

**CHINA POST OLYMPICS:
RISING CONFIDENCE AMIDST CHALLENGES**

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Executive Summary

1. China has dazzled the world by putting up a performance of truly Olympic proportions at the 2008 Beijing Olympics. The opening and closing ceremonies were spectacular, stunning and unparalleled. 80 world leaders attended the opening ceremony, a record in the Games' history. China's gold medal tally of 51 was the highest. Even its Olympic Village won a gold award.
2. More significantly, the Games showcased China's socio-economic achievements and cemented its status as an important player on the world stage. China awed the world with its strong state capacity and organizational skills, abundant resources and talents, rich and vibrant cultural traditions as well as intellectual prowess. China's model of development was somewhat vindicated by the Games.
3. To soothe external concerns about its growing stature, China used the Games as a platform to convey a message of peace and reiterate its harmonious world vision. President Hu Jintao stated just before the Games that China's development would not threaten other countries and that China would work with other countries to ensure a world of sustainable peace and mutual prosperity.
4. China undertook a number of initiatives before and during the Games to project a modern and progressive image. These include designating three public parks as "protest zones"; improving the regulatory environment for foreign journalists; and, introducing measures to ensure clear and blue skies in Beijing. The necessary sports and supporting infrastructure was also methodologically put in place.
5. Despite the herculean effort, Beijing continued to be criticized for its alleged appalling human rights record, suppression of press freedom and lack of democracy. Its detractors even pounced on China's seeming attempt to

deceive the audience with the lip-synching episode and pre-recorded fireworks footage in the opening ceremony.

6. Despite the pressure, China stood firm and did not over-react. It countered attempts to politicize the Games as violating the Olympic spirit of peace, friendship and progress. China further skillfully managed Chinese nationalistic sentiments when various groups tried to disrupt the Olympic torch relay. Such level-headedness boosted China's international standing.
7. When the euphoria of the Games subsides, China has to grapple with a number of challenges. Foremost among them is the pace of political reforms. There are increasing demands for more competitive elections within the Party to improve accountability and strengthen governance. Meeting these demands and ensuring adequate changes are critical issues.
8. China will also come under scrutiny on whether it will continue to engage in media liberalization beyond the Games. On the environment, China will need to push as hard for a balance between environmental considerations and economic growth. At the societal level, China will have to do more to address the grievances of disgruntled individuals and groups in Tibet, Xinjiang and elsewhere.
9. On foreign policy, China will be expected to do more to persuade the regimes in Sudan and Myanmar to move in a positive direction as deemed by the international community. Managing Chinese nationalist sentiments will also become more challenging as its people will be more sensitive to perceived rights on the international stage or provocations by other countries given China's growing stature.
10. China seemed to have emerged from its success at the Games with a new found sense of confidence. A more confident China, coupled with continued rapid economic growth and social stability, is more likely to benefit the region and the world.

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ZHENG Yongnian & LYE Liang Fook*

A Creditable Performance of Olympic Proportions

- 1.1 China hosted a successful and impressive 2008 Beijing Olympics from 8-24 August 2008. Headlines such as “Great Show. Thanks, China,”¹ “A Victory for China,”² and “For China, an end and a beginning”³ and words such as “truly exceptional Games” and “spectacularly successful Games” showed how Beijing has awed and dazzled the world for more than two weeks.
- 1.2 The opening and closing ceremonies of the Games have been described as spectacular, stunning and unparalleled. The sporting events proceeded smoothly with much professionalism and clockwork precision. Gordon Campbell, the Premier of British Columbia, praised Beijing for its “stupendous job” and said that Vancouver as host of the 2010 Winter Olympics and Paralympics will try to “replicate its success”.⁴ Even President George Bush, who criticized China on its human rights before his arrival in Beijing, commented that the entire Olympic experience exceeded his expectations.⁵

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¹ *The Straits Times*, 25 August 2008.

² “A Victory for China: Spectacularly Successful Games May Empower Communist Leaders”, *Washington Post*, 25 August, 2008.

³ *International Herald Tribune*, 25 August 2008.

⁴ “Beijing Games ‘benchmark for Vancouver 2010’ ”, *China Daily*, 13 August 2008.

