

## **China's Social Unrest Problem**

### **Testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission**

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Good morning. I want to start by thanking the Commission and its staff for inviting me back to testify as part of today's panel. I am also privileged to share this panel with Dr. Sophie Richardson and Professor Carl Minzner, two of our country's top experts on these topics, and longtime colleagues and friends from whom I have learned much over the years. Before I begin, let me also note that my testimony today represents my own personal views, and does not necessarily reflect the views of CNA, any of its corporate officers, or its sponsors.

I have been asked today to discuss the scale and trends in popular unrest in China today, the Xi Jinping leadership's policy responses and China's internal security forces, and the impact this unrest is having on China's relations with the world. In doing so, I want to emphasize the following main points:

- Although Chinese authorities have, in recent years, tried to make it harder for both foreign observers and their own security analysts to track social order trends, available data from Chinese law enforcement sources indicate that unrest in China remains at a high level after a sustained increase of about two decades.
- Many of the most prominent causes of unrest in Chinese society remain unchanged, despite the Hu Jintao leadership's pledge almost a decade ago to address these social problems build a "harmonious society." Other notable causes and forms of unrest are reportedly on the rise.
- For the Xi Jinping leadership, now in its second year in office, there is no policy objective more important than reasserting control over social order, and Xi has offered numerous policy directives, institutional reforms, and speeches directed at dealing with social order challenges. Indeed, Xi seems to be well on his way to becoming the most "hands on" Chinese Communist Party leader with respect to social order issues in decades.

- China's concerns over maintaining the Communist Party's leadership over society and dealing with internal security challenges are a major factor that helps shape its leaders' thinking about foreign and defense policies. But the impact of instability concerns on international security is complex, and defies many of the simple analytical conclusions that are often set forth by foreign analysts.

## Social Stability Problems—Levels and Causes

The true level of social unrest in China is not known with certainty outside of China—or, quite possibly, by the Chinese government. But internal Chinese law enforcement data on so-called “mass incidents”—a wide variety of protests ranging from sit-ins to strikes, marches and rallies, and even genuine riots—indicated that China had seen a sustained rapid increase in these incidents from 8,700 in 1993 to nearly 60,000 in 2003 to more than 120,000 by 2008.<sup>1</sup> In recent years the picture has been harder to track, as Chinese authorities have made it harder to obtain these data, even within their law enforcement system. The Chinese Academy of Social Science reported in 2012 that mass incidents now regularly exceeded 100,000 per year.<sup>2</sup> One government research institute analyst in 2013 cited unsourced data indicating China saw a dramatic increase in protests during 2010 and 2011, though I believe such figures must be treated with extreme caution.<sup>3</sup> By contrast, government press reports in early 2014 claimed that the government achieved equally dramatic downturns in protests during 2013, although these reports also did not provide actual statistical data measuring this decline.<sup>4</sup>

The Chinese law enforcement system's other indicators of social disorder and group-based instability, however, are more consistent with a view that China saw a continued major increase in social instability over the past decade and a half, that may have plateaued somewhat in the past 3-4 years. Cases of various forms of “social order”

<sup>1</sup> Dan Weihua, A Multilevel, Multicausal Analysis of Mass Incidents Related to Police During the Period of Social Transformation (Shehui zhuanxing qi shejing quntixing shijian de shengceng ci yuanyin fenxi; ), *Public Security Studies* (*Gongan Yanjiu*), 2010, No. 10, pp. 23-28, esp. pg. 25.

