

MANAGING OPEN VIOLENCE IN CHINA

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Executive Summary

1. China has seen a sharp increase in public unrest among its citizens in not only less developed areas but more developed areas as well.
2. Despite the widespread protests, they have remained local phenomena, in which local people complain about local issues. No larger movements, or leaders have emerged to coordinate the many incidents, despite similar causes for unrest and systemic problems of China's political and social system.
3. Government authorities have developed a 'problem-solving playbook' to quiet local unrest. This 'playbook' of ten steps is followed with every protest. In March 2011 it received the approval of the National People's Congress, and was incorporated into the 12th Five-Year Programme to increase public safety.
4. Despite the similarities between large numbers of cases of unrest and their causes, both the protests and the reaction by government authorities are restricted to a specific local area and have no bearing on other localities.
5. A new 'social contract' has emerged between the government and the public, in which the former promises to develop China, while the latter promises not to disturb its 'harmonious society'. This 'contract' provides the government with the legitimacy to govern and facilitates interactions between the two.
6. This approach is highly effective in addressing specific local complaints by providing specific localised answers and in preventing unhappiness from spreading over long-standing problems.
7. The approach has, however, contributed to many underlying problems in Chinese society. These will worsen as the violent interactions between the government and its citizens encourage both sides to ignore them. Violence as first choice rather than last resort is eroding the citizens' trust in government institutions, and the rule of law.