Murray Scot Tanner

China Rethinks Unrest

A June 2003 dispatch in a preeminent U.S. newspaper described a "rare and short-lived demonstration" by more than 100 enraged Shanghai apartment dwellers protesting their forced eviction to make way for luxury condos. The one discernible error of the tightly researched report was its characterization of such protests as "rare." Public protest in China is now anything but, with such incidents numbering in the tens of thousands each year, far more than most foreign analysts seem to acknowledge, according to an unprecedented new wave of internal data from China's own police forces. A raft of recent police reports also indicate that protests are not only growing in number but also are increasing in size and becoming better organized.

The histories of China and other developing societies unfortunately provide no yardstick for gauging how serious a threat such levels of protest pose to the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) grip on power, let alone a basis for confidently predicting a "coming collapse" of China.[1] Social unrest has sparked a tremendous policy debate among the guardians of the state in Beijing. In their internal discussions, the analysts and officials of China's public security system are fundamentally rethinking the sources of unrest in a changing society as well as strategies for coping with it. Many among China's police now frankly concede that economic, cultural, and political changes, not enemy conspiracies, underlie this emerging crisis of order. Some security specialists even cautiously assert that, unless China undertakes serious institutional reform, neither coercion nor rapid economic growth will be sufficient to contain unrest.

As China's new leadership under General Secretary Hu Jintao struggles to find a more realistic and sophisticated strategy to manage unrest and

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strike an effective balance between reform and social control, these internal police debates will form a pivotal part of the counsel they receive. As these analyses underscore, the struggle to control unrest will force Beijing's leaders to face riskier dilemmas than at any time since the 1989 Tiananmen Square demonstrations. Experiments with less violent police tactics, economic concessions to demonstrators, and more fundamental institutional reforms all risk further encouraging protest in an increasingly restive society. Nevertheless, these challenges must be navigated if the party wants to avoid the ultimate dilemma of once again resorting to 1989-style violence or reluctantly engaging in a more fundamental renegotiation of power relations between the state and society.

Protests are increasing in number and size and are becoming better organized.

The United States also needs to rethink social unrest in China and recognize its potential systemic impact on the Sino-U.S. bilateral relationship. Underlying Beijing's emerging new diplomacy of self-confidence and international cooperation, quiet fears of instability are increasingly limiting and complicating the relationship by raising Beijing's perception of the risks involved in a full range of strategic and economic issues. Inevitably, Beijing will face major social-control crises as it struggles to find a new and hopefully less repressive strategy to ensure social order. Meanwhile, within the limits of our influence, the United States and its allies must now start crafting responses that will encourage Beijing to accelerate institutional reform rather than revert to the violence of 1989.

Protests Rising

Newly published internal statistics from China's police leadership, the Ministry of Public Security (MPS), confirm a dramatic increase in public protests, officially labeled "mass group incidents." These incidents take various forms, from peaceful small-group petitions and sit-ins to marches and rallies, labor strikes, merchant strikes, student demonstrations, ethnic unrest, and even armed fighting and riots.[2]

The official rate of increase is truly striking. Police admit to a nationwide increase of 268 percent in mass incidents from 1993 to 1999 (from 8,700 to 32,000, as shown in table 1). In not a single year during this period did unrest increase by less than 9 percent. The rate spiked upward by 25 percent and 67 percent, respectively, in the financial crisis years of 1997 and 1998 and grew by another 28 percent in 1999. China witnessed more than 30,000

Table I. 'Mass Incidents' and Economic Growth

Note:

1. Estimates for 2000 Mass Incidents estimated from nine-month figure.

Source: Official Chinese Public Security Statistics

mass incidents during January–September 2000, a rate that yields an annual projected estimate of more than 40,000 incidents and an increase of 25 percent over 1999, according to Chinese police sources cited in the Hong Kong press.[3]

Despite the unavailability of nationwide figures after 2000, all evidence indicates that unrest in China remains high to the present day, although it is unclear whether the total number of incidents has continued to increase, diminished somewhat as the economy began to recover, or declined in frequency, while increasing in size. In any case, the problem clearly remains serious. In April 2001, a widely publicized study by the CCP's Organization Department characterized mass unrest as still on the rise, although it provided no statistics. Police in one central Chinese province reported a 40 percent increase in protests during 1999–2001; in another central province, authorities declared a 35 percent increase in the first four months of 2000 compared to the same period in 1999. In the spring of 2002, although focused attention was on massive, prolonged worker demonstrations in the northeastern industrial cities of Liaoyang and Daqing, a harried Premier Zhu Rongji told visitors that his office was being flooded with hundreds of reports of labor unrest. Finally, a late September 2003 MPS press communiqué claimed that several forms of protest, including "collective petitions and road and building blockades," were "continuing to increase" nationwide.[4]

This increase has been widespread throughout China, yet the levels and rates of increase vary greatly from province to province.