⁵ “Bush: Olympics ‘exceeded my expectations’ ”, *Associated Press*, 11 August 2008.

- 1.3 China's gold medal tally of 51 was the highest with the United States a distant second with 36 gold medals. This was a stark reversal of fortunes when China clinched only 32 gold medals, four less than the US at the 2004 Athens Olympics. Beijing's much touted Olympic Village was described as the best ever by International Olympics Committee President Jacques Rogge.⁶ The village was presented the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design gold award by the US for its environmentally friendly design and efficient use of energy.⁷
- 1.4 The Games also brought together the largest ever gathering of 204 National Olympic Committees (an increase of three from the 2004 Athens Olympics) with 10,500 athletes competing in 302 events (one event more than in 2004).⁸ A total of 80 world leaders attended the opening ceremony, a new record in the Games' history.⁹
- 1.5 At the strategic level, the Beijing Olympics showcased China's socio-economic achievements and reaffirmed its rising power status. China's ability to pull off such a large-scale and complex event reflected its strong state capacity and organizational skills, abundant resources and talents, rich and vibrant cultural traditions as well as intellectual prowess. A total of US\$43 billion, the costliest in the Games' history, was reportedly spent to ensure a memorable experience for athletes, spectators and viewers alike.
- 1.6 To assuage the concerns of other countries, China has used the Games as a platform to convey not only a peaceful image but more importantly, its commitment to peace. In an interview with media representatives just before the start of the Games, President Hu Jintao reaffirmed China's development as

⁶ "IOC Chief: Beijing Olympic Village is best ever", *Xinhuanet*, 2 August 2008 at http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2008-08/02/content_8914155.htm.

⁷ "US gives Olympic Village gold for going green", *Reuters*, 13 August 2008.

⁸ The 2004 Athens Olympics was attended by 201 National Olympic Committees with 10,625 athletes participating in 301 events. See Factsheet of the Summer Olympic Games at http://multimedia.olympic.org/pdf/en_report_1138.pdf.

⁹ "Olympics attracts galaxy of leaders", *China Daily*, 14 August 2008.

non-threatening and its people's willingness to work with citizens of other countries as a gesture to build a harmonious world of sustainable peace and mutual prosperity.¹⁰ China seemed to have struck the right notes and conveyed the correct messages.

- 1.7 Yet, the Beijing Olympics was one of the most intensely scrutinized Games ever with China's detractors pouncing on any perceived "mistakes" or "wrong doings" on its part. Beijing was criticized for the lip-synching episode and for inserting a pre-recorded footage of fireworks during the opening ceremony.¹¹ While these actions were taken to ensure a seamless and near perfect performance, they were criticized as China's distortion of truth and worst still, as its penchant to resort to whatever means to secure a desired outcome.¹²
- 1.8 China's detractors have further criticized the country on other intractable issues such as human rights, treatment of dissidents, democracy and freedom of the press. On 13 August 2008, the Chinese police apparently roughed up and detained a British journalist after he attempted to cover a Free Tibet protest at a park near the Bird Nest Stadium.¹³ Wang Wei, Executive Director of the Beijing Olympic Games Organizing Committee defended China's actions and said that the Games were helping China to open up and accused some people of coming to Beijing with the deliberate intention of criticizing the regime.¹⁴

¹⁰ "Hu Jintao zhuxi jieshou waiguo meiti lianhe caifang" (Hu Jintao accepts joint interview by foreign media), *People's Daily*, 2 August 2008.

¹¹ The lip-synching episode involved what was apparently a last minute decision to have a "cute" child singer (Lin Miaoke) lip-synch to a "not-so-cute" little girl's (Yang Peiyi) voice track during the opening ceremony.

¹² "Silent little girl in a red dress means red faces all around", *The Age*, 14 August 2008; "No lip-synching at 2008 Winter Games, Premier vows", *The Globe and Mail*, 14 August 2008; and, "Behind the music, a ceremonial switch", *International Herald Tribune*, 13 August 2008.

