

China's Precarious Balance: Cohesiveness and Stability in a Fast-Changing Society

by Minxin Pei

Concerns about China's political and social stability figure prominently—and rightly—in Western governments' formulation of policy toward Beijing. Unlike a strong, stable, but less-than-friendly China, an unstable (and presumably weak) China presents a different set of strategic and political challenges to Western policymakers. Instability—whether economic, social, or political—makes it difficult to protect some of the important interests that have been pursued by the West during the last two decades (such as improvements in human rights, governance, and access to the Chinese market). Internally, political instability usually triggers large-scale violence and loss of government authority. In the case of China, which has a large arsenal of weapons of mass destruction, a likely fallout from such instability would be ineffective control regimes over the exports of such weapons and related technologies.

Despite these profound concerns about the consequences of instability in China, however, reliable predictions about Chinese politics have been quite rare. Few analysts, for instance, foresaw the downfall of two of Deng Xiaoping's chief liberal lieutenants (Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang) or the bloody Tiananmen events in June 1989. Deng's successor, Jiang Zemin, was derided as a lightweight and thought incapable of managing a smooth transition of power from the

Deng era. On the eve of China's resumption of sovereignty over Hong Kong, the conventional wisdom in the West was that China would “kill the goose that lays the golden eggs.” Shortly after President Clinton's visit to China in June–July 1998, there was much optimism about the prospects of political liberalization. And immediately before China and the United States signed a historic trade agreement paving the way for China's entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO), such a deal was considered unlikely because the top leadership in Beijing was judged to be hopelessly divided and paralyzed.

These and other similar instances of wrong predictions about Chinese politics in general, and political instability in particular, may be attributed to an analytical approach that focuses exclusively on elite politics. Given the thick secrecy with which Chinese leaders conceal their decisionmaking process, this elite approach can yield guesswork at best.

To examine the issue of political stability more comprehensively, the emphasis here is not on the characteristics of individual leaders, but on a set of environmental factors that influence decisionmaking and politics. The central premise of this analysis is that stability (or its opposite, instability) is the product of a dynamic process of change: The economic, social, and political transformation that has been going on in China in the last two decades has generated forces of both instability and stability, disintegration and cohesion. As the transformative process

Minxin Pei is Senior Associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington, DC

unfolds, the forces of disintegration and instability may assume different forms and manifest their effects in different ways, as do those of cohesion and stability. What matters most is the overall dynamic balance between such forces.

Generally speaking, four primary types of cohesiveness—elite, ideological, institutional, and social cohesiveness—influence China’s political stability. Looking at changes in these four variables will provide an overall assessment of the balance of forces of disintegration and cohesion in China today.

Elite Cohesiveness

Elite cohesiveness is generally considered one of the most important factors in determining the stability of a regime. Obviously, deep division within the elite, especially the ruling elite, is often a source of political conflict and paralysis in decisionmaking. Elite cohesiveness itself is also an aggregate consisting of a set of measurable and intangible primary characteristics of the members of the elite. Such characteristics may include ideological outlook (which will be discussed in the next segment), political experience, sociological background (education and class background), and generational identity. In addition to these primary variables, elite cohesiveness is also affected secondarily by the norms and procedures governing elite politics. Although the primary variables are crucial in determining the degree of cohesiveness among the elite, the role of norms and institutional procedures in enhancing or reducing such cohesiveness is considerable, though often overlooked.

Historically, political instability in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) was, almost without exception, triggered initially by a power struggle within the ruling elite. Such struggle, in turn, was caused by a lack of elite cohesiveness. For analysts, elite cohesiveness is a relative concept, especially when it is used in the context of contemporary China.

It is thus unavoidable to compare the degree of elite cohesiveness of Maoist China with that of post-Mao China. One can make a strong case that, other things being equal, the lack of elite cohesiveness during the Mao Zedong regime (1949–1976) was a major source of political turmoil. The low level of cohesiveness in the Mao regime was the result of many factors. First and foremost, the fact that the Chinese revolution was won by a coalition of nationalist, Leninist, and liberal forces determined that the new ruling elite

would comprise individuals from diverse sociological, political, and ideological backgrounds. Conflicts soon emerged inside the young PRC, both within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and between the CCP and its former allies (mostly liberal intellectuals). Some conflicts led to internal purges and claimed, as their victims, some of the senior revolutionary leaders in the CCP hierarchy (such as Gao Gang and Peng Dehuai) and sowed the seeds for future power struggles. Other conflicts resulted in the split between the CCP and the intelligentsia, as in the tragic Anti-Rightist Movement of 1957 that destroyed the lives and careers of half a million people, most of whom were members of the intelligentsia.

