

Dispute inflation

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Abstract

Much work has examined the phenomenon of dispute escalation, whereby the concrete measures state actors take edge them closer to war. Less attention has been devoted to the ways in which state actors' perceptions of what is at stake in a dispute can also change, with important consequences for the likelihood of conflict. This paper examines the phenomenon of dispute inflation – wherein a contest over an object or issue assumes ever greater stakes and significance for its protagonists – and identifies three different mechanisms that can generate increasing non-material stakes. The upshot is that theoretically even a minor dispute can grow into a major conflict due to swelling stakes, especially when dispute inflation spirals. To illustrate these dynamics at work, this paper looks to recent developments in the dispute between the People's Republic of China and Japan over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands.

Keywords

Emotions, dispute escalation, power transitions, security dilemma, spirals, territorial disputes, Sino-Japanese relations, Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute

Scholars of international conflict have dedicated considerable attention to the phenomenon of dispute escalation, seeking to identify what drives state actors closer to war (De Mesquita et al., 1997; Fearon, 1997; Leng, 2004). Much of this work focuses on escalatory actions, treating the stakes involved as static. Less attention has been given to the possibility that the significance imputed to a dispute may itself shift over time.¹ But this is also a key variable.

This is a paper about dispute inflation, defined as *the phenomenon in which a contest over an object or issue assumes ever greater stakes and significance for its protagonists*.

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Dispute inflation can manifest through a variety of mechanisms; this paper introduces three, each capable of generating increasing non-material stakes. The upshot is that theoretically even a minor dispute can transform into a major conflict due to swelling stakes, especially when dispute inflation begins to spiral. Dispute inflation between states does not necessarily predict conflict, but it does increase its likelihood. For what state actors see hanging in the balance of a dispute informs how much they are willing to endanger or lose in its pursuit (Diehl, 1992).

Positing dispute inflation does not negate the possibility of other significant stakes already being in play – material or otherwise. Dispute inflation simply denotes subsequent growth in a dispute's significance above and beyond its initial stakes, even where the latter are already considerable. As such, it constitutes not a competing approach to existing work, but rather an additional, complementary explanation of how disputes can become even more acute.

This piece proceeds in five parts. First, it introduces the concepts of dispute inflation and non-material stakes. Second, it outlines three potential mechanisms of non-material dispute inflation. Third, it discusses the ways in which dispute inflation can intersect with work on spirals and power shifts. Fourth, it offers an illustrative application of its approach by examining the dispute between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Japan over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. Lastly, it concludes by discussing potential future avenues of research, most importantly the possibilities for dispute deflation.

Dispute inflation and non-material stakes

Our starting point is that there already exists a dispute, defined as a situation in which two or more actors have conflicting preferences over the final disposition of a particular issue or thing, ranging anywhere from the level of import tariffs to the composition of the international system. This piece specifically addresses disputes between state actors, although the arguments below could conceivably extend to non-state actors as well.

Dispute inflation occurs when the perceived stakes in a dispute subsequently increase, and the relative significance of the dispute grows. This can have important consequences. Consider a simple model with two disputants weighing the costs and benefits of compromise and concession versus war. In this context, dispute inflation can work in several ways to tip the scales towards the latter. First, it can increase the relative value attached to the prize vis-a-vis the perceived costs of war, reducing the range of mutually acceptable solutions and making war more likely (Fearon, 1995: 404). Second, dispute inflation can increase the stakes involved in backing down, also reducing the relative cost of war. And finally, because dispute inflation by definition means that the disputants care more, it can intensify competition such that actors come to see interactions in zero-sum terms and cooperation becomes near impossible (Snidal, 1991: 702; Vasquez, 2009: 80–84).

Disputes can from their outset involve material stakes, non-material stakes, or a mix of the two. *Material stakes* denote the concrete, tangible gains an actor will enjoy from prevailing in a dispute, such as territory, wealth, strategic advantage, effective control, or just plain survival. Unquestionably, material stakes can increase over the lifetime of a dispute – for example, a disputed territory may jump in value due to newly discovered resources. But material stakes face material constraints; in contrast, the potential for

non-material inflation beyond the initial stakes of a dispute is limited only by the boundaries of human imagination and feeling.

Consequently, the primary focus of this piece is on the inflationary role of non-material stakes. Precisely, *non-material stakes*, as defined here, involve more abstract, relational, psychological, or emotional concerns. Among others, these can include pre-occupations with issues of honour or justice, worries over the psychological impact of a dispute's outcome, or the historical and emotional baggage that participants may be projecting onto their disagreement. These stakes are not tangible but can nevertheless have very real social effects. Non-material stakes – in the jargon of the field – are discursively constructed and affectively constituted; put more simply, they are spoken into existence and they speak to feeling.

To elaborate, constructivists have long argued that the shared ways actors talk of, conceive, and tell stories about their world and what is in it gives it meaning and, by extension, shapes our choices and behaviour (Krebs, 2015: 2; Wendt, 1992: 396–397). Disputes are no exception. What is understood to be at stake is importantly shaped by how actors speak about disputes, the ways they narrate the histories and relationships within which disputes are situated, and how they locate disputes within the larger stories they tell of the world and what matters in it. This is how discourse constructs disputes and their stakes.

But not all discourses are created equal. Some move us, elicit emotional reactions, are intuitively and viscerally compelling, are appealing even without being logically justifiable. Others leave us cold or disinterested. Scholars of emotion in International Relations have stressed that our preferences, desires, beliefs, and concerns are shaped by the affective, emotional, and felt dimensions of our existence (Crawford, 2009; Hall and Ross, 2015; Mercer, 2005). What matters to us and appears intuitive is importantly constituted by how we feel. In short, how we talk about and conceive of things gives them meanings; how we feel about them makes them meaningful.

Indeed, subsequent constructivist work has theorised affective and emotional dynamics as having both effects on and being effects of discourse (Hutchison and Bleiker, 2017; Koschut, 2017). Discursive constructions and narratives can speak to and evoke affective and emotional responses, express them, and become infused with them. This relationship exceeds the individual, for our affective and emotional responses reflect not only elements of our common humanity but also our internalization of socially prevalent attitudes, expectations, and logics. Consequently, we recognise, respond to, and even purposefully wield affectively laden discourses and logics made intuitive through social experience. Even when our own feelings are not moved by a discourse, we can intuit how others' might, and play to, along with, or upon this.

It is this combination of narrative, feeling, social interaction and imagination that gives rise to the salience of non-material stakes within international disputes. Non-material stakes are storied into existence; their political potency depends in no small part on their ability to socially invoke and communicate affective and emotional significance, to engage what and where actors feel.

