

WebMemo



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Middle East Lessons for China: Internal Stability

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With all of the upheaval in the Middle East, the question naturally arises: What lessons are the People's Republic of China (PRC), and especially the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), likely to have learned from all of this upheaval? Particularly, are the Chinese likely to interpret it as underscoring the need to become more democratic? The Chinese reaction thus far suggests that such views are hopelessly optimistic.

The Chinese Response. The Chinese leadership's first reaction was to clamp down on the parts of the Internet that are accessible from within China. It imposed restrictions on searches for terms such as "Egypt" and "Jasmine Revolution." It also rapidly responded to efforts to organize physical protests. As Chinese "netizens" sought to organize their own protests, calling for demonstrations in over a dozen cities, Chinese security forces cracked down. Further restrictions were imposed on both the Internet and cell phone text-messaging systems.

Police and security forces were out in force in Shanghai and other urban centers, and the few people who tried to stage public demonstrations were rapidly arrested.

Meanwhile, many leading Chinese dissidents and human rights lawyers disappeared and are presumed to have been detained. Soon thereafter, the authorities imposed additional controls. Foreign correspondents were informed that they must obtain prior permission before engaging in reporting activities. Others were warned that failure to abide by Chinese rules would lead to arrest until

their visas were revoked.¹ More ominously, Chinese security forces in some cases resorted to more overt measures to discourage reporting on protests. This included not only arresting some journalists but even manhandling and beating reporters.²

A Shift in Priorities? Even as Chinese officials were seeking to constrain the expression and reporting of dissent, the annual meeting of the National People's Congress was underway in Beijing. In the process of discussing the 12th Five-Year Plan, it was revealed that China would be devoting more resources to internal security than to fending off external threats. China had officially spent 533.5 billion renminbi (\$81.2 billion) in 2010 on behalf of the People's Liberation Army but would now officially spend 601.1 billion renminbi (\$91.5 billion) in 2011, an increase of 12.7 percent.

By contrast, the PRC had officially spent 548.6 billion renminbi (\$83.5 billion) on internal security and policing efforts in 2010. This will be increased to 624.4 billion renminbi (\$95 billion) in 2011, constituting a 13.8 percent increase in spending on "police, state security, armed civil militia, courts and jails."³ Chinese spending figures are notoriously unreliable, but the fact that the reported amounts indicate both

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more absolute spending and a faster rate of increase in spending on internal security suggests that this is a major concern for Chinese decision makers.

Efforts to Dampen Popular Discontent. Chinese leadership worries in this regard predate the current turmoil in the Middle East. There have been growing numbers of “mass incidents” resulting from a range of factors, including growing income inequality exacerbated by regional disparities and concerns about corruption.⁴

Chinese analysts have noted that the situation is made worse by local officials’ failure either to take responsibility for their shortcomings or undertake remedial actions promptly. Zhou Yongkang’s comments regarding the need to “detect conflicts and problems early on” suggest that this remains a problem. Zhou, whose portfolio on the Politburo Standing Committee includes maintaining law and order, emphasized the ongoing need to improve “social management.”⁵

To this end, there have been some efforts by the CCP to undertake corrective measures. In particular, the corruption issue has led to several high-profile actions. In April 2010, the mayor of Zhuanghe (in Liaoning province in northeast China) was fired after he ignored a mass protest against corruption in city government. More recently, Chinese Railway Minister Liu Zhijun was fired as part of an investigation of graft within the ministry. Liu, who had held the post since 2003, is the most senior official to be investigated on corruption charges in five years. His dismissal on the eve of the National People’s Congress likely signals a renewed anti-corruption effort.

The new wrinkle in the Chinese efforts to maintain social stability—and the CCP’s hold on power—is the Internet. The ability of netizens to connect via the Internet, organize protests, and communicate information has led to a growth in “Web mass incidents (*wangluo quanti shijian*).” The unrest in the Middle East provides an indication of where such protests might eventually lead if the security services are unable to curtail them.

