main focuses of the SCS dispute and have long been claimed by China, maintaining territorial integrity is the first main business for the Chinese government. To be more specific, China has to protect its national sovereignty and territorial integrity when there is an intense dispute about territory in the SCS, so as to please the nationalists, enhance the legitimacy of the communist regime, and thus consolidating its rule at home. In practice, territory and sovereignty have always been the most sensitive issue and the top priority in China's diplomacy ever since the foundation of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949.

As the territorial disputes intensified in the East Sea (ES) and SCS since the late 2010s, Chinese leaders reaffirmed its firm determination to protect national sovereignty on various occasions. Chinese former President Hu Jintao vowed to maintain national territory and state sovereignty after the Japanese government illegally "purchase" the *Diaoyu Dao*/Senkaku Islands in September 2012.<sup>44</sup> Since Xi Jinping came to office, he has actually taken a tougher stance on the issues bearing on national territory and state sovereignty than his predecessors. Soon after the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, Xi Jinping warned the foreign states not to expect China to make a deal with them at the expense of core national interests, and not to expect China to bear the consequence of any infringement on its sovereignty, security and development interest.<sup>45</sup> It should be highly noted that the claims on sovereignty is much more important than security and development interest, which means that the significance of maintaining territorial integrity is much higher than protecting maritime interests. After all, no Chinese leaders could afford the serious consequences of losing even one small piece of territory, no matter land or sea, either through peaceful negotiation or military conflicts with foreign countries, the weak states in particular.

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Conference on September 18, 2019. Embassy of PRC in Malaysia. (September 18, 2019). <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/cede/det/fyrth/t1699416.htm>.

<sup>44</sup> See *Hu Jin Tao jiu dang qian zhong ri guan xi he diao yu dao wen ti biao ming li chang* [Hu Jintao made position on Sino-Japan relations and Diaoyu Dao issue]. Embassy of PRC in Japan. (9 September 2012). <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/jp/chn/zt/dyd/zhongfanglichang/t969361.htm>.

<sup>45</sup> *Xi Jinping: tong chou liang ge da ju, hang shi zou he ping fa zhan dao lu de ji chu* [Xi Jinping: to coordinate China's domestic and international efforts, consolidate the foundation of the path of the peaceful development]. The Central People's Government of PRC. (29 January 2013). [http://www.gov.cn/ldhd/2013-01/29/content\\_2321822.htm](http://www.gov.cn/ldhd/2013-01/29/content_2321822.htm).

Given the Chinese top leaders' hard-line stance on the sovereignty of the islands and reefs in the disputed waters of the SCS and their determination to preserve territorial integrity, China is unlikely to make compromise on the territorial dispute with the ASEAN claimant states. Instead, China is more likely to mobilize internal and external resources as possible as it can to support its claims and operations in the SCS, in which the nationalism is an useful instrument for the Chinese leaders to get support at home and pressure the claimant states to make concessions. That is why the Chinese government utilized nationalism through monopolizing medias to strengthen its claims on the sovereignty of the island and deter the Philippines from occupying the island during the *Huangyan* Island crisis. Eventually, China has de facto controlled the *Huangyan* Island by locking the entrance of the lagoon and initiating constant ship presence around the island, though the grounded Philippine warship has been there since the crisis. China's assertive actions during the *Huangyan* Island standoff is perceived as a successful victory in the SCS dispute since the violent clashes with Vietnam in 1988, which was called the "*Huangyan* Island" model by Chinese scholars. This model, as Su Hao, who is an renowned expert in Chinese diplomacy at China Foreign Affairs University (directly affiliated with Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China) said, all parties must maintain the status quo and no parties are allowed to revise it easily. Otherwise, China has to crush the foreign invasion and strengthen control of the occupied islands and reefs.<sup>46</sup>

Despite the tough stance on the territorial dispute with ASEAN claimant states in the SCS, China has responded to the conflicts of maritime interests with the SCS countries relatively moderately. By investigating China's media strategies and its moderate foreign policy during China–Vietnam oil rig crisis in 2014, Yaping Wang and Brantly Womack concluded that the Chinese nationalist sentiment on these standoff was calm and definitely less feverish than before the 2012 Sino–Philippines *Huangyan* Island standoff or the 2016 Sino–Philippines arbitration.<sup>47</sup> They further analysed how the government manipulate the media and thus to offset the domestic nationalism when executing a moderate foreign policy during the maritime crisis with Vietnam in the SCS. In a similar vein, China has adopted a more moderate policy towards the *Wan'an Tan* standoff with Vietnam in 2019.

