

Rethinking China's Coercive Capacity: An Examination of PRC Domestic Security Spending, 1992–2012

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Abstract

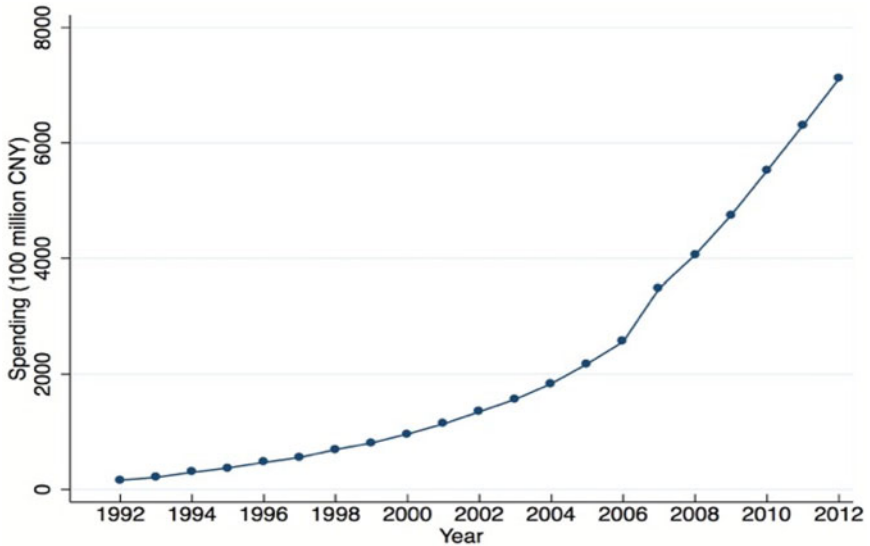
Discussions of China's rising domestic security expenditure often present this spending as evidence of the Chinese Communist Party's strong coercive capacity. This article argues that a lack of theoretical clarity about domestic security has resulted in flawed conclusions about these expenditures and their implications for China's coercive capacity. Challenging the conventional wisdom, the article analyses China's domestic security spending from 1992 through 2012 and argues that it is important to consider not only the total amount that China spends but also how it spends these resources and the magnitude of the threats that this expenditure must address. It finds that China's domestic security spending is not historically unprecedented, is not expanding as a proportion of national expenditure, and is not necessarily high (or producing high coercive capacity) when compared to other countries. The article also shows that certain locations struggle more to fund their coercive capacity than others, and that these locations overlap with areas where internal security threats may be particularly acute. The challenges that the coercive apparatus must address have also grown over the same period during which domestic security spending has risen. Finally, attempts to improve the political position of China's coercive agents cannot be equated with improvements in their capacity to manage Chinese society. Cumulatively, this reassessment provides more evidence of the limitations on China's coercive capacity than of its strength.

Keywords: domestic security; internal security; public security; policing; authoritarian stability; coercive capacity; stability management (*weiwen*); Commission on Law and Politics (*zhengfawei*); China

In March 2011, international news outlets reported that internal security spending in China had, for the first time, surpassed external defence expenditure.¹ Double-digit increases in spending had pushed the domestic security budget upward at an exponential rate, as shown in [Figure 1](#), and the internal security budget remained higher than the defence budget for several subsequent years (see [Table 1](#)).

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1 Buckley 2011; 2012a; Blanchard and Ruwitch 2013.

Figure 1: **China's Total Domestic Security Expenditure, 1992–2012**

Sources:

MOF 1992–2002; NBS 2003–2013.

Since then, domestic security has occupied a prominent place in public and academic discussions of Chinese politics and society, and the domestic security budget is a frequent point of reference.² But how should observers interpret this apparently astonishing growth? Journalists commonly suggest that China's leaders are raising spending in an unprecedented fashion to address heightened insecurity and as part of an increasing emphasis on “stability maintenance” (*weihu wending* 维护稳定, or, *weiwen* 维稳) in official discourse and behaviour.³ Academic literature, however, has taken a different tack, citing spending increases as evidence of the “strong coercive capacity” of the Chinese state following a “dramatic expansion” in that capacity since the early 1990s.⁴

This article demonstrates that neither of these perspectives is entirely correct, in large part because both rest on an overly simplistic idea of what “coercive capacity” means and because they selectively employ indicators that are not a good match for the concept. In the pages that follow, I seek to clarify the discussion on China's internal security spending in order to shed light on the role of coercive capacity in China's authoritarian stability. This is done in two ways: first by carefully defining coercive capacity, and then by using new theoretically

² “Everything Xi wants,” *The Economist*, 4 July 2015; Lampton 2015; Erickson and Liff 2016.

³ On the history and development of *weiwen*, see Yuen 2014; Kan 2013; Qian 2012.

⁴ Wang 2014a; 2014b; Wang and Minzner 2015. See also Chen 2013; Xie and Shan 2013; SDRG 2010.

Table 1: China's External Defence and Internal Security Spending, 2010–2013

Year	2010	2011	2012	2013
Defence budget	532.115 billion yuan (US\$84.6 billion)	601.156 billion yuan (US\$95.58 billion)	670.274 billion yuan (US\$106.57 billion)	740.622 billion yuan (US\$117.75 billion)
% increase		12.97%	11.5%	10.5%
Defence expenditure	533.337 billion yuan (US\$84.79 billion)	602.791 billion yuan (US\$95.84 billion)	669.192 billion yuan (US\$106.39 billion)	741.062 billion yuan (US\$117.82 billion)
% increase		13.02%	11.02%	10.74%
Int. security budget	514.007 billion yuan (US\$81.72 billion)	624.421 billion yuan (US\$99.28 billion)	701.763 billion yuan (US\$111.57 billion)	769.08 billion yuan (US\$122.28 billion)
% increase		21.48%	12.39%	9.59%
Int. security expenditure	551.77 billion yuan (US\$87.73 billion)	630.427 billion yuan (US\$100.23 billion)	711.16 billion yuan (US\$113.06 billion)	778.678 billion yuan (US\$123.79 billion)
% increase		14.26%	12.81%	9.49%

Sources:

"Quanguo gonggong caizheng zhichu juesuan biao" (National public expenditure final account tables), published by the Ministry of Finance at: http://yss.mof.gov.cn/2010juesuan/201107/t20110720_578444.html; http://yss.mof.gov.cn/2011qgcjzs/201207/t20120710_665233.html; http://yss.mof.gov.cn/2012qhczjs/201307/t20130715_966261.html; http://yss.mof.gov.cn/2013qgcjzs/201407/t20140711_1111874.html.