Table 1. Elite Cohesiveness in China’s Regimes, 1949–1999

| | Mao | Deng | Jiang |
|-------------------------|------------|--------------|--------------|
| Ideological Outlook | Diverse | Less diverse | Similar |
| Political Experience | Diverse | Similar | Similar |
| Sociological Background | Diverse | Diverse | Similar |
| Generational Identity | Strong | Weak | Strong |
| Elite Norms | Weak | Improving | Strong |

Ultimately, the ideological conflicts within the elite over the fundamental CCP policy—“class struggle vs. economic construction”—escalated to irreconcilable levels and culminated in the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). With the help of the radicals and the control of the military, Mao Zedong was able to purge those who advocated a more moderate policy and took China on a disastrous path to self-isolation and bloody civil turmoil.

It must be pointed out that diversity in the backgrounds and ideological outlooks of the elite should not be a necessary condition for conflict. In Maoist China, what made intra-elite conflict inevitable and uncontrollable was not merely the above-mentioned diversity, but the lack of institutional procedures within the CCP for managing such conflict and containing its political devastation. As in other totalitarian regimes, the supreme leader, in this case Mao, enjoyed unrestrained power and discretion, especially in the appointment and removal of members of the top leadership. Job security for the elite throughout the regime was minimal, as there was no due process

or set of principles providing a basic level of protection for the elite. Worse still, there was no guarantee of the physical security of the elite. Fall from power was immediately followed by public humiliation, physical abuse, torture, show-trial, incarceration, and worse. In most instances, even the family members of the disgraced officials were not spared. This created a “winner-take-all and loser-lose-all” environment in which power struggles became extremely vicious and uncompromising.

Two additional factors intensified power struggles among the elite during the Mao era. First, the CCP had no internal procedures to marginalize or reduce the power of extremists. In fact, the radicalized Communist ideology under Mao legitimized leftist extremism, and the rapid promotion of radicals during the Cultural Revolution provided further incentives for displaying extremist outlook and behavior. Second, the Mao regime had no reliable system of promotion and retirement. As a result, elite circulation was slow and frustrated the ambitions of the younger generation, many of whom were thus easily recruited into rival factions with the prospects of better political careers.

The Deng era saw many reform measures aimed at correcting the flaws of the Maoist regime. As a result, the ruling elite became more homogenous and were protected by more reliable rules and norms. The homogenization initially occurred due to a combination of political purges and institution-building. After Deng consolidated power in 1979, he began a systematic purge of the radicals inside the regime and a simultaneous campaign of rehabilitating and recruiting moderates. Consequently, although Deng retained a considerable number of ideological conservatives leery of rapid economic reform and gave them some political space, his efforts to promote younger and more educated individuals gradually built a solid core of moderates within the elite.

Deng also pushed through one of the most important political reform measures in post-Mao China—a mandatory retirement system for government officials. Under the new system established in 1982, strict retirement rules were set for officials at different levels inside the government (but not the CCP). This greatly accelerated elite circulation and helped inject much-needed fresh blood into the regime. It also removed a source of political instability—the frustration of capable and ambitious individuals whose political prospects would otherwise be utterly hopeless under

the old system. To better manage intra-elite conflicts, Deng introduced a set of rules that spelled out the procedures for resolving policy and political disputes. He also made sure that losers in internal power struggles enjoyed a minimal level of physical security and material comfort (he violated this policy only once, when he personally ordered the persecution of Bao Tong, chief aide to Zhao Ziyang, after the Tiananmen crackdown in 1989). To prevent the rise of radicals on either end of the ideological spectrum, Deng mandated limited competition for certain CCP posts. Over the years, such competition was responsible for preventing some of the more controversial political figures (mostly hardliners and princelings) from rising to important positions inside the regime.

By and large, Deng’s efforts were very successful in increasing the degree of cohesiveness within the ruling elite. However, the Deng regime had a more mixed record in dealing with China’s nonruling elite. Members of the nonruling elite, or societal elite, are business leaders, professionals, and intellectuals. If coopted, these elites can be an important source of stability. If alienated, they can become potent opponents. The regime astutely adopted a divide-and-rule strategy in dealing with societal elites. It gave considerable gains in freedom, status, and material rewards for business and professional elites because their primary interests—economic and professional opportunities—were compatible with the regime modernization program and could be satisfied without threatening its hold on power. It was the liberal intelligentsia, a perennial opposition in all authoritarian regimes, who posed a constant challenge to the regime.