<sup>2</sup> “Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Report Says Mass Incidents in China Each Year Number in Tens of Thousands,” (社科院报告称中国每年群体性事件多达数万起) December 18, 2012, People's Daily network (Renmin Wang) Beijing, at <http://news.163.com/12/1218/11/8J0KU2R500014JB6.html>. I

<sup>3</sup> Ye Yu “An Examination of the Modern Nature of Mass Incidents,” (Quntixing shijian de xiandaixing shenshi), *Renmin Luntan*, 2013, Number 1. The author works for the Nanjing Population Management Cadres Institute. The author cites standard Chinese sources in asserting other mass incidents data, such as the claim that these incidents had reached nearly 60,000 by 2003. But the author goes on to state that “the year 2011 was six times that of 2003” (pg. 40) an assertion which would produce the astounding figure of approximately 360,000 incidents per year or about 1,000 incidents a day nationwide. The author cites no published Chinese sources on unrest statistics that are recent enough to be the source of annual data for the year 2011, so it is difficult to take these data at face value.

<sup>4</sup> “Scholar: The Political-Legal Work Conference Convened Under Central Auspices for the First Time in Recent Years” (学者:政法工作会近年首次以中央名义召开), *Xinjing Bao*, January 9, 2014, <http://zgws.xinhuanet.com/info.aspx?id=40499&typeid=128>; “Xi Jinping: Use Realistic Operations to Protect Social Fairness and Justice,” January 9, 2014, [http://www.qstheory.cn/zs/xjp/201401/t20140109\\_311072.htm](http://www.qstheory.cn/zs/xjp/201401/t20140109_311072.htm).

violations rose from 3.2 million in 1995 to 11.7 million in 2009, and increased more slowly up to 13.9 million in 2012. Formally reported cases of so-called group social order violations—categories of legal violations that include disrupting public order, creating fights and disturbances, and obstructing state officials in performance of their duty—rose more slowly from 462,000 to 631,000 during the same period.<sup>5</sup>

Many of the most prominent reported causes or sparking incidents behind these protests have remained largely unchanged over the past decade or more. Studies by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and China's official trade union federation identify bad economic conditions, unemployment, poor labor relations, wage disputes, illegal government seizure of rural land and illegal evictions of urban residents from their apartments, environmental pollution, and unfair or improper law enforcement as the major causes of unrest. These are essentially the same list of main causes that Chinese police analysts cited a decade ago, and they persist today notwithstanding numerous announced policy efforts by Beijing to rein in these problems.

Other causes and forms of unrest and instability have emerged or become more prominent in recent years, however, and have attracted the attention of Party leaders and law enforcement officials.

- Between 2006 and 2010, China saw a striking increase in cases of so-called “medical disturbance” incidents, in which patients or their family members “violently beat, threaten, or curse medical personnel,” with cases of these attacks rising 68 percent from 10,248 in 2006, to 17,243 in 2010, spurring a policy directive from the Ministries of Health and Public Security.<sup>6</sup>
- As has been widely reported in the Chinese press, China has recently suffered three incidents of multiple knife attacks at railway stations in Kunming, Urumqi, and Guangzhou. These, coupled with a string of reported attacks on government offices in Xinjiang and a flaming car attack last October in Tiananmen Square, have spurred a major reaction by Chinese leaders, who portray these as signs of a growing problem of terrorism in China, especially Uyghur separatist terrorism.<sup>7</sup>

### **The Xi Jinping Leadership's Response**

- Xi Jinping's institutional reforms and policy pronouncements on social order, law enforcement, and counterterrorism indicate that since coming to power two years

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<sup>555</sup> These data, collected by the Ministry of Public Security, were compiled from annual editions of *Policing Studies* (*Gongan Yanjiu*) and the *China Social Statistics Yearbook*.

<sup>6</sup> These national statistics and policy directives are reported in “Since Last Year 115 Medical Disturbances Occur in Nantong,” (去年以来南通共发生医闹事件115起,) date 2012-05-28, reported on the Jiangsu provincial site of the People's Daily news network, <http://js.people.com.cn/html/2012/05/28/112298.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Steven Jiang and Katie Hunt, “Five arrested in Tiananmen Square incident, deemed a terrorist attack,” *CNN*, October 30, 2013, <http://www.cnn.com/2013/10/30/world/asia/china---tiananmen---arrests/>.

ago, Xi may be well on the way to becoming the most “hands on” Party General Secretary with regard to social order issues in at least the past 35 years.

