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Hearing on Stability in China: Lessons from Tiananmen and Implications for the United States<sup>1</sup>  
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Members of the Commission: Good morning and thank you for the opportunity to speak at this hearing to discuss the issue of stability in China.

As we approach the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1989 Tiananmen protests, social unrest and its threat to political stability remain a central concern in the People's Republic of China (PRC). This trend is marked by the following recent developments: the rising number of mass incidents reported by China's Public Security Ministry, which have increased from 10,000 in 1994 to 90,000 in 2010; the frequent references to social stability in official statements by Presidents Jiang, Hu and Xi; and the efforts by the central leadership to develop an elaborate and well-funded nationwide stability maintenance system.<sup>2</sup> Social unrest is a consideration that factors strongly into Beijing's decision-making over domestic and foreign policies and will almost certainly impact China's prospects for national development for years to come. As such, this testimony will address the following issues:

1. The social, economic and political drivers of unrest before and after 1989
2. Patterns of popular contention in contemporary China
3. The state as a shaper of popular contention
4. Implications for the United States

### **Social, Economic and Political Drivers of Unrest**

Upon the initiation of the Reform and Opening up Policy in the late 1970s and 80s, the People's Republic of China (PRC) incrementally relaxed control over the centrally planned economy, unleashing market forces that have brought rapid economic growth and dynamic change to Chinese society.

Growth, however, has come with consequences. The transition towards a market economy resulted in uncertain job prospects, rising inflation, a widening gap between the rich and poor, and growing corruption within the ranks of the Chinese Communist Party (CPC). Following the death of Hu Yaobang in 1989, these public concerns boiled to the surface when students gathered in Tiananmen Square to commemorate the reformist leader and voice their frustrations with the party. Their gathering soon expanded into a demonstration involving as many as one million participants in Beijing, inspiring hundreds of supportive protests throughout the country, and generating calls for serious political reform. Drawing intense

international criticism, the national leadership declared martial law and forcefully cracked down on the protestors, killing an unknown number, and purged the party leadership of reformist leaders such as Zhao Ziyang, deemed more sympathetic to the demands of the protesters.

Since 1989, China has not witnessed another nationwide protest on the scale of the Tiananmen protests. However, many of the social, economic and political drivers of unrest in the late 1980s have persisted to the present day, inspiring tens of thousands of localized protests each year and highlighting the continual threat of social instability. These primary factors include employment insecurity, inequality and official corruption.

### *Employment Insecurity*

Since the initiation of market reform, Chinese leaders have incrementally deconstructed the Maoist era “iron rice bowl” – the guaranteed employment, benefits and pensions associated with employment in the planned economy. Particularly since “deepening of reform” in the 1990s, the “losers” of reform, including former SOE workers, pensioners, and rural farmers, have faced previously unknown levels of economic insecurity. Even those who have successfully found employment in growing sectors of the economy have discovered that these positions are often uncertain, casual positions and do not guarantee reliable, long term incomes or benefits. China’s labor market is poorly regulated, and employers have frequently laid off workers, cut or withheld wage with little prior notice, leading to tensions and unrest on many worksites.

Those without employment have faced the greatest struggles. While official figures in China have indicated that unemployment has remain at the low rate of 4.1%,<sup>3</sup> household surveys indicate that actual unemployment is closer to 8%.<sup>4</sup> Of particular concern to the party, unemployment has heavily impacted young workers between the age of 16 and 30. Moreover, job creation in recent years has not met the demands of a growing number of college graduates. The number of graduates unable to find work increased from 750,000 in 2003 to 2 million (or 32% of the total) in 2009.<sup>5</sup> Economic hardship has been a central issue of many protests in recent years; and is particularly noteworthy when it impacts the educated youth – the same demographic who served as the foot soldiers of major protests at Tiananmen in 1989 and the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011 and 2012. In this vein, we should pay close attention to short-term fluctuations in China’s economic conditions. Research suggests that a sudden downward drop in economic activity – even after decades of positive growth – can lead to politically destabilizing explosions of social unrest.<sup>6</sup>