Clearly, no region has been hammered harder than China's aging northeastern industrial region, where free-market reforms have badly hurt workers in inefficient state enterprises. For several years in the mid-1990s, even before the financial crisis, police in Jilin province annually confronted an average of more than 500 "relatively large-scale incidents"—those involving at least 50 protestors. These numbers, however, pale in comparison with those in Liaoning province, where protests have exploded since the mid-1990s. In a recent report, the province's public security chief claimed a stunning 9,559 incidents between January 2000 and September 2002—an average of about 290 per month, or nearly 10 per day for almost three years. Even more astonishing, these numbers reportedly represent a partial decline from those reported in 1999.[5]

Changing Protest Styles

For those concerned about China's internal stability, the raw numbers of protests are less important than an escalation in their size, level of organization, severity of demands, or degree of violence. The CCP's remarkable capacity thus far to avoid the fate of its late Leninist brethren in Europe owes much to the party's skill not only in preventing large-scale, well-organized protests with broad anti-regime demands but also in suppressing organized opposition or civil society groups that can mobilize such protests. Having absorbed the brutal lessons of the Tiananmen demonstrations, Chinese protestors throughout the mid- to late 1990s self-consciously restrained their actions. Most disgruntled citizens declined to establish permanent underground organizations that might have threatened the party. Their protests rarely included more than a few dozen people, usually from the same work unit or village. Protest tactics remained scrupulously peaceful, and demands focused on concrete local issues rather than broad systemic changes. Indeed, to avoid official wrath, many petitioners took pains to reaffirm their support for the party's central leadership, claiming that they only wanted local officials to obey Beijing's laws. Political scientist Kevin O'Brien has thoughtfully dubbed this style of protest "rightful resistance," pointing out that it not only presented little threat to CCP authority but also offered Beijing the chance to portray itself as a savior for citizens plagued by lawless, predatory, local party officials.[6]

Recent reports indicate, however, that, even though most protesters' demands remain limited and concrete, in many other ways unrest is starting to outgrow the self-restrained rightful-resistance model. The most obvious

signs are reports by security officials indicating a clear trend toward larger and larger demonstrations, many involving hundreds, thousands, or even tens of thousands of protestors.[7] During 2002–2003, the thousands of factory strikers in Liaoyang and Daqing as well as student demonstrators in Anhui province highlighted this trend. Even though the MPS claimed that police nationwide handled only 125 incidents involving more than 1,000 persons during 1999, provincial police reports make clear that these figures greatly understate the situation. In the same year, for example, the small southwestern province of Guizhou alone reported 21 incidents with more than 1,000 participants—one-sixth of the declared national total—even though Guizhou accounted for less than 1 percent of the reported 32,000 total protests nationwide. Police in coastal Fujian province reported that the number of protests in the first half of 2001 was not much higher than the number for the same period in 2000, but the number of protestors had increased by 53 percent.[8] Again, however, Liaoning's problems dwarfed those of other provinces, with police estimating that more than 863,000 citizens took part in the 9,000-plus protests that occurred between 2000 and 2002—an average of more than 90 people per incident and more than a tenfold increase in average size over previous years. Inevitably, the raw size of such incidents greatly increases the risk that they will get out of control, no matter the extent to which protest leaders try to restrain the demands and tactics of the participants.

Beijing will face major social control crises as it struggles to find a new strategy.

Chinese police and Western observers also concur that the level of organization among protestors is gradually improving. Despite determined efforts to undermine organized links, police report that many of the protests they face—indeed a majority in some places—now boast an elaborate organization, complete with designated leaders, "public spokespersons," "activists," and "underground core groups."[9] To circumvent tough laws against "illegal organizations," many of these groups reportedly piggyback on legally registered industrial associations; official trade unions; family and clan associations (especially in the countryside); and nominally apolitical social, recreational, and even athletic groups. One frustrated officer complained that local protestors now show up "having already raised funds for petition drives, hired lawyers, and invited news reporters" to the event.[10]

Increasingly, demonstrators are overcoming one of Chinese communism's signature devices for curbing dissent: the country's vast web of self-contained, cellular neighborhoods and work units (*danwei*). Historically, these

units controlled unrest both passively and actively by allowing workers and peasants little regular contact with potential sympathizers in other units. Instead, protests traditionally focused on local officials, and their demands remained manageably narrow. Security officials reinforced these obstacles to broader organization by harshly punishing efforts to link up with other units, treating these attempts as prima facie evidence of hostile intent toward CCP rule. In conversations with foreigners, disgruntled workers and peasants frequently testified to the success of this divide and rule system, stressing their careful efforts to avoid linking up.[11] Nevertheless, many recent police reports concur that linking up is becoming more common in recent years.[12] Police in the central province of Anhui, for example, reported that 11 local construction groups jointly organized a series of protests in January 2002 that blocked access roads to government offices in the provincial capital.[13]

Scholarship is reconsidering 1989's official lessons on unrest's sources and responses.