Notes:

In 2014 and 2015, the Chinese government declined to release the total amount spent on internal security. All US\$ estimates adjusted based on 2013 annual average exchange rates.

derived indicators, placed in appropriate comparative perspective, to provide a re-assessment of China's coercive capacity.⁵

The revised analysis of China's domestic security budget demonstrates that conventional wisdom exaggerates the exceptional and unprecedented nature of China's increases in spending on domestic security. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has indeed attempted to strengthen its coercive capacity, but it is probably doing so because it perceives that capacity to be inadequate for managing China's rapidly changing society. In other words, budget trends in the last two decades likely indicate the weakness and limitation of CCP coercive capacity during this period, not its strength.

This article proceeds in four sections. The second section establishes the importance of coercive capacity, outlines the current lack of clarity in its theorization and measurement, and offers a theoretically guided redefinition of the concept and some suggestions for better measurement. The third section offers a revised analysis of China's domestic security spending, based on the reconceptualization offered in section two. The fourth section concludes by discussing the implications of this analysis for current developments. It discusses how the framework proposed here may usefully illuminate China's internal security behaviour in recent years, including the reorganization of domestic security forces, the creation of new national security legislation, and the tightening of control over Chinese society under Xi Jinping's 习近平 leadership.

Assessing China's Coercive Capacity

Coercive capacity has long been recognized as a critical component of authoritarian stability.⁶ Few studies, however, examine how that capacity is generated and sustained, or assess the relative importance of the budget in that process. This section asks: what is coercive capacity and how should it be measured? More specifically, it discusses how internal security expenditures are related (or not) to coercive capacity, both generally and in the China case.

The China field is divided on these questions. The dominant interpretation suggests that since 1989, China has been undergoing a long-term process of "securitization" (of which *weiwun* is the most recent manifestation) that has strengthened the regime's coercive capacity.⁷ This explanation points to increased spending on the coercive apparatus as a major piece of evidence for its claims.⁸ Even works that are normatively critical of the increased spending interpret it as an indication of rising coercive capacity.⁹

5 On comparative perspective, see Reny 2011; Johnston 2012; O'Brien 2011. On coercive capacity, see Guo, Xuezi 2012; Scoggins and O'Brien 2016; Deng, Yanhua, and O'Brien 2013; Tanner and Green 2007. On China's authoritarian resilience, see (among many others) Nathan 2003; Pei 2012.

6 Bellin 2005; Brownlee, Masoud and Reynolds 2015; Greitens 2016; Pei 2012, 32; Skocpol 1979; Wang 2014a.

7 The term "securitization" is used in Wang and Minzner 2015.

8 The other is the promotion of police officials within the Party hierarchy, addressed below. Wang and Minzner 2015; Wang 2014a; 2014b.

9 Chen 2013; Xie and Shan 2013; SDRG 2010.

A few Chinese-language studies, however, adopt a more sceptical tone, noting that the 1994 fiscal reforms exacerbated local budget problems even in the context of increased overall spending. They argue that the Ministry of Public Security's (MPS) frontline officers often have inadequate resources for the tasks they are expected to perform.¹⁰ Articles in China's public security journals commonly discuss how to deal with the negative consequences of budgetary shortfalls¹¹ and how to maximize efficiency, given limited resources.¹² These complaints are not necessarily to be taken at face value – under-resourcing is, after all, a perennial complaint of bureaucrats the world over – but neither should they be dismissed out of hand. Instead, this article looks at the disjuncture between these two perspectives and asks: what *is* China's coercive capacity? To answer that question, it is necessary to generate theoretically appropriate measures of coercive capacity and use these to judge where China falls.

Analysing spending is attractive for many reasons, not least because it is quantifiable.¹³ Rigorous assessments of domestic coercive capacity and of its financial underpinnings, however, have been hampered by three key challenges, each of which directly affects the debate over China. First is a simple lack of transparency and data. There is no comprehensive dataset for internal security spending and assets comparable to the military compendia published annually by the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) and the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). Both military and internal security budgets are sensitive subjects, but the comparative lack of external pressure to make domestic expenditures transparent, combined with the institutional heterogeneity of the internal security apparatus compared to the military, hinders rigorous interpretation.¹⁴

Second, differentiating internal from external security is often difficult, especially when assets or personnel are fungible or dual-use. As a result, there is no consensus on how to make this demarcation; datasets on military expenditure often include organizations with a domestic focus but at the same time exclude actors that have a large international impact, without providing a justification.¹⁵ The IISS and SIPRI, for example, include the People's Armed Police (PAP) – an

10 Xie 2013a; 2013b; Scoggins and O'Brien 2016. See also Guo, Gang 2012; Lü and Landry 2014; Whiting 2004.

11 Yao 2004; Ye 2006; Deng, Xuan 2011.

12 Xie and Dang 2013; Shi, Xiaochen, and Zhang 2015.

13 Andreas and Greenhill 2010.

14 Militaries are generally cross-nationally comparable in terms of having recognizable service branches. In domestic security, however, each country tends to create its own mix of national/local police, intelligence agencies, presidential/state security agencies, courts, etc. For a comparative approach to domestic security bureaucracies, see Greitens 2016. Expenses may also be funded off-budget, both generally and in the Chinese case. Analysts disagree on how large China's extrabudgetary expenses on domestic security, especially funds earmarked for *weiwén* (*weiwén jingfei*), are likely to be. I acknowledge that unobserved extrabudgetary spending may introduce downward bias on the data but believe the data is still valuable so long as appropriate caveats are provided.

15 On how this lack of consensus affects military spending estimates, see Liff and Erickson 2013; Forsythe 2014.

organization strengthened post-1989 to take over domestic security from the PLA – in China’s defence spending, but they exclude maritime law enforcement agencies that operate in disputed territorial waters (such as the South China Sea).¹⁶ On the other hand, studies of authoritarian politics typically use military spending as a proxy for coercive capacity;¹⁷ in China’s case, this excludes the main organizations/spending tasked with responsibility for domestic security, which is nonsensical if internal security is the concept of theoretical interest.

Separating law enforcement and criminal justice from political policing is the third challenge. The extent to which normal judicial-legal institutions are used for political policing, and how exactly they are employed, varies widely across countries and across time.¹⁸ Discussion of China’s domestic security budget often treats this spending as aimed entirely at suppressing political opposition to the CCP’s single-party rule, commonly citing the growth of “mass incidents” to explain budget increases. Yet, in fact, in China a single budget and organizational system – the political-legal system (*zhengfa xitong* 政法系统) – address both criminal and political aspects of domestic security. At the local level, censors remove both pornography and political commentary, and MPS offices handle crime control as well as protest management.¹⁹ The “internal security budget” supports law enforcement and criminal justice functions that would still require funding even if China democratized tomorrow. Yet, discussions of China’s domestic security budget seldom consider whether crime, rather than political opposition, has played any role in the recent budget increases.