### *Inequality*

Income distribution has become a source of social tension and a leading concern for officials in China.<sup>7</sup> The country’s rising Gini coefficient from 0.30 in 1988 of 0.47 in 2013 indicates that socioeconomic inequality has widened dramatically during the deepening of economic reforms from the mid-1990s to early 2000s.<sup>8</sup> At a time in which a record 1.1 million Chinese have become millionaires, many of the poorest citizens have experienced little improvement in their

living standards.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, a 2004 household survey revealed that 71.7% of Chinese respondents agreed with the assessment that in contemporary China, the “rich get richer, [while the] poor get poorer.”<sup>10</sup> Such widely held sentiments can serve as powerful drivers of unrest - even in a context of overall economic growth. Individuals who have seen rising incomes during the three decades of market reform can feel a sense of “relative deprivation” – perceiving that their living standards are actually declining as they observe others advancing faster and further than themselves. In present day China, expanding inequality has created a phenomenon in which not only the poorest segments of society but also the rising middle class perceive that wealth is not being distributed fairly.

### *Official Corruption*

Corruption has also been a growing problem in China over the last thirty years. The 2013 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), ranked China 80th out of 175 countries in terms of perceived public sector corruption.<sup>11</sup> According to the Pew Forum, 78% of Chinese considered corrupt officials to be either a “very” or “moderately big” problem.<sup>12</sup> President Xi’s recent anti-corruption has been more extensive than initially anticipated, involving over 180,000 officials prosecuted or punished, including officers from both the military and police forces and some high-ranking national-level officials. However, the crackdown has mostly focused on lower ranking officials and factional rivals of the president, and the longer term effects of the campaign on party corruption have yet to be determined.<sup>13</sup> Compounding the issue, citizens on social media have generated increase awareness of the problem, exposing local officials – such as Yang Dacai or “Brother Watch” – who have misused their offices to accumulate personal wealth. The popular perception that corruption is pervasive among party cadres has encouraged citizens to frame their grievances through a lens of injustice – their rights having been violated by a cadre of officials who do not play by their own rules. This has created conditions for spontaneous, often highly combustible expressions of public outrage in response incidents of official abuse.

### **Patterns of Popular Contention in Contemporary China**

Following the crackdown at Tiananmen in 1989, popular contention has reemerged in a variety of forms in Chinese society, which can be categorized as the following: ethno-religious challengers, political dissidents, and parochial protests.

#### *Ethno-Religious Challengers*

Popular dissent involving ethnic or religious concerns is heavily repressed in China. Ethnic challenges are treated as threats to the territorial integrity of the state and granted little political space. State officials also view religious movements with large memberships and high levels of organization as threatening to social stability and the party’s grip on power. Consequently, even nonviolent demonstrations involving ethnically or religiously framed grievances face harsh crackdowns by the authorities.

The Dalai Lama, who advocates nonviolence and greater cultural and religious autonomy for Tibet, is described as a violent separatist in official statements and the media. Demonstrations by Tibetans are quickly and forcefully silenced by internal security forces – as occurred during a 2008 observance of Tibetan Uprising Day that then spiraled into violent ethnic rioting. Facing a growing influx of Han Chinese in Lhasa and other traditionally Tibetan communities and limited in their ability to otherwise voice their concerns, some Tibetans have resorted to extreme expressions of opposition to Chinese rule, marked by around 125 self-immolations from 2009 to the present.

