

Briefing Memo

China after the Beijing Olympics: Erupting Problems, Limited Reforms

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Introduction

China is now seeing its presence grow as a major power in the global arena. It is said in China that the Beijing Summer Olympic Games will be the culmination of the “100-year dream” to hold an Olympic Games in China. The event has a “feel-good effect” on Chinese society as well as a positive effect on China’s re-emergence in the international community. A letter sent jointly by the Communist Party Central Committee (CPCC) and the State Council to the Chinese national team at the time of the closing ceremony glorifying the Games’ success read in part, “The children of China, with enterprising initiative and a high-spirited manner showed their vigorous stance to the world, and the Chinese people made unflagging strenuous efforts, came together and battled, showing the world a spirit and character that advance peacefully.” In fact, at the Beijing Olympics, China achieved first place in gold medal count for the first time, winning 51. It topped the second highest gold medal total of 36, won by the United States, by 15 medals.

U.S. President George W. Bush, who had taken a critical stance toward the human rights situation in China prior to the Beijing Olympics, ended up praising the Beijing Olympics as having exceeded his expectations.¹ UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown stated that the Beijing Olympics was a smashing success, and expressed his praise to Chinese president Hu Jintao that the event set a new standard for the next Olympics in London².

From these circumstances, one may perhaps term the Beijing Olympics a success. However, dealing with the Chinese societal issues that came to the surface during the process of hosting the Olympics is an ongoing task. After the closing of the Olympics, debate over how to address China’s domestic problems is once again growing lively. It is fair to say that China is now emerging out of the “100-year dream.”

¹ *The Associated Press*, August 11, 2008.

² *China Daily*, August 23, 2008.

1. The Beijing Olympics and International Protests

The process leading to the hosting of the Beijing Olympics was fraught with difficulty. The “riots” that broke out on March 14, 2008 in Lhasa, Tibet Autonomous Region, set off increasing international opinions that criticized the human rights situation in Tibet, and the Olympic torch relay became a forum for protest activity against the Communist regime. Some leaders of European countries voiced their intent to boycott the opening ceremony. In March, leaders such as Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk and Estonian President Toomas Hendrik Ilves expressed their intentions not to participate in the ceremony, while French President Nicolas Sarkozy hinted at a boycott when he said, “all options were open.”³ In response to anti-China criticism, there was a public backlash in China, and on April 19, protest demonstrations were held at French diplomatic missions, at the French supermarket giant Carrefour in Beijing and in other urban areas. By April 21, three days later, the demonstrations had spread to 19 cities. To restrict expansion of the protests, the Chinese leadership stepped up propaganda efforts. On April 21, an article in the *People’s Daily* stated that, “As a major power recognized by the world, our state of mind must be more open, receptive, rational and full of confidence. We must value the core interests of the state and have (patriotic) passion while possessing reason.” On April 20, *Xinhua* also published an article that stressed showing patriotism through rational methods. Nevertheless, Anti-French demonstrations again broke out on May 1 in Beijing, Chungking, Shenyang, Fuzhou, and Changsha.

In addition, a terrorist attack on Han people thought to have been perpetrated mainly by Muslims occurred in the Uighur Autonomous Region. On August 4, only four days before the start of the Beijing Olympics, an armed police station was attacked and 16 police officers were killed in Kashgar Prefecture of the Uighur Autonomous Region. On July 21, an incident occurred in Junming City, Yunnan Province in which two local buses were destroyed. According to the US IntelCenter, on July 23, two days later, an organization calling itself the Turkistan Islam Party (TIP) claimed responsibility for the crime, and uploaded to the Internet a video declaration that warned that terror would continue unless the Beijing Olympics were canceled.⁴

Such “acts aimed at sabotaging the Beijing Olympics” (Shi Dagang, Secretary of the Communist Party Committee of Kashgar Prefecture) were not the only disturbances. Protests against corruption and expropriation of land on the part of regional governments, and labor disputes occurred frequently. These illustrated to China and the world at large during the Olympic hosting process the growing instability of Chinese society. There was also a string of direct appeals to the central government in

³ *Le Figaro*, March 26, 2008.