¹³ "British journalist detained by Beijing police after covering Free Tibet protest", *Guardian*, 15 August 2008. On 4 August 2008, two Japanese journalists were reportedly beaten up and detained after their coverage of a deadly attack on Xinjiang security forces. See "Chinese police beat, detain two Japanese reporters", *FOXNews*, 5 August 2008 at <http://www.foxnews.com/wires/2008Aug05/0,4670,ChinaReportersBeaten,00.html>.

¹⁴ "Beijing Games chief comes to China's defence", *Financial Times*, 14 August 2008.

- 1.9 Such cases of manhandling appear to cast doubts on China's promise to improve the reporting environment for foreign journalists in the country. They provide fodder for those who continue to argue that the Beijing Olympics has failed to cajole China to play by internationally accepted norms and practices. Assuaging the concerns of its critics who are mostly from the West will not be easy given the differences in values that underpin the mindset and political systems between China and the West. This will be an on-going affair that China is capable of managing to its advantage. The valuable experience China has gained in dealing with the West through hosting the Games may stand China in good stead.
- 1.10 After the Games, it is even more pertinent for the Chinese leadership to concentrate on tackling a host of domestic challenges temporarily overshadowed by the euphoria surrounding the Games. The hard infrastructure in terms of the stadiums, facilities, subways and airports that have been built or upgraded will certainly benefit Beijing residents. The government will however have to do more to look into the needs and concerns of those in poorer and less penetrable areas in Tibet and Xinjiang where recent unrests and violent incidents have taken place.
- 1.11 The Chinese leadership will also have to manage demands within the Party for more competitive elections to foster greater transparency and accountability. There are increasing calls for more effective methods to check excesses like corruption and abuse of power and for new ideas to rejuvenate the Party and government. The leadership will further need to display political will to press ahead with the emphasis on environmental considerations while pursuing economic growth.
- 1.12 Externally, the Chinese leadership will have to meet even higher expectations of great power responsibility on the part of the international community. China appears to have emerged from the Games with a new found sense of confidence. A more confident China, coupled with continued rapid economic growth and social stability, is more likely to be of greater benefit to the region, if not the world.

Internal Initiatives and Outcomes

- 2.1 China undertook a number of domestic initiatives before and during the Olympic Games to put its best face forward. These initiatives, ranging from political to socio-economic realms, were intended to display China's modern and progressive image. With its increasing integration with the world, China wants to show that it is a responsible and constructive player by adhering more closely to international norms and practices.
- 2.2 One initiative is China's designation of three public parks as "protest zones" for people to voice their grievances during the Games. The three protest sites, the Ritan Park (日坛公园), World Park (世界公园) and Purple Bamboo Park (紫竹院公园), are located away from the main Olympic venues. Protesters were required to obtain prior permission from the Ministry of Public Security (MPS), giving the names of organizers, the topic and the number of participants. The protest sites showed China's willingness to adhere more closely to international standards by providing avenues for individuals or groups to express themselves. At other international gatherings or events such as the 2004 Athens Olympics and the World Trade Organization meetings, special sites were allocated for such a purpose.
- 2.3 There were reportedly 77 protest applications. But no protests actually occurred at the three designated sites.¹⁵ Apparently, the MPS did not approve the applications. According to *Human Rights Watch*, a Chinese activist who applied for permission to protest was detained.¹⁶ The tight control by the MPS showed the gulf between decision-making and decision-implementation which might or might not have been deliberate. It nevertheless raised doubts about China's seriousness in creating the sites as outlets for public expression.

¹⁵ "Olympic protest applications: 77; number of protests: 0", *International Herald Tribune*, August 19, 2008.

¹⁶ Ji Sizun, a grassroots legal activist from Fujian had made an application on 8 August 2008 to call for greater participation of Chinese citizens in the political process and to denounce official corruption and abuses of power. He was arrested on August 11, 2008. See "China: Police detain would-be Olympic protesters", *Human Rights Watch*, 13 August 2008 at <http://www.humanrightswatch.org/english/docs/2008/08/12/china19601.htm>.