The Uyghurs, a large Turkic Muslim minority concentrated in the northwest province of Xinjiang, have also struggled to find channels to voice their discontent. Like Tibetans, Uyghurs have seen a growing in-migration of Han Chinese into their traditional homeland and heavy restrictions on their ability to maintain their culture, religion and language. Lacking a prominent overseas leader with the notoriety and influence of the Dalai Lama, Uyghur resistance to Chinese rule has been more violent and less organized than Tibetan dissent. In 2009, news of the killing of two Uyghur migrant workers in toy factory in Guangdong spread via social media to Xinjiang, triggering violent ethnic clashes between Uyghur and Han residents that resulted in nearly 200 deaths, a yearlong Internet blackout in Xinjiang, and the deployment of a heavily military force throughout the region.<sup>14</sup> In recent months, Uyghur separatists associated with the East Turkestan Islamic Movement have been connected to deadly attacks at Beijing's Tiananmen Square and railway stations in Kunming, Guilin, Urumqi and Guangzhou. In recent decades, Beijing's response to such terrorist attacks has been to couple ramped up development funds with "strike hard" campaigns that even further limit political expression within Xinjiang, often exacerbating existing ethnic tensions.

Officially, religious organizations are required to register with one of China's five recognized patriotic associations. In practice, the state has tolerated the growth of unofficial religious organizations, such as "house churches," which often operate in plain sight. However, such organizations operate under conditions of legal uncertainty and can face sudden crackdowns if they are deemed threatening to social stability. In 1999, Falun Dafa, a rapidly growing religious movement with millions of adherents staged a silent, 10,000 person strong demonstration on Tiananmen Square. The organizational capacity, popularity and pervasiveness of the movement within the CPC itself, prompted an expansive state crackdown involving mass arrests, torture and imprisonment in labor camps. As suggested by these cases, protest actors who frame their grievances in religious or ethnic terms are given little political space to operate and face heavy state repression.

### *Political Dissidents*

The situation is different for China's political dissidents. The country has a long tradition of dissident intellectuals who have voiced challenges to those in power. In the last three decades, an educated group of scholars, teachers and students has raised sensitive and political issues - defending individual rights and advocating for political reform.<sup>15</sup> These dissidents have preferred less confrontational tactics, writing open letters, taking legal actions and delivering

public petitions to government offices.<sup>16</sup> While they have supported causes that might have wider public appeal, such as workers' rights, dissident intellectuals have generally functioned in isolation from the more numerous and often more confrontational everyday resisters. Some dissidents, such as imprisoned 2010 Nobel Peace Prize recipient, Liu Xiaobo, and exiled legal activist, Chen Guangcheng, have received international notoriety but are largely unknown among regular Chinese citizens. While granted some freedom to voice their views, dissents operate under close official scrutiny, and face harassment, arrest and prosecution when they touch on controversial subjects or attract larger followings, such as occurred with Liu Xiaobo's arrest after his participation in the Charter 08 manifesto.

### *Parochial Protests*

The most pervasive form of public dissent in China is everyday resistance, which can also be labeled as "parochial" or "localized" unrest. These actions are: framed around material and issue-specific grievances, lack broad and coordinated coalitions of social actors who are based in diverse societal and economic sectors and geographic localities, and target particular local officials. These should be distinguished from "national protest movements" that are framed in general and inclusive terms that incorporate outside groups, coordinated across many previously unconnected sites and social actors, and united against a single unifying target, such as a national government or leader.<sup>17</sup>

In contemporary China, parochial protests are commonplace, whereas national protest movements have been absent. The participation of various social groups in parochial protests has waxed and waned over the last three decades. Since the early 1990s, China has seen urban SOE workers emerge as the leading force behind parochial protests. These workers have fought back against layoffs, reductions in compensation, pensions and other benefits, and abuse at the hands of corrupt managers. Second, urban residents have organized often highly confrontational protests against forced land seizures carried out by local governments and developers. Finally, rural villagers have carried out large numbers of protests against excessive taxation, land seizures and abuse by local officials.<sup>18</sup> Since the mid-2000s, new protest actors have emerged: migrant workers in foreign-direct investment (FDI) firms, white-collar workers, and students. These new groups are motivated by a range of grievances: cadre corruption and malfeasance, excessive taxation and fees, illegal or undercompensated land seizures, environmental pollution, and irregularities in local elections.<sup>19</sup>

Critically, because China's parochial protests are fragmented and uncoordinated on a national scale, officials can deal with them on a case-by-case basis, extending concessions or applying repression with little risk that they will expand geographically or to other social sectors. Were these parochial protests to achieve coordination across social and economic classes, they would present an existential threat to the survival of the regime.

