

**THE CHINESE LEADERSHIP'S
SOFTENING RESPONSE TO
POPULAR PROTEST**

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Executive Summary

1. Over recent years the intensity of popular unrest in China has increased extraordinarily. The Chinese leadership has responded to this trend by gradually softening its public communication on the issue.
2. From Jiang Zemin to Hu Jintao, the Chinese Communist Party devised a new set of terms and concepts to enable a more frank discussion of protest within the boundaries of party ideology. It has also increasingly acknowledged that most grassroots protesters' grievances are legitimate.
3. At the same time, the party leadership has stepped up open criticism of local officials and circumscribed conditions under which state repression is considered appropriate. However, central leaders have stopped short of openly endorsing protest as a legitimate form of behavior.
4. The central government possibly chose to respond in this way to increase pressure on often unruly local officials and protect the legitimacy it enjoys among ordinary citizens.
5. The leadership's peculiar reaction to popular pressure sheds light on why the one-party regime has been able to, up to now, defy the odds and coexist with such a considerable degree of popular unrest. However, its populist strategy may well have emboldened citizens to take their grievances to the streets.
6. While it is too early to gauge Xi Jinping's spin on the issue, the new leadership has provided some indications that it may back up strong words with more decisive steps to solve chronic governance problems at the roots of unrest.
7. The handling of the early 2013 journalists strike in Guangzhou suggests that Xi's administration does, for now, continue with the approach of cautiously accommodating pressure from social forces instead of openly confronting it.

8. However, it also suggests that the lines of conflict in the politics of protest may become more complicated. Pressure from society is unlikely to decrease anytime soon.