

The Human Rights Olympics: Beijing 2008 and China's Security Dilemma

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Introduction

Tracy Smart argues that "the Western focus on the inter-related issues of human rights and Tibet in the context of the Olympic Games represents a major security dilemma for the government of China, which could have significant repercussions, both domestically and internationally". Smart argues that while success in the bid to host the Olympics "strengthened the position of the government, it also intimately linked the success of the Olympics" with state legitimacy. Ultimately, Smart concludes "the only conceivable consequence" of further perception of interfering in China's internal affairs "is a humiliated and less open China, and this is in no-one's best interests."

The Human Rights Olympics: Beijing 2008 and China's Security Dilemma

By allowing Beijing to host the Games you will help the development of human rights. China and the outside world need to integrate. China's opening up is irreversible. The Olympic Games is a good opportunity to promote understanding.

Liu Jingmin, Beijing 2008 Olympic Games Bid Committee, 2001¹

On 8 August 2008, the attention of the world will be focussed on the People's Republic of China and its capital, Beijing, for the opening the 2008 Olympic Games.² In many ways, the world's spotlight has been firmly focused on this nascent North Asian great power, and particularly its human rights record, since Beijing was controversially awarded the Olympics in 2001. The violent protests by members of the Tibetan ethnic minority in early March 2008, and the subsequent government response, have again raised serious human rights concerns.³

I argue that the Western focus on the inter-related issues of human rights and Tibet in the context of the Olympic Games represents a major security dilemma for the government of China, which could have significant repercussions, both domestically and internationally.

Human Rights and Tibet: The East - West Divide

The human rights issue has been the cause of much difficulty and misunderstanding in China's relationship with the West. As detailed in the United Nations' *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, the term covers a broad range of areas including social, economic, cultural, civil and political rights. From a Western perspective, human rights can be defined as "...those rights which are held to be justifiably claimed by any individual, especially rights of the individual against the state".

The issue of Tibet is another major cause of dissent between China and the West and is widely seen by the latter as a human rights issue. Public support for Tibet's exiled spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, by high profile individuals, including Hollywood actors and members of the US Congress, has seen Tibetan human rights, and demands for Tibetan independence, become a *cause celebre* in the Western world.

China's primary national interest is in upholding the State's "...sovereignty, unity, and territorial integrity". Tibet is internationally recognised as being under Chinese control, therefore from China's perspective the "Free Tibet" movement is not a human rights issue but a separatist movement. Any Western commentary on the issue is viewed as interference in the internal affairs of a sovereign country and a threat to China's national interest. China has expressed an absolute opposition to "...any interference in the internal affairs of UN member states under the pretence of safeguarding human rights".

An Olympics with Chinese Characteristics

Some people say, because of serious human rights issues, 'We close the door and say no'. The other way is to bet on openness.

François Carrard, Executive Director, International Olympic Committee, 2001

China originally bid to host the 2000 Olympics but was defeated by just two votes in 1993. This narrow defeat caused a great deal of embarrassment to China and was widely attributed to Western concerns over China's human rights record, particularly as the 1989 Tiananmen Square incident was still prominent in the international memory.

Hosting an Olympic Games has been a long held ambition for China, and the announcement of the successful bid saw an outpouring of nationalist pride. Such an outcome represented a dramatic convergence between the concerns of the government and those of the people and was seen by the government as a validation of the legitimacy of the State.

One of the primary motivations for hosting the Olympics was the opportunity for China to improve its image and emerge onto the international stage as a truly modern nation. International image and reputation has assumed increasing prominence in the development of China's foreign policy. It is of extreme strategic importance as China becomes more involved in, and dependent upon, the global market to sustain its economic growth.

Progress Since 2001

Preparations for the Games have been going along with China's development, and the rights of the people have been protected and improved in this process.

Liu Jingmin, Beijing 2008 Olympic Games Bid Committee, 2007

Since 2001, the Chinese government has reported continued progress in the area of human rights.

Western commentators have noted attempts to reform the legal system, improvements in labour practices, and a lifting of restrictions on foreign media. There has also been a small but incremental increase in democratic processes in China and an increasingly consultative approach at the higher levels of the government.

Despite these positive developments, concerns exist that progress in human rights is not occurring at a satisfactory rate and that, rather than improving the situation, the Olympic preparations have caused a regression in some areas. Direct effects include the poor working and living conditions of large numbers of rural workers who have migrated to

Beijing to work on Olympic-related projects, and the displacement of 1.5 million people, many through forced eviction, as a result of venue development.⁴² There is also evidence, from both Western and Chinese sources, to suggest that Olympic-related security concerns have been used to justify suppression of freedom of speech.⁴³ Many Chinese activists who have spoken out about the Olympics have been labelled as 'anti-Olympic' and branded 'anti-China' and have been forcibly detained by the government.⁴⁴

The facts behind the 'March 14 Incident' in Tibet are not entirely established. Whatever the catalyst and nature of the initial protests, they rapidly turned violent, and the resultant Chinese Armed Police response was also violent.⁴⁵ This government-backed response confirmed the fears in the minds of many in the West with respect to human rights in China.

Security Implications - The Government's Dilemma

No responsible government will sit idly by such crimes, which gravely encroach human rights, gravely disrupt social order and gravely jeopardise the life and property security of the masses.

President Hu Jintao, regarding the 'March 14 Incident', April 2008⁴⁶

The potential for the Olympics to become a focus for protests by dissident and disenfranchised groups (and their international supporters) has long been recognised as a major Olympics-related security risk.⁴⁷

China is a diverse nation comprising 55 recognised ethnic minorities in addition to the Han majority, and a large number of religious groups.⁴⁸ Tibetans are only one of a number of groups with grievances against the central government, and which contain dissident or even terrorist elements in the view of the government.⁴⁹ Approval or disapproval of any kind from one of these elements represents a potential threat, not only to Chinese territorial integrity and the safety of the Olympics, but to China's highest priority - its ideological reputation.

