

# China's Olympic Nightmare

## What the Games Mean for Beijing's Future

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Summary: Failure to plan for predictable problems has turned China's coming-out party into an embarrassment.

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On the night of July 13, 2001, tens of thousands of people poured into Tiananmen Square to celebrate the International Olympic Committee's decision to award the 2008 Olympic Games to Beijing. Firecrackers exploded, flags flew high, and cars honked wildly. It was a moment to be savored. Chinese President Jiang Zemin and other leaders exhorted the crowds to work together to prepare for the Olympics. "Winning the host rights means winning the respect, trust, and favor of the international community," Wang Wei, a senior Beijing Olympic official, proclaimed. The official Xinhua News Agency reveled in the moment, calling the decision "another milestone in China's rising international status and a historical event in the great renaissance of the Chinese nation."

Hosting the Olympics was supposed to be a chance for China's leaders to showcase the country's rapid economic growth and modernization to the rest of the world. Domestically, it provided an opportunity for the Chinese government to demonstrate the Communist Party's competence and affirm the country's status as a major power on equal footing with the West. And wrapping itself in the values of the Olympic movement gave China the chance to portray itself not only as a rising power but also as a "peace-loving" country. For much of the lead-up to the Olympics, Beijing succeeded in promoting just such a message.

The process of preparing for the Games is tailor-made to display China's greatest political and economic strengths: the top-down mobilization of resources, the development and execution of grand-scale campaigns to reform public behavior, and the ability to attract foreign interest and investment to one of the world's brightest new centers of culture and business. Mobilizing massive resources for large infrastructure projects comes easily to China. Throughout history, China's leaders have drawn on the ingenuity of China's massive population to realize some of the world's most spectacular construction projects, the Great Wall, the Grand Canal, and the Three Gorges Dam among them. The Olympic construction spree has been no different. Beijing has built 19 new venues for the events, doubled the capacity of the subway, and added a new terminal to the airport. Neighborhoods throughout the city have been either spruced up to prepare for Olympic visitors or simply cleared out to make room for new Olympic sites. Official government spending for the construction bonanza is nearing \$40 billion. In anticipation of the Olympics, the government has also embarked on a series of efforts to transform individual behavior and modernize the capital city. It has launched etiquette campaigns forbidding spitting, smoking, littering, and cutting in lines and introduced programs to teach English to cab drivers, police officers, hotel workers, and waiters. City officials have used Olympic projects as a means to refurbish decaying buildings and reduce air pollution, water shortages, and traffic jams.

Yet even as Beijing has worked tirelessly to ensure the most impressive of Olympic spectacles, it is clear that the Games have come to highlight not only the awesome achievements of the country but also the grave shortcomings of the current regime. Few in the central leadership seem to have anticipated the extent to which the Olympic Games would stoke the persistent political challenges to the legitimacy of the Communist Party and the stability of the country. Demands for political liberalization, greater autonomy for Tibet, increased pressure on Sudan, better environmental protection, and an improved product-safety record now threaten to put a damper on the country's coming-out party. As the Olympic torch circled the globe with legions of protesters in tow, Beijing's Olympic dream quickly turned into a public-relations nightmare.

Although the Chinese government excels when it comes to infrastructure projects, its record is poor when it comes to transparency, official accountability, and the rule of law. It has responded clumsily to internal and external political challenges -- by initially ignoring the international community's desire for China to play a more

active role in resolving the human rights crisis in Darfur, arresting prominent Chinese political activists, and cracking down violently on demonstrators. Although there is no organized opposition unified around this set of demands, the cacophony of voices pressuring China to change its policies has taken much of the luster off of the Beijing Games. Moreover, although the Communist Party has gained domestic support from the nationalist backlash that has arisen in response to the Tibetan protesters and their supporters in the West, it also worries that this public anger will spin out of control, further damaging the country's international reputation. Already, China's coveted image as a responsible rising power has been tarnished.

For many in the international community, it has now become impossible to separate the competing narratives of China's awe-inspiring development and its poor record on human rights and the environment. It is no longer possible to discuss China's future without taking its internal fault lines seriously. For the Chinese government, the stakes are huge. China's credibility as a global leader, its potential as a model for the developing world, and its position as an emerging center of global business and culture are all at risk if these political challenges cannot be peacefully and successfully addressed.

