

TESTIMONY

Challenges to China's Internal Security Strategy

MURRAY SCOT TANNER

CT-254

February 2006

Testimony presented to the US-China Economic and Security Review
Commission on February 3, 2006

This product is part of the RAND Corporation testimony series. RAND testimonies record testimony presented by RAND associates to federal, state, or local legislative committees; government-appointed commissions and panels; and private review and oversight bodies. The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. **RAND**® is a registered trademark.



Published 2006 by the RAND Corporation
1776 Main Street, P.O. Box 2138, Santa Monica, CA 90407-2138
1200 South Hayes Street, Arlington, VA 22202-5050
201 North Craig Street, Suite 202, Pittsburgh, PA 15213-1516

RAND URL: <http://www.rand.org/>

To order RAND documents or to obtain additional information, contact
Distribution Services: Telephone: (310) 451-7002;
Fax: (310) 451-6915; Email: order@rand.org

Statement of Murray Scot Tanner¹
Senior Political Scientist
The RAND Corporation

Before the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission

February 3, 2006

Let me begin by expressing my appreciation to the Chair and the other distinguished members of the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission. It is always an honor to have the opportunity to testify before this commission.

My testimony today will briefly examine several points:

- I will begin by sketching out the key points of the Chinese government's evolving strategy to contain and manage the rising levels of protest and unrest in Chinese society.
- Next I will discuss several trends in recent reports of unrest in China—trends which suggest that Beijing is encountering serious challenges, difficulties and failures in carrying out some—though not all—of the elements of its internal security strategy.
- Finally, I will briefly address the implications of these challenges for China's future political stability.

Beijing's Evolving Internal Security Strategy

Beginning in about 1998-1999, Beijing's internal security experts launched a serious search for a more sophisticated strategy for dealing with the persistent increases in popular protest that had begun in the early 1990s. Security officials and analysts had begun to recognize that it was probably no longer possible to force protests back down to the very low rates China witnessed in the years immediately following the 1989 Beijing massacre. These security experts explicitly recognized that growing numbers of citizens had legitimate complaints about unemployment, layoffs, illegal taxes and fees, corruption, and numerous other developmental problems that China could not solve anytime soon. Consequently, their new implicit goal was to forge an internal security strategy that would permit them to effectively contain unrest, address some of its underlying economic and policy-related causes, and prevent it from becoming a major threat to the regime's stability.

¹ The opinions and conclusions expressed in this testimony are the author's alone and should not be interpreted as representing those of RAND or any of the sponsors of its research. This product is part of the RAND Corporation testimony series. RAND testimonies record testimony presented by RAND associates to federal, state, or local legislative committees; government-appointed commissions and panels; and private review and oversight bodies. The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors.

China's internal security strategy is rooted in a broader political strategy whose goals are threefold: 1) revive (or at least minimize challenges to) the popular legitimacy of the Party's Central leadership² through effective management of the economy, social order, and foreign policy; 2) respond to seething popular anger over China's political, economic and social problems and contain it from spinning out of control and causing *nationwide or regional instability*, and; 3) isolate and repress any serious potential opposition, especially *organized, foreign-backed, or ethno-religious* opposition. Beijing's goal is to reach out to the vast majority of Chinese citizens who are relatively apolitical—especially the rapidly emerging urban economic elite—and persuade them that only the Communist Party can provide them with economic growth, efficient governance, social stability and low crime rates, national unity, and international respect—to offer them, if you will, clean, responsive autocracy. At the same time, the Party wants to drive a wedge of prosperity and coercion between this enormous mainstream of average citizens and the minority who try to organize opposition, promote systemic political change, or who ascribe to heterodox religious views.

