

Hu Jintao's Strategy for Handling Chinese Dissent and U.S. Pressure

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By Tanaka Sakai

It is said that the number of demonstrations against government mismanagement and corruption in China is rising. Since late last year, the media in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Europe, Japan, and the United States has frequently reported protests erupting at city offices and other public sites across the country.

People regularly barge into government offices to protest when local newspapers reveal incidences of corruption. News coverage leads to public anger when redevelopment projects provide almost no restitution for people who have been evicted to make way for construction, while the relatives of local officials get rich. Protests frequently prompt revenge. [Local officials send gangsters](#) to threaten and physically harm people who had raised their voices against government abuse.

Recently, many Chinese have seen their standard of living deteriorate as state-owned companies are privatized, as employees are fired with little compensation, and as businesses begin to charge for services, which were once free, at company-affiliated schools, hospitals, and apartments. In the meantime, the children of well-connected party officials are raking in money, building luxurious homes, and driving around in expensive cars. This situation heightens the dissatisfaction of average citizens, so when [protests begin](#), they quickly expand as other people, who have

different complaints, arrive.

74,000 Protests Per Year

"There were 58,000 protests that involved over 100 people throughout China two years ago. Last year the number rose to 74,000, and a total of 3.8 million people participated in these demonstrations." This [announcement in August 2004](#) by Zhou Yongkang, Minister of the Public Security Bureau, alerted the world to the country's heightened unrest.

The news of 74,000 protests caught the attention of reporters throughout the world. Soon many commentators in the West and Japan were speculating that the [Chinese regime might be on the verge of collapse](#).

Yet even as people throughout the world were reading these reports, one was forced to wonder why the Chinese government was making a point of communicating to the outside world that demonstrations were on the rise.

Previously, the Chinese government had neither announced yearly statistics about demonstrations, nor had it talked about any specific incidents. In addition, Chinese media outlets only sporadically mentioned the protests. The only people able to gauge the magnitude of the disturbances were a few top Communist leaders. If the Minister of Public Security had not announced that protests were increasing, nobody would have known that this was happening.

Almost all Chinese perceive that economic disparities are growing and are aware of the

protests, but they do not think that the government is threatened with collapse.

The rising number of protests is a sign of “economic struggles” rather than “political strife.” The cause of the demonstrations is public anger over lost economic benefits, such as compensation, that people have not received because of corruption. Because this is the case, if municipal and Communist Party officials provide the expected compensation and punish officials accused of corruption, the protests will subside.

It is thought that many demonstrations grow out of strikes organized by labor unions demanding higher wages and “negotiating” over prices. Just as labor unions demanding higher wages from companies do not seek to topple the companies, people who are calling for compensation from the government are not attempting to bring down the Communist Party.

Fanning the Flames Before a Shift In Policy

Many Chinese understand the causes of the demonstrations in this manner, but many Western and Japanese observers do not comprehend the realities of the situation. Because hawks dominate the media in the United States, many commentators have a hostile attitude towards China, and Japan is the recipient of much of this skewed American analysis. If the Public Safety Bureau reports that there were 74,000 demonstrations in 2003, it is not surprising that many outside observers conclude that China must be near to collapse.

Recent events help explain why top Chinese officials are heightening the sense that [the country is facing a crisis](#). At the fifth plenary session of 16th Central Committee of the Communist Party, the Hu government decided to shift its economic emphasis away from strengthening large cities to a Five Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development aimed at agricultural areas.

In China, if the government decides that it is going to crack down on local official corruption, it first reveals the extent of corruption in the press in order to persuade people that the new policy is necessary. If the government did not do this, but simply promulgated an anti-corruption law, then many officials would be angered and the result would be a political battle between different factions within the Communist Party. To avoid such a scenario, the government arranges for many articles detailing corruption to be published. The government seeks to mobilize public opinion by raising public concern in order to smooth the way for the implementation its new policies.

Hence the Public Safety Bureau’s announcement that the number of demonstrations are rising and the increase in coverage by local newspapers to prepare the way for the launch of the Five Year Plan in 2006. Because the plan will decrease funds being directed to large cities, urban party officials are sure to oppose it. In order to quell this opposition, central government officials are playing up the danger posed by protests in rural areas.

The Last Will of Deng Xiaoping?

The Chinese government in October announced the rural revitalization plan just before U.S. Treasury Secretary John W. Snow visited China. Before his trip, Snow had repeatedly criticized China’s refusal to allow the yuan to float more freely.

During his visit, however, [Snow praised the Five Year Plan](#) as “beneficial not only for China but good for the world.” This is because if the prosperity of rural Chinese—1 billion of the country’s 1.3 billion population—improves even marginally, they will probably buy more American goods and the U.S. trade deficit with China will decrease.

Since the 1980s, Deng Xiaoping’s concept of “getting rich first” has guided Chinese

economic policy. The idea of “getting rich first” allowed people who can get rich first, to do so, while those who cannot fall behind. The current policy shift initiated by Hu places an [emphasis on helping rural agricultural areas](#) that have been left behind for the last two decades.