The above paragraphs highlight the risk of uncritically employing budget statistics to gauge China’s domestic coercive capacity. What, then, should analysts use instead? I suggest not that budget statistics should be abandoned but that they must be interpreted more carefully, in historical and cross-national comparative context, to make judgments about their importance for “coercive capacity.”²⁰ Specifically, drawing on recent findings in security studies, I argue that any assessment of coercive capacity must go beyond simply what a country spends to incorporate two additional factors: what that money is spent *on*, and what it is spent *against*.

It is important to consider what domestic security budgets are spent on because two countries with equivalent budgets may choose to spend that money in ways that make their expenditures more or less effective. Studies of military

16 PAP spending is included in China’s statistical yearbooks as a major category under domestic security. Prior to March 2013, maritime law enforcement was handled by five agencies, all civilian; post-consolidation responsibility lies with the State Oceanic Administration (under the Ministry of Land and Natural Resources). The MPS also issued passports in 2012, reportedly without consulting the Foreign Ministry, that showed disputed islands as Chinese territory. Blasko and Corbett 1998; Cheung 1996; Erickson and Collins 2013; Liff and Erickson 2013; Forsythe 2014; Fravel 2007; Goldstein 2010; Jakobson 2014; Martinson 2014; Ruwitch 2012; Tanner 2002; IISS 2001–2012; Wines 2009.

17 Bellin 2005, 31; Albertus and Menaldo 2012.

18 Solomon 2007; Greitens 2016; Scoggins and O’Brien 2016.

19 King, Pan and Roberts 2014; Scoggins and O’Brien 2016.

20 On the value of comparison, see Liff and Erickson 2013; Johnston 2013, 34.

effectiveness (where the acquisition of hardware arguably provides better evidence of capacity than it does for internal security) have shown that the correlation between spending and performance is tenuous; they conclude that “it’s not what states spend, it’s what they do with what they spend” that matters.²¹ Just as a military that invests primarily in tanks will find itself disadvantaged in fighting a predominantly naval war, domestic security forces that are trained and equipped for rural counter-insurgency may perform poorly in urban riot control. These studies further suggest that performance is not simply a matter of buying the right equipment or training; organizational attributes such as fragmentation, social cohesion, information management and promotion patterns all affect a country’s ability to translate spending into military power.²² Recent literature suggests that the same is true of domestic security, where autocrats face organizational trade-offs between optimizing their forces to address different types of domestic security challenges, each of which they must navigate successfully in order to stay in power.²³ To understand whether increased spending is actually increasing China’s coercive capacity, then, it is important to consider whether the organizations that receive that spending are effectively employing it for the purposes of controlling Chinese society.

A useful definition of coercive capacity and its importance for authoritarian rule also requires an understanding of what the budget is being spent *against*. In other words, how does the coercive apparatus’ ability measure up against the challenges it is expected to handle?²⁴ It makes little intuitive sense to claim that the coercive capacity of (for example) a 500-person police force with a \$1 million budget would be the same in a city of 20,000 as it would be in a city of 2,000,000, or that it would have the same capacity to keep order in a city with extremely high crime and violence as in a city where crime rates are much lower. During the period analysed here, Chinese society changed tremendously: the population grew, both crime and incidents of political protest increased in frequency, and many of the traditional institutions of social control that characterized Maoist China were weakened or abolished. The CCP’s capacity to enforce its rule and stay in power depends not just on its raw spending, or even on its absolute ability, but on its ability *relative* to the also changing ability of Chinese society to challenge it. Coercive capacity will only be a useful predictor of regime survival if it is relative in its conceptualization and measurement.

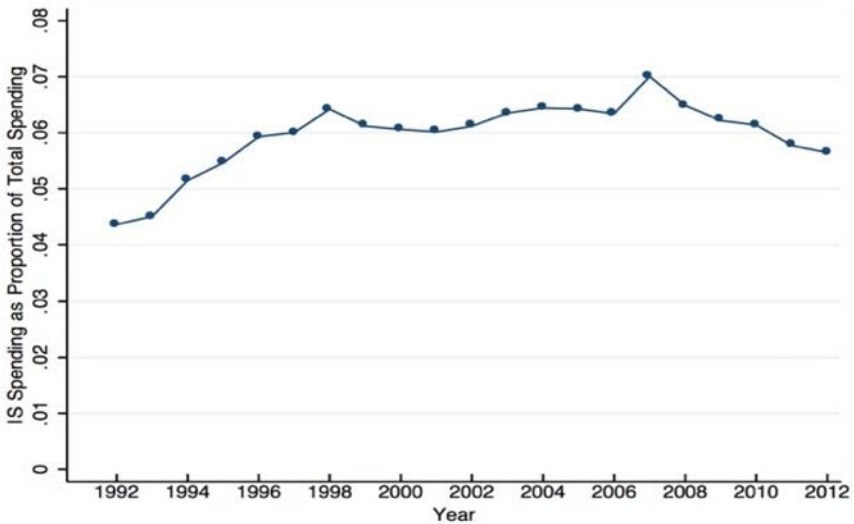
Theoretically, it only makes sense to equate spending with effective coercive capacity (especially if coercive capacity is then to be credited with regime survival) if how that spending is employed and the magnitude of the challenges it must address are also considered. The sections that follow show that careful analysis of China’s domestic security budget, placed in historical and cross-national

21 Biddle 2006; Brooks and Stanley 2007; Grauer and Horowitz 2012; Talmadge 2015.

22 Horowitz 2010; Narang and Talmadge 2017.

23 Greitens 2016; Roessler 2011.

24 Here, my argument parallels a long-standing claim in international security that relative rather than absolute gains are what matter for inter-state conflict. Grieco 1993.

Figure 2: **Internal Security Expenditure as Proportion of Total Expenditure**

Sources:

MOF 1992–2002; NBS 2003–2013; see also Guo, Gang 2012. Pre-1997 statistics omit prisons.

comparative context and assessed alongside the above criteria, undercuts the claim that increased spending has created an increase in CCP coercive capacity. Rather, the data more likely indicate weakness or limitation – a finding that may also more logically explain China’s recent domestic behaviour.

Reframing China’s Internal Security Spending

The following section outlines a revised interpretation of China’s domestic security spending, offering several correctives to academic and conventional wisdom. First, it looks at how much China is spending in historical perspective, showing that although total spending has increased, domestic security has remained roughly constant as a proportion of national expenditure over time. Second, it examines what China spends its domestic security budget on – what categories and what regions – to show that China’s spending, and the coercive capacity it buys, is not necessarily exceptional in cross-national terms and may even be fairly low. Third, it investigates what China spends its budget against, showing that the combination of rising crime and increasing levels of political protest suggests that the challenges facing the coercive apparatus may well be outstripping its supposed increases in capacity. Finally, it presents an organizational analysis, showing that efforts to raise the political power of the coercive apparatus are not the same as strengthening its ability to manage society. Cumulatively, these points suggest that increased overall spending on domestic security is likely to indicate – and be motivated by – the inadequacy of China’s coercive capacity rather than its repressive strength.

