

Beijing's Olympic-Sized Catch-22

On August 8, Beijing will host the opening ceremonies for the 2008 Summer Olympics. For two weeks, we will be treated to athletic performances that animate dreams and inspire the world, set against the backdrop of one of the world's most ancient and celebrated civilizations. That, at least, is the way that Beijing would like to sell the Games. For better or worse, they will mark a critical crossroads in China's development as a responsible global player.

Just as the Tokyo Olympics in the summer of 1964 closed the book on war-time Japan, the Beijing Games will end China's past century as the "sick man" of Asia and open a new chapter as a modern, advanced nation. The newly built stadium known as the "Bird's Nest" and the supermodern "water cube" aquatics center are iconic Olympic facilities offering the world a new image of China beyond the Great Wall. The symbolism of China's first astronaut in space carrying the Beijing Olympic banner could not have been a stronger statement of the nation's aspirations.

The Olympics, however, also generate pressures on the regime to change its behavior, not just its image. Beijing is wrestling with the difficulties of conjoining its controlled and closed political system with the classical liberal ideals of individualism, open competition, and respect for human dignity embodied in the Olympics. It is under siege from intense international scrutiny of its behavior by media stars such as director Steven Spielberg, journalists, Nobel laureates, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and socially responsible corporate actors all demanding changes in China's domestic and foreign policies.

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No one expects sweeping political changes in China along the lines of what took place in South Korea, where the 1988 Games played a key role in the authoritarian government's decision to relent to democratization pressures. Recent Chinese cooperation on Iran, North Korea, and even climate issues are directly related to Chinese national interests, not an embrace of Olympic ideals. Movement on trade, currency reform, and product safety would reflect Beijing's interests in avoiding trade wars.

The test of whether the Olympics change China will come over human rights and responsible foreign policy, particularly in Africa and Burma. Here, China faces a catch-22: It seeks the Olympic spotlight to enhance its prestige, but that spotlight engenders massive pressures for political change that if left unaddressed by Beijing, undercut any prestige and reputation benefits of the Games. In short, Beijing has to pay the price for the limelight it seeks with the Olympics. Is China willing to pay? If not, will the Games be remembered as the "Genocide Olympics," as Darfur activist and film star Mia Farrow claims? If China does change, will any of this change be lasting or merely a temporary fit of good behavior until the tourists and the Olympic cameras leave Beijing Capital International Airport?

The catch-22 dilemma for political change faced by Beijing is inescapable. China has responded by making piecemeal but real adjustments in policies toward Sudan and Burma as well as on selective, internationally known human rights cases. Yet, when it comes to separatist protests or domestic activists, the regime continues to be ruthlessly efficient and forceful in its control, as it has done with the demonstrations in Tibet, regardless of cries for an Olympic boycott. The true story of whether the Olympics change China will be written long after the Olympic flame is extinguished, but the prospects may not be nearly as dark as people think.

Sport and Political Change

President George W. Bush, seeing the Olympics purely as a sporting event, has stated that he will not "use the Olympics as an opportunity to express my opinions to the Chinese people in a public way 'cause I do it all the time" with President Hu Jintao.¹ Sports purists would take the same view as Bush, arguing that sport is at best an art form, in the sense of a perfectly executed golf swing or triple axle, and at worst a capitalist venture but that it should not be political. Yet, the Olympics have historically been a political event. The U.S. and Soviet boycotts of the 1980 Moscow and 1984 Los Angeles Olympics, respectively, were hardly the first time that the Games were used politically. A fascist regime tried to use the Games in Berlin in 1936 and the Soviets used the Games in Helsinki in 1952 to demonstrate the supposed superiority of

their political and social systems. Egypt, Iraq, and Lebanon did not participate in 1956 because of the Suez crisis, Germany was banned from the 1920 Games for its actions in World War I, and South Africa faced bans because of its apartheid policy, to cite a few examples.

Moreover, this will be only the third time since 1896 that the Summer Games are held in Asia, where a tradition of sports diplomacy is arguably more prominent than in other regions. Not only did a ping-pong ball play a key role in Chinese-U.S. rapprochement, but the two Koreas have tried to promote reconciliation by fielding united sports teams, and beating Japan in sports has long been viewed as requital for its historical aggressions.