Hu is Deng’s second successor. Perhaps Deng’s last will was that his “get rich first” policy should expire after about twenty years.

Courting Taiwan

Hu Jintao is launching other [new policies](#). One of these is that China will not strike out at Taiwan as long as the island does not declare “independence.”

China appears ready to recognize Taiwan’s autonomy in the economic realm. Encouraged by Korea, the Hu government explored the possibility of allowing a representative from Taiwan to attend this month’s APEC conference in Pusan.

(On 12 October, after a visit to Taipei by Korean officials the Taiwanese government decided to send Wang Chin-p’ing, Chairman of the National Assembly, a top official in the opposition Nationalist Party to the meetings, but China apparently responded that a politician would not be acceptable, so the [Koreans asked Taiwan to send an economic expert](#).)

Nurtured by the Hu government, [economic ties between Taiwan and China have been growing](#) stronger. Chinese can now buy fruit grown in Taiwan and take vacations to the island, and the exchange of the two rivals’ currencies has begun on a limited scale. As economic ties strengthen, a declaration of independence becomes more difficult. Proponents of independence warn their fellow islanders to “not be taken in by Chinese money,” but many Taiwanese cannot restrain the desire to “get rich on the continent.”

Simultaneously, [Hu has been seeking to politically isolate Taiwan](#). In September at the UN General Assembly, he met with President Bush and suggested the creation of a bilateral organization to maintain stability across the Taiwan Straits. This proposal represents a Chinese attempt to advance a process for resolving the cross-straits standoff without including Taiwan, that is, one that is entirely between China and the United States. Hu was seeking to take advantage of the Bush administration’s view that any movement toward Taiwanese independence is a threat to the U.S.-Chinese relationship, but because many U.S. congressional representatives are hostile to China and sympathetic to Taiwan, Bush remained noncommittal.

Meanwhile, the Hu administration is embracing Taiwan’s opposition Nationalist Party, which tends to be friendly to Beijing. The most recent Chinese strategy to woo the Nationalist Party centers on positioning “Japan as the common enemy.” On September 3, Hu declared in a speech at the Sixtieth Anniversary Commemoration of Victory in the War of Resistance that “the Nationalist and Communist parties fought together, each party fulfilling its role, in order to defeat Japan during the anti-Japanese war.” This was the first time that any top Chinese Communist leader had clearly [recognized the contribution played by the Nationalist party in the war against Japan](#).

Because of President Koizumi’s visits to Yasukuni Shrine, Chinese relations with Japan are adversarial. Hu’s pronouncements that “China and Taiwan should unite in face of the enemy Japan,” utilising the Yasukuni visits as ammunition, reveal a deeper strategy.

America Decreases Its Criticism of China

Recently, T’ien Hung-mao, Taiwan’s former Minister of Foreign Affairs, who is now the chief of the Foreign Policy Research Center, stated in an interview with local media: “If the

United States pulls out of Iraq, America will be swept by isolationism and not want to become involved overseas, and the spread of Chinese hegemony will pick up speed. As America's desire for a fight falls, the likelihood of a military conflict in the Taiwan Straits will decrease. The Taiwanese government should face up to this scenario, and make realistic plans about how it will deal with such a situation."

In summary, T'ien Hung-mao predicted that as a result of its self-destructive behavior in Iraq, the [U.S. would fall into isolationism](#), world power would become more multipolar, Chinese hegemony would be strengthened, and Taiwan would no longer be able to maintain a hard-line stance vis-à-vis China by relying on U.S. power.

T'ien Hung-mao's statements are supported by recent developments. In the past several months, top [Bush administration officials have toned down criticism of China](#) during visits to the country. As mentioned, Treasury Secretary Snow praised Hu's Five-Year Plan during his trip in early October. The purpose of Snow's trip was to advance the interests of U.S. financial institutions and manufacturers in China.

Defense Secretary Rumsfeld arrived in Beijing soon after Snow departed. Even while criticizing increases in Chinese defense spending, he [expressed hope for greater military exchange](#) between the United States and China.

[Rumsfeld is like a salesman for the U.S. arms industry](#). During the Iran-Iraq War, he met with Saddam Hussein to persuade the dictator to buy chemical weapons. (At the same time, the United States was exporting weapons to Iran via Israel.) During this trip to China as well, it is thought that Rumsfeld was actually trying to sell U.S. weapons to China, even as he was publicly criticizing its leadership.

Before Snow's arrival, Secretary of State

Condoleezza Rice visited Beijing. She may be a "secret proponent of multilateralism." A few months earlier, during meetings between China, Russia, and India about how to maintain peace and stability in Eurasia, [Rice placed a call](#) to the Chinese foreign minister to extend her support for the conference.

After Bush participates in the APEC meetings in mid-November, he will visit China. During his first four-year term, he repeatedly criticized China, but like President Clinton, it appears that during his second term, he will lower his criticism and instead put on a happy face in Beijing and become a spokesman for U.S. companies hoping to make money in China.