What China spends on domestic security (historical perspective)

China's domestic security budget is most often described using percentage increases from the year before or in comparison to the country's defence budget. Both of these metrics give the impression that domestic security spending has recently increased on an unprecedented and dramatic ("double-digit") scale and that this spending is consuming an increasingly large chunk of the resources of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Neither claim is accurate. China's entire budget has been rising fast, producing double-digit growth in most categories. The growth in aggregate health care expenditure is as exponential as domestic security spending; growth in social security spending has, like domestic security, outstripped growth in defence spending since the early 1990s.²⁵ More than that, since the 1980s, the PRC has shifted an increasing share of its budget towards education, health care, social security and housing.²⁶ Domestic security spending's share of total expenditure, however, has stayed relatively constant: between 5 and 7 per cent of total expenditure (Figure 2).

The figures presented in this article draw on China's official statistical yearbooks. Adjustments have been made where necessary in order to ensure that the aggregate figures include comparable sub-categories over time. (For example, labour re-education was sometimes included in the aggregate yearbook figure, sometimes listed separately; here, it is included in totals regardless of where in the yearbook it appeared.) The percentage of national expenditure allocated to domestic security ranged from a low of 4.4 per cent in 1992 to a peak of 7.0 per cent in 2007, declining to 5.6 per cent in 2013.

China is spending more money on everything, not just on domestic security; domestic security is not getting a bigger share of the pie now than before. This suggests that to understand increased domestic security spending, it is best to start with what is driving overall budget increases – often attributed to factors like increasing personnel costs – rather than assuming that domestic security is somehow exceptional.²⁷ Indeed, the pattern here suggests that the causal forces responsible for spending increases are not, in fact, either unique to internal security nor particularly new, since the percentage spent on domestic security has not dramatically increased in recent years; if anything, it has declined.

One potentially complicating factor is that under the "securitization" of the Chinese state, more parts of the political system (including bureaucrats responsible for everything from labour to the environment) now share responsibility for "stability maintenance" but do not appear in the domestic security budget. Typically, however, the responsibility of these actors in terms of stability maintenance is

25 This holds even using high-end estimates of military spending from SIPRI/IISS. Sheen 2013; State Council Information Office 2012.

26 Zhu and Wang 2011.

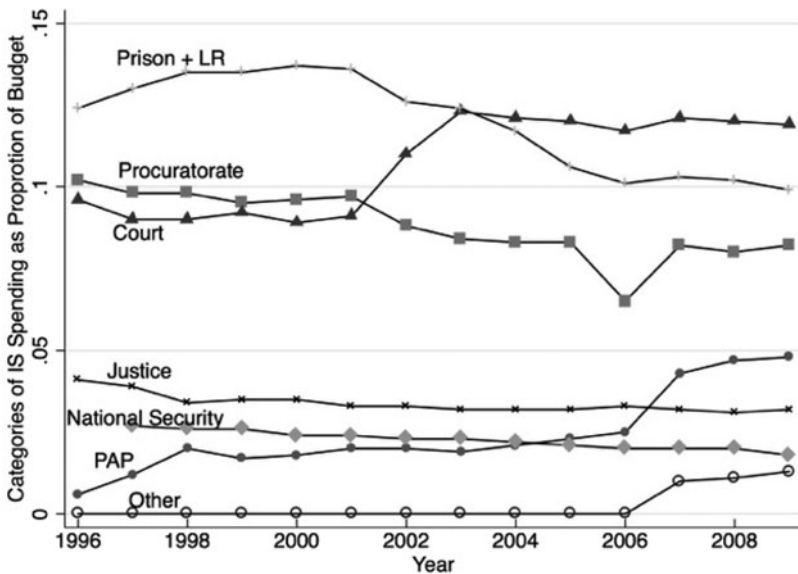
27 Unfortunately, the data necessary to fully test this hypothesis do not (yet) exist. Qualitative research suggests regional disparities in police salaries are consistent with the subnational variation analysed here. For example, police in Guangdong earn 6–7 times more than police officers in many other provinces. Scoggins 2016.

preventive: to minimize societal and citizen grievance and forestall unrest. I focus here on a somewhat narrower definition of coercive capacity and restrict the analysis to the set of actors who exercise and implement the regime’s monopoly on (physical) force rather than include all those who are responsible for the broader political imperative of reducing citizens’ grievances with the state or regime.

How China spends its domestic security budget (categories and geography)

Coverage of China’s internal security spending figures seldom discloses precisely what these statistics include or how they compare to other countries. Figure 3 shows the categorical allocation of China’s domestic security spending. The bulk of China’s domestic security budget since 1996 has gone to the Ministry of Public Security (*gong’an* 公安), ranging between 58.8 per cent (2009) and 63.2 per cent (1996). Other major categories each year include the PAP (*wujing* 武警), national security (*guojian anquan* 国家安全), procuratorate (*jiancha* 检察), courts (*fayuan* 法院), Ministry of Justice (*sifa* 司法), prisons (*jianyu* 监狱), and re-education through labour (*laojiao* 劳教). Since 2006, the budget has also included categories for protection of state secrets (*guojia baomi* 国家保密), anti-smuggling

Figure 3: **Categories of Domestic Security Spending by per Cent of Budget, 1996–2009 Excluding MPS**



Sources:
MOF 1996–2009.

Notes:
For 1996–1997, the yearbooks did not include prison and labour re-education figures in total domestic security spending (but included them in subsequent years). To make the data comparable, these sub-categories were added to the 1996–1997 totals, so the estimate of total internal security spending is higher than that in the yearbooks.

police (*jisijing* 缉私警) and “other” (*qita* 其他), although each of these is fairly small. Most categories show a fair amount of stability over time; the budget percentage going to prisons and labour re-education declined the most,²⁸ while the biggest spending increases were on courts and the PAP.

As noted above, this budget includes not only explicitly “political” organizations such as state security and the PAP but also institutions with broader criminal justice functions such as local police and courts. Is China's spending on this system exceptional? To construct a preliminary answer to this question, I aggregated budgets for comparable institutions in the United States and Russia – two countries that, like China, are great powers with a large territory, diverse geography, and significant internal security concerns, either criminal or political (but which, as a robust and a weak democracy, respectively, might plausibly spend less on internal security than China's fully authoritarian system).²⁹ Only known and measurable costs are included, making the estimates conservative. **Table 2** shows this comparison for 2013.

