

Is China as stable as it says it is?

Written by Sushil Seth
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One noticeable aspect about China these days is the cockiness and arrogance of its rulers, which manifests itself both at home and abroad. This has come with a new sense of entitlement about China's central place in global affairs.

US President Barack Obama's visit to China last month, where he spent more time than in any other country during his tour of the region, helped confirm Beijing's conviction about its "manifest destiny" as the new Middle Kingdom.

In China's relationship with the outside world, this arrogance is reflected at several levels.

At one level, a deeply rooted sense of historical humiliation at the hand of Europeans and Japanese has created an exaggerated sense of nationalism. As a result, Beijing requires constant confirmation of its great power status and has a tendency to assert its sovereignty and "territorial integrity."

This is often used in reference to Taiwan, where China uses coercive diplomacy on other countries to assert its position.

Beijing also uses coercive diplomacy to prevent other countries from having any kinds of dealings with the Tibetan leader-in-exile the Dalai Lama and Rebiya Kadeer, the leader of the Uighur community, also in exile.

In the cases of Tibet and Xinjiang, even though these regions are already part of China and are recognized as such by the international community (with some exceptions), Beijing remains paranoid.

The revived tensions along the Indo-Chinese border were in large part related to New Delhi's refusal to bow to pressure from Beijing not to allow the Dalai Lama to visit Tawang, a town on the border that houses a major Tibetan Buddhist monastery.

In the same way, relations between China and Australia recently reached a crisis point when Canberra granted a visa to Kadeer to attend the premiere of a documentary about her life at the Melbourne International Film Festival.

This is evidence that China's perception of itself as a great power involves a dangerous mix of national pride and paranoia, as highlighted by a series of naval incidents in the South China Sea involving Chinese ships and US Navy vessels.

Vice Admiral John Bird, commander of the Seventh Fleet, recently told the Sydney Morning Herald that the jostling of a US ship in March by Chinese vessels had been followed by other lesser incidents.

He said: "I would like to believe China learnt from that, but to be truthful, at any time they could do that again."

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“They have made it clear they consider the South China Sea to be more or less theirs,” he said.

It is not difficult to imagine that such brinkmanship could get out of hand.

At home, the authorities are encouraging the view that the people should be grateful to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) for achieving economic growth and bringing glory to the nation.

As such, whenever there is resistance to and criticism of the CCP’s policies and authoritarian ways, the leadership reacts with intolerance and repression.

When Hu Jintao (胡锦涛) became president, there was an expectation that the political scene would be somewhat liberalized — at least within the CPC. But those hopes have since been dashed.

Many human rights activists and lawyers supporting their cause “are either in jail or have had their licenses removed,” said Mo Shaoping (莫少平), one of the activist lawyers.

Fan Yafeng (樊亚丰), another rights activist, has been sacked from the Academy of Social Sciences.

“The Government has given up all political reforms. Their only aim is to protect their own interests,” Fan says.

In his view, China is closer to its “crisis point” than many people believe.

The government is targeting any group that has the potential of emerging as an organized opposition to its rule.

A case in point is the crackdown on informal church groups — also known as “house churches” — that operate outside official control.

With China’s Christian population estimated at about 130 million people, the government keeps a tight control on Church organizations.

Those “house churches,” however, have resisted government control, which has resulted in persecution, evictions and detention of some leaders. Given their capacity to mobilize support inside and outside the country, it is no surprise that the government sees them as a threat.

The explosion of “black jails” to detain people petitioning the central authorities against rampant injustice at the local level is another example of increasing repression.

In a recent report, Human Rights Watch wrote: “Provincial and municipal level officials have developed an extrajudicial system to intercept, abduct, and detain petitioners in black jails.”

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“Their emergence since 2003 constitutes one of the most serious and widespread uses of extra-legal detention in China’s recent history,” it said.

It is difficult to believe that the central leadership is not aware of such illegal activities. Indeed, these jails have the hallmarks of dirty work being outsourced by government agencies.

The government is so obsessed with managing the country’s image that it refuses to see how bad things are.

Wherever one looks, the situation has the makings of a serious social crisis. For instance, the abduction of children doesn’t seem to grab the attention of the authorities to the same extent it would in a civilized society.

Unemployment is rising, with 20 million losing their jobs following the closure of many factories making goods for export. This puts additional strain on an already depressed rural economy, as most of these unemployed were rural migrants working in the urban industrial economy.

China’s economic stimulus package might show healthy economic growth with inflated stock market indicators and property valuation, but they are not doing much, if anything, to stimulate employment.

The social services sectors like health, education and welfare are starved of funds.

The stimulus package was nothing more than a stopgap measure awaiting the revival of the export sector — which might not happen, at least not for some years, because the US continues to have serious debt problems.

Commenting on the wastefulness of some of the stimulus spending, Zhang Xin, an investment executive, said: “In Pudong [Shanghai’s business district], vacancy rates are as high as 50 percent and they are still building new skyscrapers.”

Such wasteful spending on construction projects is contributing to corruption, which is already a national disease.

Even the much hyped talk of a significant decline in poverty in China has to be approached with caution, when 800 million farmers are not part of the urban industrial economy.

Irene Khan of Amnesty International said that China’s alleged success in alleviating poverty is overblown.

At the same time, China’s industrial and business sector are controlled by party apparatchik in cahoots with their favored industrial and business barons.

Therefore, the image of a prosperous China requires some serious questioning. The country

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is a robber-baron economy working for the powerful and operating in a moral vacuum.

As Xu Zhiyong (徐智勇), an activist, has said: “If China reaches a crisis point ... it will be because of the accumulated rage from social injustices.”

This rage is frequently expressed through demonstrations in different parts of the country, though it has yet to turn into an orchestrated, nationwide movement, mostly because of extensive government surveillance and exemplary punishments for those who stand out of line.

Most people have a sense of where that line is. For instance, any advocacy of democracy, and questioning of the CCP's monopoly on power, can be regarded as treason because the party and the nation are one and the same.

This is where the real danger lies, as built-up social rage can easily be channeled into national hysteria over some perceived slight and/or humiliation of China's national pride and cause an international incident.

There is danger for the CCP as well, because the same organized hysteria is also capable of being turned against the party if it fails to ensure China's imagined place in the world.

In the next decade or so, the Chinese leadership will have to maintain social stability by turning people's rage into chauvinist pride.

This will be a delicate operation, with unpredictable results for China and the world.

Sushil Seth is a writer based in Australia.

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