The Truth and Fiction of the "Plan for Democratization"

It appears that the Bush administration has promised the Hu government that if China shows signs that it is gradually moving toward democracy, then the U.S. government will decrease its criticism. Recent actions by the Chinese government to strategically establish an image that seems to be making advances in democratization create this appearance.

"The Plan for Democratization and Reconstruction," which the Chinese government announced on 19 October, is one way that Hu is creating a democratic image. This plan proposes that the government and party explore avenues to increase the autonomy of minority peoples, expand grassroots democratization through village elections, pay more attention to human rights, and further democratize the party by implementing such changes as [institutional reform of the People's Congress](#).

Although the plan includes various suggestions, there is little indication that there will be significant progress in democratization. In short, there is little that is new in the plan. The election of some village leaders has been going on for some time, and the decision to

implement institutional reform of the People's Congress and hold broader local elections was taken earlier. Moreover, since the founding of the state in 1949, minority peoples have had a degree of regional autonomy.

The step toward greater democracy that is currently receiving most attention in China is [whether citizens will be allowed to directly elect local assembly members](#), who have until now been appointed by the party. Prime Minister Wen Jiabao told British Prime Minister Tony Blair during his visit to Beijing in September that the government would permit direct local elections, so the government has orally made this pledge. However, this reform measure is not included in the "Plan for Democratization." In China, there is a distinct possibility that if local politicians are popularly elected, regions will stop following the dictates of the party and central government, and will no longer pass tax revenues onto the state. If China becomes more democratic, territorial and clan loyalties and separatist movements will likely grow stronger, central rule might be endangered, internal order may deteriorate, and conflict between regions will probably increase.

If this happens, then the belief that China should democratize might simply be an armchair theory or even worse, an invitation for disaster, like the Bush administration's attempt to "democratize the Middle East." Perhaps the Chinese Communist Party's intense monopolization on power is as "necessary" as Hussein's and the Saud and Assad families' dictatorial rule. The [Plan for Democratization](#) states that "if the Communist Party does not exist, neither can democracy," and this is right.

The Chinese government's Plan for Democratization is a fiction. The government has merely drafted a plan that would satisfy U.S. insistence that "in order for China to be recognized as a major power by international

community, it needs to become democratic."

The Restoration of Hu Yaobang and Talks with Tibet and Hong Kong

Another sign of so-called democratization is the Hu government's restoration of the reputation of Hu Yaobang, the progressive leader who died just before the Tiananmen Square student demonstrations in 1989. Hu has largely been ignored in China during the last fifteen years because his death inspired the demonstrations. The party decided to conduct memorial rites for Hu on the ninetieth anniversary of his birth in November. This, too, is an [attempt by the Communist Party to alter its image](#).

The Hu government is making other efforts at creating a democratic image by increasing communication with the exiled Tibetan government of the Dalai Lama and with pro-democracy Hong Kong legislators. These are also strategic moves by the Chinese leadership as it seeks to increase China's global power.

Shenzhen, Democratization and Development

On 13 September during a visit to Shenzhen in Guangdong Province, a region adjacent to Hong Kong, Prime Minister [Wen Jiabao declared that Shenzhen should play a leading role in political reform](#) as it did in economic reform. Just as Shenzhen was a pioneer in the experiment with free-market economy of the 1980s, central Communist Party officials now appear to want the city to become a pioneer in the experimental introduction of direct city legislative elections. The following day after Wen had departed, Secretary Li Hongzhong, the top party official in Shenzhen, made no mention of Wen's remarks in his speech. It appeared as if local party officials were disregarding the experiment with political reform being advocated by central party officials. This incident highlights the divergence between central government leaders, who are actively implementing (or,

more accurately, pretending to implement) political reforms to elevate China's global reputation, and regional leaders, who have little interest in political reform.

In the case of Shenzhen, the disparity can be understood as one between local leaders, who want economic development to continue for coastal cities such as their own, and Beijing officials, who want to economically develop interior rural areas that have fallen so far behind places like Shenzhen.

This situation invites comparison with the European Union. After the American invasion of Iraq, top government leaders in France and Germany hoped to create a European Union that was strong enough to balance the power of the United States. This rush, however, was stalled by the rejection of the E.U. constitution in the nationwide referendums in France and the Netherlands. It was as if alienated voters were demanding that their leaders do something about the domestic economy before becoming infatuated with foreign affairs. The Bush administration's hopes for a more multi-lateral world, which are motivated by different reasons than those held by some French and German politicians, were also frustrated by the

vote.

The [Bush administration is alternatively acquiescent to and alarmed by the rise of China](#). Top Chinese central government officials hope to take advantage of their country's economic ascent to establish China as a geopolitical power, but because regional party officials do not recognize the trends towards America's self-destruction and global multi-polarity, they prefer that the government prioritize domestic issues and do not wholeheartedly support Hu's strategies vis-à-vis Taiwan and the international community.

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