When roughly equivalent categories are compared, China spent less than the United States on domestic security, for a larger territory and much larger population, and that both China and Russia spent roughly comparable amounts on domestic and external security. The United States spent around \$489 per capita on domestic security, while Russia spent \$393; China spent approximately \$92.³⁰ Until a full cross-national dataset on domestic security spending is available, there is no way to tell how these three countries stack up against “the average” in their budgetary allocations for internal security or even against various comparison categories that might be of theoretical interest such as great powers, authoritarian regimes, communist countries, etc. These illustrative data, however, should call into question the assumption that China is an exceptionally heavy spender on domestic security, as often implied, or that China's high spending is simply the consequence of its authoritarian system.

Table 2: Comparison of US, Russia and PRC Security Spending, 2013 (US\$)

Country	Defence spending	Domestic security spending	Domestic security spending (per capita)
US	\$526.6 billion	\$155 billion	\$489
Russia	\$63.4 billion	\$56 billion	\$393
China	\$120 billion	\$124 billion	\$92

Sources:

DOD 2013; Cooper 2014. Jane's lists Russia's 2013 defence spending as \$68.8 billion for 2013. Calculations based on US population of 317,000,000; Russian population of 142,355,000; PRC population of 1,355,000,000. US Census Bureau, www.census.gov/popclock/ and <http://press.ihs.com/press-release/aerospace-defense-terrorism/global-defence-budgets-overall-rise-first-time-five-years>. For an explanation of construction of the US spending estimate, see Appendix 1.

28 Note that these data end prior to the official abolishment of labour re-education in December 2013.

29 Polity scores range from –10 (full autocracy) to 10 (full democracy). The US Polity IV score in 2013 was 10; Russia's score was 4; China's score was –8.

30 On the use and misuse of per capita figures, see Xiao 2013.

Perhaps more importantly, China's lower spending also results in a smaller coercive presence deployed on the ground. PRC domestic security spending is not lower simply because coercive capacity – for example, the cost of hiring a police officer – is cheaper in China, and Beijing is not buying more coercive capacity for a lower price. It has fewer police per capita than the US, at 1.38 officers per 1,000 residents in 2009 (the last year for which an estimate was available), compared to a US average of 2.3 and a Russian average of around 5.³¹ In fact, China has a lower per capita police ratio than many other countries (see [Figure 4](#)).

These data suggest that complaints about China's police shortfall in public security journals and Chinese media, and the recruitment of volunteers to fill those shortfalls, are not simply the result of bureaucratic dissatisfaction and posturing for publicity (although this may also be the case).³² China is not getting more for its money; it is actually getting less coercive power as a result of lower spending.

Analysing the geographic distribution of China's domestic security spending similarly suggests that the decentralization of domestic security budgets may have weakened China's coercive capacity, particularly in areas perceived to be resistant to CCP rule. Previous analyses have noted the dominance of provincial and local spending relative to that of the central government. [Figure 5](#) shows that this trend has deepened over time. Indeed, the percentage of internal security expenditure funded by local rather than central coffers rose significantly from 1992 (68.7 per cent) to 2012 (83.4 per cent). This trend contrasts with the defence budget, where around 85 per cent of spending is central, and the shift towards local expenditure continued even after the 2003 reforms, which were aimed at strengthening central control by increasing transfer payments (*zhuyi zhifu* 转移支付) to local public security departments.³³ The transferred funds are intended to prevent local departments from levying excessive and unpopular fines to cover budgetary shortfalls, but their usage is restricted to certain categories, which often leaves local government with a heavy burden. In China, where central oversight is often framed as the answer to local abuse and predation, the gradual weakening of central financial control over coercion is notable and consistent with the idea of China as a “fragmented authoritarian” polity.³⁴

Past studies have shown the importance of local financial capacity for determining localities' domestic security spending: wealthier eastern provinces spend

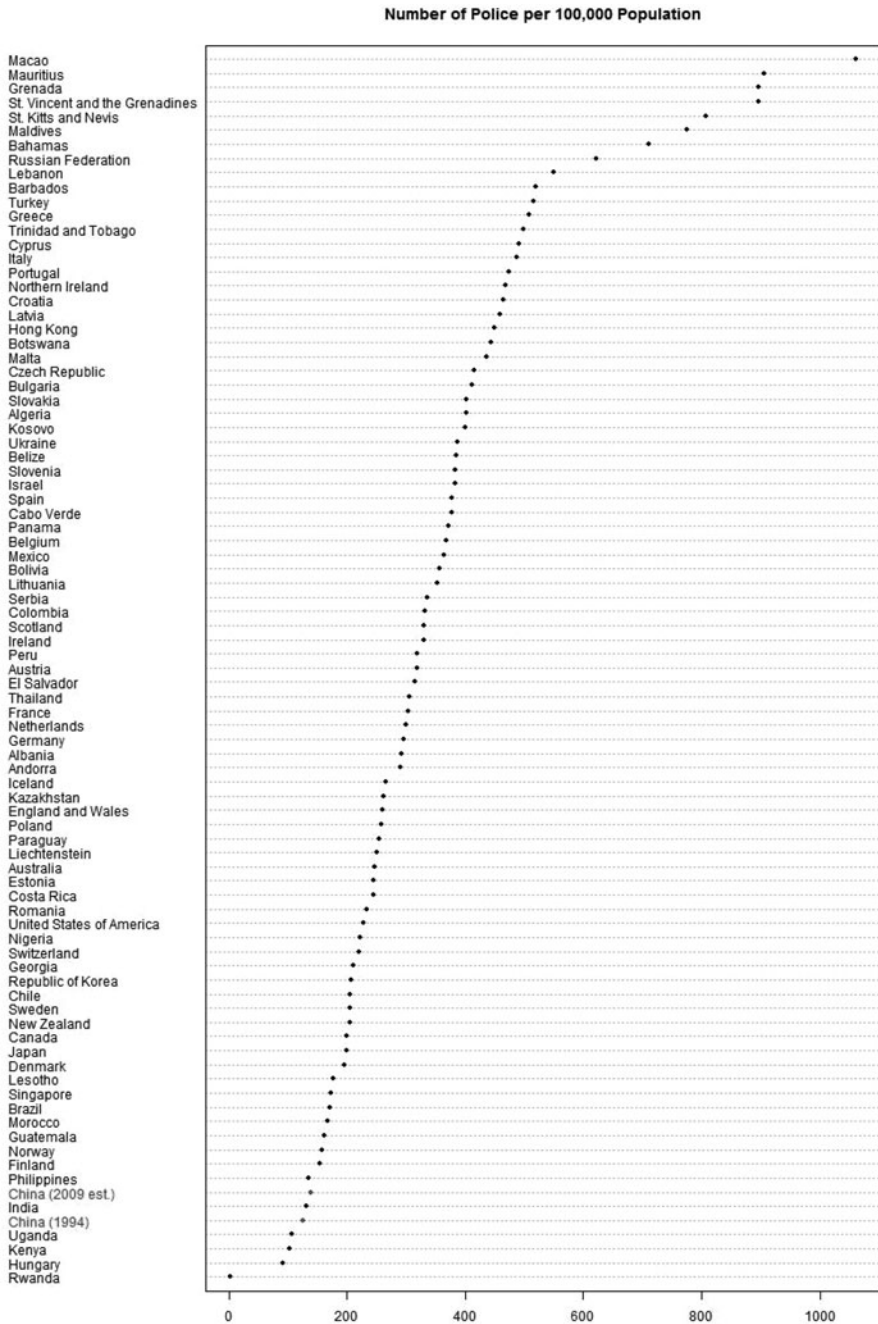
31 Reaves 2010; 2011. Scoggins and O'Brien 2016; Scoggins 2016.