## TIANANMEN'S GHOSTS

Nothing has threatened to ruin China's Olympic moment as much as criticism of the country's repressive political system. China lost its bid for the 2000 Summer Olympics to Sydney, Australia, at least in part because of the memory of the violent Tiananmen Square crackdown of June 1989. When China made its bid for the 2008 Games, Liu Jingmin, vice president of the Beijing Olympic Bid Committee, argued, "By allowing Beijing to host the Games, you will help the development of human rights." François Carrard, director general of the International Olympic Committee, warily supported such a sentiment: acknowledging the seriousness of China's human rights violations, he nonetheless explained, "We are taking the bet that seven years from now ... we shall see many changes."

Few would place such a bet today. For months, human rights activists, democracy advocates, and ethnic minorities in China have been pressuring the government to demonstrate its commitment to greater political freedom. For many of them, the Olympics highlight the yawning gap between the very attractive face that Beijing presents to the world and the much uglier political reality at home. Exactly one year before the Olympics, a group of 40 prominent Chinese democracy supporters posted an open letter online denouncing the Olympic glitz and glamour. "We know too well how these glories are built on the ruins of the lives of ordinary people, on the forced removal of urban migrants, and on the sufferings of victims of brutal land grabbing, forced eviction, exploitation of labor, and arbitrary detention," they wrote. "All this violates the Olympic spirit." Even Ai Weiwei, an artistic consultant for Beijing's signature "Bird's Nest" stadium, has been critical of the Chinese government. He declared in an interview with the German magazine *Der Spiegel*, "The government wants to use these games to celebrate itself and its policy of opening up China .... By now, it has become clear to me that this hope of liberalization cannot be fulfilled .... The system won't allow it."

Protests have arisen around virtually every Olympic Games in recent history, but Beijing, with its authoritarian political system, is uniquely threatened by dissenting voices, and it has responded with a traditional mix of intimidation, imprisonment, and violent repression. Teng Biao, a lawyer and human rights activist, was seized in March 2008, held by plainclothes police for two days, and warned to stop writing critically about the Olympics. Yang Chunlin, a land-rights activist, was arrested for inciting subversion because he had gathered more than 10,000 signatures from farmers whose property had been expropriated by officials for development projects. After a 20-minute trial, he was sentenced to five years in prison. In April, the HIV/AIDS activist Hu Jia, who was also one of the authors of the open letter, was sentenced to three and a half years in jail for subversion, after being held under house arrest for several months along with his wife and baby daughter. Although the vast majority of Chinese are probably unaware of these protests and arrests, Beijing's overreaction demonstrates how fearful the Chinese government is that any dissent or protests could garner broader political support and threaten the party's authority.

## CRASHING THE PARTY

The international community has also raised its own human rights concerns. For more than a year, China has endured heightened scrutiny of its close economic and political ties to Sudan. A coalition of U.S. celebrities and international human rights activists has ratcheted up the pressure on Beijing to do more to help bring an end to the atrocities in Darfur, labeling the 2008 Olympics "the genocide Olympics." The very public attention they

have brought to China's relations with the Sudanese government prompted the movie director Steven Spielberg to withdraw as the artistic adviser for the opening and closing ceremonies for the Games. It also seems to have had some effect on Beijing, which now strives to appear as if it is placing more pressure on Khartoum.

The Chinese government's questionable human rights record has received even more scrutiny since its violent suppression of Tibetan demonstrators in the spring. In March, Tibetan Buddhist monks marched to commemorate the 49th anniversary of Tibet's failed independence uprising and to call for greater autonomy for Tibet and the return of their exiled religious leader, the Dalai Lama. The demonstrations soon escalated into violent protests. Chinese police forcefully cracked down on the protesters in the Tibetan capital of Lhasa and throughout other Tibetan areas of western China, leaving more than a hundred dead and injuring hundreds more.

Ignoring international calls for restraint, Beijing closed off much of the affected region, detained or expelled foreign journalists from the area, and created a "most wanted" list of Tibetan protesters. All independent sources of news, including broadcasts by foreign television stations and YouTube videos, were blacked out in China, and text messages in and out of Tibet were filtered. Vitriolic government propaganda condemned the Dalai Lama as a "wolf in monk's robes" and a "devil with a human face but the heart of a beast." Chinese officials accused the "evil Dalai clique" of attempting to restore "feudalist serfdom" in the region and called for a "people's war" against it. The international community immediately condemned the crackdown and called for Beijing to resume negotiations with representatives of the Dalai Lama. Meanwhile, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, Czech President Václav Klaus, and Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk have since announced that they will not be attending the Olympics' opening ceremonies.