So, when the world's most populous country hosts the world's biggest sporting event, it is about more than sports. China will seek to portray the Games as Beijing's coming-out party, showcasing its rapid economic growth and prosperity, as the 1988 Seoul Games did for South Korea. Beijing has been transformed in preparation through a \$40 billion-plus infrastructural facelift of the city, including everything from the building of a new airport terminal and subway lines to razing traditional *hutong* neighborhoods. Some \$17 billion has been spent on environmental cleanup, including banning one million cars from the city and planting more than 200 million trees to absorb carbon dioxide.

A trip to Beijing starts at the airport, where you taxi on the tarmac past a dragon-like structure recognized as the largest terminal building in the world, with a footprint larger than the Pentagon. On the expressway to Beijing, you whiz past thousands of tree saplings planted as part of a "million tree" city beautification and environment project. Cruising the city thoroughfares, you quickly lose count of the number of high-rise construction cranes amid gleaming new city spires rising out of the rubble of demolished old *hutong* neighborhoods. The pace and scale of Beijing's physical transformation is an awesome testament to how much the Olympics transform the host city, but does this transformation go deeper than concrete and glass to spurring changes in politics and society?

China will seek to host a flawlessly executed Games and rack up much gold, silver, and bronze in the process. Yet, the Games have greater purpose for the government. It seeks to use the Olympics to enhance internal credibility and control, showcase its economic growth, delegitimize Taiwan, improve its international stature, extinguish memories of the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, and establish the People's Republic of China (PRC) as a global player—a formidable list of objectives. What China contends with now in its

The Olympics generate pressure to change China's behavior, not just its image.

Olympic run-up, however, is the larger historical lesson that sport creates certain undeniable pressures for change upon the host government in domestic and international policies.

Specifically, the Olympics create two types of pressure for political change: tactical and ideational. Tactically, the Games act as a giant magnet, attracting

The Games embody classical liberal ideals of individualism and open competition.

global scrutiny amid a continual drumbeat of NGO and media pressures to open political space and moderate foreign policy. Ideational pressure relates to the values that sport intrinsically privileges. The concept of sport and of the Olympics is inherently a collection of values and prescribed practices about humanity and its treatment based on fair play, transparent rules, best efforts, and rewards based on merit and performance. The International

Olympic Committee (IOC) charter's similarity with the universal declaration of human rights is hardly coincidental:

The goal of Olympism is to place sport at the service of the harmonious development of man, with a view to promoting peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity.... [T]he practice of sport is a human right. Every individual must have the possibility of practicing sport, without discrimination of any kind and in the Olympic spirit, which requires mutual understanding with a spirit of friendship, solidarity, and fair play.²

The link between Olympism and liberalism both in ideational and tactical terms is therefore inescapable.³ A government that hosts the Olympics is expected to embrace the values consistent with the Olympic social movement, explicitly in the competitions themselves and implicitly in its overall role as host. Pressure groups, both domestic and international, leverage the Olympic spotlight to compel the host government, particularly an illiberal one, to address practices that are inconsistent with the ideals. What may have once been a standard practice for the host government changes as new audience costs become associated with the host's behavior under the international spotlight.

One might expect that authoritarian regimes such as Beijing would not feel obligated to respond to such pressures and instead focus on hosting a flawless Olympics and ensuring that their teams bring home gold. That is what Hitler tried to do in 1936, after all. In the twenty-first century, however, with 24-hour cable news and literally hundreds of thousands of tourists crawling all over China armed with cell phone cameras, illiberal regimes cannot simply ignore the pressure to conform or otherwise risk embarrassment of Olympic proportions. Illiberal regimes such as China therefore face a catch-22: they host

the Olympic limelight to illuminate the country's accomplishments and global status, but they must pay the price of unprecedented pressures for political change in exchange for this limelight. Not responding to the pressure would do great damage to the prestige so desperately sought through the Games.

The Genocide Olympics and Team Darfur

The ideational and tactical pressures on Beijing in the run-up to the Olympics are probably beyond anything the organizers imagined. For the first time in nearly three decades, the Summer Games will be hosted by an authoritarian regime (1980 in Moscow was the last). More than 21,600 press passes will be authorized, and an estimated additional 10,000 freelance journalists will show up without press credentials to get a piece of the Olympic action. The NBC television network plans to present more than 3,600 hours of coverage, which is more than the combined total of every Summer Olympics ever televised in the United States. On NBCOlympics.com, the network also plans to provide live streaming broadband video coverage for the first time ever. Countless blog sites have been set up to cover all aspects of Beijing's behavior, which China has sought fruitlessly to control by issuing guidelines on blogging during the Games. With 500,000 tourists expected to descend on Beijing, the Olympic hosts face the most comprehensive and intense media scrutiny and penetration of the Chinese Communist Party's lifetime.

