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## Chinese Government Responses to Rising Social Unrest

MURRAY SCOT TANNER

CT-240

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Testimony presented to the US-China Economic and Security Review  
Commission on April 14, 2005

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**Statement of Murray Scot Tanner<sup>1</sup>**  
**Senior Political Scientist**  
**The RAND Corporation**

**Before the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission**

**April 14, 2005**

I would like to begin by expressing my appreciation to the Chair and the other distinguished members of US-China Economic and Security Review Commission. I am honored to have the opportunity to speak to you today about unrest in China.

My testimony today will briefly examine the rise of social unrest in China today, its sources and changing forms, as well as the sharp dilemmas China's Party leaders and security officials are facing as they search for an effective strategy for coping with this challenge. My testimony draws in part upon a unique set of sources – the surprisingly blunt internal debates over unrest that have been going on among China's police officials and analysts several years now. I will close with a few comments on what I consider to be a somewhat disturbing trend – China's recent tacit support for anti-Japanese demonstrations this past week.

**Mass Unrest in China: Recent Trends**

In the past five years officials of China's public security system have confirmed what foreign observers have sensed for some time: social protest has risen dramatically over the past decade, and is now a daily phenomenon in China's political system.

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

Recently uncovered police data document that China has witnessed a sustained ten-year rise in what officials call “mass group incidents” (*quntixing shijian*) – an overly broad, catch-all term that encompasses the full spectrum of group protests – including sit-ins, strikes, group petitions, rallies, demonstrations, marches, traffic-blocking and building seizures, and even some public melees, riots, and inter-ethnic strife.<sup>2</sup> The Ministry of Public Security (MPS) reports that the number of “mass incidents” (e.g. various forms of protest) has skyrocketed from about 8,700 in 1993, to 32,000 in 1999, to about 50,000 in 2002, and surpassing 58,000 in 2003 (See table in Appendix).<sup>3</sup> Especially noteworthy has been the steady rate of increase: protest incidents have apparently increased every year since 1993 (although 2001 data are unavailable), and in no year did they increase by less than 9 percent.<sup>4</sup>

Nationwide data for 2004 are not yet available, but statistics reported by some provincial police departments indicate the problem remains serious. Some localities report a continued increase in total protests. Others have witnessed some decline in the total number of incidents, but an increase in the average number of protestors per incident.

China’s region of greatest unrest is almost certainly its three northeastern provinces that border North Korea (Liaoning, Jilin, and Heilongjiang provinces). Workers in this aging “rustbelt” of state-owned factories suffer greatly from layoffs, illegally withheld wages and pensions, and shady factory buyouts. Liaoning police report that in 1999 – the height of the Asian financial crisis – their province alone accounted for nearly one fifth of China’s total reported protests – almost 6,000 of 32,000 nationwide. The province

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<sup>2</sup> No one English word can begin to capture the breadth of these activities. Thus, in this testimony I will use the terms “protests”, “incidents”, and “demonstrations” pretty much interchangeably throughout.

<sup>3</sup> An comparison of the MPS’s nationwide data and the data of China’s various provincial Public Security Bureaus indicates that the nationwide data are an estimate based on the provincial totals, but not a straightforward summing of the various provincial statistics.

<sup>4</sup> Li Zhongxin, *Quntixing Shijian Yanjiu Lunwenji* (Collected Research Essays on Mass Incidents), (Chinese People’s Public Security University Press, June 2001); Xiao Tangpiao, “Ershi yu lai Dalu Nongcun de Zhengzhi Wending Zhuangkuang”, *Ershiyi Shiji* (Hong Kong), October 21, 2003, internet edition; Josephine Ma, “Three Million Took Part in Surging Protest Last Year”, *South China Morning Post*, internet edition, June 8, 2004; Louisa Lim, “Chinese Protests on the Rise”, *British Broadcasting Corporation*, June 8, 2004, <http://bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/3786541.stm>

witnessed 9,559 incidents between January 2000 and September 2002 – an average of about 290 per month, or nearly 10 per day for three years.<sup>5</sup>