Although Deng initially relied on this group to dislodge the radicals and formulate an ideologically palatable theory (“Socialism with Chinese Characteristics”) to justify his economic reforms, their demands for political reform and democratization soon collided with his precepts on the supremacy of CCP rule. The subsequent conflict between the regime and the intelligentsia formed the most visible schism in Chinese politics in the last two decades. Its most violent and tragic expression was the 1989 Tiananmen Square pro-democracy movement. Interestingly, it was the bloody setback of the Tiananmen movement, which led to the imprisonment and exile of the leaders of the intelligentsia, that transformed the relationship between the regime and the intelligentsia.

The crackdown itself produced a surprising result: With the removal of the radical liberals (mostly through exile) and their intraregime patrons, the moderates inside the intelligentsia gained dominance. Their ascendance also coincided with two epochal events and one interactive trend: (1) the collapse of communism in the former Soviet bloc, (2) Deng's tour of southern China in 1992, and (3) rising Chinese nationalism and China-bashing in the West. These three factors produced an unanticipated political realignment that led to the re-incorporation of the moderate intelligentsia into the regime and the further marginalization of the liberals. The social and political turmoil following the Soviet collapse graphically demonstrated to the moderates the costs of radicalism and the undesirability of hasty reforms. Deng's tour, which reenergized China's lagging reform, gave the moderate intelligentsia new hopes as well as opportunities to rejoin the regime or seek business prospects in the private sector. The more controversial and not-so-well-understood factor—the interaction between rising Chinese nationalism and China-bashing in the West—did much to undermine the intelligentsia's admiration and support, which was very deep in the 1980s, for Western values.

As a result, the threat posed by the intelligentsia, which used to obsess the regime in the 1980s, greatly diminished toward the late 1990s. But the incorporation of the intelligentsia into the regime may have been only a temporary trend, because the fundamental goal of the moderate intelligentsia—reforming China's economic *and* political systems—conflicts with the declared CCP goal of maintaining its supremacy. At the moment, China's deteriorating external environment (unstable relations with the United States and the increasing prospects of a military conflict with Taiwan) makes it hard for this group to push their political reform agenda. Should the external environment improve and, more important, should this group eventually come to realize the basic incompatibility of their interests with those of a CCP intent on perpetual monopoly of power, they are likely to turn against the CCP. The probability of an intraregime power struggle will increase because many members of the moderate intelligentsia are now inside the regime.

Ideological Cohesiveness

The concept of ideological cohesiveness refers, first, to the degree to which professed ideological values are consistent with actual policy and, second, to the degree to which the elite and the public identify with such values. Ideological cohesiveness on both dimensions is politically important. A relatively high degree of consistency between a regime's professed ideological values and its policy tends to inspire confidence and loyalty, among both the ruling elite and the public. On the other hand, a high degree of dissonance between ideology and policy usually generates cynicism. A regime's professed ideology must also have an intrinsic appeal to its elite members and the public at large. Without such an appeal, the degree of overall ideological cohesiveness may be low.

It has been obvious to students of Chinese politics that, if measured by these two standards, China's official Communist ideology has declined considerably in the last two decades. On the whole, this decline has positively contributed to political stability and progress of reform. At the elite level, declining Communist ideology has marginalized the leftist forces that previously had dominated Chinese politics. Pragmatism has replaced ideology as the guiding force for policy. The decline of the official ideology has nevertheless created subtle difficulties for the regime. Because it has not yet officially jettisoned the Communist ideology, the dissonance between the regime's professed values and policy has increased greatly and become a source of cynicism. This dissonance also makes the regime vulnerable to occasional attacks launched by the dwindling leftist forces. Sometimes, it becomes an important obstacle to economic reform (such as massive privatization). Bereft of ideological appeals, the regime has no effective means to mobilize the emotional support of its people. As institutionalist economists have noted, ideologically inspired voluntary compliance and cooperation can significantly cut monitoring and enforcement costs (and increase efficiency). Loss of the regime's ideological attractiveness may have become an important, though not quantifiable, source of internal decay (such as corruption and erosion of CCP authority) as well as popular resistance expressed in a variety of forms (such as tax evasion, open defiance of authority, and noncompliance with government rules). The ideological void created by the declining Communist orthodoxy has led to the proliferation of new values that pose direct and indirect

challenges to the regime. Among those values are Western liberalism (especially strong among the intelligentsia), various religions and cults (such as the Catholic Church, Islam, and quasi-religious groups like the Falun Gong).