Various groups have utilized this spotlight to put intense pressure on the regime to change illiberal policies. In addition to Farrow's now-famous *Wall Street Journal* op-ed on March 28, 2007, calling the 2008 Games the "Genocide Olympics" because of Beijing's hands-off policies in Sudan⁴ and Steven Spielberg's February 2008 resignation as artistic director for the Games (also over Sudan), the Chinese have faced a phalanx of pressure from nongovernmental groups, politicians, and athletes themselves.

Eight Nobel Peace Prize laureates in February 2008 wrote an open letter to Hu demanding an end to China's trade and aid to the Khartoum regime to force an end to the atrocities in Sudan.⁵ Prince Charles of Wales declared that he would not attend the opening ceremonies of the Beijing Games, presumably in opposition to China's handling of the Tibet issue. After the September 2007 Burmese junta's crackdown on peaceful protests by Buddhist monks, the *Washington Post* editorial page derided Beijing's cherished Games as the "Saffron Olympics," declaring that "Burma's saffron-robed monks will join Darfur's refugees in haunting the Beijing Olympics—which are on their way to becoming a monument to an emerging superpower's immorality."⁶

Congress introduced three "sense of Congress" resolutions in August 2007, one calling unconditionally for Bush to boycott the Games⁷ and two others

calling for a boycott unless China “stops engaging in serious human rights abuses against its citizens and stops supporting serious human rights abuses by the governments of Sudan, Burma, and North Korea.”⁸ Human Rights Watch demanded an end to China’s use of capital punishment before the Games. Advocacy groups also organized around the abuse of labor and civil rights of millions of migrant workers brought into Beijing to build the Olympic sites

and who were forced to live in makeshift housing and work under terrible conditions.

The test will come over human rights and foreign policy, particularly Africa and Burma.

At every moment when Beijing organizers have sought to showcase their Olympic preparations to the world, groups mobilized to embarrass the country for their human rights practices. At the August 2007 one-year countdown celebrations, at which the Chinese threw a party for one million people in Tiananmen Square, complete with fireworks, media stars such as Jackie Chan and Yao Ming, and songs of

“We Are Ready!” the group Reporters Without Borders held an unauthorized press conference calling for the release of 100 dissidents, free speech activists, and journalists imprisoned in China. Protesters climbed the Great Wall and unfurled a banner mimicking the Olympics theme of “One Dream, One World,” but with the revision “One Dream, Free Tibet 2008.” As the fireworks streamed over Tiananmen Square, critics on blog sites around the world drew analogies between these celebrations on the blood-stained square of former pro-democracy demonstrators and the Nazi use of a site in 1935 for mass executions that was later used to hold the 1936 Olympics. Activists have already used the international leg of the Olympic torch relay in April 2008 to protest Chinese human rights abuses.⁹ Officials cancelled the last leg of the Paris Olympic torch relay after they were forced to douse the flame several times and carry it in a bus to avoid anti-China protesters, with similar problems in London and San Francisco. The imagery being forced on the public is too much for Beijing to ignore. The run-up to the Olympics looks like a marathon through a human rights minefield.

In perhaps the worst nightmare of Beijing organizers, athletes have become energized in expressing their outrage at Beijing’s record. Team Darfur, a group of some 250 athletes from 42 countries founded by 2006 speedskating gold medalist Joey Cheek, organized to use the Beijing Games to voice their concerns about China’s policies in western Sudan. Belgian steeplechaser Veerle Dejaeghere considered making political statements, such as wearing a “Free Tibet” t-shirt, during the Games.¹⁰ There were rumors that t-shirts imprinted with “Democracy Rocks” were being circulated among interested athletes.

Concern over these and other athletes' disruptive behavior led some national Olympic committees to seek prior agreements from their athletes that they would not make political statements, in the spirit of the Olympic Charter.

Much of the pre-Olympics pressure on China has focused on a boycott of the Games, but this became less likely after Bush accepted Hu's invitation during their bilateral meetings at the September 2007 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation meetings in Sydney. The IOC has also come out strongly against a boycott, calling them "a thing of the past, not of the present nor the future," referring to the 1980 and 1984 boycott-blighted Games.¹¹ NGO groups have adjusted their strategy and focused instead on utilizing the Games to maximize pressure on the regime and to embarrass the PRC leadership. Freedom House, for example, called on Bush to meet with Chinese dissidents and human rights activists on the sidelines of attending the Beijing Games.¹² (Chinese activists also never wanted a boycott as they wanted to capture the attention of the world through the Olympics.) NGOs are asking world leaders to boycott the opening ceremonies. Media personalities such as Quincy Jones and Ang Lee are being targeted to withdraw their cooperation with Olympic organizers as Spielberg had done. Farrow and others are targeting corporate sponsors, who maintain a "sports purist" line largely because of the prospects of gaining a foothold in an emerging middle-class consumer market larger than the entire population of the United States.