But China's more prosperous coastal regions have not been spared either. Guangzhou City – one of the fastest growing regions in the world for more than two decades – reported 863 protests involving an estimated total of over 50,000 people between January and October of last year.<sup>6</sup>

Certainly, these raw numbers of protests tell us that many Chinese are dissatisfied with their jobs, the economy, or their local officials. But they are not, by themselves, the best indicator of whether or not a regime is threatened by social unrest. Relatively large numbers of protests constitute far less of a threat to the government so long as most protests remain small, unorganized, peaceful, isolated from each other, and their demands remain limited and concrete. From the standpoint of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) survival, it is crucial to note that there is, to date, very little sign that protestor demands are turning against the Chinese government per se (although anger at local officials seems to be virtually universal). Even more important is that 25 years after the rise of the Solidarity trade union in Poland, China has still prevented the emergence of any similar nationwide or even regional independent political party, trade union, or student, peasant, or business association that could organize or sustain major anti-regime protests.

That said, there is increasing consensus that the form of protests is changing in ways that Beijing will find harder to control. Police officials note that protests are growing larger in size and that “repetitive” or long-lasting protests are on the rise. Demonstrators are increasingly reaching across the old boundaries of workplace and office unit, and their levels of organization, use of communications technology, and tactical cleverness is increasing. While police insist most protests are peaceful, they also report that “confrontativeness” and violence are on the rise.

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<sup>5</sup> Published report by Liaoning Public Security Bureau Chief Li Wenxi, dated November 2002, obtained by RAND analysts.

<sup>6</sup> Wu Sha (Guangzhou City PSB Deputy Director), Dali Jiaqiang Quntixing Tufa Shijian Chuzhi Gongzuo Quanli Weihu Shehui Zhengzhi Wending (Forcefully Strengthen the Handling of Sudden Mass Incidents, and Protect Social and Political Stability with All Our Might), *Gongan Yanjiu*, 2004, Number 12, pp. 48-53.

MPS figures indicate that protests are growing in average size – from 10 or fewer persons 8 years ago to about 52 people per incident in 2003, with protests involving hundreds and thousands becoming increasingly common. Guangzhou reports that this past year, 1 protest in 7 involved more than 100 persons. In Liaoning, an estimated 863,000 citizens took part in the 9,000-plus protests between 2000 and 2002 – an average of more than 90 per incident.

Many demonstrators cleverly frame their demands and stage manage their protests so as to embarrass the objects of their protests (enterprise managers, local officials, etc.) and paralyze security officials from using extreme force. Favorite tactics include waving copies of the laws that local officials are violating, “skipping levels” and taking demands to higher administrative officials, and placing senior citizens, retired soldiers, women and children in the front ranks of protests.

Protestors make extensive use of the Internet and e-mail, cellular phones and text-messaging, as well as deliberately hard-to-monitor “low-tech” methods to organize their protests. Few protests have been more openly organized than the April 9, 2005 anti-Japanese protests, the plans for which were widely known even in the West almost a full day before the demonstrations. Technology has helped protest leaders reach across the old boundaries of workplace and village to organize similarly disgruntled citizens—as when Muslims from neighboring provinces were called in to support their brethren caught up in ethnic violence in Henan in October 2004.<sup>7</sup> For more than a decade, China’s government and its “netizens” have been engaged in a game of cat and mouse, as the state develops new and increasingly sophisticated strategies for monitoring and controlling information flows, while citizens craft increasingly evasive strategies to circumvent this control. A recent RAND study by James Mulvenon and Michael Chase on dissident use of the internet in China concluded that:

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<sup>7</sup> Joseph Kahn, “Martial Law Is Declared After 150 Die in Clashes in Central China”, New York Times (Online version), October 31, 2004; See also Joseph Kahn, “Ethnic Clashes are Confirmed by Beijing: Toll Is Unclear”, New York Times (Online version), November 2, 2004; “Police Cars Torched as 10,000 Riot”, Reuters, October 21, 2004.