China's protestors are also proving astute learners, exhibiting impressive tactical and technical sophistication. Cellular telephones, text messaging, the Internet, and e-mail enable faster and more flexible organization. Police complain that protests now spring up more suddenly, with simultaneous, coordinated actions breaking out in distant locations and quickly overtaxing the capacity of the police to respond adequately. Displaying a keen grasp of political street theater, many protest leaders now routinely place senior citizens, women, and children in the front lines of demonstrations, thereby shaming the targets of their protests and paralyzing the police. Police frustration over this tactic is palpable, as evidenced by a recent report by two officials of the paramilitary People's Armed Police (PAP) on the Muslim protests in Xinjiang. With masterful euphemism, they complained that, "because the rioters were mixed in among ... many ethnic minority women and children, the Public Security and PAP forces were unable to adopt *appropriate measures* for handling the protest."[14]

Finally, even though Chinese police insist that the vast majority of protests have remained peaceful, violent resistance is clearly on the rise. In 1999, for example, Guizhou police reported a 42 percent increase in protests involving physical attacks on party and state officials, resulting in 17 deaths and 282 injuries. In part, this increase reflects a dramatic rise in violence generally throughout Chinese society. Police deaths in the line of duty, which averaged a remarkably low 36 per year between 1949 and 1978, have skyrocketed to 450–500 annually, several times more than the number of

police deaths in the United States, which has a far more heavily armed society. Although most police fatalities are the result of traffic accidents and ill-advised struggles with better-armed criminals, evidence suggests that protestors, too, are increasingly responding to suppression with violence.

Reevaluating Causes

In the face of a rapidly increasing number of protests, top Chinese internal security specialists and many in the police community are reassessing the causal factors behind social unrest in China as well as strategies for coping with it, embracing views that diverge markedly from the official lessons imposed after the Tiananmen demonstrations. More specifically, many are now quietly deemphasizing shopworn conspiracy theories that blame mass protests primarily on the CCP's foreign and domestic enemies, reflecting the classic Leninist insistence that social protest in a Communist country cannot just happen, it must be instigated.

In the days after the Tiananmen demonstrations, this Leninist conspiratorial worldview was typified in a report on the protests issued by Gu Linfang, the Chinese vice minister of public security who was in charge of "political security."[15] To document a conspiracy in 1989, Gu painstakingly listed dozens of allegedly nefarious contacts among protest leaders; reformist Communist officials; foreign academics; and, of course, Western and Taiwanese intelligence agencies. The vice minister railed against party reformers for coddling schemers who fomented rebellion. A Leninist to his marrow, Gu refused to concede any acceptance of what social scientists have known for decades, that whenever a society grows and changes as rapidly as China has, an increase in political protests is a normal development.

By the late 1990s, however, many analysts from the MPS's own think tanks and universities recognized that subsequent efforts to deter social unrest or limit it to very low levels were failing. They have responded with a flurry of unprecedentedly frank scholarship on social protest that reconsiders the official lessons of 1989 on the sources of protest and the best strategies for handling it. To be sure, limits remain. No security official has dared publicly to question one-party rule or to open a historical can of worms by reassessing the official verdict that the Tiananmen demonstrations themselves were a "counterrevolutionary riot." Yet, in new analyses of unrest, reliance on social science is increasingly supplanting paranoia.

Although the extent to which analysts suspect enemy instigation of protests today still differs widely, it is increasingly difficult to find analyses that even approach Gu's obsession with conspiracy. (The principal exception is the probably excessive blame heaped on the Falun Gong and Muslim sepa-

ratist organizations.) Even relatively traditional analysts list "international enemy forces" as only one among many major sources of unrest.[16] Most available police analyses now blame unrest primarily on approximately the same list of social, economic, and political forces that Western scholars invoke, implicitly relegating enemy instigation to the role of a secondary catalyst. One provincial deputy police chief, for example, rather candidly downplayed "enemy forces" in his region, noting that "there have only been a few sprouts or trends toward these, though we cannot permit ourselves to overlook them."

A powerful ideological consequence of this view is that most analysts now claim that the vast majority of protests results from disagreements "among the people" ("nonantagonistic contradictions"), not from conflicts "between the people and their enemies" ("antagonistic contradictions"). An internal MPS document prepared in 2000 reportedly made this verdict on protests official.[17] In terms of internal security strategy, this characterization typically, though not always, reduces reliance on coercion. Reflecting this judgment, since 1999 the MPS and its think tanks have adopted as the new standard phrase for protests "mass group incidents," a term whose assumption that the protestors are "the masses" suggests powerful sympathetic overtones.

The New Orthodoxy: It's the Economy, Shagua!

In lieu of conspiracy theories, most security analysts now embrace the classic economic explanations of unrest, with some even claiming that economic conflicts ultimately underlie all social protest. Like most Western analysts, Chinese analysts emphasize the problems accompanying Beijing's painful 20-year reform of its state-owned enterprises, including layoffs, unemployment, improperly withheld wages, housing allowances, health care payments, and pensions. Police experts concede that 50–80 percent of all medium- and large-sized state-owned enterprises are now in serious financial trouble, a situation that by 2001 had affected the jobs of more than 27 million workers.[18]

Surprising numbers of analysts in the public security system display an undisguised sympathy for the very worker and peasant protestors the police are supposed to suppress. In their writings, they characterize laid-off demonstrators as "exploited," "marginalized," "socially disadvantaged," "victims," and "losers" in economic competition, driven to protest by social distrust and the "heartlessness" of the free market. They frankly concede that many protestors are victims of crooked managers who drove their factories into bankruptcy through illicit dealings or who absconded with company assets.

One Shanghai analyst recently claimed that 55 percent of the protests there were attributable to illegal actions by enterprise managers.[19]

Many police experts hold a special contempt for China's increasingly unequal income distribution. They suggest, almost humorously, that, even after 25 years of market-oriented reform, China's police force remains riddled with "Communist sympathizers." Some invoke comparative development studies to claim that such widening inequality places China in a "zone of genuine danger" of instability. With undisguised judgmentalism, one provincial police report argues that inequality exacerbates unrest primarily because most citizens realize that many of China's *nouveaux riches* attained their wealth through corrupt, illegal enterprises that made "explosive profits."