China's Midgame Adjustments

As one might expect, Beijing strongly resisted any attempts to link the issues raised by NGO activists, politicians, and media entertainers with the Olympics. Spokespeople of the Beijing Organizing Committee for the Games of the XXIX Olympiad (BOCOG) accused all who called for boycotts as afflicted with an anachronistic Cold War mentality harking back to the 1980 and 1984 Games. Beijing advocated a purist view of sports, asserting that the Olympics should be played without politics.

Beneath the rhetoric, however, one can discern a deliberate but unspoken strategy of selective accommodation and moderation to address all the pressures that Beijing faces. Officials have dealt with the ideational disconnect between liberal Olympism and the regime's illiberalism by introducing "Chinese-style" Olympic themes that are relatively value neutral: "environmentally friendly," "high-tech," and "harmonious." Beyond this, Beijing has tactically moderated some aspects of foreign policy in Burma and Sudan and has showed some leniency on carefully selected human rights issues, although hardly watershed political transformations. On the contrary, the changes were very calculated, designed to gain maximum publicity but not designed to fos-

ter fundamental change. When it comes to domestic dissidents and separatist movements, Beijing has ruled with its typical iron fist.

Regarding human rights, China has selectively liberalized on certain cases or on issues that it knew would garner international attention. In the run-up to the Games, for example, Beijing made a pledge to the IOC that it would expand individual freedoms in the country. In March 2004, the Tenth National People's Congress adopted an amendment to the constitution stipulating that the state will respect and safeguard human rights. Chinese described this as a major milestone in China's development, as it marked the first time the concept of human rights had been constitutionalized.¹³ On January 1, 2007,

The Olympics create both tactical and ideational pressure for political change.

it relaxed restrictions on the foreign press, allowing reporters to travel around the country for interviews without requiring prior government approval. Given that China has more detained reporters than any other country in the world and has blocked Web sites, television, and radio broadcasts, this step was a positive one. Beijing knew it would garner international attention and might even win it some positive press coverage.¹⁴

China has also made token concessions on some other high-profile human rights cases. On September 15, 2007, the Chinese released Zhao Yan, a 45-year-old Chinese research assistant for the *New York Times* who had been detained for three years on charges of fraud and disclosing state secrets linked to an article about the inner workings of the top leadership in China. A Beijing court convicted him of fraud in June 2006 without permitting him the right to cross-examine state witnesses. The case drew international attention and quickly became high profile when Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice raised it with Hu.¹⁵ That same month, China released U.S. citizen Steve Kim, who had been detained for four years for working through Christian churches in New York City to provide food and shelter to North Korean defectors hiding in China.

In June 2007, Chinese authorities permitted the mother of a man killed in the Tiananmen Square massacre to publicly mark the anniversary of his death on the square before television cameras.¹⁶ In January 2008, while unveiling some of its new iconic Olympic facilities, Beijing organizers finally admitted that at least six migrant workers had died in the construction.¹⁷ Ching Cheong, a Hong Kong reporter for the Singaporean *Straits Times*, was released in February 2008 after having been detained since 2005 on charges of allegedly spying for Taiwan.¹⁸ That same month, Foreign Minister Yang Jeichi announced Beijing's intention to restart a long-suspended bilateral human rights

dialogue with the United States.¹⁹ As per Beijing's calculations, these cases gained much media attention, lending some credence to the view that they were liberalizing in the run-up to the Games.

Beijing also reacted immediately to any media stories linking human rights abuses and the Olympics taken up by international NGOs. In 2007 the advocacy group Play Fair claimed that manufacturers of official Beijing Olympic merchandise were using child labor. The Chinese responded immediately to these concerns. They claimed that an investigation found that one company, Lekit Stationary in Dongguan, was guilty of using eight underage children and promptly stripped the company of its Olympic license. They also claimed that three other companies were stripped of their Olympic licenses for other labor violations.²⁰ In response to media reports that some 14,900 people were relocated since 2001 by the Olympic venue preparations, in some cases forcibly, BOCOG organizers hastily organized a press briefing to state that all residents have been given compensation, vocational training, and replacement residences that were better than their prior homes.²¹

Although any liberalization of China's human rights policies should be seen in a positive light, there should be no false sense of optimism that the political change wrought by the pressure of the Olympics in this particular issue area is long lasting. Beijing adopted a conscious strategy, selecting key high-profile cases, usually involving foreigners, to demonstrate token liberalization. Even in these cases, the permanence of these changes is hardly assured.