Granted, this distinction between material and non-material stakes is one of ideal types; reality is not always so clean. An actor may perceive, for instance, non-material stakes such as troop morale or international status to be imperative for material stakes

such as the ability to defend a territory or retain allied assistance, respectively. Hence, a further distinction is necessary between the *first-order inflationary stakes* that are seen as hanging in the balance of a dispute, and potential *second-order stakes* that syllogistically – in an ‘if x, then y’ fashion – may be understood as impacted thereby. First-order non-material inflationary stakes can thus come to implicate second-order material ones, but understanding the relevance of the latter requires first theorising the non-material inflationary mechanisms responsible for the former.

Also, to be clear, the units of interest here are states. Admittedly, the individual level – that is, policymakers – might appear more amenable to analyses involving affective and emotional dynamics. Certainly, leaders and officials can be directly influenced by the felt salience of perceived non-material stakes. This is an important channel for inflation, especially when decision-making is concentrated in the hands of a few (Byman and Pollack, 2001). But perceptions and discourses of non-material stakes can also work indirectly by shaping the political environment, by motivating consensus among an influential elite or increasing perceived pressures and audience costs within the domestic public.² Crucially, not everyone need ‘feel it’ to tolerate, relay, or promulgate the spread of dispute-inflating discourses within a polity. Some may truly feel a dispute is significant. Others may outwardly go along due to perceived social, political, or emotional pressures. And others may cynically play to or up such discourses’ intuitive appeal out of political expediency or self-interest, even seek to strategically manipulate emotions (Petersen, 2011).

In fact, dispute inflation is arguably more likely when key players have incentives to cater to its dynamics. One incentive is mobilizing domestic support (Vasquez, 2009: 410). US President Harry Truman (1947), for instance, only sought aid for Turkey and Greece in 1947, but he framed his request to Congress as implicating the ‘peace of the world’. Another is international support. Seeking US backing for its war in Vietnam, France reframed its colonial conflict as a larger struggle against the feared forces of international communism (Logevall, 2010: 282–283). And a further incentive is simple self-interest, be it political entrepreneurs seeking attention, governmental departments seeking more resources, pundits seeking more ears, journalists seeking more dramatic headlines, or even merchants seeking to peddle derivative kitsch (Bang, 2017).

Still, even originally cynical foreign policy positions, with time and repetition, can become sticky, even internalised as sincere. As Snyder (1991: 31–40) has demonstrated, domestic actors need not initially believe their own rhetoric for it subsequently to guide state behaviour. Actors can also become politically entrapped by statements first made for strategic reasons, such as increasing bargaining leverage (Goddard, 2006; Schimmelfennig, 2001). Dispute inflation, once set in motion, can take on a life of its own; intentional inflation can lead to unintentional consequences (Rosenberg, 2017).

All this tells us little, however, about the precise ways in which non-material stakes can be generated during the course of a dispute. The following suggests three different potential mechanisms of non-material dispute inflation.

Mechanisms of dispute inflation

The three mechanisms introduced below are not random; they flow out of fundamental capacities we have by virtue of being thinking, feeling, and interacting actors – bluntly, human. For one, we have the capacity to acquire narrative and emotional histories,

affectively significant concerns, and sensitivities that importantly constitute who we are. But this also generates baggage – accumulated frustrations, insecurities, resentments, and complexes – that can end up implicated in the perceived stakes of a dispute. Alternately, our intuitions about the workings of the heart and mind allow us – however inaccurately – to anticipate potential psychological and emotional responses in ourselves and others; these hypothesised responses can themselves heighten what may be understood to be at stake in a dispute's outcome. Lastly, we have a basic capacity to engage in abstract thought and infuse such abstractions – like liberty, honour, or justice – with moral significance and feeling. This capacity also enables us to see grand, emotionally laden issues of principle or honour at stake in even small disagreements and burn with indignation at perceived violations.

Each of the above capacities corresponds, respectively, to one of the mechanisms of non-material dispute inflation elaborated below: projection, extrapolation, and abstraction. Granted, this is a first theoretical take; other mechanisms may possibly exist as well. But these three already offer a substantial basis for a theory of dispute inflation, and ready examples exist within international politics for each. Where feasible, I also illustrate by building upon classical rational choice games to highlight how – in no small part because these mechanisms engage intuition, feeling, and emotion – they may in cases depart from standard approaches that generally take actors as rational and preferences and stakes as fixed.

One: projection

A classic game is the 'battle of the sexes' in which a couple must decide their evening's entertainment (Luce and Raiffa, 1989 [1957]: 91). Whilst both wish to spend the evening together, as per 1950s American gender stereotypes, one wants to go to a boxing match and the other the opera. It is a conflicting interest coordination game; it consists of two actors with fixed preferences who would benefit from choosing the same option but disagree which it should be.

Now to re-imagine it slightly. Say while deliberating, one of the participants – possibly frustrated with events at work, possibly suffering a larger sense of inferiority – states accusatorily, 'Nobody ever cares about my wishes'. To this the other, nursing alternative resentments, replies, 'How dare you, all you do is take'. Suddenly, with this turn in discourse, the options have become proxies for submerged and accumulated annoyances, insecurities, and grudges within the relationship and beyond; affective dynamics are in play. The couple may be lucky to go together anywhere that evening.

This is *projection*. It denotes how disputes can become laden with the baggage of externally generated, affectively constituted concerns and sentiments. Such baggage can include any manner of accrued and intertwined discourses and feelings of anxiety, frustration, prejudice, suspicion, resentment, insecurity, and grievance. This baggage may be the product of past experiences or current circumstances, particular to a specific relationship or more diffusely related to an actor's more general situation or concerns. Untriggered, it can remain latent or diffuse. Once projected onto a dispute, however, it drastically alters the perceived stakes. A dispute can thus come to implicate much more than its ostensible object, entangling a whole range of emotional concerns and affectively laden narrative frames, rendering resolution that much more difficult.

Emotional baggage may seem something personal, not an attribute of collective actors such as states. But states can also carry their own analogous forms of emotionally salient baggage. Collective memory – in the shape of shared, emotionally laden narratives of the past – is one source of state-level baggage, especially when infused with legacies of trauma (Hutchison, 2016; Resende and Budryte, 2014) or defeat (Mock, 2011). Insecurities and frustrations encoded within fragile collective discourses of state identity – highlighted in the constructivist literature on ontological security – are another (Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi, 2020; Kinnvall and Mitzen, 2020; Zarakol, 2010). Similarly, diffuse status concerns – also the focus of an extensive literature in International Relations (Murray, 2019; Paul et al., 2014) – may further give rise to significant anxieties.