Beijing may be kidding itself if it believes economic growth alone will bring unrest under control.

Beijing hopes that it can grow its way out of social unrest before it threatens the regime's survival. As former premier Zhu stated in his March 2003 valedictory, "Development is the fundamental principle, and the key to resolving all problems China is facing. We must maintain a comparatively high growth rate in our national economy." Zhu also argued that the pace of reform had to be balanced against the risks of unrest.[20]

Even the MPS's own data, however, suggests that Beijing may be kidding itself if it believes economic growth alone will bring unrest under control. The rapid spike in protests in 1997–1998 suggests that social unrest may be correlated to decelerating economic growth and rising unemployment, and the underlying sustained increase in incidents is at least consistent with long-term, persistent economic changes, such as rising inequality. Yet, declining economic growth and increasing inequality are only part of the story. The data demonstrate that unrest began rising rapidly no later than 1993–1995 when the rate of economic growth exceeded 10 percent. Protests also show a ratchet effect, remaining quite high (and continuing to rise in at least some provinces) even as the rate of economic growth revived (see figure one, above).

Moreover, stepping back from the 1993–2000 data, unrest also flared up during a period of rapid economic growth between 1986 and 1989, as double-digit inflation and corruption spawned resentment among students and workers. Thus, since 1986, social unrest has, at times, risen during periods of inflationary high growth, recession, and recovery—a serious challenge to any simple economic determinist explanation of social unrest. Apparently recognizing these inadequacies, some police analysts contend that social and

political forces are also stoking social unrest and this situation is likely to continue regardless of economic conditions.

More specifically, a few analysts attribute rising unrest to deeper shifts in China's political culture. A quarter century of gradual, progressive political reform is forging a new culture that they characterize, rather positively, as one that is more open, assertive, and even "developed." China's citizens are now simply much less willing to tolerate unjust, corrupt bureaucrats, and the population is far more willing to take complaints to the streets. In Tiananmen Square in 1989, Deng Xiaoping administered a brutal lesson in social calculus: that the risks and dangers of street protest far outweigh any potential rewards. Fifteen years later, however, many police see a new social logic gradually taking hold, with disgruntled citizens increasingly convinced that peaceful protest is significantly less dangerous and not only effective but often unavoidable as a means to win concessions. Police sources now routinely quote a popular expression: "Making a great disturbance produces a great solution. Small disturbances produce small solutions. Without a disturbance, there will be no solution."

Institutional Failure

The most far-reaching new police critiques argue that mass protests are to some extent an inevitable product of socioeconomic development, but are exacerbated when political and legal institutions fail to keep up with change. Rapid socioeconomic development causes a rapid expansion in popular economic and political demands. When citizens have not learned how to voice demands through the available political and legal channels, or if those channels are clogged or underdeveloped, frustration inevitably spills over into the streets.[21] Socioeconomic change may generate these underlying demands and clashes of social interest, but it is usually government failures that cause these contradictions to turn antagonistic and dangerous.

Although the Chinese ideological roots behind this analysis and the language used to express it reflect a moderate period in Mao's thinking of the mid-1950s, many Western scholars immediately will recognize this theory of unrest as a central theme in Samuel P. Huntington's 1968 classic, *Political Order in Changing Societies*. The similarities are not accidental, and some Chinese police analysts explicitly claim Huntington as an influence. One such analyst argues that China's increasing unrest results from "imperfect political structures" that provide inadequate avenues for voicing, aggregating, and balancing this surge in popular demands. Lacking "proper channels" to voice their demands, citizens often express them through "improper channels ... such as illegal assemblies, marches, and demonstrations."[22]

These analysts argue that the CCP and the state cannot hope to contain social unrest unless they address its institutional catalysts, including government mishandling of social tensions and bureaucrats who are corrupt, indifferent, or abusive.[23] In strikingly harsh tones, some police officials and analysts lambaste local officials and their law enforcement colleagues for their favoritism, corruption, and tendency to wring illegal fines from defenseless peasants and workers. They also blame China's badly underdeveloped legal institutions for failing to protect the unemployed and disadvantaged from business owners who exploit China's Wild West–style capitalism and illegally divert money from workers' pension and insurance funds. They emphasize that any successful strategy for controlling social unrest in China cannot and should not rely exclusively on repression by the state's law enforcement organs, no matter how professional and effective they may be. Unless coercion is combined with broader legal and democratic reforms that encourage more effective state response to popular demands, protests cannot be handled successfully. Exactly which political reforms police analysts and officials may advocate to senior party leaders in private, however, remains a tantalizing mystery. Certainly, in China's strict one-party system, none have yet dared even to mention publicly the institutional solution that Huntington himself preferred: a competitive two-party system that could peacefully integrate new groups and demands into politics.

Unless coercion is combined with reforms, protests cannot be handled successfully.