The relationship between the regime and society has been affected by the ideological shift. The value-based bond (however false, in retrospect) that connected the regime with the Chinese people has evaporated. Faced with a people deeply disillusioned with its official ideology and distrustful of its policies, the regime has grown increasingly reliant on a new set of instruments, the most prominent of which are pragmatist policies aimed at maintaining high economic growth and improving people's livelihoods, appeals to Chinese nationalism, and selective repression.

It remains too soon to judge whether this ad hoc approach can adequately offset the loss of ideological appeal suffered by the regime. Pragmatist policies under Deng and Jiang Zemin have contributed greatly to China's economic growth and rising standards of living. However, pragmatism is no ideology—it may provide ad hoc political justification of policy, but it does not supply an alternative vision. Its appeal remains strong at the moment because most Chinese people seem to assign a high value to economic development. Such appeal may decline as, ironically, the standards of living rise to a certain level and people begin to demand changes in the political system.

Appeals to nationalism can produce, at best, short-lived support. Such appeals tend to be more effective when the country faces acute external threats. Without such threats, it is hard to translate nationalism-generated emotions into political support for the regime's domestic policy. On many issues, nationalism is simply irrelevant to China's most pressing problems (rampant official corruption, rising inequality, environmental degradation, and restructuring of unprofitable state-owned enterprises). Overplaying nationalism could also backfire because it risks jeopardizing the regime's other goals. Obviously, fueling anti-Western nationalism could undermine China's relations with the West and investors' confidence. The nationalism card could also be played by the dissident groups to embarrass the regime.

On balance, declining ideological cohesiveness does not pose an immediate threat to political stability. Its impact on Chinese politics is subtle, indirect, and impossible to measure. In all likelihood, the regime will face greater challenges—mainly from the

rise of competing ideologies and beliefs—in the future, especially if it fails to offer a more coherent ideology that is fundamentally compatible with the Chinese political reality.

Institutional Cohesiveness

Institutional cohesiveness—the degree to which the principal institutions of a political system perform according to a set of rules and norms—affects political stability in several ways. In a polity in which the main political institutions have a well-defined scope of authority and norms are enforceable, the political process tends to be more stable and the government functions more effectively. This does not mean the total absence of conflict in such systems—conflict of interests exists in any political system. However, well-defined and enforceable rules and norms can help manage such conflicts and contain their effects. In contrast, polities in which the principal institutions perform according to poorly defined or unenforceable rules and norms often experience paralysis as institutional rivalry develops into an uncontrolled fight for power.

In the Chinese context, an analysis of institutional cohesiveness must examine two sets of institutional relationships—those between the ruling Communist Party and the state and those among the various institutions of the state.

The central characteristic of the Chinese political system is its party-state. A peculiar product of the 20th century, the party-state differs from the nation-state because of the supremacy of the ruling party over the state and the existence of a parallel system of rule which embodies and ensures such supremacy and performs the basic functions of government. The emergence of the party-state in China was largely a product of history. The Chinese Revolution forged a well-organized political party that later established the Chinese state after winning the revolution. For a developing country ravaged by revolution and civil war, the Communist Party became a central organizing force. Its hierarchical structure, organizational networks, and political ideology could easily be tapped to meet the urgent needs of state-building. Despite the claims that the Communist Party built the modern Chinese state, the truth is that the state was established on the back of the Communist Party. The short-term advantages

of a party-state were evident: State authority was swiftly established; the young communist state, against monumental odds, was able to perform its most critical functions (law and order, national security, and provision of basic public goods).

However, the party-state has numerous long-term degenerative flaws. The effective administration of the state by the ruling party perpetuates the weakness of the state. Political risks in a party-state are highly concentrated, because the health of the state depends on the vigor of the ruling party. Ideological and organizational decline of the ruling party inevitably impairs the effectiveness of the state. Internal division and power struggle of the ruling party often affect the integrity of key state institutions. Most important, the supremacy of the ruling party politicizes the basic state institutions, such as the military and courts, which are supposed to be autonomous in modern political systems.