More broadly, a general affective climate – as constituted by intermingling discourses, concerns, and popular trends – can shape what state actors may project onto a dispute. Affective climates are akin to what Ringmar (2018: 39–42) describes as ‘public moods’, a social environment that ‘predisposes us to see the world in a certain fashion and to relate to it in a certain way’ by virtue of the developments and content circulating within it. A climate marked by discourses of decline and worries about the future, for instance, offers a welcome environment for inflationary responses. The prominence of more particular emotionally salient concerns – such as emerging inter-state rivalries marked with hostility and grievance – can also predispose state actors to inflate their disputes (Colaresi, 2005; Vasquez, 2009: 80–84). External situational or relational changes – to the extent they manifest in socially circulating, affectively salient discourses and concerns – can thus correlate with a propensity to dispute inflation. Projection thus allows exogenous, diffuse, and possibly even unrelated concerns to inflate the stakes of specific disputes.

In short, states possess their own analogous forms of emotionally salient baggage, and these can fuel dispute inflation on the international stage. Consider the Takeshima/Dokdo Islands dispute between South Korea and Japan. While relatively insignificant materially, the islands have been a repeated source of bilateral tensions (Bukh, 2015). A primary reason is they have become intertwined with a variety of larger resentments and frustrations, particularly on the South Korean side concerning the legacies of Japanese colonialism (Kim, 2014). As one analyst notes, ‘For South Korea, Dokdo is the reminder of its 36-year-long suffering under the Japanese occupation. Koreans consider any contest about its sovereign control over the islands to be tantamount to denying their historical memory as victims of Japanese imperialism. . .’ (Bong, 2013: 192–193). Simply, the islands have become a receptacle for more emotionally fraught concerns.

Two: extrapolation

As one classical psychology text observes, the typical person is an ‘intuitive psychologist who seeks to explain behavior and to draw inferences about actors and their environments’ (Ross, 1977: 174). State actors are no exception, often employing intuitive folk theories of psychology to forecast the impact of their behaviour on others and even themselves. What research there is has generally found intuitive predictions of emotions or psychological states – for oneself or others – to quite often be both overly confident and wrong (Dunning et al., 1990; Pollmann and Finkenauer, 2009; Wilson and Gilbert, 2005).

But regardless their accuracy, they can be an important source of additional non-material stakes.

Extrapolation denotes how the application of folk theories of psychology can result in the imaginative implication of larger, non-material stakes. The term ‘folk theory’ highlights how in many cases links between cause and effect are asserted based on affectively intuitive discourses of human psychology, which often may be uncertain or unproven. But they nevertheless speak to and drive real hopes, anxieties, and fears; arguably, this affective dimension contributes to their potency. The target of such extrapolation may be one’s own domestic constituents, other leaders, other states, even the international community as an amorphous whole. The predicted consequences can take many forms: loss of confidence, loss of morale, approbation, perceptions of weakness, and more.

Within International Relations, attention to reputation is a particularly well-studied manifestation of this phenomenon. This, in part, is because of the fixation state leaders show toward reputation (Dafoe et al., 2014: 381). Tang (2005: 35) even posits a ‘cult of reputation’ to explain ‘politicians’ persistent obsession with reputation’. Underpinning this is the folk psychological theory that others draw inferences about future behaviour based on previous behaviour – what Press (2005) labels the ‘Past Actions’ theory. In actuality, many have found reputations to play scant role in state actors’ evaluations of one another (Hopf, 1994; Mercer, 2010; Press, 2005), but as Mercer (2013) notes, ‘the belief that one’s past behavior reveals to others one’s future resolution was apparently so seductive and intuitive that it had to be true’. Significantly, although reputations are themselves non-material, actors may see them as implicating second-order material stakes as well, thus further augmenting their import. Although scholarly debate over reputations continues (Weisiger and Yarhi-Milo, 2015), what matters for our purposes is state actors believe reputations to be important. And this is but one of many such emotionally intuitive folk theories.

Others include the Cold War domino theory – according to which the loss of one state would generate fear in non-Communist states and simultaneously embolden Communist ones, setting off a chain reaction. This fed the anxieties of Cold War U.S. leaders despite lacking evidentiary grounding; indeed, the aftermath of the Vietnam War proved it hollow (Slater, 1993). A further set of folk theories concern factors that enhance or sap confidence or morale within groups such as ‘the troops’ or ‘international investors’. It is, for instance, questionable whether Nationalist morale would have collapsed had the Republic of China lost the small islands of Jinmen and Matsu to the PRC in the 1950s; such fears, however, led the United States to threaten using nuclear weapons (Chang, 1988). Also important is the ‘fear of fear’ that state actors have toward mass panic causing domestic instability (Ruby, 2012). The intuitively appealing predictions of folk psychological theories can – accurate or not – become social facts that inflate non-material stakes.

Three: abstraction

Another classic game is the ultimatum game. A first party divides a hypothetical pie in two pieces the size of their choosing – one for themselves, one for a second party. The second party then accepts or rejects that division. If the second party accepts, both receive

their respective piece of pie; if it rejects the division, however, neither receive anything. Rationalists expect that regardless how the pie is divided, the second party should always accept, for even a sliver is better than nothing. In reality, however, people often reject offers seen as too small, depriving themselves to punish the other (Camerer and Thaler, 1995; Thaler, 1988).

There is a simple reason why actors might reject an unequal division of the pie in the ultimatum game: principle. Even in such simple games, actors may also see larger, more abstract issues – such as fairness and justice – at stake (Brañas-Garza et al., 2014; Srivastava et al., 2009). Rejection in such cases thus reflects loftier concerns implicated in the interaction. ‘A matter of principle’, ‘an issue of honour’, ‘justice’ – these are relatively intangible but affectively poignant formulations that, when introduced, can greatly alter the significance of a dispute.

Abstraction upwards occurs when the stakes of a dispute become attached to grander, more abstract values or constructs, especially those with moral or normative significance. This is akin to what Vasquez (2009: 80–84) calls the creation of ‘transcendent stakes’, emerging when ‘a stake becomes virtually equated with the value in question’. These may be broad, general concepts such as liberty and justice (Welch, 1993) or more actor-specific concerns – such as honour. Opposed abstractions, such as good versus evil or right versus wrong, can also be superimposed upon disputes. Certain abstractions – such as ‘our way of life’, ‘our values’, freedom, justice, liberty, or order – may be seen as desirable in and of themselves. Others, like honour or prestige (Dafoe et al., 2014), may not only have intrinsic value, but also can have instrumental value as they shape how one is treated by others (O’Neill, 2001: 85–99). Where the instrumental utility of first-order inflationary stakes plays a role in attaining second order material ones – such as a negotiation outcome – this can further boost their perceived worth. That said, the perceived value of abstractions may also be a function of their affective potency, in that they are not simply concepts, but discursive signifiers laden with affective salience even when absent a concrete anchor.

