

Social Unrest

DOES SOCIAL UNREST THREATEN CHINA'S NATIONAL STABILITY?

CHINA BALANCE SHEET

WWW.CSIS.ORG/CHINABALANCESHEET

Background

- Social unrest is widespread in China. In the summer of 2005, senior Chinese officials announced that riots, strikes, demonstrations, and protests had increased from 8,700 in 1993 to 74,000 in 2004.
- Ministry of Public Security sources announced in 2006 that “public order disturbances” rose by 6.6 percent over 2005 to 87,000.
- According to official Chinese sources, the number of more narrowly defined “mass incidents” fell by 22 percent in the first 10 months of 2006 to 17,900. In 2008, it was reported that “figures of mass incidents and participants decreased by 2.7 percent and 17.1 percent, respectively” in 2007, without further elaboration.
- Protests are growing in average size from 10 or fewer people in the mid-1990s to about 52 people per incident in 2004.
- In the first half of 2005, there were over 340 protests involving more than 10,000 people, resulting in an estimated economic loss of \$5 billion.
- Between January and October 2005, 1,826 police were injured and 23 killed handling “mass group incidents.”
- Mass petitions to government authorities by groups of citizens seeking the redress of their grievances increased at double-digit annual rates of growth throughout the 1990s and into the early twenty-first century.
- In urban areas, sources of unrest include unfair working conditions in enterprises; unpaid pensions for retired workers of state-owned enterprises; low and unpaid wages for migrant workers; insufficient compensation for resettled urban residents; environmental degradation; and ethnic tensions.
- In rural areas, where the frequency and scale of incidents are greater, unrest arises largely from shady land confiscation, fees, tolls and other local tax burdens, environmental degradation, and official corruption.

RECENT INCIDENTS OF UNREST IN CHINA

- **November 2008, Gansu Province:** Over 2,000 people in Gansu's Wudu district looted government offices in response to reports that the city government would relocate to a different county. The existing offices were damaged in the May earthquakes. Villagers, worried that the move would take away jobs, lower property values, and lower investment in the area overall, clashed with police for several days.
- **June 2008, Guizhou Province:** Dissatisfaction over police handling of the alleged suicide of a 17-year-old girl resulted in protests involving a reported 30,000 people. A police station and county government office were assaulted and torched by rioters, and 59 people were taken into custody. Officials admitted that residents harbored social grievances over working conditions at mines, demolition of homes for urban development, relocation of residents for reservoir construction, and the reform of state-owned enterprises, among other issues.
- **April 2008, Yunnan Province:** Six villagers were shot, one killed, and more than 20 injured by police during a protest against plans for a tungsten mine in Saixi village. Villagers were protesting the amount of compensation offered by the government for their land.
- **March 2008, Tibet Autonomous Region:** Rioters throughout the region targeted businesses owned by Han Chinese and Hui Muslim immigrants. The riots, which involved looting, assault, and arson led to the deaths of at least 19 civilians and 1 police officer, with more than 382 civilians and 241 police officers injured. Paramilitary police and army troops successfully quelled the protests.
- **January 2008, Guangdong Province:** About 2,000 villagers burned 10 trucks in a protest over compensation for land appropriated to erect high-voltage electricity pylons. Six officials were injured, and some 2,000 riot police were sent to the scene.

Background *(continued)*

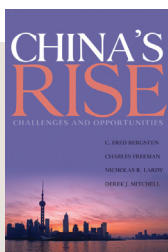
- Protests often aim to circumvent the control of local officials by challenging local decisions that differ from national regulations and thus provoking the intervention of higher-level authorities.
- “Responsibility systems” discipline local Party authorities for outbreaks of social unrest, which creates both incentives for citizens to resort to street protests to try to resolve their grievances against local authorities and incentives for local Party officials to suppress social unrest. This conflicting incentive system exacerbates social unrest.

Current Situation

- The central leadership is acutely aware of the challenges posed by social unrest. In late 2005, Central Party Committee and State Council leaders issued an internal directive that made reducing the level of social unrest a major policy goal in 2006, and they recently announced a slew of new policies aimed at addressing social welfare issues, especially in the countryside.
- The authorities have adopted a somewhat more permissive and sophisticated strategy to deal with protests, even supporting them on occasion: In April 2005, Premier Wen Jiabao reportedly called a halt to construction of a dam on the Nujiang River in Yunnan Province amidst widening public outcry against the project.
- That said, China has not “gone soft” on unrest: In the most troubling and persistent cases, local authorities will intimidate or arrest individuals deemed to be “ringleaders” as a way to suppress further protests.

Implications

- Although incidents of unrest are frequent and widespread—and clearly worrisome to Chinese leaders—they remain largely spontaneous, unorganized, and focused on localized “backyard” grievances. They do not appear to threaten the stability of the regime for the near to medium term.
- The vast majority of protests are not promoting broader political reforms, nor do they appear linked through any national network or other coordinating mechanism of dissent.
- However, the nature and frequency of incidents of unrest could change as the Chinese economy continues to struggle due to the ongoing financial crisis. Fourth quarter growth fell to 6.8% in 2008, confirming a significant economic slowdown. As this continues to hurt employment numbers, angry Chinese workers may present authorities with increasingly numerous and organized instances of unrest.
- Chinese authorities will continue to crack down at the first sign of any association among leaders and organizations on a national level, such as against Falun Gong and the China Democracy Party.
- Although Chinese officials admit that failures of local government officials are the cause of many citizen protests, they have so far avoided the deep institutional reforms required to address long-term problems of social instability in favor of maintaining centralized one-party rule in the near term.
- By pointing out the link between authoritarian controls and the increase in citizen protest activities, U.S. authorities can credibly tie greater political liberalization to a core interest of Chinese leaders: social stability.



FOR FURTHER INFORMATION:
SEE CHAPTER 3: “DEMOCRACY WITH CHINESE CHARACTERISTICS? POLITICAL REFORM AND THE FUTURE OF THE CHINESE COMMUNIST PARTY” IN *CHINA’S RISE: CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES* BY C. FRED BERGSTEN, CHARLES FREEMAN, NICHOLAS LARDY, DEREK J. MITCHELL &
CHAPTER 3: “SOCIAL INSTABILITY IN CHINA: CAUSES, CONSEQUENCES, AND IMPLICATIONS” IN *THE CHINA BALANCE SHEET IN 2007 AND BEYOND*