A ban on printing foreign newspapers and magazines in China, the distribution of which had previously been available only to foreigners at hotels and certain other venues, was lifted in the run-up to the Games. Minister of the General Administration of Press and Publication Liu Binjie made it clear, however, that this relaxation was only for the Olympics. The widely publicized lifting of restrictions against the foreign press, for example, is scheduled to end on October 18, 2008, one day after the conclusion of the last event of the Beijing Paralympics. Moreover, the Foreign Correspondents Club of China released a statement in August 2007 saying that 95 percent of foreign reporters still believe that, even with the expanded freedoms, reporting standards are far below the international norm.²²

China has shown some leniency in selected, internationally known human rights cases, but they have cracked down against all domestic elements in the run-up to the Games. In the fall of 2007, the Chinese Ministry for Public Security reportedly issued an internal secret blacklist of individuals, including Falun Gong activists, domestic media, Xinjiang activists, and others, who were considered "antagonistic elements" to be banned from the Games.²³ Using the pretext of the Lunar New Year holidays about five months before the Games, the government instituted new inspections at train and bus stations, airports,

and major roadways of all migrant populations traveling into Beijing in order to monitor and control the potential for domestic activists infiltrating the city. All Beijing residents were also required to apply for provisional residence permits. Chinese authorities reportedly usurped the passports of all Uighurs in advance of the Olympics and restricted access to the Tibetan side of Mount Everest as part of a clampdown on any protests during the torch relay starting in April 2008.²⁴

Beijing has selectively accommodated and moderated to address the pressures it faces.

Moreover, the government pursued all Chinese activists who might be suspected of using the Games to embarrass Beijing. In July 2007, Yang Chunlin was arrested and tortured for gathering 10,000 signatures on a petition opposing the Olympics and demanding redress for citizens who had lost their land for construction of Olympic facilities.²⁵ On December 27, 2007, Hu Jia, an advocate for

HIV/AIDS victims and an active blogger on Chinese human rights violations, was detained by Chinese authorities and formally arrested for “inciting subversion.” The Chinese have sought to hold the activist until after the Olympics.²⁶ Another victim of detention was Jiang Yanyong, a military surgeon who first revealed the scale of the SARS outbreak in 2003. Jiang was banned from leaving the country to accept a human rights award. Gao Zhisheng, a Chinese human rights lawyer, was arrested and tortured after writing an open letter to the Senate in October 2007 detailing Chinese human rights abuses. British minister Lord Mark Malloch Brown raised with Yang Jeichi in August 2007 the case of Chen Guangcheng, whose attorneys say was another Chinese citizen jailed in retaliation for his activism.²⁷

As the government temporarily reduced restrictions against foreign reporters, it implemented tighter restrictions on domestic reporters, restricted Web access, and continued to jam radio transmissions.²⁸ According to Reporters Without Borders, Zhang Jianhong remained under arrest for powerful writings about human rights abuses and press censorship. In the summer of 2007, there were also reports that more than 100 foreign missionaries were expelled from the country to prevent foreign Christian activity in Beijing, Shandong, Tibet, and Xinjiang ahead of the Olympics.²⁹

Chinese authorities have shown and will continue to show little patience for domestic human rights activists, even as they selectively demonstrate flexibility on cases that gain notoriety in the international spotlight. Any protests perceived as incited by separatist intentions, such as those in Lhasa, Tibet, in March 2008, have been and will continue to be put down ruthlessly by Beijing regardless of whether they need to quash these acts of defiance publicly.

Human rights groups have adjusted to Chinese tactics, trying to draw international attention to the plight of persecuted Chinese activists, but a vicious circle swirls around the Olympics. The more that domestic-based Chinese activists and perceived separatists try to leverage the Games to embarrass Beijing, the more Beijing will crack down even as the protests get closer and closer to disrupting the Games.