- 2.4 Another initiative by China was its promise to improve the reporting environment for foreign journalists in the country. In the live coverage of the Games, China did a generally commendable job except for the initial minor hiccups over the fireworks footage and lip-synching episode. On sports-related incidents, it has also been rather forthcoming with news. A press conference was held shortly after Liu Xiang, China's high-profile hurdler, was forced to pull out from the 110 meters man's hurdles due to an injury.¹⁷ This forthrightness was driven by the need to soothe the emotions of the Chinese audience given their huge expectations of Chinese athletes to perform.¹⁸
- 2.5 However, China's handling of the media beyond sports-related matters has received a rather mixed review, bordering on the negative, from interest groups and observers from outside China. A common refrain by *Human Rights Watch* and *Amnesty International* is that China has continued to deny foreign journalists and their Chinese staff of the requisite freedom that it promised when it made the bid to host the Games in 2001. The most recent example was the manhandling of a British journalist by the police when he attempted to cover a Free Tibet protest at a park near the Bird Nest Stadium. This incident, coupled with other occasional arrests of dissidents and their harsh treatment, has conveyed a rather unsavory image of China.
- 2.6 Yet another initiative that China pushed hard for was to ensure clear and blue skies for the Olympics. Many observers had earlier expressed concerns that Beijing would have difficulty bringing the level of pollution down to the standards required for the Games. A lot of effort was thus made to shift polluting industries out of Beijing, limit the number of cars plying the roads, maintain the healthy conditions of the lakes and ensure sufficient water supply

¹⁷ "Liu Xiang pulls out, coaches laud him fighter", *Xinhuanet*, 18 August 2008 at http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2008-08/18/content_9468166.htm.

¹⁸ There was the case of Liu Yan, an award winning dancer who was seriously injured on 27 July 2008 during a rehearsal for the opening ceremony. *People's Daily*, the Party's newspaper, only ran an article on the incident on 12 August 2008. Rather than an attempt at covering up, the delay appears to have been intended to avoid marring the atmosphere ahead of the grand opening ceremony on 8 August 2008. See "Behind the opening ceremony, a paralyzing fall, *New York Times*, 14 August 2008.

for Beijing. These efforts appeared to have paid off as there were minimal complaints about the air quality by athletes during the Games.

- 2.7 A total of US\$43 billion at China's prices and costs (this would amount to nearly US\$200 billion based on purchasing power parity) has reportedly been spent by China in providing, *inter alia*, the necessary hardware in the form of stadiums, subways, airports, accommodation and other facilities to ensure an Olympics of the highest standards. The hardware that is in place will directly benefit the residents of Beijing and travelers to the city. Likewise, the 2010 Shanghai Exposition will skew the benefits in favor of Shanghai residents. A great deal of wealth will thus continue to be concentrated in the major cities.
- 2.8 The spate of protests that broke out before and during the Games underscore the need for Beijing to more effectively and speedily distribute wealth to other parts of China. More importantly, Beijing must address the socio-political grievances behind such unrest. In August 2008, three separate attacks against Chinese security forces by Uygur elements in Xinjiang left several dead and wounded.¹⁹ Earlier in March 2008, Tibetan monks and their sympathizers staged protests in Tibet and neighboring provinces. One possible reason behind such unrest is the wealth gap between Xinjiang and Tibet on the one hand and other parts of China on the other. Other underlying factors include cultural, religious and ethnic differences between the minority groups and the Han Chinese.²⁰

China's Rising Stature and Big Power Mentality

- 3.1 China has cemented its status as an important player on the world stage with a successful Beijing Olympics. This is the first Olympics held in the world's

¹⁹ On 12 August 2008, a group of Uygur men killed three border security guards near Kashgar in Xinjiang. On 10 August 2008, a series of bombing directed at government buildings, hotels and stores in Kuqa county in Xinjiang left 12 dead. On 4 August 2008, two Uygur men rammed a truck into a group of 70 paramilitary officers who were jogging in Kashgar in Xinjiang. See "Attackers strike again in western China, killing three at checkpoint", *International Herald Tribune*, 13 August 2008.

²⁰ "Uygurs kill three border guards near Kashgar", *South China Morning Post*, 13 August 2008.

largest developing country. In past Olympics, China was a mere participant when it first took part in the Los Angeles Olympics in 1984. This time round, China was not only a participant but also an organizer. This outcome is a reflection of the tremendous socio-economic progress China has achieved since the open door and reform policy introduced three decades ago. From a country on the periphery of world politics, China has now become a key player which many countries want to befriend.