32 Rising salary/personnel costs would explain both increasing expenditure and a shortfall in police personnel. Zhong 2009; Hu 2009; Bureau of Justice 2013; “Zhongyang zongzhiban: quntixing shijian ji xinfang zongliang xiajiang mubiao shixian” (Central CMPS Commission: reduction targets of mass incidents and petitions realized), *China Net*, 6 February 2009; “Jiceng minjiang mianlin zuida de kunnan shi jingli buzhu” (The biggest problem with civilian police is the shortage of police), *Renmin Net*, 9 March 2013; “China's police complain of manpower shortage in countryside despite crime rate falling,” *Xinhua*, 15 November 2006.

33 Xie 2013a, 82–85, 90; Tanner and Green 2007.

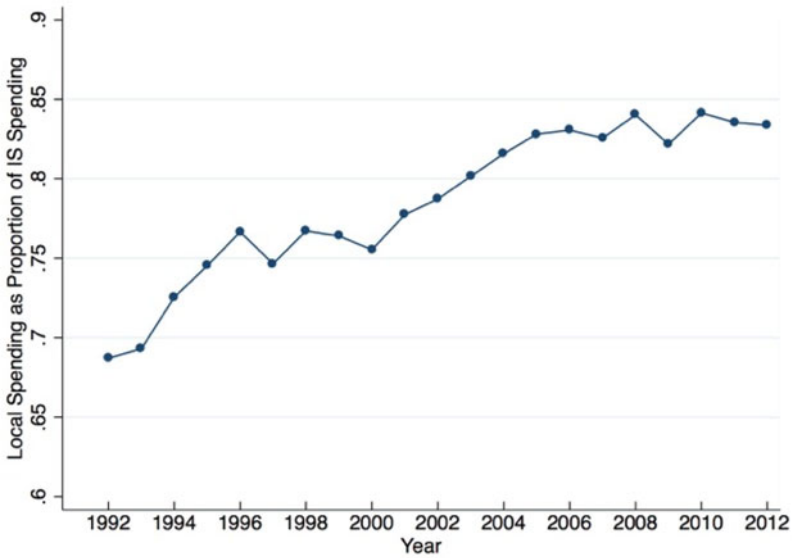
34 Tanner and Green 2007; Mertha 2009; Lu and Landry 2014; Wallace 2014; Lampton 1987a; 1987b; Lieberthal and Oksenberg 1988; Lieberthal and Lampton 1992.

Figure 4: Global Police per Capita Ratios



Source:

UN Office on Drugs and Crime. 2009. "Total police personnel," <https://data.unodc.org/?lf=1&lng=en>. Multiple years were tested and comparable results found.

Figure 5: **Local Spending as Proportion of Total Internal Security Spending**

Source:

MOF 1992–2002; NBS 2003–2013.

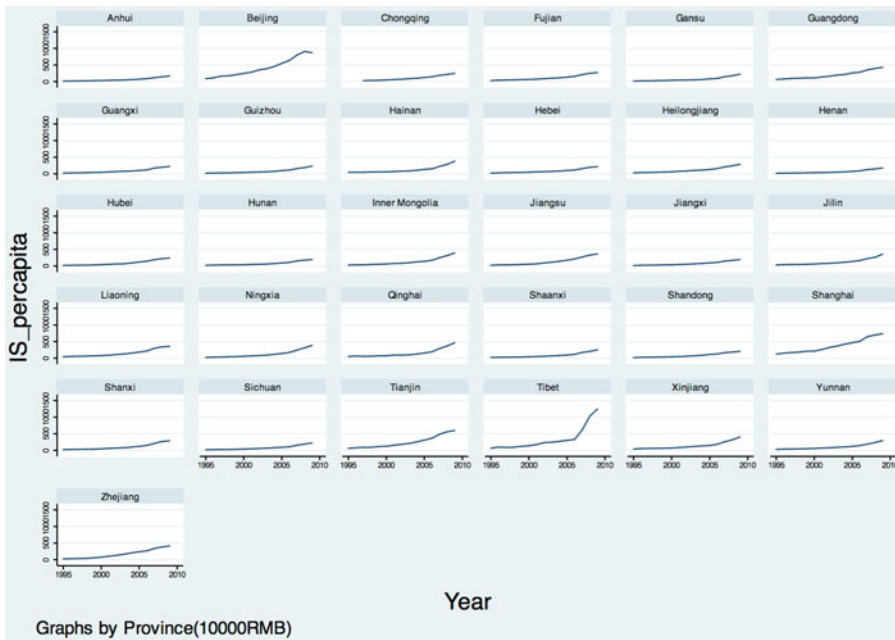
more than poorer inland ones in both gross and per capita terms.³⁵ Guangdong, for example, has the largest domestic security budget of any province, while Ningxia consistently has the lowest; Guangdong's spending per capita is almost three times that of Ningxia. Poorer inland provinces and regions, however, do spend a higher proportion of their revenue on domestic security and (post-2003) fund more of their budgets through central transfers.³⁶ In other words, provinces that can spend more on domestic security do so; those that cannot receive money from the centre to help offset perceived shortfalls. This sub-national variation in the financial foundation of coercive capacity, hidden by the more common references to annual percentage increases and defence budget comparisons, is consistent with a strain on the coercive apparatus rather than evidence of robust capacity.

Important for assessing the regime's coercive capacity relative to society, that strain is more pronounced in particular areas. Figure 6 shows that per capita spending on domestic security has increased more steeply in some regions than in others, especially in the latter half of the 2000s. The two most noticeable increases are in Beijing – unsurprising given the presence of the top leadership – and Tibet, where

³⁵ Xie 2013a, 86.