To inject abstract stakes into a dispute, actors can elevate an intangible value or concern as under challenge, at risk, or hinging upon the contest’s outcome. Consider US President George H. W. Bush’s (1990) response to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990:

Out of these troubled times. . . a new world order—can emerge: a new era—freer from the threat of terror, stronger in the pursuit of justice, and more secure in the quest for peace. . . The test we face is great, and so are the stakes. This is the first assault on the new world that we seek. . .

The significance of the stakes Bush described far exceeded the concrete issues under contention.

Actors can also invoke abstract concerns in the course of a dispute by pointing to their wrongful violation, thus inciting indignation. Indignation describes the impulse to deprive or harm an actor as retribution for behaviour perceived as unfair, morally wrong, or unjustly injurious. Within International Relations, a variety of scholars have theorised anger, outrage, and revenge as drivers of state behaviour (Barnhart, 2021; Hall, 2017; Löwenheim and Heimann, 2008; Markwica, 2018). Noteworthy for our purposes is that

all these depend on the desire to exact retribution, punish, or inflict harm that can emerge in response to a perceived wrongful violation or injustice. The desired outcome thus becomes more than simply resolution of the issue at hand, it should also punish the violation of an abstract value, therewith even further increasing the stakes and significance of a dispute.

These are three different potential mechanisms of non-material dispute inflation. Again, others may also exist. But for clarification, traditional issue linkage, wherein actors leverage one dispute for advantage in another (Wiegand, 2011), is not a form of non-material dispute inflation. Neither is simple threat inflation, for it is not perceptions of the ability to inflict harm under discussion here. Nor is standard dispute escalation, which involves actors taking reciprocal, increasingly dangerous measures to enhance their position in a contest (De Mesquita et al., 1997; Fearon, 1997; Leng, 2004). Dispute inflation entails a change in the very understandings of what is at stake. This focus arguably has affinities with research into how disputed territory becomes perceived as more desirable or even indivisible (Goddard, 2006; Hassner, 2007; Hensel and Mitchell, 2005; Toft, 2014) or viewed in normative terms (Forsberg, 1996). But it extends beyond territorial disputes, and (as suggested below) can arise in contexts as diverse as the Vietnam and Iraq Wars.

Which precise mechanisms become triggered during a dispute – and to what magnitude – depends on circumstance and context. Correspondingly, which mechanisms are most influential or prevalent is entirely an empirical question, contingent upon the disputes and disputants under examination. Notably, none of the mechanisms outlined above are mutually exclusive. Disputes can – and often likely do – exhibit *compound inflation*, whereby multiple inflationary mechanisms are triggered simultaneously. For instance, a provocative move by one disputant may concurrently be interpreted by the other through the lens of prior grievances and frustrations (projection), as a test of its international reputation (extrapolation), and as an outrageous challenge to the rules-based order (abstraction). Multiple mountains may grow from the same molehill.

Intersections

Dispute inflation and its non-material mechanisms complement a number of existing research agendas within International Relations. Below, I outline how it intersects with two research agendas in particular: the study of spirals and the study of power shifts.

Spirals

As Tang (2009: 616) notes, a spiral is ‘a situation in which tension between two states is continuously increasing because the process is driven by a self-reinforcing mechanism’. The classic model of a spiral in International Relations is the security dilemma, which describes how the actions one state takes to improve its security leaves another more insecure (Jervis, 1978). In this model, both states have one primary, over-riding material

preference: security. But as states cannot be certain the security measures of their counterparts are purely defensive, they respond with countermeasures that generate escalatory spirals. That being, spirals can also be driven by non-material concerns; Wohlforth (2014) has theorised status dilemma spirals, whereby status-enhancing actions by one side leave another feeling less secure in its status. In his model, actors increasingly project status concerns onto their relationship as a whole, leading to greater conflict as each seeks to competitively better its status position.

Regardless which model one adopts, both focus on spirals of escalatory behaviour, in which action–reaction dynamics drive forward tensions between states. Crucially, while perceptions of the other as hostile may intensify, the basic stakes – be they security or status – remain the same. That being, spiralling escalation does not happen in a discursive or emotional vacuum (Bleiker and Hutchison, 2008). The growing insecurity and tensions that accompany a security dilemma can spawn intensifying fear and apprehension; status dilemmas, likewise, can generate diffuse anxieties, insecurities, and resentments. Both can thus give rise to affective climates conducive to dispute inflation, producing baggage that actors may project onto pre-existing disputes. The context of spiralling relationships can also increase the likelihood actors view their disputes through the lenses of larger concerns, such as reputation or honour, and thus extrapolate stakes outwards or abstract stakes upwards, respectively. As the perceived stakes grow, so too pressures for further escalatory action. Consequently, downwardly spiralling relationships can both foster and be fuelled by inflationary mechanisms.

In fact, by reorienting our analytical lens away from spirals driven by particular motives – such as security or status – to the dynamics surrounding disputes in general, it becomes possible to posit a further, broader type of spiral, the *inflationary spiral*. Inflationary spirals occur when the inflammatory rhetoric and actions accompanying dispute inflation on one side increase the stakes the other side perceives, motivating reactions to further inflationary effect. It is a condition of endogenously intensifying dispute inflation across two or more parties, in which the ostensible issues of dispute become wrapped ever more thickly in non-material concerns. To wit, say one disputant acts out of projected anxiety to strengthen its position. The other, perceiving this as an affront to its honour, reacts in a forceful manner. The original party then interprets this as a gross injustice, and further responds accordingly. And so on. These spirals can work directly, as when the inflationary framing of a dispute by one side elicits mirroring discourses and sentiments in the other. They can also work indirectly, for instance by motivating provocative escalatory behaviour or emboldening domestic political entrepreneurs to push further inflation. No one mechanism of inflation is necessary for such a spiral, and all, theoretically, are sufficient. Inflationary spirals can be asymmetrical in form, with one party, for example, extrapolating out ever greater psychological consequences while the other increasingly frames the dispute in abstract terms. Inflationary spirals can also be asymmetrical in magnitude, with a dispute inflating at a much higher rate on one side than the other. What matters is that inflation by one side begets inflation by the other, repeatedly.