Dilemmas of Changing Strategy: From Deterrence to Containment

Regardless of their preferred explanations for the rise in protest, all Chinese police analysts accept another of Huntington's implicit insights: that a key task of security forces in a developing country is to buy time for the regime by containing protests and keeping popular demands from overwhelming the state's governing capacity before it can undertake needed political reforms. In the years immediately after Tiananmen Square, Chinese police strategies for accomplishing this goal focused on trying to deter or quickly squelch demonstrations with overwhelming force. Yet, as police shift from a strategy of deterrence and quick suppression to a more permissive strategy of containment and management, they are facing trickier dilemmas than ever.

Security leaders understand that violent tactics may help if the key goal is to deter protestors. Increasingly, though, they are now conceding that moderate levels of protest are probably inevitable and that protestors enjoy con-

siderable sympathy from the public (indeed, even the police). Once a protest has started, police risk further enraging protestors if they resort to crude, ham-fisted violence. As a result, the predominant concern of police strategists has recently shifted from how best to deter all protests to how to avoid misusing force and accidentally exacerbating popular ire.

The new goal of security forces today is to minimize popular anger through more moderate, professional policing of protests and to limit police use of violent coercive tactics to incidents of imminent mob violence, arson, looting, or attacks on key government buildings. This approach, of course, implicitly means police will allow many low-key illegal protests to continue while they try to maintain order at the scene. Police leaders increasingly discourage officers from plunging into crowds or making mass arrests and urge them instead to maintain containment, carefully gather intelligence, and wait until after crowds have dispersed before quietly detaining protest leaders. The police who handled the previously mentioned factory worker protests in Liaoyang skillfully deployed many of these tactics.[24] Some security analysts go even further, advocating that police act as go-betweens, brokering concessions by managers and government officials to protestors. Although such moderate containment tactics minimize the risk that any given protest will boil over into violence, they also risk encouraging other protests by sending average citizens the message that it is now far less risky and dangerous to take part in demonstrations.

The predominant concern of police strategists has shifted to how to avoid misusing force.

Moreover, Beijing's directives to local police on handling protests are often vague or internally contradictory, with a lot of room for local interpretation—or local error. As a result, many police quite reasonably fear that this change in tactics will trap them in paralyzing, dangerous situations, caught between angry protestors and intransigent, local party bosses demanding that the police decisively restore order. Among the best examples of these vague, contradictory rules are the principles on police use of force, dubbed the "three cautions" and the "three fears." Police are instructed to use police power, weapons, and coercive measures cautiously, but Beijing also insists that using force cautiously does not mean not using it at all. Therefore, national authorities also instruct police to overcome their "three fears": fear that they will be held responsible for botched operations, fear that the masses will surround and attack them, and fear that after the fact the police will suffer either official punishment or popular revenge. Such principles

provide little concrete guidance to local police trying to avoid punishment for being either too harsh or too soft. The history of Chinese communism is littered with disasters caused by local officials who tried vainly to balance such contradictory orders.

A favorite antiprotest tactic of many local government officials—buying off demonstrators with lump-sum payments of part of their back wages and pensions—creates enormous dilemmas for police. Some police endorse such payoffs and regard them as efforts by local officials to solve real problems for angry citizens who deserve the money anyway. These buy-offs, of course, also spare police from carrying out unpopular repressive actions. One police analyst indicates that some types of worker protests in Shanghai declined significantly after officials strengthened health care and pension guarantees. Other police officials reject such buy-offs as shortsighted, counterproductive, and even dangerous. Although buy-offs may help local officials prevent Beijing from finding out about an embarrassing local protest in their jurisdiction, the tactic creates a dangerous incentive structure and risks contagion to other areas by showing citizens that they too could win concessions by taking their complaints into the streets.

Leadership's Responses

Unfortunately, despite the significant new issues addressed by these police debates on unrest, several important and intriguing questions remain unanswered. We do not know, for example, how widespread these more sophisticated views of unrest and the strategies for dealing with it are within the public security system, especially among top police leaders and working-level members of the police force. If sympathy for worker protestors becomes strong and widely shared within the force, it could gravely undermine police morale and discipline in confronting protestors. There is, for example, strong evidence that police sympathy played a role in allowing the protests in Tiananmen Square to grow beyond control.[25] The analyses also raise questions about whether or not China's security services, notwithstanding their concern for social order, are really a unified bloc against political reform, as is often assumed in the West. As usual, the crucial unknowable remains: What advice are Beijing's security gurus privately giving top party leaders, and how might such thinking affect China's strategies for reform and domestic security?

Since becoming CCP general secretary in November 2002, Hu has not yet elaborated a clear strategy for reform and internal security. Does Hu share the hope of his predecessors that the CCP can ride out social unrest and avoid tough institutional reforms through some combination of sus-

tained economic growth, buy-offs, and tougher but more professional police forces? Alternatively, will Hu insist on implementing significant political reforms that would offer would-be protestors better legal channels for voicing dissent? There is evidence to support both interpretations. Before his accession, Hu often publicly embraced the conservative dictum espoused by Deng and Jiang Zemin—"Stability overrides everything"—but he has also made occasional cryptic calls for "new thinking" in dealing with popular tensions.[26] During the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) debacle, Hu shrewdly advocated more open flows of information and policy discussion. In September 2003, he also called for "active" but "stable" progress toward unspecified "judicial structural reforms," "village elections," and other legal and quasi-democratic reforms that could further open institutional channels for disgruntled citizens to voice their views.[27]

Hu Jintao has not yet elaborated a clear strategy for reform and internal security.