One of the main reasons of China's moderate policy during the maritime crisis is that these crisis are directly caused by the conflicts of maritime interests (such as the natural resource) rather than the lose and occupation of the islands and reefs in the disputed waters, though the roots of the crisis is the territorial dispute. In order words, China has to protect the maritime territory at first as it determines to the legitimacy of the regime. While it is unwise for China to take a same hard-line stance on the conflicts of oil and gas exploration and fishing and other natural resource in the disputed waters

<sup>46</sup> Gao Yu. (28 August 2012). *Zhuan jia: wo guo chu bu que li huang yan dao mo shi, nan hai bu shi ling he bo yi* [Experts: China has established the *Huangyan* Island model, it is not a zero-sum game in the SCS]. CCTV. <http://news.cntv.cn/special/zfjcnhhyddz/shouye/index.shtml>.

<sup>47</sup> According to them, despite the overall strong nationalism in China on the SCS dispute, the public held a relatively mild opinion towards this dispute with Vietnam. See Frances Yaping Wang, Brantly Womack (2019). Jawing through crisis: Chinese and Vietnamese media strategies in the South China Sea. *Journal of Contemporary China*. 28(119), p. 725.

of the SCS because these conflicts are not necessarily endangered the Chinese regime or substantially revised the status quo in the SCS. Instead, China proposed the “*Gong Tong Kai Fa* [Joint Development]” with ASEAN claimant states in the SCS ever since the 1990s, so as to alleviate conflicts and maintain stability of the SCS. So, it is safe to say that there is a zero-sum game on the territorial sovereignty (“*Zhu Quan Shu Wo* [Sovereignty Belongs to Us]”) and a win-win cooperation on marine development (“*Gong Tong Kai Fa* [Joint Development]”) between China and ASEAN claimant states in the SCS. In that case, China has to mobilize internal and external resource to maintain the territorial integrity in which the domestic nationalism is included, while seeking joint development with ASEAN claimant states to maintain stability of the SCS. In fact, China has adopted a moderate and flexible policy to deal with the conflicts of maritime interests in the SCS such as de-escalating the tensions on the oil and gas exploration either conducted by Chinese enterprises or Vietnamese companies or the illegal fishing activities conducted by the Vietnamese fishing boats in the disputed waters.

Another major factor affecting China’s manipulation of nationalism in its SCS policy is Chinese leaders’ trade-off between “*Wei Quan* [Sovereignty Protection]” and “*Wei Wen* [Stability Maintenance]” in the SCS. Kuik pointed out that the instrumentality of territorial issues in inter-elite politics and group interests may have further motivated the Communist Party of China (CPC) elites to continue finding an optimal point between sovereignty protection and stability maintenance.<sup>48</sup> On one hand, China has to maintain its territorial integrity by using coercive means when there is an intense dispute over territory in the SCS. On the other hand, the assertiveness itself is neither the goal nor an inherent characteristic of Chinese diplomacy.<sup>49</sup> It is also a departure from its earlier charm diplomacy in Southeast Asia between 1996 and 2007 which manifested cordial bilateral engagement, active participation in multilateral forums and constructive involvement in regional economic integration.<sup>50</sup> Given this, China has also adopted some “soft” measures such as the pragmatic cooperation under the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) framework to ease tensions in the SCS. Usually, there is a top priority on stability maintenance after sovereignty protection so that the tensions could be mitigated. However, although China hopes to maintain peace and stability, the moderate approach or the policy of self-restraint may instead encourage some countries to be more demanding in their relations with China.<sup>51</sup> Hence, China has turned to a more proactive and assertive approach with the aim of deterring other countries from further provocations and escalation.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Cheng Chwee Kuik (2017). Explaining the contradiction in China’s South China Sea policy: structural drivers and domestic imperatives. *China: An International Journal*. 15(1), p. 168.

<sup>49</sup> Zhou Fangyin (2016). Between assertiveness and self-restraint: understanding China’s South China Sea policy. *International Affairs*. 92(4), p. 877.

<sup>50</sup> Cheng Chwee Kuik (2017). Explaining the contradiction in China’s South China Sea policy: structural drivers and domestic imperatives. *China: An International Journal*. 15(1), p. 165.

<sup>51</sup> Zhou Fangyin (2016). Between assertiveness and self-restraint: understanding China’s South China Sea policy. *International Affairs*. 92(4), p. 877.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*, p. 878.