“[w]hile Beijing has done a remarkable job thus far of finding effective counterstrategies to what it perceives as the potential negative effects of the information revolution, the scale of China’s information-technology modernization would suggest that time is eventually on the side of the regime’s opponents.”<sup>8</sup>

### **Causes of Unrest: Not Just the Economy**

There are many specific grievances that drive protestors into the streets, and these have been widely noted by other witnesses today. Most protests stem from social, economic, and political policy problems that Beijing is unlikely to be able to solve any time in the near future. Overwhelmingly, Chinese police analysts emphasize the popular grievances resulting from economic reforms, including layoffs and unemployment (and demobilization, in the case of soldiers), withheld wages, pensions, housing allowances, health care and other benefits. These causes were especially clear during the economic crisis of 1997-2000, when rising unemployment was accompanied by a sharp increase in protests of more than 25% in 1998, and 67% in 1999. Police officials also bluntly concede that a major factor behind unrest has been the dramatic rise in income inequality during two decades of market-oriented reforms, which has undermined popular faith in economic reform and stoked widespread suspicions that those who have “gotten rich first” did so through corruption and connections rather than hard work and innovativeness.<sup>9</sup>

But bad economic times alone cannot fully account for the sustained rise in unrest. This fact is amply demonstrated by comparing the rising levels of protest with recent rates of economic growth. Although protests did accelerate during the late 1990s recession, they began rising as early as 1993-1996 when China’s GDP was growing at more than 10 percent a year. More importantly, protests have continued to increase at more than 20% a year during the 2000-2003 recovery when the economy grew at 9% annually. Thus, while unrest has clearly accelerated during economic downturns, its persistent increase – regardless of the state of the economy – clearly suggests that protests are being motivated

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<sup>8</sup> Michael Chase and James Mulvenon, *You’ve Got Dissent! Chinese Dissident Use of the Internet and Beijing’s Counterstrategies*, Santa Monica, RAND, 2002, pg. xiii.

<sup>9</sup> Zhang Shengqian, Zhi’an Shijian Chuzhi (*Handling Social Order Incidents*), (Beijing, People’s Public Security University Press, 2001), pg. 36-39.



by more than just transitory economic conditions. Consequently, the Chinese police's own data strongly suggests that Beijing's leaders would be unwise to think that if they just hold on long enough, they can simply "grow their way out" of the current unrest.

### **Inadequate Political Institutions**

It seems increasingly clear that the lagging development of China's political and legal institutions bears at least as much of the blame for rising unrest as does the economy. Of special note is the lack of effective channels for redressing citizen grievances, weak government oversight and enforcement of laws, and perhaps most of all, pervasive corruption. Many of the most common causes of unrest – predatory and illegal tax burdens on peasants, judicial corruption, coercive family planning enforcement, fraudulent financial schemes, property rights disputes, polluted farmland and streams, failure to make good on promised jobs and benefits for veterans – have at their root failures of governance. To be sure, Chinese citizens in record numbers feel it is worth their while to take their complaints to the courts, people's congresses, mediation committees, letters and mass visits offices, and press organs. But the growth of these official channels is not keeping up with citizen demands, and these institutions are often sclerotic, bureaucratic, corrupt, or even vengeful. Consequently, until China effectively reforms these organs of governance, many citizens will continue risking repression by taking their demands into the streets.

These political shortcomings are especially evident in what is perhaps the fastest growing source of protests – the battles over urban renewal and the forcible eviction of many city dwellers and peasants from their homes and farms to make way for profitable new construction projects. Even police officials note that one of the most common scenarios for protest occurs when the evicted tenants or farmers discover (or believe) that corrupt officials have taken bribes from developers to evict them, or have pocketed the difference between the meager reimbursements paid to the former residents and the high subsequent sale price of the land. Guangzhou police report that in 2003-2004, forcible evictions were the number one source of unrest in their city, accounting for more than 23% of all protests.<sup>10</sup> Sichuan provincial public security officials report that in their province as a whole, the percentage of all protests caused by such property evictions grew from 12% to

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<sup>10</sup> Wu Sha, *Gongan Yanjiu*, 2004, Number 12, pp. 48-49.