As the Olympic torch made its way across the globe, the number of protesters along its path ballooned, from a few in Athens to thousands in London, Paris, San Francisco, and Seoul. These large-scale disruptions of Olympic pageantry humiliated the Chinese government and angered Chinese citizens, producing a wave of nationalist counterdemonstrations by Chinese living abroad and millions of virulent anti-Western posts on Chinese Web sites. A bit more than a month after Beijing's initial crackdown, senior Chinese leaders indicated a willingness to meet with the Dalai Lama's envoys. But this does not represent a fundamental shift in policy; it is merely a stopgap measure designed to quell the international outrage.

## WAITING TO INHALE

Although some foreign athletes have joined the chorus of China's critics, the more immediate concern for many Olympians will be whether Beijing can ensure clean air and safe food for the duration of the Games. The city has reportedly spent as much as \$16 billion to deliver a "green Olympics"; many of the Olympic sites showcase a number of clean-energy and water-conservation technologies, and for the past seven years the city has been shutting down many of the biggest polluters and steadily weaning the city's energy infrastructure off coal, replacing it with natural gas. On February 26, senior Chinese officials formally announced a more sweeping effort, including restrictions on heavy industry in five neighboring provinces surrounding Beijing, a ban on construction in the months immediately preceding the Olympics, and plans to compensate car owners for staying off the road during the Games.

But pollution levels in Beijing are still far above average. On a typical day, the city's air pollution is three times as bad as the standard deemed safe by the World Health Organization. Last August, an air-quality test revealed that pollution levels in the city had barely improved despite one-third of the cars having been removed from the city's roads. Even some senior Chinese officials have reservations about the prospects for a green Olympics. The mayor of Beijing, Guo Jinlong, admitted in early 2008 that bringing traffic and environmental pollution under control by the time the Games begin would be an "arduous" task. After all, there are few economic incentives for businesses to reduce pollution; the central government routinely calls on local officials and businesses to clean up their act to no effect. Many factory managers have agreed to slow production during the Olympics but not to shut down. In the brutally competitive Chinese economy, closing factories for several weeks could well spell the end of those enterprises unless the government provides significant financial compensation. Meanwhile, corruption flourishes, and local officials openly flout environmental laws and regulations. In January 2008, it was revealed by a Western environmental consultant, Steven Andrews, that officials in Beijing's Environmental Protection Bureau had for several years been skewing the city's air-quality data by eliminating readings from some monitoring stations in heavily congested areas.

Faced with the prospect of dangerously high levels of air pollution during the Games, International Olympic Committee officials have warned that competition in endurance sports, such as the marathon and long-distance cycling, might be postponed or even canceled. The world's fastest marathon runner, Haile Gebrselassie, has already withdrawn from the Olympic race for fear that air pollution might permanently damage his health. Many athletes are planning to take precautions, such as arriving in Beijing as late as possible, coming well equipped with medication for possible asthma attacks, and wearing masks once there.

Beijing's capacity to provide safe food and clean water for the athletes is also in question. In the past year, China has endured a rash of scandals involving food tainted with steroids and insecticides, and as much as half of the bottled water in Beijing does not meet potable-water standards. Some teams, such as the United States' and Australia's, have announced that they will be bringing some or all of their own food and that their bottled water will be supplied by Coca-Cola. Olympic officials have put in place a massive food-security apparatus that will track the athletes' food from the producers and distributors to the Olympic Village. Having promised a safe and green Olympics, Beijing must now deliver. Otherwise, it risks irrevocably damaging the historic legacy of the 2008 Games.

### BEIJING'S BLIND SPOT

Beijing's failure to respond creatively to its critics and effectively manage its environmental and product-safety issues reveals a certain political myopia. China's leaders have long been aware that opponents of the regime would try to disrupt the Olympics. They prepared extensively for disturbances by developing a citywide network of surveillance cameras and training, outfitting, and deploying riot squads and other special police. They also made some attempts to defuse international hostility, such as offering to renew the human rights dialogue with Washington that was suspended in 2004 and publicly pressuring Khartoum to accept a joint African Union-United Nations peacekeeping force. But Beijing has been unable to counter the images emanating from Darfur and Tibet. Chinese leaders simply saw no relationship between the pageantry of the Olympics and Tibet, Sudan, or broader human rights concerns, and they never figured out how to engage and disarm those who did. They continue to fail in this regard.