As discussed before, domestic nationalism was aroused by China to legitimize its provocative actions of forcing the Philippine vessels to depart from the nearby waters of the *Huangyan* Island and de fact controlling the island during the 2012 *Huangyan* Island standoff with the Philippines. Since 2012, China has demonstrated a high level of strategic patience, and its use of strategic measures in handling the SCS issue has become more flexible and effective.<sup>53</sup> Even in the oil rig crisis with Vietnam between May and July 2014, China has cautiously used media in order to avoid the anti-Vietnamese sentiment to pour in and thus binding its SCS policy. One month after the end of the standoff with Vietnam, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi advocated the “dual-track” approach in resolving the SCS issue at a press conference after the China-ASEAN (10 + 1) Foreign Ministers’ Meeting on 9 August 2014. It means that any relevant dispute will be addressed by the countries directly concerned through friendly consultations and negotiations and in a peaceful way.<sup>54</sup> It is an important indication of China’s preference for stability maintenance as well as its flexibility over the issues in the SCS. Thereafter, there is few big troubles between China and ASEAN claimant states in the SCS until the 2016 Arbitration. As the Arbitration seriously challenges China’s sovereignty in the SCS, China has strongly opposed it by embarking on a anti-Philippine and anti-American propaganda through medias. Nonetheless, the statement between China and the Philippines was broken after the convergence of China’s BRI and the “Build! Build! Build!” (BBB) Programme of the Duterte administration. Meanwhile, China pushes forward the COC consultation process since mid-2017 (the COC framework document was adopted in August 2017) with the aim to stabilize the SCS through establishing rule and order in the region. In the following years, the COC process has made some progress. In August 2018, the COC Single Draft Negotiating Text was formed<sup>55</sup>; in 2019, all parties completed the first reading of the COC SDNT ahead of the schedule and prepared for the second reading process.<sup>56</sup> It is in this context that the *Wan’an Tan* standoff between China and Vietnam in 2019 not provoked an outcry from the nationalists in China. Instead, China tightened its control over the medias in order not to undermine the China–Vietnam relations as well as the COC process.

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Wang Yi: handle the South China Sea issue through the “dual-track” approach. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC. (9 August 2014). [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjlb\\_663304/zjzg\\_663340/yzs\\_663350/gjlb\\_663354/2747\\_663498/2749\\_663502/201408/t20140810\\_518825.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjlb_663304/zjzg_663340/yzs_663350/gjlb_663354/2747_663498/2749_663502/201408/t20140810_518825.html).

<sup>55</sup> Carl Thayer. (3 August 2018). A closer look at the ASEAN-China single draft South China Sea code of conduct. *The Diplomat*. <https://thediplomat.com/2018/08/a-closer-look-at-the-asean-china-single-draft-south-china-sea-code-of-conduct/>.

<sup>56</sup> The first reading of the single draft negotiating text of the Code of Conduct (COC) in the South China Sea completed ahead of the schedule. (1 August 2019). Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China. [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/nanhai/eng/wjbxw\\_1/201908/t20190802\\_8523410.htm](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/nanhai/eng/wjbxw_1/201908/t20190802_8523410.htm).



## 5 Conclusion

This book chapter examines the different roles of nationalism in China's "assertive" SCS policy by investigating the three major maritime standoff between China and the Philippines, and China and Vietnam in 2012, 2014 and 2019, respectively. It finds that nationalism has not always functioned as a pushing factor in China's SCS policy. Generally speaking, China has to protect its national sovereignty by provoking xenophobic actions when there is an intense dispute over territory in the SCS. It is also more likely for China to ramp up nationalism to support its SCS policy when sovereignty protection becomes the top priority. Otherwise, China is more likely to cool down the nationalist fever so as to reduce the conflicting maritime interests and thus to stabilize the SCS when stability maintenance becomes the top priority.

In practice, China took a tougher stance on the *Huangyan* Island standoff with the Philippines than the oil rig crisis and the *Wan'an Tan* standoff with Vietnam. In general, nationalism served as a significant source of legitimacy of China's SCS policy during these standoff and crisis, but it becomes more effective during the *Huangyan* Island standoff. As the top priority of China's SCS policy has shifted from sovereignty protection to stability maintenance since the land reclamation in the SCS in early 2015, China is more likely to take a flexible and moderate position on the SCS dispute with ASEAN claimant states. Although the rise of nationalism during the COVID-19 pandemic has been witnessed, it is not necessary to intensify the tensions in the SCS. In addition, the Chinese government has faced with high pressures on the sustainable high economic growth amid/after the COVID-19 pandemic, hence, maintaining a peaceful external environment is the key to promote domestic development. Given this, China would be prudent in manipulating the nationalism to support its SCS policy in the context of the rising power rivalry between China and the USA in Southeast Asia under the Joe Biden administration.

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