The tensions between the ruling party and the state are thus unavoidable, for the basic needs of the party (maintaining its monopoly of power) and those of a modern state (keeping itself autonomous from political forces) inevitably conflict. To be sure, such conflicts of party interests vs. state interests in the Chinese case have been often disguised as intraregime disputes (such as over the party's policy priorities). In the Deng era, the ruling elites became increasingly aware of the need to define the party-state relationship and proposed, in 1987, to separate the party from the state. The reform initiative, which was associated with soon-to-be-disgraced CCP General Secretary Zhao Ziyang, failed miserably in the conservative backlash of 1989. After the Tiananmen crackdown, the regime reemphasized the supremacy of the CCP and never seriously entertained any thought of withdrawing itself from the state. Consequently, the long-accumulated tensions between the party and the state remain and, if anything, are expected to increase in the future as the contradictions between the central characteristics of a monopolistic party regime and the requirements of a modern state intensify and become more visible.

The cohesiveness of a state is not only influenced by the relationship between the ruling political forces and the state apparatus, but also by the relationship between the various components of the state apparatus itself. In the Chinese case, these two sets of relationships are interdependent. This interdependence poses highly complicated challenges to reform efforts

aimed at creating a more decentralized and flexible state. It is generally recognized that, despite dramatic *economic* decentralization of the last twenty years, *political* authority in China remains highly centralized. Such centralization has been usually attributed to China's perceived need for it and to the country's proverbial fear of disintegration. Much less well-understood, however, is the fact that, although centralization of power has long been a historical feature of the Chinese political system, the monopoly of power by the Communist Party has made the centralization of state not only necessary but sustainable. Without the party-state, such centralization may be possible, but its perpetuation is unlikely. On the other hand, a highly centralized state serves the needs of the Communist Party effectively.

Centralization, however, has come at great costs. Intrastate institutional relations, especially those between the central government and provincial governments, remain unstable. As a result, policy changes are frequent and sudden, creating ample incentives for both the center and provinces to cheat. This state of affairs has created a unique paradox: centralization and ineffectiveness. It is marked by the oft-observed low capacity of the central government to implement its policies and enforce its rules in provinces, despite the apparently high degree of centralization of decisionmaking power. Without restructuring China's constitutional framework to create a federalist state, this paradox will only worsen in the future.

The greatest failure of the Deng era was that of the regime to establish institutions capable of effectively managing state-society relations. Although significant progress in legal reform has created increasing, but limited, institutional channels through which the Chinese people can seek protection of their personal and property rights, the overall institutional framework of managing state-society relations remained almost nonexistent. For example, there are few legitimate institutions and procedures that can represent independently organized social interests. Those that are accessible to the public—such as the press, the People's Congress, and the courts—have not demonstrated sufficient effectiveness to gain credibility. In any case, they provide only individual relief, but no collective assistance. State-society relations are thus treated more or less as crisis management: The ruling elites are galvanized into action only after long-accumulated state-society tensions develop into crises. Without a complex and sophisticated institutional framework to

address such tensions, the regime typically resorts to repression, rather than manipulation or diversion, to deal with such crises (the most recent example being the crackdown on the Falun Gong movement). This modus operandi tends to create short-term instability without any long-term benefits. The fundamental solution to this systemic flaw is a gradual, but significant, expansion of democratic participation and social autonomy in China—a highly unlikely prospect given the current political climate in Beijing.

Social Cohesiveness

Two factors determine the degree of social cohesiveness of a society: class cleavages and cultural identity. Generally, societies with less divisive class cleavages and strong cultural identity (Japan and Germany being such societies) enjoy a higher degree of social cohesiveness. Although social cohesiveness per se may not have a direct impact on political stability, it is an important environmental factor that increases (or lowers) the overall risks of political turmoil. In countries where deep class divisions (manifested chiefly in high inequality) and conflicts of cultural identity (mainly ethnic cleavages) exist, the likelihood of political instability is significantly higher than in countries where similar cleavages are less pronounced.

There is mounting evidence showing rising inequality in China in the last twenty years. Many factors contributed to this trend. The abandonment of egalitarian policies that imposed an artificial level of equality (mainly by preventing the accumulation of wealth by the talented and entrepreneurial segments of society) during the Maoist era obviously played a role. Economic liberalization that freed up market activities and created new business opportunities allowed the entrepreneurial elements to take greater risks and seek higher returns. Freer labor mobility, while benefiting some, has left immobile labor elements behind economically. As in the West, rapid technological progress has favored the younger and more educated in the labor force. The restructuring of loss-making state-owned enterprises removed the rents previously collected by their workers. To be sure, these market forces were not solely responsible for rising inequality in China. Government policy or inaction exacerbated this trend. For instance, lack of public investment in rural infrastructure, research and development, and primary education was a major

cause of stagnant rural income. Continual discrimination against private firms (especially in terms of their access to bank credits and financial markets) inhibits the growth of the private sector, which could have helped alleviate the rising unemployment problem (a major cause of inequality in urban areas). The CCP prohibition against independent labor unions has further denied Chinese workers their collective bargaining power and left them poorly protected in a rapidly changing labor market with few rules.