NO LONGER ON THE SIDELINES IN AFRICA

China has practiced a policy of noninterference in domestic affairs in Africa while maintaining robust energy and military relationships with many of the illiberal regimes in power. It has provided fighter jets to Zimbabwe, helicopters to Angola and Mali, and light arms to Namibia and Sierra Leone. During the 1998–2000 Ethiopian-Eritrean war, China sold \$1 billion worth of arms to both sides. In Sudan, China has gone against the climate of international opinion and been the largest supplier of arms, including munitions and antipersonnel mines, all of which the Khartoum regime has used against the Sudanese.

The West has maintained sanctions on Sudan since the 1990s for the government's use of Arab militias to carry out genocide in Darfur, leaving 250,000 dead and 2.5 million displaced. Yet, China remains Sudan's top customer for oil, purchasing two-thirds of all Sudanese oil exports, and invests in the country's infrastructure as its base for broader petroleum interests in Africa. When asked about China's human rights concerns and its relationship with Sudan, Hu responded during a 2004 state visit to Gabon that Chinese aid is "free of political conditionality and serving the interests of Africa and China." A Chinese trade ministry official put PRC motives more bluntly: "We import from every oil source we can."³⁰

China's resistance to any efforts at putting international pressure on the Sudanese regime is clear. China did not support any of the UN resolutions in 2004 and 2005 on Sudan and in some cases threatened to veto them. In each instance, China defended its actions by stating that Darfur was not China's responsibility and that the causes of Sudan's problems were not politics but poverty, in which case Chinese investments in the country were part of the solution, not part of the problem. Zhou Wenzhong, then deputy foreign minister and now China's ambassador to the United States, summed up China's defense: "Business in business. We try to separate politics from business.... [T]he internal situation in the Sudan is an internal affair, and we are not in a position to impose upon them."³¹

As the pre-Olympics pressure mounted on Beijing from all sides, including NGOs, newspapers, the entertainment world, the European Union, and Congress, Beijing quietly started to change their Sudan policy to bring themselves

more in line with the international community. During the China-Africa summit in November 2006, Hu pressed President Omar al-Bashir of Sudan to accept a proposed hybrid African Union (AU)–UN peacekeeping force in the country to replace the largely ineffective AU efforts. In February 2007, Hu traveled to Sudan again, pressing Bashir to comply with the hybrid peacekeeping operations plan offered by former UN secretary-general Kofi Annan.³²

In March 2007, China quietly removed Sudan from its list of countries with preferred trade status, effectively taking away government incentives

Any protests perceived as incited by separatists will be put down ruthlessly.

for Chinese companies to do business in Sudan.³³ The following month, Assistant Minister for Foreign Affairs Zhai Jun traveled to the region, visiting three refugee camps and publicly calling for the Sudanese government to show some “flexibility” in response to the UN calls.³⁴ In the most explicit acknowledgment of the responsibility imparted by the world on China, Beijing in May 2007 appointed a special envoy for Darfur, Liu Guijin, who became

the public face of China’s efforts to explain China’s turn in policies to the world. He made several trips to the region in order to press Khartoum to accept its obligations under the UN plan.

These actions may appear small, but they are nonetheless evidence of a clear shift in policy away from China’s previous stand on the principle of non-interference in domestic affairs. When the United Nations made the July 2007 decision to deploy the largest-ever, 26,000-strong UN peacekeeping operation to Sudan in December 2007, it was widely accepted that China’s efforts were critical to Sudan’s acceptance of the plan. The U.S. special envoy for Darfur, Andrew Natsios, openly credited Beijing’s critical role and its use of considerable leverage to get UN peacekeepers into the country.³⁵ Beijing then participated for the first time in the AU-UN force by contributing a 315-member peacekeeping unit of construction workers, medical units, and a force-protection unit to be deployed in October 2007. This commitment made China the first non-African country to contribute forces to the effort.

The pressure in advance of the Olympics undoubtedly played a role in the shift in China’s policy. Beijing had demonstrated little or no interest in the killings in Darfur, but as NGOs, entertainers, and athletes linked it to something the Chinese held very dear to their own prestige, the situation in Sudan grew in importance to Beijing’s own reputation. Farrow’s op-ed and Spielberg’s resignation as artistic adviser, in the words of one British official, “made China sit up and take notice. It certainly had the effect of concentrating minds in Beijing and elsewhere.”³⁶ Chinese actions were clearly strategic rather than

motivated by some sense of moral outrage at the atrocities in Darfur and were designed to relieve some of the pressure. The outcome, however, was one in which sport affected political change in a way that might not have otherwise been possible.