16.3% between 2001 and 2003. In the city of Chengdu alone, the figure was a stunning 61%<sup>11</sup>

### **China's Changing Political and Legal Culture**

But citizens would be far less likely to respond to these institutional failures with public protests if China were not also undergoing a significant change in its political culture, in particular popular attitudes toward political and legal rights. China's rapid economic growth, rising access to education and information, and increasing exposure to notions of "contracts" and "rights" are apparently producing an increasingly assertive society. After 25 years of economic and political reforms, many average Chinese citizens are simply more willing to take their demands into the streets than was the case in the past. Many appear to have forgotten the bloody "lesson" that Deng Xiaoping administered in the 1989 Tiananmen massacre – that the risks and dangers of protest far outweigh any potential payoffs to the protestors. Instead, police officials report increasingly hearing citizens claim that "If you want a great solution to your problems, you must make a big disturbance. A little disturbance only gets you a little solution. And if you make no disturbance, you get no solution."

### **Beijing's Risky New Protest Strategies**

Hu Jintao and China's security officials seem to recognize that the post-Tiananmen strategy of trying to deter or quickly quash all demonstrations is now less effective (although evidence indicates these are still the rules of engagement in Muslim and Tibetan areas). Before coming to power, Hu often invoked Deng Xiaoping's dictum that "Stability overrides everything". But he also argued that the leadership needed to "keep a cool head...and enhance its political flair and acuity in handling contradictions among the people."<sup>12</sup> In recent years they have begun promoting police strategies that are much more permissive and sophisticated – employing both carrots and sticks – but are also much riskier for the regime.

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<sup>11</sup> *Gongan Yanjiu*, 2004, Issue Number 1, pp. 73-77.

<sup>12</sup> Xinhua, March 6, 1997.

Official police directives and training now emphasize containing, managing and defusing demonstrations and trying to avoid enraging crowds with unprofessional violence. Instead of plunging into crowds, police are directed to focus on sealing off protest areas to contain demonstrators and isolate them from onlookers who might be tempted to join in. Management of information and press reports about protests are also a key concern, and among their key tasks, police are instructed to prevent any unauthorized recording, photography, and interviewing of protestors, especially by foreign journalists. For their part, however, police are encouraged to gather videotape evidence about protest leaders for later prosecution, and are urged to be visible in doing so, in order to heighten their deterrent effect. But except in cases of violence, police are usually instructed and wait until after crowds have dispersed before detaining the leaders. Western journalists have meticulously documented police efforts to drive a wedge between protest leaders and rank-and-file, often by attempting to “buy-off” the rank-and-file with back-wages or pensions, while sowing fear and internal dissention among protest leaders.<sup>13</sup>

The up side of this “permissive containment” strategy is that, when implemented effectively, it reduces the risk that small-scale demonstrations could spin out of control. But this strategy also risks encouraging protests by sending citizens the message that non-violent protests – even illegal ones – may be tolerated, and may even pay off handsomely for the protestors.

These new strategies also risk loss of control if they are not accompanied by adequate and appropriate police training. If police forces lack the skills, professionalism and self-discipline necessary to defuse protests with minimal violence, they risk exacerbating popular anger and violence. Recent press reports cite numerous cases of security forces employing unprofessional, violent tactics to suppress disgruntled citizen groups – sometimes causing protestors to respond in kind. In some cases, reports indicate that local Communist Party leaders – anxious to quickly suppress demonstrations that might prove embarrassing to them – have given security officials orders that would contravene official national strategy and risk further enraging protestors.

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<sup>13</sup> Phillip Pan, “Three Chinese Workers: Jail, Betrayal and Fear”, December 28, 2002, pg. A-1; these tactics are also recommended in Zhang Shengqian, *Zhi’an Shijian Chuzhi*, pg. 63.

Chinese security officials have also stressed their need to revive and strengthen their social intelligence networks so that they can respond quickly and contain protests early. It is clear, however, that these once-vaunted networks of “security activists”, neighborhood committees, and other informers have been eroded greatly by reform, and police report that they frequently do not find out about impending protests until they are well under way.