### **The State as a Shaper of Popular Contention**

As previously noted, since 1989, social unrest in China has continued persist but no national protest movement has yet emerged. China has continued to maintain brisk economic growth as well as political stability. In many respects, this has confounded the initial expectations of scholarship in the wake of the Tiananmen incident, when China's unreformed single-party political system seemed unlikely to meet the demands and aspirations of a dynamic and rapidly changing society. The regime had bought time by applying force against its own people but was unlikely to meet the needs of a dynamic, complex society or to survive long into the future.

However, beneath the surface of continued CPC rule, China's political order *has* evolved, transforming the opportunities available to popular challengers, and thus providing political space for limited, parochial forms of unrest while inhibiting the development of national, regime-threatening forms of popular contention. These transformations have included the development of legal channels for voicing dissent, the reform and expansion of the internal security forces, the norm-bound process for cadre promotion and retirement, and the ongoing decentralization of the state apparatus.

### *Legal Channels*

When in disputes with the state, citizens may use the courts to pursue legal actions or file petitions to government officials and offices. Despite improvements to the courts in recent decades, aggrieved citizens nevertheless often lack the resources and knowhow needed to conduct lawsuits against the state. There is also little confidence in the impartiality and professionalism of the courts, limiting their ability to serve as vehicles for channeling public dissent.

The most commonly used method for voicing complaints from the 1950s to the present has been the presenting of petitions to officials. In 2005, over 600,000 petitions were presented to the central government, and over 13 million petitions were presented to complaint agencies at all levels of the government.<sup>20</sup> While frequently presented to officials, petitions have a very low rate of success. A 2005 survey of petitioners in Beijing found that less than 1% of all petitions resulted in a desired outcome.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, citizens attempting to travel to Beijing to petition the central government directly have often been intercepted by local officials and confined to unofficial "black jails" located throughout the city. In April 2014, central officials formally forbade outsiders from submitting petitions to the capital, stating that petitioners should lodge complaints with their own local governments or online.<sup>22</sup> As a result of their low levels of success in pursuing grievance through official channels, citizens have often escalated their efforts, taking illegal, dangerous and disruptive actions. These have included demonstrations, strikes, riots or attacks on government officials or property. The intention of these actions has often been to draw the attention of central leaders, the media, or fellow citizens, putting pressure on local officials to take desired actions.

### *Internal Security Forces*

Since 1989, Beijing has also reformed and upgraded its internal security apparatus, which centers on the People's Armed Police (PAP), a paramilitary organization jointly operated by the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) and the People's Liberation Army (PLA). Its primary mission is addressing the "quelling of sudden incidents" of social unrest.<sup>23</sup> The PAP is deployed at provincial and local-levels of government, its units conducting joint patrols with civilian police officers. Because of their special training for pacifying riots with nonlethal crowd dispersal techniques, PAP officers assume a leading position when major incidents of social unrest break out. In this capacity, the PAP commands over 1 million personnel and is supported by 1.9 million MPS officers attached to local security offices.<sup>24</sup> As social unrest has continued to rise, Beijing has increased its funding for the internal security forces, whose annual budget of \$124 billion in the year 2013 exceeded the \$119 billion officially spent on national defense.<sup>25</sup> Demonstrating the new leadership's concern with internal unrest, Xi Jinping has established a National Security Commission under his direct supervision that appears to be heavily oriented towards internal threats.<sup>26</sup> Upgraded internal security units have served as a highly competent instrument for the monitoring and dispersal of large crowds when called upon by local or national officials.

