

**Playing Chicken with Firecrackers:  
When Do Nationalist Protests Serve as Credible Signals in International Crisis  
Bargaining?**

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**Abstract:** Do nationalist protests at home affect crisis bargaining abroad, and if so, how? Existing accounts ignore the home government's fear that nationalist protests will spontaneously turn into anti-government protests, and the foreign government's uncertainty that nationalist protests are genuine costly constraints of the home government. In this paper, I formally analyze how these two uncertainties influence international crisis bargaining. Results show that the uncertainty of transitioning into an anti-regime mobilization is a liability but also an asset, or even a necessity, for nationalist protests to be a credible signal at the international level. Specifically, there exists a non-monotonic (U-shaped) relationship between the probability of a protest to be an anti-regime mobilization and the probability of war. When the probability is low, nationalist protests are not costly enough, thus failing to credibly reveal information regarding the home government; the high probability, on the other hand, is likely to result in repression of all protests, forestalling them being observed as a signal. Thus, nationalist protests can only decrease the ex ante probability of war with middle levels of uncertainty. Here, nationalist protests are costly so as to allow for credible information transmission, while the home country elites are not so averse that they resort to repression. Empirically, I test the theory against original datasets on nationalist protests and state behaviors in East Asia, gathered via natural language processing of a large corpus of social media text. The paper ends with an illustration of the (in)effective signaling with the 2014 anti-China protest in Vietnam.

**Relevance to Workshop Theme:** This paper clarifies *when* and *why* nationalist protests at home influence the bargaining abroad, thus resonating well with **the theme “domestic drivers of foreign policy.”** The latest scholarship views nationalist protests as a *potential* signal in international bargaining, however, the scope conditions of nationalist protests to be a credible signal, and its overall effect on bargaining still remains unspecified. Thus, nationalist protests is not a panacea for the information problems that impede negotiated settlements, and a better understanding of the scope conditions has fundamental implications for extant theories on nationalism and foreign policies, and enduring implications for contemporary East Asian regional security.

**Resonance with GRADNAS Ethos:** Consistent with the GRADNAS approach, this paper advances the literature with both conceptual innovation and empirical rigor. A formal analysis provides greater precision and clarity of complex linkages between multiple factors, while the scope conditions generated by the model allow us to account for the inconsistent empirical evidences on the effect of nationalism documented in extant literature. Empirically, with original data on both independent variable (nationalist protests) and dependent variable (states' aggressive behavior in the South China Sea), I hope to assess the generalizability of the theoretical insights from the model on the white-hot issue: maritime disputes in the SCS.