- 3.2 From the opening to the closing ceremonies, and in the conduct of the Games itself, China showed its strong governing capacity and exceptional organizational skills. In addition, the centrality of purpose of the Party and the government, as well as its athletes and even ordinary Chinese, in working towards a successful Olympics was particularly impressive. Individual inconveniences were easily overlooked for the national good. The national unity and pride of China was most prominently displayed.
- 3.3 Besides the kudos it received on the international stage, China has gained valuable software experience in hosting super-scale international events. Most specifically, China would have learnt a lot from coping with a large and diverse group of foreigners all converging in Beijing at a particular point in time. The software experience it gleaned ranged from diplomacy, media management, public relations, logistics preparation, and crowd and traffic control to tourism management. While some of its encounter with foreigners may not have been entirely amicable, and may at times be antagonistic, particularly involving impromptu protesters, these episodes by themselves offer valuable lessons.
- 3.4 To be sure, China faced one of the most politicized Olympic Games in history. In the lead up to the Games, China came under strong criticism by foreign governments, interest groups and other parties for its alleged appalling human rights record, suppression of press freedom and lack of democracy. China's relations with undemocratic regimes in Sudan and Myanmar also came under the spotlight. The apparent crackdown on "peaceful demonstrators" in Tibet in March 2008 galvanized external pressure on China. Some foreign leaders and

renowned individuals even announced that they would not participate in the Olympic opening ceremony.²¹

3.5 Yet China did not buckle under the intense pressure. Instead, it stood firm and refrained from over-reacting. It even countered attempts to politicize the Games as violating the Olympic spirit of peace, friendship and progress. Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi asserted that those who attempted to politicize the Games were in the minority and that they did not represent the international community.²² China also stated that those who think that China will be compelled to act according to “their wishes” because of the Games will be wasting their effort and will be disappointed.²³

3.6 China further proved its mettle when it skillfully managed nationalistic sentiments against the perceived humiliation and bullying of China when various groups tried to disrupt the Olympic torch relay. France bore the brunt with numerous calls to boycott products sold by French companies like *Carrefour*. In an effort to restore calm, China’s Foreign Ministry spokesperson Jiang Yu called on the Chinese people to express their patriotism in a “rational and orderly way within the framework of law”.²⁴ Commentaries in the *Beijing News* and *China Youth Daily*, two major Beijing-based newspapers, also exhorted ordinary Chinese to take a calmer and more rational approach to express their unhappiness with France.²⁵

²¹ They include German Chancellor Angela Merkel, film director Steven Spielberg and actress Mia Farrow. UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon did not attend the opening ceremony apparently due to scheduling problems. French President Sarkozy had threatened to boycott the opening ceremony but later reversed his decision.

²² “FM: the very few forces who politicize Beijing Olympics cannot represent international community”, *Xinhuanet*, 12 March 2008 (http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/200803/12/content_7772451.htm).

²³ “Aoyun shi jiaqiao, bushi zhuqiao” (Olympics Games is bridge building, not putting up a wall), *People’s Daily*, 29 January 2008.

²⁴ Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Jiang Yu’s Regular Press Conference on April 22, 2008 at <http://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xwfw/s2510/2511/t428243.htm>.

²⁵ “Appeals for calm in China amid French boycott calls”, *Straits Times*, 18 April 2008.

- 3.7 China's level-headedness at a time when emotions were running high among the Chinese people on the one hand and the West on the other was commendable. This bolstered China's international standing and reinforced China's message of a harmonious world. The Chinese leaders and authorities were fully aware that nationalism was a double-edged weapon that could harm China as much as other countries. It would also be imprudent of China to play up nationalist sentiments at a time when it was due to host a major event.