In short, dispute inflation and its accompanying mechanisms can theoretically exacerbate already spiralling relationships between states, such as those driven by security or status dilemmas. Escalation and inflation are quite complementary. Shifting focus to

disputes regardless of motive, it becomes possible to theorise inflationary spirals in their own right, propelled forward by interacting inflationary mechanisms.

Power shifts

Power transitions have long been an object of International Relations scholarship (Tammen et al., 2017) and, with the rise of the PRC, have enjoyed renewed interest (Chan, 2020; Allison, 2017). Standard realist approaches have focused on the material concerns at stake, be they security (Mearsheimer, 2001) or the distribution of benefits in the system (Gilpin, 1981). Various others, however, have pointed to non-material factors: how emerging powers discursively construct their rise (Goddard, 2018; Miller, 2021), may harbour dissatisfaction with international norms and rules (Tammen et al., 2017), or resent their perceived status (Dafoe et al., 2014; Greve and Levy, 2018).

While the relevant literature is too vast to do justice here (Tammen et al., 2021), the simple point is that like spirals, power shifts do not occur in a discursive or emotional vacuum. Shifting power relations can be unsettling, giving rise to emotionally salient discourses of self-doubt, jealousy, or anxiety (Hagström, 2021; Onea, 2014) in the declining power, and ‘unhappiness and resentment’ (Paul, 2017) in the rising one, particularly where it does not feel sufficiently accommodated or recognised (Murray, 2019) – all affective climates highly conducive to inflationary projection. Moreover, states facing the uncertainties of shifting balances of power may particularly obsess over their reputation, prestige, or status (Larson and Shevchenko, 2010), becoming increasingly likely to engage in extrapolation and abstraction.

Concisely, it is not just the material *per se*, but also the discursive and emotional fall-out of perceived material changes that can matter; non-material inflationary mechanisms present further pathways through which power shifts can shape international behaviour, inclining state actors to infuse previously lesser disputes with outsized significance and volatility. Indeed, these mechanisms help bridge the theoretical relationship between diffuse perceptions of power shifts and the emergence of flashpoints resulting in increased tensions, if not war.

All said, however, the analytical centre of gravity for dispute inflation is precise, discrete disputes. From this perspective, power shifts are but one of a potential range of contextual factors that may engender conditions ripe for dispute inflation, along with emerging rivalries (Colaresi, 2005; Vasquez, 2009: 80–84) and major exogenous shocks (Hall and Ross, 2015) among others. Power shifts may encourage dispute inflation, but dispute inflation is not confined to the context of power shifts.

Dispute inflation in our time

The history of international relations offers numerous potential examples of dispute inflation. US involvement in the Vietnam War, for instance, became saturated with non-material stakes – concerns about international status, falling dominos, honour, commitment, reputation, and sacrifice (Payne, 2015). Various scholars contend the push for the 2003 Iraq War was inflated with post-9/11 anxieties and fears (Hall and Ross, 2015) and folk psychological hopes for its regional impact (Butt, 2019). Even the European debt

crisis saw Grecian–German disputes exacerbated by inflationary dynamics involving issues of status, respect, historical resentment, and fairness (Adler-Nissen, 2017).

But how to make a case for non-material dispute inflation? First, the perceived significance of the dispute in question must have increased. Important evidence is growing political salience, hardening positions, and greater willingness to incur costs, run risks, and focus attention and resources. Second, one must identify the predominant justifications for this increased significance, distinguishing between substantive causes, unsubstantiated rationales, and new inflationary logics. Substantive causes – such as increasing material stakes – need not rule out simultaneous non-material dispute inflation but do potentially lessen the latter’s explanatory power. Unsubstantiated rationales suggest ad hoc or motivated reasoning, in which case one must seek motives elsewhere. Non-material inflation is evidenced in the growing salience and prevalence of references to non-material stakes, driven by emotionally salient discourses and reasoning. A prototypical indicator of dispute inflation is where the question, ‘Why has the dispute over X become so intense?’ returns the answer, ‘Well, it may have just been about X to originally, but now it is about a lot more than that’.

For the purposes of illustration, this piece explores recent developments in the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute between Japan and the PRC. Claimed by Japan (which calls them *Senkakushotō*), the PRC (which calls them *Diàoyúdǎo*), and Taiwan (which calls them the *Diàoyútái*), the disputed features consist of five uninhabited islets and a number of minor protruding features in the East China Sea. Since 2010, they have been a particular source of tension within Sino-Japanese relations, with both sides focusing attention and resources on the issue and showing increased willingness to court risk. While all parties assert long historical claims, the actual appearance of an explicit dispute dates back half a century, when first Taiwan, then the PRC proclaimed sovereign title shortly before the United States transferred administrative control to Japan (Drifte, 2014). That said, Japan still does not officially acknowledge a dispute. And while the United States does not take a stance on the sovereignty of the islands, it has repeatedly pledged to come to Japan’s defence in the event the latter is attacked while exercising administrative control (Manyin, 2016).

Prior to 2010, the dispute had been relatively contained (Downs and Saunders, 1999; Fravel, 2010; Hall, 2019). Certainly, it was a pet issue of activists on both sides, but for the most part Tokyo and Beijing worked to keep it in check and avoid major crises. In 2008, two PRC maritime survey vessels for the first time entered within 12 nautical miles of the islands – which Japan administers as its territorial waters – raising significant concerns in Tokyo; but while Japan lodged diplomatic protests, it did not spiral into a crisis (Bush, 2010). In September 2010, however, the Japanese Coast Guard (JCG) arrested a Chinese fishing captain and took his crew into custody after his ship collided with two JCG vessels in the vicinity of the islands. Although the arrest was a political decision (Green et al., 2017: 85–90), the case was pursued by the prosecutor’s office in Naha, which a local court ruled could continue detaining the captain even after the crew was subsequently repatriated. This increasingly escalated into a major diplomatic incident as Beijing progressively applied pressure on Tokyo to release the captain, allegedly even obstructing rare earth exports to Japan (Green et al., 2017: 85–90) albeit this may have been at local initiative (Klinger, 2018: 138–139).

Tensions subsided after the prosecutor chose to release the captain, although the incident left the Japanese government under significant domestic fire for appearing weak – a situation exacerbated by a subsequent controversy over a JCG officer leaking video footage of the collision (Hagström, 2012; Smith, 2015: 209–210, 218).