³⁶ Ibid. Elsewhere, however, Xie says that per capita spending in more developed, wealthier provinces is lower: e.g. Qinghai spent 368 yuan per person in 2008 on domestic security while Shandong spent 184 yuan. Xie 2012, 24.

Figure 6: Domestic Security Spending per Capita over Time by Province



Source:

Data on spending from MOF 1996–2009; GDP and population data from China Data Online.

per capita domestic security spending started low but increased dramatically around 2006. Indeed, Figure 7 shows that Tibet is particularly ill-equipped financially to deal with challenges to CCP rule. Domestic security spending relative to GDP has always been higher in Tibet than in other provinces, but the ratio skyrocketed after 2006. Although scholars have previously noted the uniqueness of central subsidies to Tibet, even when compared to other poor areas in western China, these figures add an additional layer of meaning.³⁷ In the eyes of China's leadership, Tibet represents a unique intersection: high domestic security threat combined with low financial capacity to address that threat.

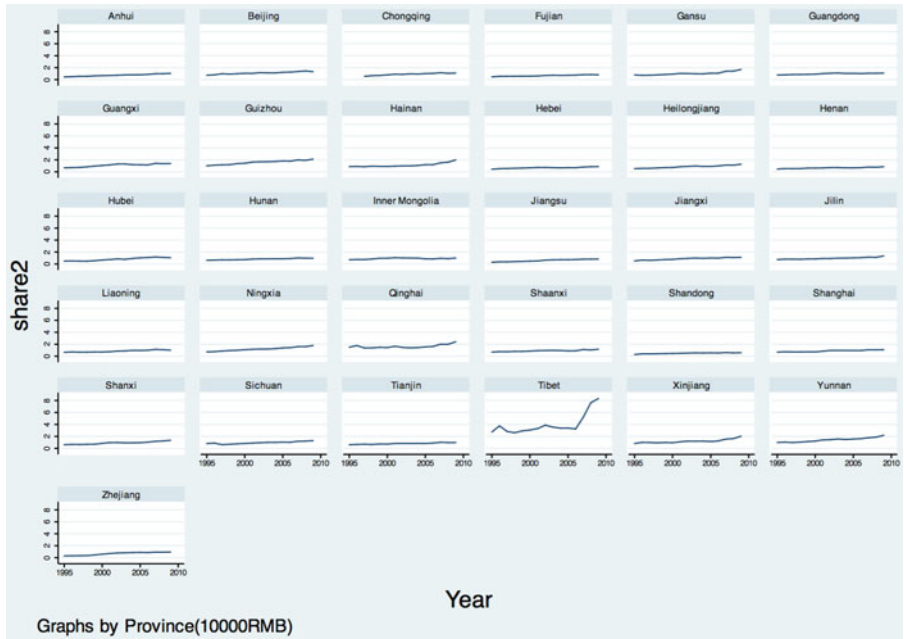
The threats facing China: rising crime and political protest

The example of Tibet illustrates why it is useful to consider the capacity of China's coercive apparatus relative to the challenges that the apparatus must address. Systematic consideration of these challenges, combined with the budget trends outlined above, highlights the weakness of China's coercive capacity rather than its strength.

The internal security budget covers crime control and management of political unrest. Both needs have increased steadily during the period of rising domestic

³⁷ Fischer 2015.

Figure 7: **Domestic Security Spending over Time by Province Relative to GDP**



Source:

Data on spending from MOF 1996–2009; GDP and population data from China Data Online.

security expenditure.³⁸ According to the PRC’s own statistics, the number of “mass incidents” has grown steadily: from 8,700 in 1993 to 127,000 in 2008. Lawsuits against government offices and officials similarly grew: from 11,418 in 1988 to 142,861 in 2008. Both scholarly and media analyses commonly cite the rise in “mass incidents” to explain domestic security budget increases.³⁹ Less frequently mentioned is the fact that during the same period crime also increased, more than doubling from 2000 (4.5 million) to 2008 (9 million). Violent crimes increased at an even steeper rate. The total number of criminal cases heard in court rose from 2 million in 1987 to nearly 7 million in 2008, and China’s public security bureaus dealt with a far larger number of cases than those that actually appeared in court. At the same time, many of the institutions of social control and management that existed under Mao – the household registration (*hukou* 户口) and work unit (*danwei* 单位) systems, for example – weakened during the process of economic liberalization and the rural-to-urban migration that followed.

Given these changes in Chinese society and in the institutions that previously linked the party-state with society, it is not surprising that the PRC’s formal

38 Unless otherwise cited, data in this paragraph are drawn from *Zhongguo falü nianjian 1989–2009*; originally cited in Xie 2012, 5–7.

39 Shirk 2007, 57.

institutions of coercion have had to boost their resources to keep up. Although these data are not conclusive evidence that the regime's efforts at compensation have failed, they do provide reason to question whether the supposed expansion of coercive capacity in China has in fact kept pace with the challenges the regime faces.

Strengthening the coercive apparatus? Political power versus coercive capacity

One explanation proffered for the increased resources devoted to internal security (and the decision to stop publishing the budget in 2014) was the rise and subsequent fall of Zhou Yongkang 周永康, who was minister of public security in 2002–2007 and a member of the Politburo Standing Committee and head of the Central Political-Legal Commission (*zhengfawei* 政法委) in 2007–2012.⁴⁰ Yuhua Wang and Carl Minzner identify the incorporation and elevation of public security officials within the Chinese political system under Zhou as the other main indicator (in addition to budget increases) of the strengthening of coercive capacity: since the early 2000s, political-legal committee chairs have almost always sat on provincial CCP standing committees, and police chiefs are increasingly represented on provincial Party leadership teams.⁴¹ Indeed, after Zhou's 2002 promotion, the number of police chiefs involved in provincial Party leadership increased sharply, from ~60 per cent in 2003 to ~90 per cent by 2012.⁴² Wang also notes that police funding is positively correlated with the rank of police chiefs and negatively correlated with the percentage of the labour force employed by state-owned enterprises (SOEs). He concludes that the "strong coercive capacity" of the CCP plays an overlooked role in China's authoritarian resilience.⁴³

I believe these conclusions to be overstated. Drawing on the previously discussed literature on the organizational dimensions of coercive capacity, I suggest that these analyses have conflated two separate factors: the political power of China's coercive agents *within* the regime, and those agents' capacity relative to Chinese society. Studies in comparative authoritarianism have previously documented that intra-elite politics and societal unrest are distinct challenges to authoritarian rule, and that the tools used to deal with them are different: autocrats commonly attempt to buy the loyalty of coercive agents (either politically or economically), but these efforts are often orthogonal or even counterproductive to endowing them with the capacity to manage popular unrest.⁴⁴ The treatment of the coercive apparatus from 1992 to 2012 is evidence that the CCP elevated the internal political power of coercive agents during this time, but this cannot be equated with an improvement in coercive agents' capacity to manage Chinese society.