Challenges Beyond the Games

- 4.1 China is now basking in the limelight of a successful Olympic Games. The burning issues and challenges that confront China have temporarily taken a back seat. However, when the euphoria dies down, these issues and challenges will loom large again and require the urgent attention of the leadership. Going forward, the Chinese leadership will have to address or carefully manage them to ensure China's continued stable and peaceful development in line with its goal of a harmonious society. This will in turn ensure that the Party retains its dominant hold on power.
- 4.2 At the political level, one of the foremost challenges facing China is the pace of political reform in the country. There are those who argue that the Beijing Olympics will prod China to further speed up the pace of political reforms in the country. They observed that South Korea was a military dictatorship when it was awarded the 1988 Seoul Games and became a vibrant democracy soon after staging them. In a similar vein, they argue, Beijing could move along the same trajectory. From China's perspective, however, political change ought to proceed in an orderly and manageable manner. It may also proceed fitfully depending on the circumstances.
- 4.3 Political reform in China is not equivalent to having a Western style liberal democracy. It is more about the Party evolving itself to stay relevant to prevailing circumstances and need. President Hu Jintao has stated that China will continue to deepen the reform of the political system as part of overall

reforms.²⁶ The question is not whether but how to implement political reforms. Within the Party, there are greater demands for more competitive elections to improve accountability and strengthen governance. To rejuvenate itself, the Party has to attract talents and represent the diverse interest of the society. Expanding and deepening competitive elections is a means to attract talents to join the Party.

- 4.4 A related political challenge is the pace of media liberalization in the country. The party seeks to balance between greater demands for media liberalization and having a responsible media. The pressures for greater media liberalization include a more diversified society where individuals are more media savvy and aware of their rights as citizens. They travel more and have greater access to information technology.
- 4.5 China has indeed improved the regulatory environment for foreign journalists operating in the country while preparing for the Games.²⁷ During the Games, China has also been rather open in its Games-related coverage. These media standards are likely to continue as they do not constitute a policy change on China's part. It will also do more harm to China's image if it were to withdraw these standards so soon after the Olympics. Moreover, China has other ways of controlling the media in the country.
- 4.6 From the environmental standpoint, China will come under close scrutiny in its efforts to maintain the same environmental standards that it had set for the Games. Should the air quality in Beijing deteriorate after the Games, China is likely to be criticized for reverting to its old ways or for being lackluster in enforcing strict environmental standards. China will also be expected to do more to improve the environment in other parts of China. Failure to do so will

²⁶ Hu Jintao accepts joint interview by foreign media, *People's Daily*, 2 August 2008.

²⁷ In January 2007, the "Regulations on Reporting Activities in China by Foreign Journalists during the Olympic Games and the Preparatory Period" was implemented. With these regulations, foreign journalists only require the consent of the interviewees or organizations for interviews in China. Previously, foreign journalists had to go through a more laborious process of first applying for permission through the local Foreign Affairs Office.

make China's incessant calls to do more for the environment increasingly hollow.

- 4.7 At the societal level, China will need to do more to tackle the grievances of disgruntled groups in China. Despite tight security, Uygur elements were still able to mount three attacks on government forces and buildings in just over a week. The authorities initially also appeared hapless in responding to the unrest in Tibet and in the neighboring provinces. More of such incidents could be expected in the future. The issue confronting Beijing and the relevant local governments is to adopt a more comprehensive strategy to address the sources of such unrest. Mere reliance on economic or financial distributive measures would be insufficient.²⁸
- 4.8 On foreign policy, China will be expected to do more to reinforce its responsible stakeholder image. It will continue to face criticism for cozying up to dubious regimes in Myanmar, Sudan and even Iran. To counter such perspectives, China will have to show that it is able to cajole these regimes to move in a positive direction as deemed by the international community while adhering to its oft repeated mantra of non-interference in the domestic affairs of other countries.
- 4.9 More importantly, China will have to pay more attention to managing the potential negative fall-out of nationalistic sentiments on its foreign relations. Such sentiments are most easily aroused when it involves issues related to the US and particularly Japan. With China's growing political stature and economic strength, this task will be more challenging as its people will be more sensitive to perceived slights or provocations by other countries. Already, some countries are preparing for scenarios where Chinese nationalism may affect its international behavior. The Chinese leadership may have to devote more efforts to educating its people and pacifying their nationalistic sentiments.

²⁸

“Central government to pump US\$5.5 billion into Tibet”, *China Daily*, 14 August 2008.