This internal security strategy has several specific elements:

1. ***Contain, Manage And Defuse Protest Incidents.*** This focus on containment and management represents an important shift from several years earlier. Just seven or eight years ago security officials still seemed to hope they could either deter or quickly suppress nearly all demonstrations and strikes. At worst, they hoped they could promptly gain control over protests by keeping them short (several hours or one day), bottled up in their original work units, villages or factories, and prevent protestors from “linking-up” with disgruntled groups from other localities. Police analysts now frequently assert that some increases in protest are inevitable in a system growing and changing as fast as China, and clearly believe that for the time being, containment and management of protest is probably the best they can aspire to.
2. ***Professionalize Police Techniques to Avoid Turning Peaceful Protest into Sustained Mass Movements or Riots.*** Police directives and training manuals urge officers to observe “three cautions”—cautiously using coercive tactics, police power, and weapons. Police must focus on suppressing protest organizers, but so long as they remain non-violent, instead of plunging in, they are directed to cordon off protests and wait until later to round up organizers.

² Throughout this testimony, such phrases as “China”, “Beijing”, and “Party Central Leadership” are often used interchangeably simply to break up monotony.

It is important to note, however, that available evidence indicates that security forces continue to use much tougher and less permissive strategies against unrest in Muslim, Tibetan and other ethnic minority regions.³

3. ***Prevent the Emergence of Any Nationwide, Regional, or Ethno-Religious Organized Opposition or Politically Active Civil Society Group.*** Dating back long before Tiananmen, security officials have been obsessed with both domestic groups and foreign NGOs that might provide an organizational backbone for sustained protest and opposition. In the past two years they have focused on preventing “color revolutions” both in China and in its authoritarian neighbors. China has redoubled efforts to quash such activist organizations, using informants and intimidation to turn organizers against each other.

4. ***Keep A Firm Grip On “Keypoint” Security Areas Vital To National Unity Or Stability.*** Beijing is, of course, the most vital of these, and security officials have publicly stated that “if the capital is stable, the country will be stable.” Other keypoints almost certainly include Shanghai and the Muslim and Tibetan regions in the West. In the past two years under Hu Jintao, there has also been a drive to restore growth and order to the three northeastern provinces (bordering North Korea and Russia), which appear to have suffered the highest rates of protest in the country since the late 1990s.

5. ***Pressure Local Party Officials to Monitor and Resolve Citizen Grievances*** before frustration spills into the streets. A key aspect of Beijing’s anti-unrest strategy has been the official claim that the vast majority of protests represent “contradictions among the people”—that is, officially legitimate complaints and conflicts of interest among average citizens who are presumed to be loyal to the CCP state. This ideological verdict indicates that at least officially, the Party claims that most of these citizen complaints should be handled through persuasion and compromise rather than repression. The view is enshrined in the official term for most protest incidents adopted in the late 1990s—*quntixing shijian*—“incidents involving groups of the masses.” As a result, Beijing places the burden on local Party and government officials to resolve these problems before they lead to serious protests, and is making this an increasingly important criterion in the evaluation, compensation, promotion or demotion of local Party officials.

³ For example, South China Morning Post, January 21, 2006 citing Xinjiang Ribao, reports that 18,000 Uyghurs were detained on a variety of national security charges in 2005. This astonishing figure, if true, would represent one in every thousand residents of Xinjiang, according to current census data.

6. ***Encourage Angry Citizens To Blame Local Officials***, rather than the Central government or the system itself, for the abuses that drive them to protest. Citizens are urged to believe that the abuses they encounter from local government are not typical of other regions or the system as a whole, and that the Center would attempt to resolve these problems if it learned of them. The reality is quite different, as Human Rights Watch recently documented in its study on the repression of legal petitioners who attempt to come to Beijing.

Beijing's Gamble

Given the wide array of complex economic, social and political problems that have stoked China's steady increases in unrest since the early 1990s, Beijing probably has no political alternative but to try to forge a more sophisticated strategy for containing unrest. In the face of so many protests by such sympathetic petitioners as elderly pensioners and hardworking peasants, the crude police tactics employed against protests in most of the 1980s and early 1990s would risk major retaliation and rioting, and could seriously jeopardize support for the regime.

At the same time, Beijing's shift to this implicitly more permissive "safety valve" approach is extremely risky—since it sends many citizens the implicit message that they may be able to protest without serious consequences—and its success depends upon developing a far more professional internal security corps nationwide, while also finding ways to compel the political system to deal with the underlying grievances of protestors. Unquestionably, Beijing is taking a very serious gamble that it can successfully contain and defuse unrest while trying to promote these nationwide reforms in both its security services and its political system.