Yet, for the time being, instead of elaborating on any sort of comprehensive internal security strategy, Hu is sending disgruntled citizens the same dangerous mixed messages that his predecessors did: organizing protests is still an extremely risky undertaking, but protest itself is often rewarded with concessions. For example, in May 2003, several workers who had organized the Liaoyang protests were sentenced to long prison terms. On the other hand, in response to protests in the winter of 2003 by several thousand students in Anhui, Hu reportedly ordered local officials to meet one of their demands by stiffly punishing a driver who had killed a fellow student.

Hu sits atop an ill-defined power structure that is hardly conducive to taking risks. Despite a promising start, he is still far from consolidating his leadership over a Politburo full of Jiang's former associates, and Jiang still lurks over his shoulder as head of the CCP's Central Military Commission. It is unclear how much power Jiang still wields and how far he might permit Hu to go toward revising the highly risk-averse strategy toward unrest that the CCP has embraced since the Tiananmen demonstrations. From Hu's perspective, however, this ambiguous hierarchy must still seem eerily reminiscent of the 1980s, when Deng twice stormed out of official retirement to remove successors whom he felt were too soft on student protestors. Hu could surely strengthen his public legitimacy by seizing on a few populist reform issues, as he did with his open information policy on SARS, but even Hu's very modest calls for institutional reform are fueling rumors that there are serious disagreements between Hu and the more hard-line Jiang. As in Tiananmen Square in 1989, such popular perceptions of leadership disagree-

ment could dangerously embolden some protestors to think they have a closet ally in the Politburo. For the reflexively cautious Hu, even appearing to condone or back down before mass protests would be a very high-risk strategy.

Whether or not there are real disagreements among the leadership over handling unrest, their options may be narrowing. As these police debates demonstrate, security officials are recognizing that the old strategy of deterring and demonizing protest movements is failing. Low- to medium-intensity protest is an increasingly normal part of China's political bargaining game.[28] Many in the security forces are trying to respond to this change by forging a new safety-valve strategy of containment and management, which focuses on preventing large-scale organized opposition or violence and protecting the key cities and institutions that are essential to the regime's survival.

The erosion of repressive regimes during the 1980s and 1990s in Taiwan, Indonesia, the Philippines, South Africa, and especially South Korea suggests that such safety-valve containment strategies are neither static nor sustainable. When the regime can no longer prevent chronic, low-level demonstrations, social protest often ceases to be a safety valve that can protect the regime. Instead, protest escalates until the regime must either reassert its dominance through extreme repression or enter a prolonged renegotiation with society over more fundamental issues of power, policy, and institutional change. Ultimately, it seems likely that China's leaders will once again be forced to confront the wrenching choice of trying to re-teach the lessons of Tiananmen Square or entering into those negotiations with society. Although the police debates over institutional reform discussed above might suggest that some of Beijing's security experts have already made up their minds on that question, there is simply no way of knowing how they might respond at the height of a genuine, 1989-style social order crisis, especially if CCP leadership once again united behind a decision that claimed that violence is necessary to suppress another imaginary conspiracy.

Unrest and the Limits of the New Diplomacy

In sum, China's internal security officials are now recognizing with growing frankness the expansion of unrest in their society—not just the raw numbers of demonstrations but also their size, social scope, level of organizational sophistication, and occasionally their level of violence. Increasingly, police experts and officials are backing away from narrow Leninist interpretations and acknowledging that most protest reflects not anti-Communist conspiracies (the official claim regarding Tiananmen) but rather a largely legitimate popular reaction to genuine economic, social, and political problems in Chi-

nese society. By acknowledging both the magnitude of unrest and many of its true causes, however, China's security leaders have set themselves a much greater challenge as they seek more sophisticated strategies to contain and manage protests they can no longer entirely prevent. They also force Beijing to acknowledge more openly that an enormous array of policy issues—both domestic and foreign—have implications for China's growing social order crisis.

Relations with China are likely to become much trickier.

Because the implications of China's growing unrest cannot be limited to China, the United States and its allies would also benefit from rethinking the state of China's social unrest and particularly its widening influence on Sino-U.S. relations. For example, as a number of Western analysts have correctly observed, in the past several years China has begun to engage in a new style of diplomacy marked by greater international activism, self-confidence, and engagement, especially with selected multilateral economic and security institutions.[29] At the same time, China's pervasive fear of unrest, like a systemic illness with few obvious symptoms, has quietly insinuated itself into almost every issue in China's major bilateral and multilateral relationships and, in many ways, will set the limits on how far China can go in its new diplomacy. Unlike their colleagues in China's internal security forces, Chinese diplomatic interlocutors have been loath to concede the growing latent impact of protest on Beijing's foreign relations, probably for fear of appearing to admit that their government's legitimacy may be increasingly challenged. Yet, as unrest continues to raise the risks of major reforms and concessions, relations with China are likely to become much trickier and the recent era of good feelings between China and the United States is likely to become much more complicated.