Measured by inequality, China's social cohesiveness has evidently declined. But it is difficult to determine, on the basis of available evidence, the political effects of this decline. Inequality in China has two salient characteristics: interregional (or interprovincial) and urban-rural inequality. In the past, the political effects of inequality could be contained geographically because of these two characteristics. In post-reform China, labor mobility has effectively broken down the geographical barriers. The consequence of this breakdown is rather mixed: it both reduces inequality and increases it at the same time. On an individual level, mobile laborers who migrate to more affluent areas have increased their income, while those immobile ones remain mired in poverty. On a regional level, provinces with a large outflow of laborers seem to have benefited greatly from the remittances those laborers have sent back.

The novel—and potentially destabilizing—phenomenon is the emergence of the urban poor (mainly victims of reforms in state-owned enterprises). Unlike the vast masses of the rural poor (hidden and dispersed in inaccessible interiors), China's urban poor are concentrated, visible, and easily organized. Moreover, as a relatively privileged group (state employees), they are more aware of their relative deprivation, more assertive of their rights, and more skillful in confronting the government.

The other aspect of social cohesiveness—cultural identity—changes much more slowly than class cleavages. In China's case, there are two contradictory trends—one enhancing such identity and the other reducing it. The trend of rising Chinese national identity has evidently coincided with the resurgence of Chinese nationalism. This trend has received enormous impetus from the decline of the official Communist ideology (which used to subordinate Chinese nationalism to a universal doctrine), from government-inspired and spontaneous efforts to restore Chinese cultural and historical symbols, from China's

recent economic success, from the country's growing confidence in its international standing (such confidence, it should be noted, owes a great deal to the remarkable success of Chinese athletes in international sporting events), and from the ironic effects of globalization (in curious ways, increasing contact with the rest of the world may only increase the Chinese people's self-cultural awareness).

But the rising Chinese cultural identity is accompanied by a contradictory and centrifugal trend—the rise of ethnic cultural identity in outlying regions with high concentrations of minority groups (such as in Tibet and Xinjiang). This resurgence of separatism, which emphasizes cultural distinctiveness, rather than identity, coincided with the breakup of the Soviet Union, a historic development which inspired China's minority groups to re-ignite their own nationalist dreams. It is worth noting that, ironically, the growth of ethnic separatism occurred despite (perhaps because of) the relatively liberal ethnic policies adopted by the post-Mao leadership. The best example was Tibet, where liberal reforms introduced by Hu Yaobang in the early 1980s failed fully to address Tibetans' nationalist needs. Consequently, the failure of liberal policies has caused Beijing policymakers to re-adopt harsh, repressive measures in these areas. If the record of the last decade is any indication, repressive measures have not worked. Ethnic separatism will remain a major source of instability for the foreseeable future, despite the low probability of success (defined in achieving the political goals of independence).

Conclusion: Focusing on the Big Picture

This discussion of political and social cohesiveness in present-day China does not, unfortunately, yield an unambiguous assessment of the country's stability. The rapidity of change and fluidity of conditions make it almost impossible to offer such an

assessment. However, this analysis demonstrates that, on balance, there has been an overall decline of social and political cohesiveness (see table 2). Strictly speaking, one need not be alarmed about declining political and social cohesiveness in transition societies—rapid changes inevitably produce forces tearing at the political and social fabrics of these societies. Generally, what has kept most transition societies from falling apart under such pressures is a set of countervailing trends that generate new forces of social and political cohesion. In China's case, such trends are emerging and visible. The main cause of concern is, however, that these stabilizing trends are weak and tentative. At the moment, they do not appear to be capable of countering the centrifugal forces working within the Chinese society and polity.

Table 2. Overall Assessment of Political and Social Cohesiveness

| Type of Cohesiveness | Increase (+) or Decline (–) |
|----------------------|-----------------------------|
| Elite | + |
| Ideological | – |
| Institutional | – |
| Social | – |

Obviously, not all forces of disunity and instability have the same political effects. For example, declining social and ideological cohesiveness has mostly an indirect, background effect on political stability. Analysts must focus their attention on elite and institutional cohesiveness, because these two factors more directly and powerfully determine political stability. Moreover, given the slow pace of institutional change and adaptability, elite cohesiveness will remain for a long time the principal cause of China's political stability.