A strategy of containing unrest suffers from at least two fundamental dilemmas:

1. Low violence containment demands a far higher level of professionalism, training, flexibility and self-discipline from local security forces nationwide, and;
2. Containment requires that local Party and government leaders facing protests respond as Beijing would have them respond—striking a very delicate balance between permissiveness and repression, compromise and firmness.

For this very reason, the strategy plays into some of the key organizational weaknesses of China's law enforcement system. The most important such weakness is its decentralized leadership system which places primary leadership over the regular public security police—the

first responders in nearly all protests—in the hands of local Communist Party Committees and governments, rather than superior-level police departments. Historically, this system has produced significant gaps from region to region in the levels of police professionalism, discipline, honesty, budgets, equipment, and personnel levels and quality. Moreover, local police forces are often forced to “serve two masters” when guidelines and directives on handling unrest issued by superior-level police departments come in conflict with the political demands of local Party leaders. Sometimes, local Party leaders prefer to defy the official strategy and suppress petitioners and protestors harshly rather than deal with their complaints—particularly when these local officials’ corruption and abuses are the cause of these complaints.⁴

Failures of Containment

Perhaps our greatest analytical challenge in monitoring unrest in China is finding ways of evaluating nationwide trends in the behavior of China’s internal security forces. Even the large number of press reports we have received in recent years represent only a tiny fraction of the overall trend in unrest. At the same time, we are not doing an adequate job of mining and sifting the large and growing volume of Chinese source materials available to us. With that disclaimer, recent reports suggest China is encountering major setbacks in implementing its strategy to contain unrest.

Use of Deadly Force. Although Tiananmen in 1989 demonstrated that massive use of deadly force can sometimes terrify protestors into abandoning their demands, Chinese police leaders and analysts are also aware that unprofessional, ham-fisted use of violence against demonstrators can often backfire, producing riots or major mass movements. Several recent reports of police killings of protestors cast obvious doubts on whether local security officials in many regions have the skills, training, and discipline to contain protests with minimal violence, and whether local Party leaders faced with major protests are willing to show the restraint and responsiveness that Beijing has, at least officially, called for.

- In a widely reported case last month, police suppressing a protest in the southeastern village of Panlong allegedly beat a teenage girl to death with stun guns or batons. Officials reportedly ordered her quick burial, and offered the hard-to-believe official claim that this 13 year-old had died naturally of a heart attack.

⁴ Of course, none of this analysis is intended to deny the possibility that abuses committed against some protestors is the result of decisions endorsed by superior-level police departments as well.

- In December, Police in Dongzhou reportedly shot to death approximately 20 demonstrators protesting the seizure of land to build a power plant. This incident merits much more detailed investigation, but Western press interviews with Dongzhou residents suggest that police commanders, faced with an angry and possibly violent crowd, panicked and allowed their forces to open fire. Highly contradictory official press reports released several days later illustrated the dilemmas Beijing faces in handling unrest: they noted that a police commander had been detained for the violence, but also insisted that protest leaders, in effect, “had it coming”—having encouraged such extensive violence (hurling bricks and small explosives) that police were driven beyond the point of self-control.

Employment of Thugs. Recent press reports suggest that a large numbers of localities are also relying on a wide array of semi- and unprofessional forces to suppress dissent and terrorize petition leaders. These include “contract police officers” (non-civil service police which the MPS has tried for years to phase out), citizen joint defense teams, criminal gangs, thugs, and unemployed youth. Among the obvious appeals of such forces are their lower wages and the “deniability” they provide to local government officials when they commit illegal abuses against dissidents. These forces have, in particular, been used to attack protest organizers, their advisors and attorneys. Among the most publicized examples concerned defense attorney Gao Zhisheng, who last month reported that a car he believes belongs to security officials attempted to run him down.

