

BEIJING OLYMPICS: AN EXHIBITION OF CHINESE SOFT POWER

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The recently completed Summer Olympics at Beijing was a monumental work which is unlikely to be repeated for a long time to come. It is clear Chinese were aiming to create an image that they can get the things done. The motto of the games, “One world, One Dream” was designed to present a benevolent image: the themes of opening and closing ceremonies were of openness and good spirit. All aspects of the game were carefully organized. China had won more gold medals than any other country. The people were intensely proud of their country. The budget of Beijing Olympics of £ 22.6 is huge when compared with next Olympics in London in 2012 which is £9.3. The Olympics are expected to generate two million jobs and add 0.3 % to GDP growth. The International Olympic Committee President Jacques Rogge stated, ‘The Games are a chance for the rest of the world to discover what China really is.’

IOC had claimed that by awarding Beijing the Olympics it would help China becoming more open and liberal. Was this a genuine hope? What is the real impact of Olympics in China’s political and social evolution? Will it have a lasting impact on China and the world outside?

The Olympics have history of transforming the identity of host nations. The successful Olympics in 1988 followed by World Cup in 2002 at Seoul beautified the city and disciplined the public and all of this was done for the “success of the game.”¹ It also led to openness of the economy and transition to democracy. It also served as a vehicle to establish economic and political connections with post soviet blocks. The Olympics in Japan in 1964 heralded the arrival of nation on the international stage and helped it grow. “Olympics had huge political and economic impact, helping the process of transition of democracy. But this effect could not be expected for China”²

Author Xu Guoqi, professor at Michigan in his book, “Olympic Dreams: China and Sports, 1895-2008”⁽³⁾ has emphasized that for long Chinese leaders have viewed sports as a means of engagement with the outside world. At the end of 19th century, Xu writes, China was characterized as a ‘sick man of east Asia’ lacking the ‘war like spirit’ required for winning. China participated for the first time in 1932 Olympic Games with a single athlete with the political purpose of countering Japan who had established a puppet state

in occupied China at Manchukuo. “When the communists took over, Mao Zedong, using the model of the Soviet Union, viewed sports as a means of establishing the superiority of socialism. But China would not participate in the Olympics for a long while because of western support for Taiwan”⁴ The book also explains how the famous “Ping Pong” diplomacy thawed the relations between USA and China “noting that the most arcane details were handled by some of the most powerful men in the world at that time.”

Transition from Mao’s Power from Barrel of Gun to Confucian Soft Power

Daniel Bell Professor of Political Theory at Beijing’s famed Tsinghua University has stated⁵ that Beijing symbolizes change from Mao’s concept of hard power to Confucian soft power. China’s had been viewing itself as a weak and vulnerable country that has been denied a historical place in history. China is now more powerful. It has begun to establish its place under the sun. The traditional ways of Confucian soft power can begin to reassert themselves. It is no coincidence that glossy ‘Introduction to China’ brochures distributed to 21000 foreign journalists at the Olympics left out communist party leaders of the past and instead they extol Confucius—who is figure head of Chinese new identity. Marx and Mao have been left out. The themes in the opening and closing ceremonies emphasized openness to the world & its people. “The ceremonies clearly aimed to celebrate Confucian values rather than send a totalitarian message...Chinese ideogram representing ‘harmony’ were prominently displayed.”⁶ The Confucian sayings such as, “The World’s peoples are all brothers” and “Is it not one of life’s greatest pleasures to have friends visiting from afar” were beamed to millions world wide. Mao’s anti intellectualism concepts were totally ignored and instead role of four precious necessities- pen, ink, paper and ink grader were emphasized. Beijing’s were taught to treat foreigners with kindness and civility. Taxi drivers were asked to learn English. The spectators were asked to cheer the opposing team. There were equal cheers for American and Russian winners although they were the main competitors for gold. It was not without reason that small nine year old kid was made to walk with towering basketball player and an icon of China-Yao Ming. The young child had rescued victims of Sichuan earthquake. The children were prominently displayed as much as possible.

Prof Joseph Nye’s defines soft power as the “ability to influence others to get them to do what you want... For China, soft power is a new field of international cooperation and competition. Currently China is building or rebuilding its soft power, as the country is rising economically and strategically in the world, an exclusive reliance on hard power is seen as inappropriate and insufficient in pursuing China’s goals. Officially and unofficially, the development of the nation’s soft power has been regarded as a pressing task at the near top of China’s priorities.”⁷ Though some leaders in the west hesitated in accepting invitations due to political costs, large number of leaders from developed and developing countries attended the largest and most complex global event by a developing country. Leaders from small countries felt honored being invited for opening or closing ceremonies. “Some from Africa said they have witnessed the birth of a new super power. Some from Asia even repeatedly said the China’ role in the games not only increased their soft power but also of Asia as a whole.”⁸ India has expressed its hope to obtain assistance from China to prepare for the forthcoming Commonwealth games in 2010 at

New Delhi. The journalists from around the world enjoyed media freedom and transparency and could interview any person without taking previous permission which was the rule. It is expected some of the restrictions may be eased beyond October 2008 when they would be reviewed. USA has remained a top sports power. Premier Wen Jiabao congratulated US for highest overall number of Olympics medals. China has been undergoing great social and economic changes for the last thirty years.