ON THE FIELD OF PLAY IN BURMA

China's collusive relationship with the Burmese military junta generally garnered little attention among the public prior to the Olympics. As Burma's largest trading partner since 2005, leading investor, and diplomatic protector, Beijing enjoyed access to Burmese timber, gems, and other raw materials. It did \$2 billion worth of arms sales to the country, including aircraft, patrol boats, tanks, missiles, antiaircraft guns, and armored personnel carriers, and has enjoyed the use of naval bases along the Burmese coastline. Scores of Chinese multinationals operate in the country on large projects, including the construction of oil and gas pipelines stretching some 1,500 miles from Burma's Araksan coast to China's Yunnan province to assist China's import of oil and gas from Africa, the Middle East, and South America. Beijing consistently opposed any attempts by the United States or other countries to bring the issue of human rights in Burma to the UN Security Council agenda.

When hit by the onslaught of world opinion calling on China to stop the bloodshed in Burma after the junta's September 2007 crackdown, Beijing initially defended their inaction based on their principle of noninterference in the domestic affairs of other countries. They also sought to stop any attempts to link Burma with the Olympics. In a hastily arranged press conference (on a Chinese national holiday no less) in Washington after a *Washington Post* column called for an Olympic boycott over Burma, Chinese embassy spokesperson Wang Baodang claimed that it was totally irresponsible to make such linkages and that the Olympics should not be politicized.³⁷ China blocked a UN Security Council resolution condemning the Burmese regime's actions. Liu Jianchao, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson, rationalized Beijing's position, saying, "What happens in Myanmar, in essence, is an internal matter of itself."³⁸

Yet, as Burma shaped up to become another rallying cry for those seeking to embarrass Beijing at the Olympics, the Chinese started to make quiet changes in the policy. Chinese Foreign Ministry officials grew concerned that all of the blame for the situation in Burma would be pinned on China and tarnish the Olympics when there were plenty of other colluding parties, such as Japan and India, that could be the focus of international opprobrium. In June 2007, Beijing hosted two days of talks between representatives of the Burmese junta and Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Eric John

of the United States to discuss relaxing house arrest for Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, leader of the Burmese democratic opposition.

Chinese Foreign Ministry and party officials began making guarded statements about the need to restore internal stability in the country. In the aftermath of the military crackdown, State Councilor Tang Jiaxuan pressed Foreign Minister U Nyan Win of Burma to restore stability and, more significantly, told him to “push forward a democracy process that [is] appropriate for the country.”³⁹ News reports from the region surmised that Chinese officials were working to persuade the regime to reduce the use of violent force against unarmed demonstrators.⁴⁰ In the most marked sign of change, Beijing dropped a long-standing position and did not oppose the October 18, 2007, UN Security Council resolution condemning Rangoon for the crackdown.

Some of the biggest shifts in China’s policy were not readily evident to the public. Although Beijing publicly stated that pressure would not work to stem the bloodshed, Chinese arms sales to the regime went down in the months after the September 2007 crackdown. China also played an important role in the first effort to get UN representation on the ground. The UN initially could not get the Burmese regime’s consent to send UN special envoy Ibrahim Gambari into the country to survey the situation. After numerous attempts, UN secretary-general Ban Ki-moon asked for U.S. assistance. Department of State and White House officials made direct contact with their Chinese counterparts and demanded that China use its leverage to allow the UN into the country. In a couple days’ time, China reported that Gambari would be allowed into the country. Moreover, in another sign of Chinese assistance, Gambari was escorted around the country by the Chinese ambassador in Rangoon.⁴¹

Beijing’s Slippery Slope

As in the case of Sudan, China’s policy in Burma underwent subtle but important changes, bringing Beijing more in line with the norms of the international community. The point of enumerating these changes in Chinese policy toward Sudan and Burma is not to sing the praises of the regime in Beijing. Rather, the point is that sport had a way of promoting changes in long-standing policy that years of diplomacy were unable to accomplish. These political changes are not nearly of the scale seen with the Seoul Olympics in 1988, and for every positive action that Beijing took, the regime took equally negative actions against groups such as domestic activists and separatists. Nonetheless, they do represent political change.

The question of how long lasting the changes in Darfur and Burma policy will be remains to be answered. Are they all tactical and temporary? All states, whether liberal or illiberal, are on their best behavior when they host the

Olympics. Yet, there is still some hope that the political change observed in Beijing's foreign policy and human rights policy will be more than temporary. This is largely because change of any kind made so obviously under the glare of the Olympic spotlight cannot be easily reversed without severe damage to the reputation and legitimacy that illiberal regimes such as Beijing so dearly crave. Moreover, change is like a slippery slope. Once it occurs, it is not only difficult to reverse, but the expectations grow for even further change. In this sense, the Olympics can set trends in society rather than merely mirror it.