Prolonged Protests and Failure to Resolve Fundamental Causes. Both police analyses and reports by foreigners concur that the number of prolonged, continuous (*lianxu xing*) local protest movements are increasing, with recurrent demonstrations lasting three or six months no longer uncommon at all. This willingness of petitioners to continue their demonstrations each day for months at a time underscores dramatically the failure of local government officials and economic managers either to reach adequate compromise solutions with the protestors, or to intimidate them into submission. In Dongzhou, for example, small-scale protests against the land seizures had been continuing for between six months and a year, according to various sources, before the major demonstration at which police opened fire. Over this period petitioners had persisted despite multiple tear-gassings and repeated detention of the protest leaders. Fundamentally, the fact that the protests reached the stage that police cracked down on them must be seen as a major failure of the local political system to reach a solution with petitioners that was even adequately enforceable.

Signs of Increasing Organization Among Protestors. Police analysts have noted for several years an increase in the level of small-scale organization and coordination among protestors—although it must be noted that China is still very far from having any nationwide or regional independent organization that could begin to challenge the CCP. Security analysts note the increasing use of “flash” messaging to coordinate demonstrations. Among the most interesting and curious developments of late has been the emergence of a cottage industry of itinerant lawyers and petition specialists who travel the country advising disgruntled citizens on how to use China’s legal petition system.

Increased Willingness of Protestors to Resist. From the Party’s perspective, few trends can appear more ominous than the apparently increasing willingness of protestors to resist government suppression efforts, sometimes with violence.

- There are signs that peaceful resistance is rising, though such trends are hard to monitor. Some dissidents have circumvented efforts to censor Internet discussions of the Panlong case by discussing a classic story of another young girl slain by former Nationalist Government troops. Others have posted messages bearing witness to the Dongzhou killings simply saying, “I know.”
- In Zhejiang province last April police tried to suppress elderly demonstrators calling for the closure of several chemical factories they claimed were killing crops, causing stillbirths, and turning local water “the colour of soy sauce.” After reports that one of two of the women had been killed in the raid, demonstrators and local citizens rioted, injuring up to 50 police.
- Violent attacks against police officers, extremely rare during the 1950s and early 1960s, are now far more common. In the past 15 years the number of Chinese police slain in the line of duty has grown up sharply, from fewer than 100 per year in the late 1980s-early 1990s to more than 400-500 per year over the past decade. Of the more than 7,000 police slain since 1990, nearly 1,000 reportedly died as the result of deliberate violent attacks. Between 2001 and 2003 nearly 3,500 officers were wounded or slain as the result of being attacked by crowds or gangs. Although no precise figure is available on how many of those injured by crowds were policing protests at the time, police sources characterize this as an “especially prominent” cause of injury and death.

Implications for China

An overall assessment of China's efforts to enforce its internal security strategy yields a very mixed picture. Beijing has been highly successful in maintaining the stability of its keypoint areas such as Beijing, Shanghai and the Northwest, and 25 years after the rise of Solidarity, China has still prevented the emergence of any remotely similar organizational threat to the Communist Party's leadership. These two successes alone, plus the apparent lack of factional divisions within the current leadership, go along way for accounting for CCP's success in staying in power.

But Western analysts must examine much more closely the success indicators for China's effort to forge a sophisticated new internal security strategy. The progress toward professionalizing police handling of protest has been much more uneven from province to province, and signs of failure to contain unrest with minimal violence are widespread. There is also precious little evidence that Beijing has succeeded in alleviating the economic and policy causes of unrest through efforts to clean up or restrain corrupt local governments. There is, however, ample evidence of protestors sustaining their protests for long periods of time even in the face of repression, as there are cases of serious resistance to security forces. If these trends continue—and if figures on overall protests continue to rise in 2005-2006—the most likely scenario is one in which the CCP government stays in national control, but must increasingly cope with pockets of chronic local or regional unrest. If local governments neither cope well with their corruption and other problems and also lag behind in professionalizing police, incidents such as occurred in Dongzhou, Danlong, and Zhejiang are likely to become more commonplace, and could even become rallying cries for larger protest movements in the future.