Though one event can not change the image overnight, “ But China people and society have had an unprecedented interaction-exceeding all expectations-with the world through games....Hosting of 2008 summer Olympics in the Chinese capital has been a milestone in China’s exploration of soft power. “China continues to be aware about the dominant position of USA in world affairs. China also continues to firmly seek cooperation with USA. The two countries have enjoyed cooperative and constructive relations for the last three decades. The only option for the two people is to continue this situation. But because of China’s soft power through the games, I worry that some in the USA may use the Beijing Olympics as evidence to revive the old political perception of a ‘China threat’ or ‘China Challenge.’”⁹

Daniel Bell makes a pertinent remark that Olympics depicted “an unfinished transition to Confucianism.” The famous saying from Analects of Confucius that, “exemplary persons seek harmony but not conformity” was not displayed as it had political denotations. Chinese governance need to be far more open to dissent and tolerant to different views. Chinese communist party need to live with its ideology of harmony as its relations with non-Han minorities are far from ideal.

Gold Winning Strategy

Medal Standings

	G	S	B	Total
China	51	21	28	100
USA	36	38	36	110
Russia	23	21	28	72

In Athens, China had scored 32-17-14=63

“During the 2008 Olympics, both at home and abroad, many critics targeted China’s gold medal producing ‘state sports system.’ They accused China of sponsoring state run sports schools and centralized sports administration without careful consideration of the costs.”¹⁰

In the medal tally the gold are much more than other medals. They say China as a ‘gold medal power’ and not a comprehensive sports power which is earned by mass participation of games and sports. China with large population can certainly make use of this strength by widening the base. Writes Xu Guogi, “Although China’s pursuit of Olympics gold medals clearly coincides with the nation’s journey towards internationalization and achieving new status in the world. State driven championship mentally still reflects a combination of can do and the country’s lingering inferiority complex.”¹¹ China has not “ignored the criticism and is carrying out the reforms”¹² at

the same time countries like Australia (6th in medal tally), Japan (8th) and Germany (5th) are now copying China.

Promotion of Nationalism

Olympics were instrumental in unification of vast country in times of rising dissidence and instability. Hosting of such a global event make people proud. Taking advantage of Olympic spirit China launched a new initiative ‘Welcome the Olympics, Improve Manners and Foster the New Attitudes.’¹³ The campaign is designed to discourage things like public spitting, belching and soup slurping.

Foreign Policy and Beijing Olympics

The period prior to and post Olympics was a window of opportunity for China to show the world how responsible and constructive China is. Since mid 90’s Chinese leaders have played a responsible role as a stake holder for resolution of international disputes. China is conducting a foreign and security policy which meets the nationalist aspirations and at the same time do not risk tensions with great powers especially with USA and do not jeopardize integration of China with international economic system. Chinese leaders can not ignore growing national pride and expectations and can not risk giving the impression that they have bowed to international pressure. The Communist Party must remain as the foremost defender of national interests. Therefore, typical Chinese approach to dealing with international issues is pragmatic and not governed by ideology. It is flexible with case by case approach to use the phrase of Deng Xiaoping; “cross the river by feeling for stones”¹⁴ Though Olympics enabled China global focus on them for the last few years and would continue to be so for some time it is doubtful whether Olympics would have any impact on its foreign policy. It would continue the balancing act between meeting national aspirations and national integration with global system. In support of this statement we shall see how Chinese dealt with successively the following two issues which had dominated just prior to Olympics.

(a) Tibet Uprising March 2008

The Chinese managed the crises, just six months before the mega event when the demand for autonomy had engulfed in Tibetan population in Tibet Autonomous Region and surrounding regions, with patience and tolerance and letting the steam evaporate. Many eye witness reports have stated that the troops at Lhasa were instructed not to use force to crush peaceful demonstrations by Tibetans. This was contrast to disproportionate use of force in similar uprisings at Lhasa in 1987-88. It was quite unusual for Han Chinese to publicly oppose the Tibetans through large number of blogs and websites as for them Tibetans were intervening in Olympics. Chinese leaders advised Hans to exercise restraint. Tibetans were joined by human rights groups in the west and even at a stage threatened the success of the games on which China had so much at stake. Dalai Lama had appealed for calm and repeatedly wished success for the games. The crises were overshadowed by massive 12 May earthquake at Sichuan province. Chinese

bowed to international pressure and recommenced talks with the representatives of Dalai Lama. Though this satisfied some of the leaders in the west, many consider the same as merely, 'public relations exercise' for enabling the smooth sailing of Olympics. "After all, there is all too well known reality that seven rounds of talks since 2002 had led nowhere, with the Chinese side giving every indication that the talks were never really intended to head towards any negotiation."¹⁵ Dalai Lama has surrendered demand for democracy and is prepared to "accept the existing socialist system under the Communist Party of China."¹⁶ The core of Dalai Lama's demand is preservation of Tibetan cultural identity in a truly autonomous Tibet. However, Chinese do not appear to concede at all and are playing the waiting game.

(b) Sudan

Beijing has been criticized for selling arms to Sudan despite growing violence in its western region of Darfur. More than 2, 00,000 people have died and another 2.5 million have been displaced. In 2006 a report from UN Panel of Experts implied that China was Sudan's main arms dealer though China's special envoy says that China is only supplying 8 percent of Sudan's total arms imports. China is also the largest trading partner of Sudan purchasing unto 2/3rd of country's oil exports. In Jan-Feb 2008 article for 'Foreign Affairs' Stephanie Kleine-Ahlbrandt and Andrew Small write that Beijing has already made amends on its policy on Sudan because of the public outcry. It had begun pressuring Sudan into accepting the deployment of more than 20,000 UN and African Union troops at Darfur. It had dispatched three hundred of its military engineers to Sudan.

Conclusion

Beijing Olympics was a great window of opportunity for China to show harmonious development. The games provided huge interactions at the level of people of the world and leaders. China was eminently successful in projecting their soft power. It must be seen in the context of harmonious and peaceful development being followed by them since 1990 and case by case approach for resolution of international issues. This approach will continue. The Olympics are unlikely to have far reaching changes in Chinese foreign and security policies. It was a grand exhibition of Chinese soft power.

Notes

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