More permanent change is inherent in the preparations for the Games. Although the Beijing Games will see their difficult moments regarding the environment and air quality, they have created a new infrastructure, new practices, and a new appreciation for the environment. Domestic advocates now have a multibillion-dollar spring-

board in the environmental cleanup preparations for the Games from which to advance their agenda. The international community will also be able to encourage China toward more environmentally friendly policies now that many of the start-up costs have already been borne in preparations for the Olympics.

China's policy in Africa is also likely to undergo permanent and more comprehensive change. For example, on Darfur, when China took steps in response to the international outcry for action, it presumed that these changes would relieve the pressure. Beijing went on a public relations campaign trumpeting the steps it had taken to gain Khartoum's acceptance of the UN plan. It performed training demonstrations of the 315-member engineering unit that they planned to contribute to the peacekeeping operation for the international media. It even drew attention to the fact that the Sudanese government criticized Beijing for siding with those in favor of the Annan plan.

What Beijing did not account for is the slippery slope. Change begets demands for more change. When Beijing helped to get the Khartoum regime to accept the hybrid AU-UN force and then contributed a small number of forces, it probably thought it was done. Yet, Spielberg still resigned from his role as artistic adviser because, he said, China had not yet done enough to stop the bloodshed in Darfur. The day after Spielberg's resignation, Archbishop Desmond Tutu warned that Chinese inaction could lead many more to boycott the Games. The South African cleric's well-publicized remarks made clear the heightened expectations heaped on Beijing: "We believe that they could use a great deal more of their leverage to help to change the situation drastically."⁴²

Thus, when Khartoum slowed the timetable for allowing the hybrid peacekeeping force into the country, the international community looked to Beijing

Beijing quietly changed its Sudan and Burma policy.

to exercise more leverage on the regime. Chinese Foreign Ministry officials got extremely defensive and complained publicly that “if you respect the truth, you will see that China has been doing a lot towards the resolution of the Darfur issue.”⁴³ Liu, prior to another planned trip to the region, maintained that China would not continue to be “blackmailed” in this manner. Yet, when he returned to the region in February 2008, Liu actively tried to persuade Khartoum to accept the non-AU-UN peacekeeping troops and to encourage competing rebel groups to enter into peace talks.

Beijing did not account for the slippery slope: change begets demands for more change.

Whether China likes it or not, every change that it makes under the Olympic spotlight puts it on a slippery slope to address pressures for more change. During Rice’s February 2008 trip to Beijing, the Chinese agreed to restart a long-suspended bilateral dialogue on human rights. Announced by Yang Jeichi, the dialogue had been suspended since 2004 after the United States sponsored a resolution in the UN Human Rights Commission condemning China. Yang’s declaration seemed designed as

a response to the growing volume of criticism from Western human rights groups that China is not a fit host for the Olympics because of rights abuses. Again, the Chinese action was tactical, designed to relieve pressure, but the cumulative effect of these actions add up to a changing Chinese foreign and domestic policy.

In another atypical Chinese action, rumors have surfaced in the Olympic blogosphere that Beijing will move some of its best diplomats from their normal posts to work diplomacy during the Games, trying to manage the public message. These officials include He Yafei, who is to be China’s chief representative at the six-party talks, arguably the most important multilateral diplomatic effort in which China has been involved. The fact that Beijing is shifting its best resources to the Games is even further indication of how a sporting event of this nature causes even the most rigid regimes to break out of their old molds.

In perhaps the most telling sign of Beijing’s slippery slope, Xi Jinping, a new star in the Communist Party and successor to Hu, was put in charge of Olympic preparations shortly after Spielberg announced his resignation. This happened once recently in the history of Asian sport when Roh Tae-woo, anointed successor to Korean military dictator Chun Doo-hwan, was put in charge of the Seoul Olympics amid the pro-democracy street demonstrations, tear gas, and fears that Seoul might have to give up the Games. Roh, in the end, made the critical decision to accede to democracy demands of the Ko-

rean people in advance of the successful Seoul Games. Like Roh, Xi, in his new post, will internalize all that is at stake for China in the Olympics. He will have to squarely face the catch-22 of political change and international prestige. This does not promise by any means such sweeping political liberalization as seen in Korea in the aftermath of the Beijing Games. It does, however, provide the future leadership of Beijing with a very unique understanding of the pressures that sport can bring for change in illiberal systems. History never repeats itself, but at times, it can be similar.

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