Given these concerns, there were probably few response options available to the Chinese government in handling the 'March 14 incident'. The adoption of a soft approach to the protests would have encouraged other similarly motivated groups. As the majority of Chinese people appear to share the government's view regarding the protests, it would also have been perceived as a sign of weakness.⁴⁴

At a time of peaking nationalist fervour in the lead up to the Olympics, this would represent a direct threat to the government's power. China's 'crackdown' of rioters in Tibet was therefore a necessity from the government's point of view to ensure territorial integrity, its own legitimacy, and domestic security at this most crucial of times.

Although China's actions in Tibet had a positive effect on domestic security, they were perceived in an extremely negative light in the West. The international outcry, including calls for an Olympic boycott and a series of worldwide protests associated with the global Olympic Torch Relay, severely damaged China's international image.⁴⁴

Such an outcome was no doubt extremely frustrating for China at a time when it is attempting to improve its image by hosting an international event. Possible outcomes could include China turning away from the West and becoming less open, and an undermining of trust in China by the West. This could heighten regional tensions in 'flashpoint' areas such as the Taiwan Straits.⁴⁵ This does not augur well for peace, stability and security in the broader region.

The government's reaction to the criticism was highly defensive, as it attempted to shift blame to the alleged instigators of the riots, the Western-linked 'Dalai Lama clique'.⁴⁶

Even more overwhelming was the reaction of the Chinese public. While many in the West undoubtedly believed they were supporting the Chinese people through their protests, this perception was not shared by many Chinese. A new wave of nationalism and anti-Western sentiments swept the country in response to what was perceived as the West's deliberate attempt to sabotage China's Olympics, and there were calls for an anti-West boycott.⁴⁷

This increase in nationalism and the strong public voice that has emerged could not only further strain the China-West relationship, but could gain a momentum of its own and be difficult for the government to control. While this may be encouraging for long term change within China, it could potentially represent a threat to the legitimacy and power of the government in the shorter term, particularly if the government is perceived as being too 'soft' in response to international criticism.⁴⁸

If threatened domestically, the reaction by the government is likely to be an increasingly inward focus and a hardening of resolve, which may in turn worsen individual human rights in China.

Due to the opening up of China over recent years, its security concerns have become enmeshed with those of the West.⁴⁹

The Chinese government therefore faces a major dilemma, and must negotiate a very delicate balance to maintain both domestic and regional security. On the one hand, it must appear strong to its people by demonstrating that it remains in control, and not appearing to bow to international pressure. On the other, it must improve its international image by demonstrating progress in the area of human rights, avoiding further violent incidents, minimising anti-Western sentiments (while still encouraging nationalism), and responding to legitimate and reasonable international pressure under the pretext of national interest. It must also deliver a successful and problem free Olympics.

Whether the Chinese government can resolve this dilemma remains to be seen, however, there are positive signs. For instance, it has acted strongly to diffuse anti-Western sentiments by reminding its citizens that a positive relationship with the West is essential, not only for the running of a successful Olympics, but for long term economic development and security.⁵⁰

Internationally, the government responded to criticism over its alleged support of violence in the Darfur region of Sudan by playing a crucial role in the establishment of a peacekeeping force in that region.⁵¹ The government has also recently announced that it will meet with representatives of the Dalai Lama to discuss the situation in Tibet.⁵²

Conclusion

The West must...stop hectoring China over human rights...You don't obtain anything in China with a loud voice.

Jacques Rogge, IOC President, April 2008³³

China has been planning to host a successful and problem-free Olympics since 2001 but recent events have made this even more vital and perhaps the best way for the Chinese government to resolve its current security dilemma. Such an outcome, and avoidance of the problems indicated above, would be good for China, the world and for human rights. Ong (2004) perhaps best sums up the opportunities that the Olympics offer:

“The CCP should emerge from a problem-free Olympics with strong popular support and a positive international reputation. In the long run, however, the Olympics may accelerate China’s drive towards international integration and will further political reform and increased personal freedom within the state”.³⁴

The West also has a stake and can play a role in ensuring such an outcome, but any further perception of interfering in China’s internal affairs will make this increasingly difficult. The only conceivable consequence of the continuation of such provocation is a humiliated and less open China, and this is in no-one’s best interests.

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³ These events have been labelled the ‘March 14 Incident’ by the Chinese government (see [‘Materials on the March 14 Incident in Tibet’](#), *China Internet Information Center Website*).

⁴ In this paper the terms ‘Western’ or ‘The West’ are defined as “... the countries of Western Europe, North America, Australia, etc., especially as contrasted historically, culturally or politically with other parts of the world”. ([Macquarie Online Dictionary](#), [accessed 8 May 2008]). ‘Security’ in this context means “freedom from danger, risk; safety...freedom from care, apprehension, or doubt; confidence” ([Macquarie Online Dictionary](#)). Anything that threatens these elements represents a security risk to China and/or the region.

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About the author

Group Captain Tracy Smart, BM BS, Dip AvMed, MPH, is a medical officer in the Royal Australian Air Force with extensive international experience, both as an exchange officer and on operations. She joined the Centre for Defence and Strategic Studies, the senior educational institution of the Australian Defence College, Canberra, in 2008, and will graduate at the end of the year with an MA in Strategic Studies. This article is an abridged version of a paper submitted as coursework. The views expressed are those of the author. Contact: tracy@warriordoc.com

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Nautilus Institute
608 San Miguel Ave., Berkeley, CA 94707-1535 | Phone: (510) 423-0372 | Email:
nautilus@nautilus.org