- Beginning soon after coming to office, Xi made inspection visits to People’s Armed Police units, issued numerous “important” security policy directives, and made “major” speeches to national meetings of police and judicial officials. Institutionally, Xi’s Politburo Standing Committee is the first since 2002 that does not include the Party’s head of law enforcement and security (“political-legal affairs”). By establishing a new National Security Committee with himself as Chairman, Xi appears to be the first General Secretary since the founding of the PRC in 1949 to personally head a top Party policy committee overseeing domestic security or law enforcement policy.<sup>8</sup>
- Xi Jinping’s concern with restoring social stability and strengthening the Party’s legitimacy has also been a major motivator for Xi’s high profile campaign against corruption, and last year Xi labelled corruption “an invisible wall between the Party and the masses.”<sup>9</sup> At the same time, Xi remains a Leninist who insists on the Party defining and controlling these anti-corruption efforts. Xi has shown no more tolerance than his predecessors for Chinese citizens who organize independently to fight corruption or publicly promote transparency and accountability.<sup>10</sup>
- Xi thusfar appears to be following in the footsteps of Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao in trying to keep the blame for the abuses and predations that spark unrest focused on local officials, and trying to find ways to reassert Central control over these Party officials. Xi’s political initiatives announced at last November’s Third Plenum do not enthusiastically promote some of the legal and political institutional reforms first inaugurated in the late 1980s and 1990s that once promised to strengthen citizen access, oversight, and influence (notably through elections), or to strengthen the institutional independence of courts, prosecutors, and anti-corruption investigators.<sup>11</sup>
- Xi has called upon police and judicial officials to strengthen “fairness and justice” and the “rule of law” in order to improve their dealings with the public. At the same time, he has emphasized the need to strengthen the Party’s leadership over law enforcement.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping’s general secretaries (Hu Yaobang, Zhao Ziyang, and Jiang Zemin), and Hu Jintao all left chairmanship of the Central Political-Legal Group and related security bodies to senior party security specialists such as Peng Zhen, Luo Ruiqing, Kang Sheng, Ji Dengkui, Chen Pixian, Peng Chong, Qiao Shi, Ren Jianxin, Luo Gan, and most recently Zhou Yongkang and Meng Jianzhu. It is worth noting, however, that our knowledge of leadership security structure during the leadership of Hua Guofeng—who was a former Minister of Public Security—is less detailed than these other periods.

<sup>9</sup> “Xi Jinping 22 Jan Delivers Important Speech at 2nd Plenary Meeting of 18th CDIC,” Beijing Xinhua Domestic Service in Chinese 0912 GMT 22 Jan 2013, [Report by reporters Xu Jingyue and Zhou Yingfeng: “Xi Jinping Delivers Important Speech at the Second Plenary Session of the 18th Central Discipline Inspection Commission.”]

<sup>10</sup> For an excellent discussion of Xi’s policy in this regard, see the interview with Sophie Richardson, “China is cracking down on both corrupt officials and anti-corruption activists,” *The World* (Public Radio International), April 9, 2014, <http://www.pri.org/stories/2014-04-09/china-cracking-down-both-corrupt-officials-and-anti-corruption-activists>.

<sup>11</sup> See especially Sections VIII and IX of the Party’s Decision at the 2013 Third Plenum.

<sup>12</sup> See especially Section IX of the Party’s 2013 Third Plenum Decision, as well as Xi’s April 2014 speech to the Politburo’s study session on social order and national security.

