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The Foundations of China's Future Stability

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The recently ended standoff between the villagers of Wukan in Guangdong province and local government officials has refocused attention on China's future stability. The more than 100,000 officially reported incidents of unrest each year gives observers the false impression that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in Beijing barely holds the country together. Pressure may be building, but China's stability is like a champagne bottle. Until the cork pops, the bottle and its contents are stable. The question is how much pressure is building and how much wine is spilt when the cork flies out.

Peter Mattis, Editor of the *China Brief* at The Jamestown Foundation, argues that regarding governance in China "The CCP has created a powerful apparatus—military, intelligence, and propaganda—that will operate short of total breakdown in leadership cohesion, i.e. the decision of some elites to contest the decisions of the party congress. The debates are over how best to maintain CCP power—not whether the party should govern."

Point predictions offer little value unless the factors underpinning the state's power and the CCP's ability to manipulate socio-political dynamics are assessed. China's future will depend more on Beijing's ability to prevent local crises from cascading nationally, than preventing the emergence of a political rival to the CCP. While the vagaries of the economy may raise or lower the pressure, revolutionary unrest in a country the size of China requires more than just resentment. Some modicum of connectivity and coordination is necessary to prevent Beijing from secretly applying differing doses of coercion and co-option.

The CCP leadership understands the nature of this challenge and has responded accordingly with a variety of public order policies that increase its internal monitoring capabilities and ability to shape public discourse. These policies amount to a three-pronged strategy for maintaining control and countering dissent. The first is to prevent localized grievances from congealing into a national crisis like what happened in 1989. The second prong is the resuscitation of the domestic intelligence system. The final element is guiding and controlling the public discourse.

The first element regarding stability maintenance is to encourage the perception that local grievances have local causes and that the central government will side with the demonstrators. So long as the protestors still believe their problems do not have roots in the national system, the belief is that there is less likelihood of unrest stirring up in neighboring localities. This first element is a guiding principle for maintaining stability, and there are specific policy choices associated with it. For example, local governments control the police while Beijing controls the military. The buildup of paramilitary capabilities gives provincial and local governments more capability to deal with incidents of unrest, but also shields Beijing from any ostensible responsibility for the violence.

Since the early 2000s, rebuilding the domestic intelligence apparatus has been a priority for Beijing. After several years of local-level experimentation, the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) in 2008 held a ministry-wide conference to establish "public security informatization" as a guiding principle of police work. This included both human and technical components. The former included a new Domestic Security Department and

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new spending on domestic informant networks. These measures supplement the electronic integration of records on individuals' movements and automated systems, like the "Golden Shield" network and databases, that alert local police when persons of interest register in hotels, buy plane tickets, or anything else requiring identification. While these capabilities give local authorities greater awareness, most importantly they supplement the political means to isolate grievances by tracking activists across different geographic localities.

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Finally, modern communication technology has forced the central government propaganda system to evolve to the new environment. Controlling the public discourse now requires more than just pre-publication censorship of newspapers and, arguably, the system has moved toward post-publication crackdowns to encourage self-censorship through uncertainty. Beijing also has moved to reduce the anonymity of the Internet—most recently, requiring true name registration for microblogging—and deployed increasingly sophisticated systems to scrub or discredit unpalatable information. More importantly, the expanded sphere for public discourse has forced the government at all levels to expose itself by engaging society through microblogs, editorials, and selective open government initiatives more frequently to try to shape how the public converses.

While the aforementioned policies will affect how well the Chinese government deals with civil unrest, the failure of these strategies does not necessarily mean the CCP will lose power. The longevity of police-states has confounded some observers, but states generally survive while the government maintains legitimacy and control over mass violence. Put into observables, the key questions revolve around central government credibility and the loyalty of the military.

Despite the tens of thousands of protests each year—many related to official corruption—Chinese demonstrators like those in Wukan still appeal to Beijing for succor. Continuing appeals indicate two things. First, the central government maintains some popular legitimacy. Second, Beijing's strategy of localizing grievances while insulating the center from blame is working. When protestors no longer appeal to Beijing, then the CCP's ability to maintain control will rest on the state's coercive power to keep the cork in the bottle.

Secondly, the final arbiter of CCP power is the armed might of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) with the People's Armed Police (PAP). Their professionalism has long been defined by contribution to the survival of the CCP—as Mao Zedong said, "political power grows out of the barrel of the gun." The PLA may still be the "Party's army" and not the Chinese nation's, but the technical requirements of modern war may be pushing the PLA toward the latter. The threshold for political change will move higher or lower by the direction of PLA professionalism toward creating military or political power, respectively. An apolitical PLA devoted to the technical expertise of creating military power will have a different set of institutional priorities distinct from the political leadership, potentially creating a reluctance to support the PAP.

These points should caution against reading too much into the succession politics of the 18th Party Congress later this year. The CCP has created a powerful apparatus—military, intelligence, and propaganda—that will operate short of total breakdown in leadership cohesion, i.e. the decision of some elites to contest the decisions of the party congress. The debates are over how best to maintain CCP power—not whether the party should govern. Both Beijing's strategies for preserving stability and the key factors underpinning the CCP's power relative to society can and should be assessed regularly. So far, Beijing has performed remarkably well using coercion and co-option. And before prematurely condemning the CCP to the dustbin of history, it is worth noting some moribund Chinese dynasties survived for several centuries using these tactics.

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