Frictions emerged again in 2012, when the governor of Tokyo, Ishihara Shintaro – a well-known nationalist firebrand – made a bid to purchase three of the islands from a private owner. Seeking to pre-empt him and diffuse a potential crisis, the Japanese government also approached the owner and – over strident objections from Beijing – purchased the islands that September. Beijing reacted fiercely, cancelling a variety of planned meetings and activities, increasing its presence around the islands, and permitting widespread public protests throughout China (Weiss, 2014: 189–218), among other things. In 2013, it declared an air defence identification zone over much of the East China Sea, including the islands. While overt tensions have subsided somewhat in the interim, the situation remains far from the status quo ante. The PRC has maintained a regular pace of patrols challenging Japanese administrative control (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Japan, 2021; Mochizuki and Han, 2020). Multiple extensive accounts of the dispute already exist (Drifte, 2014; Fravel, 2016; Green et al., 2017: 66–94, 124–168; Hall, 2019; McGregor, 2017: 261–288; Sunohara, 2013; Zhang, 2016: 295–307); my purpose is not to duplicate their work here. Rather the goal is to offer an empirical illustration of dispute inflation in action.

So, what exactly is at stake in this dispute? Numerous scholars have ruled out major material stakes, dismissing the islets' economic or strategic value (Hall, 2019: 14–22; He, 2007: 171; O'Shea, 2015: 555–557; Welch, 2017). While arguably entitling their holder to a larger exclusive economic zone encompassing seabed hydrocarbon reserves, estimates of these resources have been significantly revised downward in recent years (Hall, 2019: 17–18; O'Shea, 2015: 555). Nor do these features have any particular historical or religious significance. Their relatively limited value lies in stark contrast to the risk the dispute is generating, especially as the waters and airspace around the islands have become more crowded. The islands are now a regional flashpoint with the potential to spark armed conflict between the PRC and Japan, and by extension also the United States (O'Hanlon, 2019), a scenario presently being war-gamed (Peck, 2020) and trained for (London, 2020).

Some accounts highlight domestic factors, particularly issues of political legitimacy and in-fighting (Cho and Choi, 2016; Duan, 2019; Hall, 2019: 29–32; Streich, 2019; Takeuchi, 2014). While valuable, glossed or missing in many such approaches is a theoretical accounting for why the islands suddenly became such a salient domestic political issue (Chen, 2014: 113–114). Also valuable is work placing the dispute within the context of shifting regional power relations (Pugliese and Insisa, 2016: 43–56). But this shift has been long in coming, and diffuse changes in and of themselves do not tell us how particular disputes transform into dangerous flashpoints. Such an approach also struggles to explain why the trajectory of the official relationship – while not without issues – actually appeared to be improving prior to 2010. Both sides had managed to agree to jointly exploit resources in another contested area of the East China Sea and had been working toward a 'mutually beneficial strategic relationship' (Kokubun et al., 2014: 221–231; Wan, 2016: 17–18).

In short, this dispute demonstrates a sudden increase in political salience, attention, and resources invested combined with hardening positions and a growing willingness to incur costs and run risks. Even if one suggests the islands have economic or strategic value (propositions open to question), this value has at best remained static, and both domestic and geopolitical factors – while important – do not appear to supply the entire story. A crucial – yet under-theorised, if not neglected – part of this story is the ways the dispute has featured not just escalation, but also mechanisms of inflation.

Projection

Both sides projected myriad pre-existing and external resentments, concerns, prejudices, and frustrations onto the dispute. Perhaps most prominently, the islands became infused with resentments and frustrations stemming from the longstanding ‘history problem’ (Ja: *rekishi mondai*, Ch: *lishi wèntí*) between Japan and the PRC. Previously, the history problem had manifested itself in disputes over Japanese prime ministerial visits to the controversial Yasukuni Shrine (where fourteen Class A Japanese war criminals are enshrined), the content of Japanese history textbooks, and compensation issues among other things (Rose, 2005). On the PRC side, these disputes were evidence that Japan was not sufficiently or honestly addressing its wartime legacy; but for many on the Japanese side, Beijing was perceived as manipulating history to bolster domestic legitimacy in disregard of previous Japanese apologies and levelling unfair accusations of militarism (Gustafsson, 2016; Smith, 2015: 95–96).

The islands have become an additional vessel for such sentiments, as tensions over the dispute thrust differing historical accounts into the limelight (Hall, 2019: 25–26). Beijing’s position is that the islands were – together with Taiwan – ripped away as spoils of the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895. Correspondingly, the PRC holds that ‘in accordance with the Cairo Declaration, the Potsdam Proclamation and the Japanese Instrument of Surrender, Diaoyu Dao, as affiliated islands of Taiwan, should be returned. . . to China’ (PRC State Council, 2012). Consequently, that Japan has not done so demonstrates yet again an unwillingness to reckon with its past misdeeds. In this view, Tokyo’s arguments to the contrary are simply further attempts to distort historical fact, compounding general resentments of how Japan has dealt with historical issues. As one Chinese intelligence analyst put it to the author, for the PRC, ‘Japanese territorial issues are history issues’ (Interview A, 2017). It also did not help that the 2012 purchase occurred close to the anniversary of the Japanese invasion of Manchuria (Swaine, 2013: 5).

Tokyo, however, counters that the islands were *terra nullis* when the Japanese government officially (albeit secretly) incorporated them in 1895. It also accuses Beijing of only asserting its claim after a UN report indicated rich potential hydrocarbon reserves in the vicinity (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Japan, 2016). In this view, Beijing is again the one distorting history for self-serving reasons, a longstanding source of frustration and resentment.

These sentiments and discourses intertwined with the larger baggage of the relationship. As various scholars argue, political discourses within Japan and the PRC have respectively cast each as ‘Others’ – key negative reference points within domestic political constructions of identity (Gries, 2004; Gustafsson, 2016; Hagström and Gustafsson,

2015; Suzuki, 2015, 2017). As Callahan (2010: 166) noted in 2010, ‘the image of a barbaric and militarized Japan continues to be circulated in Chinese texts as a way of building China’s national identity against Japan in the twenty-first century’. Alternately, for Japan, as Suzuki (2015: 102) notes, particularly within Japanese right-wing discourse, the PRC is portrayed as ‘an immoral and inferior state with fundamentally different values from Japan’. These sentiments are reflected in popular perceptions registered shortly before the 2010 crisis: only small minorities in either country viewed the other as peaceful, trustworthy, or altruistic (Genron NPO, 2010).