For example, the economic theory of unrest that currently dominates in Beijing, that social stability and regime survival hinge on the CCP's ability to deliver economic growth and to save jobs, imposes a negotiating asymmetry in trade relations between China and the United States. That is to say, many economic issues that Washington might consider mere horse trading, Beijing sees as intimately related to social stability or even regime survival. Beijing's concerns lend a deadly seriousness to its handling of such issues as liberalizing renminbi exchange rates or the pace of implementing World Trade Organization (WTO) agreements that could threaten to increase unemployment in China's highly protected state-owned enterprises, particularly in the increasingly unstable northeast. Rather than risk further loss of social control by implementing systemic reforms, China can be expected to

offer quick fixes and face-saving gestures, such as the recent promise to purchase large numbers of U.S. airplanes and other exports. Beginning in the late 1990s, even before WTO accession, China's Public Security researchers began publishing hundreds of openly circulating forecasts of the industries and regions that would be hardest hit by WTO-related reforms in China as well as the likely consequences for internal security. From the standpoint of Western trade negotiators, the MPS's conclusions will constitute a virtual playbook of WTO implementation issues on which China is most likely to drag its feet. Western commercial officials would benefit from detailed analyses of these MPS studies.

Similarly, more than any other factor, fear of unemployment and domestic instability explains China's persistent unwillingness to confront the country's increasingly insolvent state banks and to open up the financial sector to foreign competition. To keep functioning, state enterprises that are operating at a loss rely on loans from state banks; as a result, perhaps 50 percent or more of these loans are now nonperforming loans. As Beijing negotiates further opening of its financial sector to foreign competition, the leadership knows that, by allowing its citizens more alternatives to keeping their savings in state banks, it risks depleting the pools of capital that underwrite both these loans and the jobs of millions of factory workers.

Fear of unrest also complicates China's full range of strategic as well as economic relations. The tremendous concentration of protests in Jilin, Liaoning, and other regions near the North Korean border ultimately means that Washington and Beijing will diverge in where they rank preferred outcomes as well as tactics in the six-party talks over North Korea's nuclear program. There is little love lost between Beijing and Pyongyang these days, and the United States and China clearly share a strong desire for negotiations leading to a nuclear-free North Korea. Whereas many U.S. officials may prefer more coercive tactics and ultimately hope for regime change in North Korea, however, Beijing can only shudder at the prospect that a collapse of North Korea might unleash even greater swarms of refugees streaming into China's most restive region. Some of Beijing's senior military analysts have openly argued that, partly because of the fear of unrest in the northeast, China should explicitly rank peace and stability on the Korean peninsula ahead of denuclearization.[30] Such scenarios even complicate Beijing's willingness to use food and fuel as levers because China must weigh the value of exerting pressure on Pyongyang against the risk of hastening its collapse. The further the United States and China get into negotiations with North Korea, the more China's fear of unrest is likely to expose deep differences in Washington's and Beijing's respective preferences.

The nexus between the U.S. war on terrorism and Beijing's struggle to repress ethno-religious dissent places Washington in an especially ticklish position. In one of the few remaining spheres in which the old conspiratorial theory of unrest clearly still predominates, Beijing's official analyses insist on treating terrorism, ethnic separatism, and extremism as a single phenomenon, refusing to concede that both violent and peaceful minority nationalists live within its borders. For the United States to gain Beijing's cooperation against real terrorism without turning a blind eye to ethnic repression, Washington must vastly improve the on-the-ground information it gathers about ethnic groups in western China and then not be afraid to draw clear distinctions for Chinese interlocutors.

China's fear of unrest may affect U.S. trade relations and the six-party talks.

Differing assumptions about social unrest also have a powerful impact on Western interpretations of Beijing's strategic buildup. One of the central debates among U.S. analysts concerns whether a CCP regime that feels threatened internally is more likely to become more cautious while confronting international security threats or resort to a Chinese version of wagging the dog, engaging in bellicose external behavior to rally nationalist support. China's modern history does not reveal many cases of initiating such "diversionary wars" at times of internal strife. At the same time, increased Taiwanese moves toward independence probably present a special case, because Beijing's concern over unrest and its high dependence on nationalist appeals for legitimacy would almost certainly make it regard concessions to Taipei as very risky.

A second debate concerns the magnitude of the burden that social unrest imposes on China's national security system and the subsequent perception of the potential China threat. Amid all the attention paid to China's rapid increase in defense expenditures, few analysts have explicitly tried to estimate what might be called the "political instability deflator," that is, what percentage of the resources that China devotes to national security (broadly defined) support increasing internal security forces, buy off disgruntled workers, keep insolvent defense factories afloat, or simply ensure the military's loyalty.

As Beijing debates the dilemmas of handling social unrest and seeks new strategies focused on managing protests rather than deterring them, China's foreign partners must prepare as well. Both the demonstrations in Tiananmen Square and Beijing's violent reaction caught the West off guard. The United States and its allies need franker and fuller discussions about the range of potential crises that CCP leaders may encounter, the way Beijing might re-

spond, and what might result, from renewed repression to reform to chronic low-level instability to state erosion. While recognizing their limited capacity to influence a regime that may see its very survival at stake, China's partners must also begin to think creatively about ways to encourage Beijing to see balanced institutional reform, rather than coercion and accusations of conspiracy, as its best response to social unrest should it flare out of control.