The ultimate risk of China’s new more permissive containment and management strategy is that security officials – for any number of reasons – may find themselves losing control of a major demonstration, which then grows and spreads. Were that to happen, the Chinese government would find itself once again in the situation it faced at the height of the Cultural Revolution or in the Spring of 1989 – forced to choose between employing far greater violence to restore order, or engage in a renegotiation of power with society and the protestors. In the past, this difficult choice has always resulted in a serious split among the Party leadership over how best to restore control.

### **Riding the Tiger?: The April 2004 Anti-Japanese Demonstrations**

I would like to close with a few comments about what I believe is rather disturbing recent development – the Chinese leadership’s decision to permit the large scale anti-Japanese protests in Beijing this past weekend, and perhaps also the protests in Guangzhou and Shenzhen.

Many important facts about these demonstrations remain to be clarified, in particular the leadership’s authorization of the demonstration. Clearly, it is important to find out whether the protest organizers formally applied for and received legal permission for the protest from the police (as required under China’s 1989 Public Demonstrations Law), or if protest leaders simply advertised the demonstrations after receiving a tacit “wink and a nudge” from authorities. In either case, however, Beijing clearly had foreknowledge of the demonstrations, and “authorized” them at least in the sense that it chose to permit them rather than try to prevent them. In many ways, Beijing’s authorization of these protests is at least as clear as it was in the 1999 protests after the US bombed China’s Belgrade embassy. Much as then, Beijing provided buses to take demonstrators home, determined how long they would be permitted to protest in Beijing’s embassy district, and its police reportedly held their lines without responding even as demonstrators broke

Chinese law by hurling rocks, bricks, and bottles into the Embassy and Consulate compounds.

In so doing, China has taken a much riskier step beyond its emerging protest strategy of “permissive containment and management” by attempting to tacitly “stage manage” angry young nationalist protestors. The leadership clearly hopes to ride this wave, buttress its popular nationalist credentials, and mobilize this popular anger as a diplomatic tool in its dealings with Japan over issues such as textbooks, Security Council membership, and security cooperation with the US to protect Taiwan. China can now claim – probably correctly – that its people would not stand for significant concessions on these issues.

But Beijing has chosen to run major risks that could end up creating serious challenges for its domestic stability and its foreign policy. By aligning itself tacitly with the protestors (notwithstanding its public calls for restraint), it risks having its policies boxed-in or manipulated by protestor demands. Many in Japan and other countries now clearly feel that, by treating these demonstrations more permissively than it does most demonstrations, Beijing has to some extent assumed responsibility for damage caused by the protestors. Moreover, whereas the Belgrade bombing was in many ways a one-time event in which popular anger was likely to cool later, China’s disagreements with Japan have both a longer history and an indefinite future. Beijing has also legitimized protests led by a network of anti-Japanese groups that exist in the gray area of China’s emerging “civil society”, and which are not as tightly controlled by the state. As a result, China will have to decide whether or not to authorize similar demonstrations again and again in the future – and press sources yesterday reported that these same groups plan to march again tomorrow. Perhaps worse, if Beijing finds it must use coercion to limit the protestors, it risks putting its security forces in the dangerous position of being seen as the “protectors” of the “unrepentant Japanese” – a very dangerous situation for a government that has staked its claims to legitimacy on nationalism and economic growth. There is good reason to believe that these young nationalist’s support for their own government is highly contingent, and they could easily grow angry with Beijing if it misplays its hand in this dangerous game.

Let me be clear about one point: if China is to democratize some day, it must eventually adopt a much more tolerant, protective policy toward peaceful public protest on all issues

– including foreign policy. But I am concerned that China has chosen to selectively and tacitly tolerate these particular protests, and I hope that Beijing looks at the resulting violence and decides that foreign policy by public protest is a very risky strategy that it should not embrace in the future.

I thank the members of the Commission for their kind attention.

### APPENDIX: CHINESE STATISTICS ON PROTEST INCIDENTS