Making all this particularly acute was that in 2010, the PRC’s GDP exceeded that of Japan for the first time. As one group of Japanese scholars observed,

the position of second in the world that Japan had defended for more than forty years China snatched away. . . It was the moment in which the Sino-Japanese powershift became clear. Against this background, the incident in the waters around the Senkaku Islands that shook Sino-Japanese relations occurred. (Kokubun et al., 2014: 237)

In Japan, the incident was labelled the ‘Senkaku shock [*Senkaku shokku*]’ (Smith, 2015: 189). The outbreak of tensions brought into stark relief more diffuse fears – compounded by longstanding discourses of demographic and economic woes – surrounding Japanese decline, particularly in the face of a China perceived as an aggressive bully (Hagström, 2012: 292–294; Hall, 2019: 26–27; Wan, 2016: 66–67).

Ironically, the fact that Tokyo had first arrested and held the Chinese captain and then subsequently purchased the islands – both despite Beijing’s strong objections – meant Beijing saw Tokyo as treating its concerns with contempt, not to mention capriciously deviating from longstanding implicit understandings to shelve the dispute (Xinhua, 2013). This played to larger themes that Japan looked down on the PRC and refused to accord it respect despite its growing power (Hall, 2019, 27). As one Chinese scholar writes, ‘Japan’s problem is that it does not want to admit, does not want to face China’s rise, is arrogantly opinionated about China’s politics, economy and social development, still full of Japanese superiority theory’s “Japan-style judgement”’ (Zhu, 2018: 204). More broadly, the dispute has come to stand for China overcoming its past weakness – long a fixation of PRC nationalist discourse. As a further scholar writes, at stake in the dispute is ‘breaking out of the situation in which Japan illegally took the islands when China was weak, no longer quietly tolerating Japan’s illegal control, showing China’s rise and revival’ (Zhang, 2018: 221).

Extrapolation

Both sides have extrapolated out the psychological effects of their behaviour in this dispute to other disputes in which they are involved, attaching second order material stakes to first order concerns about reputation. As Wiegand (2015: 171) writes, there is a view that, ‘If Japan reneged on its position on the Senkaku Islands. . . this would not only demonstrate a lack of resolve, but also potentially damage Japan’s reputation in the region and international community in terms of credibility’. Similarly, Fravel (2016a: 32) and Lu (2014: 298–299) observe that Beijing saw its reputation in disputes in the

South China Sea connected to its displays of resolve in the East China Sea. As noted above, multiple scholars (Hopf, 1994; Mercer, 2010; Press, 2005) have demonstrated such psychological reasoning to likely be mistaken. But that does not mean practitioners do not continue to view the stakes of their disputes in such terms.

More crucially, for Tokyo, standing firm on the islands became implicated in preventing the PRC from seeking more. In the words of Japanese official, 'If we give them Senkaku, next it will be giving over Yonaguni Island or even the main island of Okinawa. . .' (Okada, 2010: 3). In this view, loss of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands would only further whet the PRC's appetite, resulting in a dangerous form of psychological emboldenment. Here, too, first-order non-material inflation spilled over to implicate second-order material stakes.

In fact, others extrapolated beyond the Ryukyu Islands to the very will of Japan to remain independent. Former Japanese ambassador Miyamoto Yūji (2017; Hall, 2019: 27) related:

We consider giving them up, what will they do next, does Japan really want to be a part of China, dominated by Chinese influence? . . . If Japanese lose the guts to defend the Senkaku, we become, 'Yes, I follow your orders, China, king. . .'

Tokyo governor Ishihara Shintaro stated this even more bluntly: 'before we know it, Japan could become the sixth star on China's national flag' (Hayashi, 2012). As Nagashima Akihisa (2017), the former Special Advisor to Prime Minister Noda for Foreign Affairs and National Security, described the contest over the islands, it is an 'emotional, psychological (Ja: *kanjōteki*, *shinriteki*) struggle'.

Abstraction

Both abstracted the stakes of the dispute upwards to broader, affectively laden concerns. For Beijing, because the islands are obviously Chinese, Japan's behaviour could be nothing but thievery. Correspondingly, following 2010, the *People's Daily* began frequently referring to Japan as 'stealing' (*qièqǔ*) the islands (Masuo, 2018: 17). This means there is also now a larger issue of justice at stake (Hall, 2019: 26; Welch, 2017): as Beijing states, 'Common truth stands on China's side, justice stands on China's side' (Guo Jiping, 2012). Even more broadly, Beijing has abstracted the dispute upwards to implicating the very basis of the post-war order: Japan's actions, in Xi Jinping's words, are 'plotting to reject the outcomes of the victory of the World Anti-Fascist War, challenging the post-war world order' (Foreign Ministry of the PRC, 2012).

In contrast, from Tokyo's perspective, there is an issue of fair play: Beijing's territorial claims, coming as they did only after the area was suggested to be rich with hydrocarbon reserves, are akin to '*ato dashi janken*' – cheating by entering a game of paper-rock-scissors only after the other side has shown its hand (Tomebachi, 2016: 6). Nor was Beijing playing fairly in apparently leveraging – against WTO rules – its rare earth exports for coercion, a source of much indignation. And beyond this, PRC challenges to Japanese administrative control are seen as attempts to change the status quo

with force. Tokyo now also describes the dispute as implicating a defence of the rules of the system; to quote a foreign ministry pamphlet,

Japan, from the position of defending the international order based on the rule of law according to following the international law of the San Francisco Treaty, etc., is dealing with China's challenges to the Senkaku in a calm but firm manner. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Japan, 2014)

Or, as stated by Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, 'What is important, first and foremost, is to make [Beijing] realize that they would not be able to change the rules' (*The Washington Post*, 2013). But something even more was also at stake. As a former high-ranking Japanese defence official, echoing Thucydides' motives for war, reflected, 'it is not a struggle over economic interests. . . it is not something that would affect the military balance, and so what is left is honour. . .' (Hall, 2019: 27; Yanagisawa, 2017). Or as Nagashima (2017) put it, 'both have face (*mentsu*) in play'.

Island inflation

To summarise, albeit to differing degrees, the dispute showcases various mechanisms of inflation. Given the baggage both carried, possibly the most prominent was projection. But it was not symmetrical: as Wan (2016: 68) suggests, the PRC side was more focused on the past, the Japanese side on more contemporary concerns. As Mori observes, when Beijing started 'arguing that the Diaoyu Islands "were stolen" by Japan together with Taiwan during the first Sino-Japanese war, the Senkaku Islands, which first became an issue in the 1970s, was pulled back into the 19th Century and "made historic". . .', thereby intertwining previously separate domains of the relationship (Mori, 2017: 5–6). In contrast, for the Japanese side, the incidents crystallised fears and anxieties surrounding its current status and position, both vis-a-vis Beijing as well as more broadly. Evidence of the other mechanisms of inflation also abounded, be it extrapolation to psychological consequences for Japanese national will, or abstraction upwards to honour, even the international order.