- Xi's intentions regarding the paramilitary People's Armed Police are not yet clear. The Decision adopted by the November Third Plenum called broadly for "optimizing the structure of the Armed Police forces and their command and management structures," but gave no more detail. Since the passage of the Armed Police Law in 2009, Chinese law enforcement and military officials have continued to wrestle with the issue of how much they should recentralize power over these forces away from local Party leaders, who have been accused of abusing leadership over the PAP to suppress local citizens in non-law enforcement operations.<sup>13</sup>
- One recent policy shift that I see as a significant future source of concern is China's decision to increase the carrying of and use of firearms by regular patrol police. This move has been announced in the wake of the Kunming railway stabbing incident. On March 16 the Ministry of Public Security directed cities to establish more armed police patrols, and a vice minister of Public Security has called on officers to respond more quickly to such incidents by the use of firearms.<sup>14</sup> China has a tradition of restrained deployment and use of firearms by police, and any shift from that policy raises serious questions of whether China will provide its officers with adequate training in the safe use of firearms, and establish transparent and effective methods of oversight, and after-action review of cases of police shootings.

### **The Impact of Social Order Concerns on China's Relations with the Outside World**

The Chinese leadership's concern over social unrest and maintaining the CCP's hold on power is a major background force helping to shape China's foreign and defense policies. China's foreign policy focus on encouraging continued rapid economic growth, exports, and energy security are all undergirded by the Party's belief that economic growth is the key to maintaining its hold on power and building legitimacy.

But this impact is also complex and defies some of the simple analytical characterizations that are often put forward—such as: (1) that China has little choice but to pursue a "peaceful rise" and good relations with its neighbors in order to permit itself to focus on domestic challenges; or conversely that (2) an unstable Chinese government will feel compelled to appeal to angry, populist nationalism at home by launching "diversionary conflicts" with Japan or other neighbors.

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<sup>13</sup> See Third Plenum Decision, Part 15 on National Defense and Military Reform. On Central versus local control over the People's Armed Police (PAP) and the impact of the 2009 PAP Law and its implementation, see Murray Scot Tanner, "The Impact of the 2009 People's Armed Police Law on the People's Armed Police Force," forthcoming in Susan Trevaskes, ed., *Rule of Law and Social Control in China* (London, Edward Elgar, 2014).

<sup>14</sup> China's official English language paper *The China Daily* reported that Vice Minister of Public Security Fu Zhenghua recently instructed police that "when deadly force is required, the police should eliminate the threat with one shot." Fu "urged officers to react fast and take the initiative in emergencies." "Security Beefed Up Nationwide," *China Daily* (Asia-Pacific edition) online in English, May 8, 2014, [http://www.chinadailyasia.com/news/2014-05/08/content\\_15134048.html](http://www.chinadailyasia.com/news/2014-05/08/content_15134048.html). On the MPS's March 16 directive and expanded armed patrols, see Du Qiongfang, "Gunning for Crime," *Global Times* (online edition, in English), April 28, 2014 .

China has shown, at times, an apparent need to respond to social pressure in its foreign policy, and at other times, an ability to contain unrest that might press it toward a harder foreign policy line. In 2005, 2010, and 2012, for example, anti-Japanese protests probably put pressure on Beijing in its dealings with Tokyo. But in the past six months, China appears to have shown an ability to contain anti-Japanese protest even in the face of incidents such as Prime Minister Abe's visit to the Yasukune shrine, or tensions over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, that recent history would lead us to expect would have caused more public protest. As China's economic and diplomatic power continue to grow, we have already seen signs, and can expect to see more, of Beijing using its power to pursue policies, initiatives, and operations overseas aimed at protecting its domestic stability in lands outside its borders. Looking to the future, one issue in which China's pursuit of social control appears likely to create foreign policy challenges concerns Tibet. If, as seems possible, the Dalai Lama passes away during Xi Jinping's period of leadership, any effort by Beijing to install a Beijing-selected successor, or heavy-handed efforts to suppress the Dalai Lama's followers inside China, or an insistence by Beijing that India do the same inside of its territory, will create serious challenges for China's relations with India and the United States.

The reality of the impact of social unrest on foreign policy is complex, and I welcome specific questions on this for myself and the panel.

I thank the Commission for inviting me to testify.