40 Fewsmith 2016; Buckley 2012b; He 2012; Shi, Jiangtao 2012; Jiang 2015; "Tiger in the net," *The Economist*, 13 December 2014.

41 Wang and Minzner 2015.

42 Wang 2014a, 17.

43 Wang 2014a; 2014b; Wang and Minzner 2015.

44 Greitens 2016; Svolik 2012; Talmadge 2015.

In fact, the trend of increasing funding for domestic security pre-dated the practice of promoting police chiefs into the Party architecture, and the improved political position of police chiefs in provincial leadership did not produce an increase in spending on domestic security as a percentage of the overall budget after either 2002 or 2007. Thus, even if higher-ranked police chiefs were able to secure more funding for their provinces than lower-ranked counterparts, the coercive apparatus as a whole did not receive more funding: recall from [Figure 2](#) that domestic security spending as a percentage of total expenditure actually *declined* from 2007 to 2012. In fact, what the relationship between Party rank, SOE employment and police funding suggests is that when faced with overall budget constraints, more politically powerful police chiefs shifted resources to areas where the party-state was losing control over the labour force – a pattern that, as with the geographic data analysed above, suggests concern with the coercive apparatus' inadequate capacity to police Chinese society, not confidence in its strength.

Conclusion

Discussions of China's domestic security expenditure often present this spending, implicitly or explicitly, as evidence of the CCP's strong and increasing coercive capacity. This article challenges that characterization by analysing not just the amount that China spends but also how it spends those resources and the magnitude of the threats that those resources must combat. It finds that China's domestic security spending is not historically unprecedented, not growing as a proportion of national expenditure, and not necessarily producing high coercive capacity compared to other countries. It also shows that certain locations struggle more to fund their coercive capacity than others, and that these locations overlap with areas in which internal security threats may be perceived as particularly acute. These findings are notable given that the challenges that the coercive apparatus faces – in terms of both crime and political opposition – have grown over the same period during which spending has risen. The article further finds that it is theoretically incorrect to assume that policies that raise the political power of coercive agents within the party-state are also measures that strengthen their capacity relative to Chinese society; the two phenomena are theoretically and empirically distinct, and there is evidence for the former but not the latter. Cumulatively, this reassessment provides stronger evidence of the limitations on China's coercive capacity as of 2012 than of its strength.

This perspective helps to explain some of the key developments in China's domestic security policy since 2012, especially the creation of a largely domestically focused National Security Commission, the passage of new national security legislation, and an overall tightening of social control under President Xi Jinping. These developments make the most sense if the CCP in 2012 is understood as a regime deeply concerned about the inadequacy of its capacity to control and manage Chinese society rather than a regime confident in the strength of its ability to do

so. The PRC's decision not to continue releasing full budget statistics on internal security after 2013 confirms the need for observers of Chinese politics to develop alternative indicators of coercive capacity and to theorize the relationship between coercive capacity and China's authoritarian resilience more carefully.

Acknowledgement

The author wishes to thank Jingkai He, Jason Kwon and Hao Wang for excellent research assistance, and Zach Barter, Zack Cooper, Joe Fewsmith, Iain Johnston, Vanya Kriekhaus, Adam Liff, Peter Lorentzen, Andy Mertha, Carl Minzner, Vipin Narang, Elizabeth Perry, Suzanne Scoggins, Caitlin Talmadge, Yuhua Wang, Xie Yue, audiences at the Association for Asian Studies, Cornell University, Harvard University's Program on Global Society and Security, Princeton University, and the George Washington University's Elliott School, for helpful comments and suggestions.

Biographical note

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摘要: 谈到中国国内安全开支增加的时候, 分析人士经常会假设开支的增加是共产党强制能力提高的证据。这篇论文的论点是, 因为理论基础不够明晰, 所以关于中国国内安全开支的结论经常有缺点。在这篇文章, 笔者用中国从 1992 年到 2012 年的国内安全开支的分析来挑战一般常识。笔者认为, 除了开支的数量以外, 中国怎么利用这样的资源以及需要应对什么样的威胁也值得注意。根据笔者的统计分析, 中国国内安全开支: 1) 并不算史无前例, 2) 在国家预算占的比例不在扩大, 3) 跟别的国家相比不算高, 而且产生的强制能力也不算大。笔者还进一步表明在征收国内安全财政收入的方面, 一部分省市会更困难, 而且这些省市平常是有更严重的国内威胁的地方。随着国内安全开支的提高, 国内安全机关面临的挑战也加剧了很多。最后, 国内安全机关政治地位的改善并不意味着他们比较容易控制中国社会。总之, 笔者认为这项分析显示的不是中国国内安全机关的实力, 而是国内安全机关的局限。

关键词: 政法委; 政法系统; 维护稳定; 维稳; 公安; 强制能力; 中国国内安全开支; 群体性事件

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Appendix

Calculating US domestic security spending

Comparing domestic security spending in the US and PRC is difficult for several reasons. First, America's federal structure and decentralized policing make

aggregate estimation of US expenditure difficult. (Of the ~\$155 billion in domestic security spending in 2013, around one-third was federal expenditure; two-thirds was state-level prison spending and state/local police forces.) Second, an ideal analysis would separate political policing, aimed at keeping a particular regime in power and therefore specific (with gradations) to autocracy, from the law enforcement tasks that are common to both democracies and autocracies. Available data, however, simply do not allow this separation.

To reach the estimates of US spending given in this article, several federal departments (including the Department of Homeland Security and parts of the Department of Justice such as the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Federal Bureau of Prisons) were aggregated with state and local spending on police, courts and prisons. Even here, judgments on the precise breakdowns of internal versus external security are likely to be imperfect; the Department of Justice stated in 2014 that \$4.4 billion of its \$27.6 billion budget went to “national security,” including “counterterrorism and counterintelligence programs ... intelligence gathering and surveillance capabilities,” while the FBI has alternately described its mission as either “law enforcement” or “national security,” or both.

Certain categories that were excluded from this aggregation likely make it a low or conservative one. Estimates of state and local police spending in this article do not, for example, include sheriffs’ offices, state law enforcement agencies, or special jurisdiction agencies, which equal or exceed local police departments in number.⁴⁵ It is also possible that some portion of the ~\$50 billion annual intelligence budget should be included in the total, but a breakdown of this spending is not publicly available and therefore is not included.⁴⁶

45 BJS 2013; DOJ 2013; 2014; DHS 2013; FBI 2014; Kyckelhahn 2012; Hudson 2014; Reaves 2010; 2011.

46 DNI 2013; DOJ 2013.