Notes

1. Gordon Chang, *The Coming Collapse of China* (New York: Random House, 2001).
2. The nationwide data are from a report by the Ministry of Public Security's (MPS) Guards Bureau published in a larger June 2001 collection of national and local reports on "mass incidents." See MPS Fourth Research Institute, ed., *Quntixing Shijian Yanjiu Lunweiji* (Collected research essays on mass incidents) (Beijing: Chinese People's Public Security University Press, 2001) (hereinafter MPS Fourth Research Institute essays). Unless otherwise noted, all data and commentary in this article are from this volume.
3. Xiao Tangpiao, "Ershi yu lai Dalu Nongcun de Zhengzhi Wending Zhuangkuang," *Ershiyi Shiji* (Hong Kong), October 21, 2003. The fact that Xiao reports MPS mass-incident statistics for several other years in the 1990s that are the same as the MPS Fourth Research Institute figures greatly enhances the credibility of Xiao's claim that this is the Central Political-Legal Committee's official 2000 estimate.
4. Available at www.mps.gov.cn.
5. Li Wenxi, "Development Forges New Glory," Liaoning Public Security Bureau, November 2002.
6. Kevin O'Brien, "Rightful Resistance," *World Politics* 49, no. 1 (October 1996): 31–55. See Ching Kwan Lee, "Pathways of Labor Insurgency," in *Chinese Society: Change, Conflict, and Resistance*, eds. Elizabeth Perry and Mark Selden (London and New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 2000).
7. Fu Yongkun, "Jiji Yufang, Tuoshan Chuzhi Quntixing Shijian, Quanli Weihu Shehui Wending" (Actively prevent and appropriately handle mass incidents, make full efforts to maintain social stability), *Gongan Yanjiu* (Policing studies), no. 12 (2001): 44–46; *Gongan Yanjiu* (Policing studies), no. 3 (2002): 12–13.
8. Fu, "Jiji Yufang," pp. 44–46.
9. MPS Fourth Research Institute essays, pp. 94–95.
10. Ibid, p. 287.
11. See Lee, "Pathways of Labor Insurgency."
12. Ibid., p. 287.
13. *Gongan Yanjiu*, no. 3 (2002): 12–13.
14. Zhao Jianxin and Sun Liwen, "Some Problems to Be Grasped in Handling Mass Incidents in Nationality and Religious Areas," MPS Fourth Research Institute essays, p. 318 (emphasis added).
15. Gu Linfang, "Drawing on the Turmoil and Riot to Examine Class Struggle in Socialism's Initial Stage," *Renmin Gongan* (People's public security), October 5, 1989, pp. 3–9. This article is concluded in the magazine's subsequent issue.

16. Zhang Shengqian, *Shehui Zhian Shijian Chuzhi* (Handling social order incidents) (Beijing: People's Public Security University Press, 2001), pp. 21–23.
17. See generally MPS Fourth Research Institute essays.
18. Zhang, *Shehui Zhian Shijian Chuzhi*, pp. 32–34.
19. Zhang Min, *Shanghai Gongan Gaoke Xueyuan Bao* (Shanghai Public Security Academy journal) (April 2001): 33–35.
20. Zhu Rongji, "Report on the Work of the Government," speech, March 5, 2003 (transcript in Xinhua, March 19, 2003).
21. Zhou Guangyang, MPS Fourth Research Institute essays, pp. 14–17.
22. Zhang, *Shehui Zhian Shijian Chuzhi*, pp. 24–36.
23. MPS Fourth Research Institute essays, p. 58.
24. Phillip P. Pan, "Three Chinese Workers: Jail, Betrayal and Fear," *Washington Post*, December 28, 2002, p. A1.
25. On police behavior in 1989, see Murray Scot Tanner, "The Institutional Lessons of Disaster: Reorganizing China's People's Armed Police After Tiananmen," in *The People's Liberation Army as Organization*, ed. James Mulvenon (Washington, D.C.: RAND Corp., 2002), pp. 587–635; "Chinese Bureaucratic and Leadership Battles over Public Security, 1989–1990: Dissecting an Organizational Disaster," paper presented to the Association for Asian Studies, March 1997. See also Andrew J. Nathan and Perry Link, eds., *The Tiananmen Papers* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2001) (police reports).
26. On Hu's statements, see Murray Scot Tanner "Hu Jintao's Succession: Prospects and Challenges," in *China's Leadership in the 21st Century: The Rise of the Fourth Generation*, eds. David M. Finkelstein and Maryanne Kivlehan (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2002), pp. 45–65.
27. "Hu Jintao Stresses Building 'Political Civilization' at Politburo Study Session," Global News Wire, September 30, 2003 (translation of Xinhua article).
28. For a superb study of local government manipulation of the threat of unrest, see William J. Hurst, "The Forgotten Player: Local State Strategies and the Dynamics of Chinese Laid-Off Workers Contention" (n.d.).
29. Two of the best analyses of this trend are found in Evan S. Medeiros and M. Taylor Fravel, "China's New Diplomacy," *Foreign Affairs* 82, no. 6 (November/December 2003): 22–35; David Shambaugh, "Commentary: China's New Engagement with the Region," *Asian Wall Street Journal*, February 19, 2004.
30. Xu Weidi, "Resolving the Korean Peninsula Nuclear Crisis and Moving the Korean Peninsula Out of the Cold War," *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi* (World economics and politics), September 14, 2003, pp. 59–64.