

Why Bush should go to the Olympics

Written by Victor D. Cha

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VICTOR D. CHA, JUL 23 2008

Washington D.C critics have deplored President Bush's announcement over the weekend of his intent to attend the Beijing Olympics because of China's poor human rights record and unfulfilled promises to the International Olympic Committee to liberalize before the Games. This is a wrong-headed view. The President should attend the opening ceremonies in August, and have a great time rooting for American athletes. To boycott the Games or the opening ceremony would achieve nothing but a symbolic snub of the Chinese. It amounts to a checkmark in the box labeled, "Have you done your share to protest the Olympics today?" On the other hand, if Bush attends the Games (for which the Chinese would be eternally grateful), and then has private meetings with Hu Jintao in which he presses the case on Tibet, Burma, or Africa, that would be infinitely more productive in terms of trying to produce changes in Chinese behavior.

What often gets missed in all the noise about Beijing boycotts is the process of political change that is already being spurred on by the Olympics. Beijing's leaders have bitten off more than they can chew. They face an inescapable Catch-22 when it comes to their cherished Olympics: They seek the Olympic limelight to showcase China's greatness, but they must pay the price for that limelight in terms of intense pressures for political change. To ignore these pressures would embarrass China and spoil their big coming out party.

And so China is changing. In Sudan, Hu stated in 2004 that Chinese aid to Khartoum is "free of political conditionality." His trade ministry official was more blunt, "We import from every oil source we can." But since then, Hu has pressed for Sudan's acceptance of a UN-African Union peacekeeping force in the country to stop the bloodshed, and in March 2007, quietly removed Sudan from Beijing's preferred trade status list, effectively taking away incentives for Chinese companies doing business in Sudan. Chinese envoys have made uncharacteristic stops at refugee camps in Darfur, and then contributed the first non-African forces to the UN PKO effort. In Burma, the Chinese have quietly hardened their stance toward the military junta after the September 2007 crackdown against peaceful monk demonstrations. Beijing cut arms sales to the regime and played an instrumental role in getting UN representation on the ground.

The point here is not to sing China's praises, but Beijing did not step up on either issue until after NGOs, entertainers, politicians, and athletes linked Sudan and Burma to something the Chinese held very dear to their own prestige. Pre-Olympic pressures affected political change in a way that years of diplomacy could not.

Moreover, pre-Olympic changes in Beijing's foreign policy will not melt away once the Olympic spotlight dims. This is because every positive adjustment made by China is met with higher expectations from the world for Beijing to do more. So even after Beijing committed PKO troops to Sudan, Steven Spielberg still resigned as artistic director, and Archbishop Desmond Tutu still demanded Beijing take more steps. Journalists' complaints that Beijing is not meeting its commitment to allow for press freedoms in the run-up to the Games is predictable. But once those 20,000 press pass-toting journalists start flowing into Beijing, restrictive news access in China will never again be enjoyed by the rulers in the same way. Beijing's demands for Tibetan cooperation during the Olympics as a condition for continuing talks with the monks in Lhasa is typical Beijing parochialism. The start of these talks, however, sets a higher standard of dealing with the autonomous region's grievances that Beijing cannot simply walk

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away from after the games. This is the slippery slope of change that Beijing has now embarked upon with these Games.

Critics are right that Beijing has shown no flexibility on domestic human rights, but the last thing that these domestic dissidents want is for the world to skip the Games. On the contrary, they want the world to come to Beijing to witness their plight.

The Olympics is forcing one of the world's most rigid systems to change. The appointment of the communist party's rising star Xi Jinping as the Olympics "czar" this past spring is very un-Chinese. Widely acknowledged as the future leader of China, Xi will have to internalize all that is at stake for China in these Games and contend squarely with the Catch-22 of political change. China will be a different country after the Games. – whether the CCP likes it or not.

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