### *Elite Cohesion*

As often noted in social movement theory, the political opportunities for national level unrest open up when elites are divided. Such conditions limit the ability of regimes to respond to internal threats in a unified fashion and inspire popular challengers who may perceive the regime's vulnerability or carry out mass collective action to appeal to one elite faction or another. Over the last three decades, the CPC has reformed the hiring, promotion and retirement process for cadres to create a more merit-based and norm-bound system and minimize the threat of in-party divisions.<sup>27</sup> With such changes, CPC cadres have viewed long-term loyalty to the party leadership as in their personal interests and, for the most part, hidden factional rivalries from the public eye. Seeing little opportunity to exploit divisions within the CPC, popular challengers have largely avoided anti-regime rhetoric, preferring instead to act as "rightful resisters" – patriots who support the party but seek to see the Center's policies and directives put into practice at the local level.<sup>28</sup>

However, recent developments suggest that the CPC's unity might be under strain. Recent studies have suggested that personal and factional connections, rather than standard measures for performance, are increasingly the force that drives cadre advancement in the party.<sup>29</sup> In addition, recent attacks by the central leadership on high-ranking officials such as Zhou Yongkang and Bo Xilai have suggested that serious factional struggle has surfaced within the CPC. If factional struggle becomes a more public and persistent issue, it could create opportunities for better-organized and more overtly political forms of contentious collective action to emerge.

### *Decentralization of the State*

An additional impediment to nationalized forms of contention has been China's emergence as one of the world's most decentralized nondemocratic states. Over the last 30 years, Beijing has delegated a growing share of resources and autonomous decision-making power to subnational authorities at the local and provincial levels. From 1995 to 1998, 54.8% of all government expenditures in China occurred at the subnational level, compared to an average of 17.8% among all nondemocracies.<sup>30</sup> This power over the allocation of local resources and decisions related to local policymaking has driven subnational authorities to compete with one another in their efforts to promote local economic growth.

Additionally, local authorities have been granted a great deal of latitude in making decisions about how to deal with local outbreaks of social unrest. This enables them to autonomously decide how and when to use either repression or concessions against protestors. An estimated 80% of incidents of large scale of unrest from 1995 to 2006 were resolved at the subnational level.<sup>31</sup> Of course, local officials are under pressure from higher-ranking authorities who may intervene from above if the unrest cannot be effectively contained. This can involve punishing the local official or directly extending concessions to protestors. Such interventions both appease protestors and preserve the legitimacy of the system.

The decentralization of the state thus creates a particular political opportunity structure within China that facilitates localized, parochial forms of unrest but constrains the development of protest movements coordinated on a national level. Because they can win concessions from local officials, particularly if they draw the attention of high-ranking officials or the media, citizens are motivated to carry out large scale (and illegal) collective actions when they enter conflicts with the state. These protests are oriented *against* local officials and make appeals *to* high-ranking officials. Consequently, they focus on local, apolitical issues such as the environment, official corruption, land seizures, or labor disputes, and are organized in manner designed to pressure local officials while reaffirming the CPC and the political system itself. Thus, while the frequency and intensity of protests has increased over the last two decades, we have not seen the emergence of regime-threatening national protests movements in the mode of those seen in post-communist color revolutions or the Arab Spring.

### **Implications for the United States**

To the present, China has maintained the veneer of political stability in the face of rising unrest. As a consequence, we have often focused on the strengths of China. These have included the growth of China's economy and the challenges and opportunities it poses for American commercial interests as well as China's increasing military capabilities and their implications for the existing balance of power in East Asia.

However, we must not presume that Beijing's assertiveness in its foreign relations in recent years is simply the result of growing confidence. Rather, it is the weaknesses and fragility of China's existing political order that often shape the outlook of its leadership. Social unrest and the threat it poses to the CPC's monopoly on power is a constant preoccupation of China's leadership. To the present, the tens of thousands of mass incidents that occur in China each



year have proven manageable. However, there is an ever-present potential that localized, parochial forms of unrest might achieve a higher level of coordination and transform into nationwide protest movements that threaten the regime's survival.