In this light, American decision makers need to think about American strategic communications efforts, especially with regard to China.

Sustain Funding for Voice of America and Other American Official News Outlets. It is ironic that, in the midst of the Chinese crackdown, the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) is discussing cutbacks in funding for various U.S. Chinese-language news services, including entirely eliminating the Cantonese service and reducing the number of Mandarin broadcasters. *China Daily*, the PRC’s official English-language newspaper, lost no time congratulating the BBG on its decision.⁶

The BBG has argued that these cutbacks are intended to free resources to emphasize Internet access to Chinese audiences. But this is both (1) a false dichotomy because it is hardly a choice between radio and the Internet and (2) a risky strategy because the Chinese clearly intend to limit access through the Great Firewall of China.

Continue to Emphasize Internet Freedom. In sharp contrast to her initial days as Secretary of State, when she reassured China that human

1. Peter Ford, “Report on China’s ‘Jasmine Revolution’? Not If You Want Your Visa,” *Christian Science Monitor*, March 3, 2011, at <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-Pacific/2011/0303/Report-on-China-s-Jasmine-Revolution-Not-if-you-want-your-visa> (March 18, 2011).
2. Damian Grammaticas, “China’s Intimidation of the Foreign Press,” BBC, March 8, 2011, at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-12666701> (March 18, 2011).
3. Jeremy Page, “NPC: Internal Security Tops Military in China Spending,” China Realtime Report, March 5, 2011, at http://blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/2011/03/05/internal-security-tops-military-in-china-spending/?mod=google_news_blog (March 18, 2011).
4. See Walter Lohman, “Defrost the U.S.–Taiwan Relationship,” Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 3073, February 28, 2011, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2011/02/Defrost-the-US-Taiwan-Relationship>.
5. Chris Hogg, “China’s Security Tsar Warns Over ‘Jasmine Revolution,’” BBC, February 21, 2011, at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-12522856> (March 18, 2011).
6. Editorial, “End of Sound Wave,” *China Daily*, February 19, 2011, at http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2011-02/19/content_12043274.htm (March 18, 2011).

rights would not be allowed to interfere with U.S.–Chinese cooperation in areas such as climate change, Hillary Clinton seems to have had an epiphany and has come to recognize that defending human rights is an integral part of American foreign policy.

In particular, she has made several speeches emphasizing the importance of freedom for the Internet and the need to “protect human rights online as we do offline.”⁷ China’s efforts to limit Internet freedom clearly represent a challenge to these ideas and should be vigorously countered.

Keep the Internet Open. One of the targets of Chinese ire is the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN). This small, non-profit organization is one of the entities that creates the rules for naming Web sites. President Clinton transferred that rule-making authority from the U.S. government to ICANN in order to prevent it from being wholly managed by government bureaucracies. China, along with many other autocracies, would prefer to see this authority transferred to the United Nations, which would allow sovereignty to

be extended to cyberspace. This is hardly surprising, but “these days, [ICANN] is fending off attacks from a seemingly unlikely source: the Obama administration.”⁸

It is high time that the Administration take a page from its Democratic predecessor and return to supporting Internet freedom at the technical level, even as it instructs its Secretary of State to support it at the political level. Supporting ICANN’s role is an essential component of such a policy.

China’s Greatest Concern: Instability. As China prepares for its next generation of leaders to take over in 2012, the greatest threat to the CCP comes not from Taiwan or the United States but from its own population. Recent developments in the Middle East only heighten the Chinese leadership’s concerns, yet its reactions may precipitate the very results they seek to avoid.

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7. U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, “Internet Rights and Wrongs: Choices and Challenges in a Networked World,” remarks at George Washington University, Washington, D.C., February 15, 2011, at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2011/02/156619.htm> (March 18, 2011).
 8. Ian Shapira, “Obama Administration Joins Critics of U.S. Nonprofit Group That Oversees Internet,” *The Washington Post*, March 1, 2011, at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/02/28/AR2011022803719.html> (March 18, 2011).