

The direction that China and U.S.-China relations take will define the world's future. For the United States, a rising China increasingly affects American prosperity and security, calling for some clear-eyed thinking and tough economic, political, and security choices. As the twenty-first century unfurls, the stakes have never been higher for getting U.S. policy toward China right. By untangling the complex, sometimes contradictory, strands of this vast and dynamic country, *China: The Balance Sheet* lays the foundation for informed and effective U.S. policy toward China, the world's emerging superpower.

BACKGROUND

- More than 2,000 newspapers, 8,000 magazines, and 700 television stations have sprung up in China since a partial privatization of the media sector.
- Despite their numbers and increased responsiveness to the market, rather than the Party, the **Central Propaganda Department has kept a tight grip on the media.**
- Under the pretext of state subversion and secrets laws, **journalists are subject to fines, dismissals and demotions, lawsuits and imprisonment.** Offending news agencies are frequently closed and their editors fired.
- In 2005 the government banned dozens of newspapers and confiscated almost one million “illegal” political publications. The government also blocks the websites and radio and television broadcasts of foreign news organizations such as the BBC, Radio Free Asia, and Voice of America.
- The latest crackdown on the media can be traced to the Party's fourth plenum held in September 2004, when **strengthening ideological control over the media was a focus.** Recent regulations reveal that the focus on ideological control over the media has reemerged in the run-up to the 17th national congress.
- It appears that the Hu-Wen leadership team, which initially welcomed media reporting on previously taboo subjects such as official corruption and social unrest, is as willing as its predecessors to gag the media when the debate goes beyond the officially sanctioned parameters that the Party has set.

For further information, see Chapter 3:

“China's Domestic Transformation: Democratization or Disorder?”

China: The Balance Sheet: What the World Needs to Know Now about the Emerging Superpower

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MEDIA

CURRENT SITUATION

- In their 2006 index of press freedom, Reporters Without Borders ranked China 163rd out of 168, due to such violations as the imprisonment of 31 journalists in 2006, which made China the **world's leading jailer of journalists for the eighth consecutive year**.
- Recently issued media rules seem to confirm a trend toward a more restrictive media atmosphere. These rules include the **Emergency Response Law, which fines news agencies that report on "local emergencies"** (including natural disasters and health crises) without permission from local authorities and **Measures for Administering the Release of News and Information in China by Foreign News Agencies, which gives Xinhua the power to censor and distribute news from foreign news agencies**.
- In advance of the 2008 Olympics and in response to international criticism, China has introduced foreign media rule changes that expire in October 2008 and include such changes as allowing journalists to travel without the permission of local authorities.

IMPLICATIONS

- **Whether the recent media crackdown is just a phase in the Party's typically fluctuating approach to media liberalization or the sign of a fundamental policy shift is yet to be seen, and needs to be closely monitored.**
- In response to the crackdown, journalists have been pushing back.
 - In December 2005, some 100 journalists from The Beijing News, one of China's more progressive newspapers, took the rare move of going on strike to protest the dismissal of the paper's editor and two of his deputies.
 - In January 2006, 13 veteran intellectuals and Party officials, including Mao Zedong's former secretary Li Rui and former Central Propaganda chief Zhu Houze, protested against the closure of Bingdian (Freezing Point), forcing a partial climb down by the authorities when the paper was reinstated but with its editors demoted.
- The Olympics will have a significant impact on media freedom in China. **The influx of an estimated 20,000 journalists will make China vulnerable to criticism and may open a window for Chinese dissent.**
- However, some changes made in advance of the Olympics—such as the changes to foreign media rules—may prove to have limited long-term impact, particularly if they are allowed to expire in late 2008.
- Observers should also recognize the privatization of media now unfolding in China may signal some greater openness in the future. However, for the vast majority of Chinese media, **commercialization provides incentive for media managers and journalists to be risk averse.**

The Media as a Watchdog

In December 2005, in Dongzhou Village, Guangdong Province, local police opened fire, killing as many as 20 people during a confrontation with villagers protesting construction of a local power plant. Complaints over inadequate compensation for seized farmland, the loss of fishing grounds, and environmental hazards escalated into a violent confrontation involving more than 300 villagers and the police. Initially, local officials denied the shootings and refused comment but were forced to respond after locals alerted the Hong Kong media, via cell phones and the Internet, to report on events. In a highly unusual move, the central authorities not only confirmed the incident but admitted that it was "a mistake" and detained the local official responsible for authorizing the police action.

"History proves that only an autocratic system needs a clamp on the press and wants to blind the masses forever . . . we were all senior revolutionary people inspired by freedom . . . we know that once the freedom of speech is lost, the authorities can only hear one voice."

—"Joint Declaration" signed by 13 senior veteran cadres protesting the closure of Bingdian (Freezing Point).