As a result, tensions will run high until the end of the Games. There are also real worries that with the spotlight focused on Beijing during the Games, some of the opposition to the regime could take an extreme form. For example, Chinese security forces have expressed concern that activists from the religious movement Falun Gong might attempt to immolate themselves in Tiananmen Square. Because of such concerns, the 30,000 journalists covering the Games may find themselves straitjacketed when reporting on controversial stories. And despite recent assurances that a live feed from Beijing will be allowed and that the Internet will be uncensored in China, the government has yet to fulfill its promise to allow foreign journalists unfettered access throughout the country.

The Chinese public is already angry about what it sees as a pervasive bias toward Tibet and disrespect of China in the Western media. Chinese citizens are likely to view any disturbances of the Games as an effort to embarrass the country and undermine China's rise. Foreign media, corporations, and governments might all bear the brunt of the sort of nationalist backlash that the French retailer Carrefour endured -- in the form of a consumer boycott -- in the wake of the disrupted torch ceremony in Paris.

The combination of demonstrators desperate for the world's attention and the heightened nationalism of Chinese citizens makes for an extremely combustible situation. The official Beijing Olympic motto of "One World, One Dream" suggests an easy cosmopolitanism, but Chinese nationalist sentiment will be running high during the Games, stoked by the heat of competition. In the past, sporting events in China, in particular soccer matches against Japanese teams, have led to ugly riots, and the same could happen during the Olympics. If the Games do not go well, there will be infighting and blame shifting within the party's central leadership, and it will likely adopt a bunker mentality. Vice President Xi Jinping, the government's point man on the Olympics and President Hu Jintao's heir apparent, would likely face challenges to his presumed leadership.

A poor outcome for the Games could engender another round of nationalist outbursts and Chinese citizens decrying what they see as racism, anti-Chinese bias, and a misguided sense of Western superiority. This inflamed form of Chinese nationalism could be the most enduring and dangerous outcome of the protests surrounding the Olympics. If the international community does not welcome China's rise, the Chinese people may ask themselves why China should be bound by its rules. As a result, Beijing may find the room it has for

foreign policy maneuvering more restricted by public opinion. This form of heightened nationalism has occasionally hurt the Chinese government, as happened after a U.S. spy plane was shot down over China in 2001.\* When the crew was eventually released, an outraged Chinese public accused the government of weakness and kowtowing to the West. More recently, despite a decade of increasingly close economic, political, and cultural ties between Beijing and Seoul, South Koreans were outraged by the Chinese counterprotests during the Olympic torch ceremony; in response, the South Korean government imposed tight restrictions on the number of Chinese students permitted to study in the country. Sensing the potentially damaging consequences of a prolonged nationalist backlash, the official Chinese media began signaling in May that it was time for people to move on, focus on economic development, and steer clear of staging counterprotests and boycotting Western companies.

The barrage of criticism China has endured prior to the Olympics may have brought a short-term gain in forcing the Chinese leadership to agree to meet with the Dalai Lama's envoys, but real reform of China's Tibet policy or a broader willingness to embrace domestic reforms is unlikely to follow in the near term. Nevertheless, the current controversy could yield positive results in the long run. Beijing's Olympic trials and tribulations could provoke soul searching among China's leaders and demonstrate to them that their hold on domestic stability and the country's continued rise depend on greater transparency and accountability and a broader commitment to human rights. Already, some Chinese bloggers, intellectuals, and journalists, such as Wang Lixiong and Chang Ping, have seized the moment to call for less nationalist rhetoric and more thoughtful engagement of outside criticism. The nationalist outburst has provided them with an opening to ask publicly how Chinese citizens can legitimately attack Western media organizations if their own government does not allow them to watch media outlets such as CNN and the BBC. Similarly, they have used the Olympics as a springboard to discuss the significance of Taiwan's thriving democracy for the mainland's own political future, the need for rethinking China's approach to Tibet, and the desirability of an open press.

Whatever the longer-term implications of the 2008 Olympics, what has transpired thus far bears little resemblance to Beijing's dreams of Olympic glory. Rather than basking in the admiration of the world, China is beset by internal protests and international condemnation. The world is increasingly doubtful that Beijing will reform politically and become a responsible global actor. The Olympics were supposed to put these questions to bed, not raise them all anew.

#### CORRECTION

\* The U.S. Navy EP-3 surveillance aircraft was not shot down; it suffered a midair collision with a Chinese fighter aircraft. Moreover, it was flying in international airspace at the time of the collision.