What is more, inflation was both compound and spiral. Japanese concerns about decline, for instance, were simultaneously compounded with worries about PRC emboldenment. The PRC's discourses of historical resentments simultaneously framed the dispute as involving challenges to the broader post-war order. And inflation by one side led to inflation by the other, generating spiral effects. These occurred directly, for instance, in the escalating exchange of rhetoric, accusations, and historical claims. As Pugliese and Insisa (2016: 103–127) document, each side 'mirrored' the other, leading to the 'inflation and later into the crystallization of "bubbles" of self-righteousness on both sides'. Spiral effects also worked indirectly, as inflation created domestic pressures and incentives for domestic actors to leverage the dispute to score political points, further provoking escalation and inflation (Hall, 2019). One can see this above all in the behaviour of Tokyo governor Ishihara. His bid to buy the islands – and show up the central government – triggered the second crisis; arguably it would not have happened had the dispute not been rendered politically salient by inflation in 2010. Alternatively, the outbreak of violent popular protests within China – even if stage-managed to a certain extent

by the government (Weiss, 2014: 205–215) – conceivably further bolstered inflationary pressures within the PRC. Importantly, both Abe and Xi also had incentives to subsequently play to the dispute for domestic purposes, be it to push a political agenda in Japan or shore up the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party and Xi’s position in it, respectively (Hall, 2019; O’Shea, 2015a).

Superficially, tensions may appear to have receded slightly from the level of 2012. In 2014, Abe and Xi finally met after both sides issued statements seemingly agreeing to disagree about their disagreement (Liff, 2014). Since then, there have been no further, major collisions. All the same, the dispute remains much more significant now than it was prior to 2010. While difficult to argue the dispute has unleashed a pure security dilemma – Beijing’s actions are more about enhancing claims, not security – it has set in motion an action-reaction dynamic of military build-ups and increased patrols still unfolding in the background (Liff and Ikenberry, 2014: 73). At the time of this writing, recent changes to the PRC’s coastguard law to permit the use of force have increased Japanese concerns (Tajima and Kobara, 2021), and PRC patrols around the islands appear likely to reach ‘record numbers’ this year (Feng, 2021). With Biden recently reaffirming ‘the United States’ unwavering commitment to the defense of Japan under Article 5 of our security treaty, which includes the Senkaku Islands’ (The White House, 2021), it persists as a dangerous regional flashpoint. All said, the dispute is about much more now than before, and consequently remains far from over.

Conclusion

A simple proposal drives this paper: the significance and stakes attached to a dispute can increase. This is the phenomenon of dispute inflation, a key motor of which is the expansion of the non-material stakes the protagonists perceive to be hanging in the balance. This piece presents a first cut, and more work is warranted to explore other possible mechanisms, examine the conditions conducive to the emergence and persistence of inflation, and further map its implications for domains beyond spirals and power shifts. It does, however, offer an additional example of how one can pair constructivist approaches with emerging work on emotion and affect to generate new theoretical insights (Koschut, 2017; Ross, 2006). Conceded, the case examined above – the Sino–Japanese dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands – is a relatively easy one, featuring as it does a backdrop of historical antagonism and a shifting power balance. The goal, however, has been to offer an initial, illustrative demonstration of concept, setting the stage for further refinements, elaborations, and empirical applications of the framework.

Indeed, the concept of dispute inflation can potentially – as suggested variously above – help shed light on other conflicts, not just escalating territorial disputes, but also, for instance, the dynamics that led the United States into war in Vietnam or with Iraq in 2003. Currently, we can observe dispute inflation arguably unfolding in the South China Sea between the PRC and the United States, as longstanding disagreements over maritime entitlements and interpretations of the law of the sea (Fravel, 2016b) are increasingly becoming vessels for ever-greater non-material stakes against a backdrop of shifting power relations. Both sides appear to be reciprocally projecting anxieties, frustrations, and resentments; extrapolating psychological implications for their reputations

and the broader alignment of the region; and accumulating principled reasons for indignation (Fravel and Miura, 2019; Swaine, 2012). Above all, both ostensibly are inflating the South China Sea into an arena where nothing less than the fate of the international order is perceived to be at stake (Breuer and Johnston, 2019).

Going forward, perhaps most importantly, understanding dispute inflation also can assist in theorising deflation, a task of vital policy significance, including for the Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute examined above. Logically, one can only deflate that which is inflated. Given that dispute inflation draws potency from the felt salience of the stakes in question, hypothetically anything that saps that salience – relatively or absolutely – should aid deflation. In the past, for instance, perceived non-material stakes have arguably lost their poignancy as protracted conflict induced *fatigue*, a phenomenon observable in US attitudes in the waning years of the Vietnam War (Katz, 1997). That being, for better or worse, with the Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute neither the PRC nor Japan appear close to that point yet. Alternately, disputes have been *eclipsed* by other events of greater emotional significance, as when discord between Washington and Beijing at the turn of century was overshadowed by the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 (Hall, 2012). In fact, some have posited that Beijing's growing concerns over Washington's hostility were mitigating, if not eclipsing, the significance of its disputes with Japan (Miyasaka, 2019), although presently that effect appears limited. A further means to promote deflation is by *emotionally sterilising* disputes, for example by shifting them into the realm of the technical, legal discourse of international adjudication or arbitration; this apparently worked for Indonesia and Malaysia as they dealt with the Sipadan and Ligitan territorial dispute (Wiegand et al.). But while Tokyo has intimated it would abide by a judgement should Beijing bring the case before the International Court of Justice (Genba, 2012), the domestic political risks of an adverse ruling are likely too large for Beijing to take up this offer (Drifte, 2014). While not the most satisfying, possibly the best – and currently most feasible – hope simply lies in creating conditions that would allow the emotional salience of the dispute to *subside*, giving feelings time to abate absent new provocations. Indeed, this is a solution often implied in suggestions the PRC and Japan should 'cool it' by reducing patrols, toning down public diplomacy on the issue, and bettering crisis management cooperation (Przystup and Saunders, 2013). With time, this may conceivably create space for a re-evaluation of the stakes and more co-operative solutions.

In the end, it may be that disputes are easier to inflate than deflate. But be that as it may – and it is a question for future research – this does not mean we should not do what we can to advance the latter. Obviously, diagnosing what can exacerbate an affliction is not always the same as having a cure, but it can be an important first step.

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Notes

1. A key exception being Vasquez's (2009: 80–84) excellent but brief discussion of symbolic and transcendent stakes.
2. Indeed, Fearon (1997) posits audiences would – because of non-material stakes such as honour or reputation – punish a leader who backs down.

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