⁴ Public security authorities of the Yunnan Province denied a connection between the bus explosions and the TIP (*Xinhua*, July 26, 2008)

Beijing. In fact, on July 23, the Beijing Olympic Organizing Committee's security director Liu Shaowu announced the establishment of protest zones in three Beijing parks during the Olympics (World Park, Purple Bamboo Park, and Ritan Park).⁵ The Beijing Municipal Public Security Bureau received 77 applications for demonstrations regarding issues such as labor disputes, medical care and welfare. However, not even one application was accepted, as the "safe Olympics" slogan was stressed. Petitioners coming from the countryside were routinely taken into custody.⁶

It should also be noted that the freedom of the press that was promised to the foreign media before the games changed to stronger restrictions. When a western journalist asked a question concerning the Tibet or the Uighur issues at press conferences, they would be rejected by the presiding official on the grounds that they had nothing to do with sports. At the regular press conference of the Beijing Olympics Organizing Committee on August 14, foreign journalists made a series of objections that freedom of the press had been violated. The Beijing Olympics, which had been touted as the "100-year dream of the Chinese people" under the slogan "One World, One Dream" was held amid an eruption of domestic and external protests. An editorial in the *Beijing Qingnianbao* [*Beijing Youth Daily*] the day after the opening ceremony stressed that in a short amount of time, the ceremony had helped hundreds of millions of people around the world to understand the essence of Chinese culture and make them feel the pride and confidence of the Chinese people. However, it must be said that such statements once again evoke the argument of the unique nature of Chinese society to a part of the international community.

2. Problems Erupting after the Olympics?

The hosting of the Beijing Olympics amid various protests certainly was a blow to the Chinese leadership. This is because the holding of the Beijing Olympics was not only the "100-year dream of the Chinese people," but was also considered to be related to the legitimacy of the Communist rule, which "had unified the people with a strong will, sacrificed blood to oppose foreign invasion," and "led the Chinese people on the road to revival," "walking the road to independence" in the 1930s and 1940s "had unified the people to push development and walk the road to wealth and power" since the launch of the reform and opening-up policy at the end of 1978.⁷ The holding of the Beijing Olympics was considered the culmination of the roads to independence and to wealth and power. And, as the joint letter from the CPCC and State Council pointed out, hosting the Olympics was supposed to have been an opportunity to again make the international community aware of China's elevated status as a major power. As Hu stressed at the August 8 welcome banquet, "the Beijing Olympics was not only a chance for China, but also a chance for the world," and that "China must

⁵ *Zhongguo Xinwenshe* [*China News Agency*], July 23, 2008.

⁶ *Sing Tao Daily*, July 17, 2008

⁷ *Xinhua*, August 8, 2008.

work with the international community to use the opportunity of the Olympics to advance steps toward building a harmonious world of lasting peace and common prosperity.” In addition, Long Yongtu, Secretary General of the Boao Forum for Asia, (who is also former Deputy Director-General, China International Center for Economic and Technical Exchanges, and former chief negotiator for China’s entry into the World Trade Organization) expressed expectations for a new awareness on the part of the international community of China as a great nation in a more straightforward manner. He said that China must become not only a major economic power but also a great nation respected by the world.⁸

It is no easy task for China to become a great nation respected by the world amidst protests concerning the universal values such as human rights and democracy. As stated at earlier, while prominent world figures were applauding the “success” of the Beijing Olympics, the foreign media had a more severe assessment. On August 23, the *New York Times* ran a sarcasm-tinged editorial that stated the final gold medal should be awarded for “authoritarian image of management.” The August 25 Japanese- leading *Asahi Shimbun* editorial mentioned problems with ethnic minorities and the clampdown on speech and press, stating that the world had supported and collaborated in the holding of the Beijing Olympics because it expected these problems to be alleviated. It pointed out that it could only voice disappointment with today’s situation seven years after China’s hosting was decided.