The most likely vehicle for such a transformation is nationalism, which Susan Shirk (2007) has described as "the emotional platform that can meld various discontented groups into a revolutionary movement."<sup>32</sup> Recent nationalist, anti-foreign protests have emerged in the wake of the NATO bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999, Western criticism of China during the 2008 Tibet riots, and disputes with Japan over the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands in 2012. Such protests are particularly threatening to the political order: they can emerge quickly in the midst of a national crisis, are inclusive of diverse social groups, and threaten the government's legitimacy if it fails to defend the nation's honor. As a result, once large-scale nationalist protests emerge, China's leadership – fearing a domestic backlash – may take more aggressive foreign policy actions than it would under normal conditions.

As such, American policymakers must take care to engage China in a manner that balances concerns with China's strength with concerns for China's weakness and fragility. This is particularly true when dealing with China's "core interests" – specifically its disputed territories in the East and South China Sea, Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang. These issues have great potential to drive almost instant popular reactions within Chinese society, placing Beijing in a situation where a hard line response is the only politically viable option. Based on the potentiality of deepening elite divisions within the CPC and the growing surge of localized protests, China's leadership is likely to have a particularly intense sense of political vulnerability in the short and medium term.

In addition to exercising cognizance and caution over China's core interests, American foreign policy in the region should emphasize the constructive engagement of not only China's high-ranking officials and diplomats but also the mass public itself. It is easy to presume a single-party authoritarian state is a monolith capable of shaping public opinion, but Chinese citizens have become increasingly capable of voicing dissent and placing pressure on the CPC and need to be treated as key political players in China's foreign policy decision-making process. Consequently, it is critical to smooth Sino-American relations to engage Chinese hearts and minds by encouraging more educational and cultural linkages between the United States and China. Federal support for exchange programs, such as the U.S. Peace Corps China Program, Fulbright student and scholar programs, Gilman scholarships, and Critical Language Scholarships should be expanded to help achieve the goals of the 100,000 Strong Initiative advanced by former Secretary of State Clinton in 2013. Moreover, efforts should be made to streamline and expand the opportunities available to Chinese citizens seeking to study, work or travel in the United States. These efforts provide meaningful opportunities for mutual understanding for Chinese and American citizens and can help balance against the risk that disagreements between the United States and China will generate anti-American nationalism – upsetting this most critical international relationship.

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- <sup>1</sup> This testimony draws from Steve Hess, "From the Arab Spring to the Chinese Winter: The Institutional Sources of Authoritarian Vulnerability and Resilience in Egypt, Tunisia, and China," *International Political Science Review* 34:3 (2013): 254-272; and Steve Hess, *Authoritarian Landscapes: Popular Mobilization and the Institutional Sources of Resilience in Nondemocracies* (New York: Springer, 2013): 79-108.
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- <sup>16</sup> Pei (2003): 29-31.
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<sup>21</sup> Cai (2010): 26.

<sup>22</sup> James Areddy and Fanfan Wang, "Beijing Tells Petitioners: Please Stay Home," *Wall Street Journal*, April 24, 2014, [blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/2014/04/24/beijing-tells-petitioners-please-stay-home/](http://blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/2014/04/24/beijing-tells-petitioners-please-stay-home/).

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<sup>27</sup> Andrew Nathan, "Authoritarian Resilience," *Journal of Democracy* 14:1 (2003): 6-17; David Shambaugh, *China's Communist Party: Atrophy and Adaptation* (University of California Press, 2009).

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<sup>31</sup> Cai, 2008: 420.

<sup>32</sup> Susan Shirk, *China: Fragile Superpower* (Oxford University Press, 2007): 256.