An article in the September 13-19 issue of *The Economist* cited the possibility of destabilization of Chinese society after the Olympics. The article expected the “suspension” of protest activities and disturbances would end after the closing of the Olympics, and the problems facing Chinese society would once again come to the surface. In fact, tens of thousands of angry protesters, many of whom lost their life savings in illegal investment schemes run by legitimate real estate and mining companies, clashed with police on September 3-4 in Hunan province. The demonstrators gathered together and travelled to the prefectural government seat to petition for government intervention, causing a roadblock and traffic jam in downtown. They also swarmed the train station of Jishou City, causing the suspension of Zhiliu Railway Line’s train operation in the city station for several hours. According to Hong Kong Information Centre for Human Rights and Democracy, as many as 10,000 members of the public clashed with hundreds of Armed Police and Public Security Special Police in the city center, and more than 50 members of the public were injured.⁹

Taking these circumstances into consideration, we see that the true difficulties faced by the Chinese leadership are those coming after the Olympics. Whether they concern ethnic minorities or various

⁸ *Hong Kong Wenweipo*, July 31, 2008.

social problems, they are issues that have been accumulated along the “road to independence” and the “road to wealth and power,” and not matters that could be resolved by hosting the Olympics. Let’s look at ethnic minority issues. It goes without saying the geopolitical importance of the ethnic minority regions located in China’s peripheral areas in order that the country had eliminated possibility of invasion by foreign countries and had walked the “road to independence.” Moreover, the development and utilization of ethnic minority regions where natural resources such as coal, oil and natural gas exist in abundance is essential to advancing economic development and walking the “road of wealth and power.” China cannot do without these ethnic minority regions in respect to either of these roads.

It is true that in walking the “road to wealth and power,” China has raised the economic standards of ethnic minority regions. For example, the GDP of Tibet Autonomous Region in 2007 topped 30 billion yuan for the first time, reaching 34.2 billion and achieving annual growth of 14%. In addition, per capita net income for Tibetan farmers recorded 14.5% growth to 2,788 yuan, causing Tibet CPC secretary Zhang Qingli to remark, “This is very pleasant news.”¹⁰ However, through the process of economic development, there has been an influx of Han people into the ethnic minority regions, and the population of Han people in the Uighur Autonomous Region of Xinjiang and the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region has topped that of the ethnic minorities. These ethnic minorities are facing not only the loss of land and employment opportunities, but also a mounting sense of crisis about the destruction of their culture. The “riots” that broke out in Tibet and the “terrorist activities” that occurred in Xinjiang are manifestations of the sense of crisis felt by ethnic minorities in response to these situations. To the Chinese leadership, this might mean the collapse of policies toward ethnic minorities up to now, which have had economic development as their primary policy aim. It must be noted that it will be difficult to relieve the pattern of conflict between ethnic minorities and the Han people using economic development alone. Now that the government is in the process of waking up from the “100-year dream” under the watchful eye of the international community, this pattern of conflict must be faced.

Conclusion

As pointed out earlier, the tasks facing the Hu Jintao administration include more than just ethnic issues. Protests occur inside China regarding a wide array of issues, including labor disputes, medical care problems, welfare and the environment. Today, as China awakens from its “100-year dream,” the interest of China’s specialists and domestic media is clearly moving toward the question of how to address these domestic matters. At issue is the construction of mechanisms to handle the demands of the “will of the people” manifested by repeated protesting, and the need for “expansion of

⁹ *BBC Monitoring Asia Pacific*, September 5, 2008.

citizens' freedom and rights," including "all-inclusive political participation," is being emphasized.¹¹ However, even as it is being stressed that "expansion of citizens' freedom and rights" is no longer a "sensitive issue," the fact is that reform and improvement of the system for electing local leaders and members of the National People's Congress, actions that would ensure "all-inclusive political participation," are not being included in the discussion. Demand for the development of crisis management mechanisms is still strong. Among suggested measures are the prevention of mass incidents through improvement of the petitioning system called "xinfang" or "letters and visits" and active implementation of information disclosure systems by local governments. Although the leadership is paying great attention to trends in the will of the people, it can only be said that the aimed-at reforms will be limited.

The purpose of this column is to respond to readers' interests in security issues and at the same time to promote a greater understanding of NIDS. A "briefing" provides, among other things, background information. We hope these columns will help everyone to better understand the complex issues involved in security affairs. Please note that the views in this column do not represent the official opinion of NIDS.

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¹⁰ *China National Radio* on the Web, March 13, 2008.

¹¹ *Zhongguo Xinwen Zhoukan* [*China Newsweek*], No. 22, 2008.