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Beijing Is Haunted by Olympic Ghosts

Guðrun Wacker

The controversy over the upcoming Olympic Games in Beijing has increased markedly due to the violent demonstrations and events in Tibet: While in the West protests and calls for a boycott have grown louder, a nationalist reaction has been forming in China. A black and white perspective dominates media reporting on both sides. A few months before the Olympics, China and the West are caught in dilemmas and it will be hard to find a constructive way out. Efforts should be made nevertheless, since the current polarisation of opinions helps nobody – and least of all human rights in China.

Did the Chinese government know what they were in for when they applied to host the Olympic Games in Beijing? Most likely not. Events in the last weeks in Tibet and other places have emotionalised, politicised and radicalised the debate about these Games, which were controversial to begin with. From the perspective of the Chinese leadership, “one world, one dream” is on the verge of turning into a nightmare: The Olympic torch relay has mutated into an ideological and physical battlefield where anger and frustration is vented. The Olympic torch itself has turned into the symbol for the political regime of the host country.

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) has tried to keep the non-political character of the Games. Their efforts have failed – due to the current developments. They now declared that athletes can utter their opinions freely during the Olympics, but have to refrain from demonstrating.

False comparisons, excessive expectations

Full of hope, Western countries had cited the Seoul Games in 1988 as the model for the Games in 2008: At the minimum, the Games in Beijing were expected to trigger a similar opening of the political system. Over the last months, however, a different and no less inadequate comparison has become prevalent: Berlin 1936 – and with it the interpretation that China’s leaders only have one thing in mind, that is, to instrumentalise the Olympic Games for winning international legitimisation for their authoritarian rule, under which human rights violations are the order of the day.

The decision to hold the Olympic Games in Beijing was reached in 2001 on the basis of the final report of the assessment commission. The criteria were mainly planned sports facilities infrastructure and organisational capacities. Practically from the beginning, however, the Games became

politicised when the vice-mayor of Beijing promised that this event would lead to improvements in China's human rights situation.

Challenges for China

Thereafter, Beijing found itself, unknowingly at first, in a dilemma. Some challenges in preparing for the Olympic Games were quite clear, like building the Olympic sports facilities and necessary infrastructure in time. Other problems, like air quality and water supply in Beijing or the quality of food for the athletes, came up later in the preparations. China had, after all, promised "green Games".

But parallel to these concrete and practical tasks which were to be tackled, an additional dimension of problems formed, which became visible for the first time in early 2007, when China was pressured to use its influence on Sudan in order to bring about an end to the Darfur conflict. In this context, the Games in Beijing were called "genocide Olympics" for the first time. The problem became even clearer when – exactly one year before the opening of the Games – several small-scale demonstrations and protests were held in Beijing and at the Great Wall: This sports event provided an ideal platform for turning the international spotlight on human rights violations (Tibet, Falun Gong), limited individual rights and freedoms (media), social problems (migrant workers, petitioners) and China's foreign policy behaviour (Darfur, Myanmar/Burma).

The core dilemma for the Chinese leadership is: They have made every effort to make the Olympics a full success (from their perspective), that is, nothing short of perfectly organised, harmonious and peaceful Games that showcase how far China has come in its modernisation during the last three decades. Unfortunately, some of the means that have been implemented to realise this vision are exactly the ones that outside observers find fault with and cite as reasons for boycotting these Games: migrants with no rights toil

on Olympic sports facilities, inhabitants of Beijing are evicted from their apartments to make room for roads or the subway, petitioners are removed from the city, known "troublemakers", like followers of Falun Gong, are to be kept away from Beijing, and in Tibet, peace and quiet (law and order) is to be restored as fast as possible.

China's winning of the Olympic bid has created expectations and hopes for positive changes in China which it can not and/or does not want to fulfil. Moreover, where China did make changes it only created an appetite for more: No sooner had China published new and more liberal regulations for foreign journalists when questions were raised as to why these were of a temporary nature and why they did not apply to Chinese colleagues. Beijing also used its influence to get Sudan's consent for an international peacekeeping force. However, the voices that accuse China of doing too little have not been muted.

Calls for boycott

Western media sometimes depict politicians in Europe and the United States who speak clearly against boycotting the Games as "accomplices" of the Chinese regime: willing to overlook the abysmal human rights situation in China for a few contracts or a handful of euros more. Thus, politicians have been under public pressure to justify themselves if they are against a boycott. This "complicity" with the Chinese regime becomes visible when security forces of Western countries have to protect the torch relay against protests and attacks as well as from demonstrators.

In the end, however, China-critics calling for a boycott are facing a dilemma, too. Their pressure can only be effective as long as their demand for a boycott is not met by some big countries. And a boycott, should it be decided, will neither help the Tibetans nor will it boost human rights in China. On the contrary.

Tibet – China’s counter-strategy and its effectiveness

Chinese decision-makers and media have responded to the growing criticism from abroad, which became stronger as a reaction to recent events in Tibet, as if this criticism was a “misunderstanding” caused by a lack of knowledge of the history of Tibet and – due to distortions of events in Western media – a lack of knowledge about what “really” happened. Therefore, they confront these “wrong” versions with their own “correct” version.

The result is a picture of the events in Tibet and of the Dalai Lama that is diametrically opposed to the Western one. In the end, both versions of reality are black and white and practically void of any shades of grey.

These Chinese efforts, which are intended to “enlighten”, are in the current, emotionally charged situation, counterproductive. They will not change the widespread perception in the West that in Tibet, a peaceful and oppressed David is trying to rebel against a thuggish Goliath. At the same time, however, the Chinese leadership – by presenting the Dalai Lama as a “criminal” and a “jackal dressed in sheep-skin” who pulls the wires of unrest from behind his peaceful façade – has manoeuvred itself into a position from which it will be very difficult to offer a real dialogue to the Dalai Lama.

From the Chinese perspective, Tibet is a core national interest that concerns China’s territorial integrity. To make concessions on one such central issue – others are the north-western region of Xinjiang and Taiwan – is not considered an option by China’s leaders. China will not abandon its claims – not, anyway, for the Olympic Games.

Even though the Chinese version of events is met with disbelief and rejection in the West, it does have an impact on the people in China. The interpretation that “the West” is grudging China the Olympic Games and is denying China the position in

the world it deserves, can be found in Chinese fora on the Internet.

How widespread such views are is hard to assess, however. The debates on the Internet as well as the boycott against the French supermarket chain Carrefour show that those views have found at least some popular support. People in Beijing might be critical of the Olympic Games and the amount of money being spent on them. But with investments and all the efforts well under way, it is not in their interest to be cheated of the fruits by a boycott.

No easy ways out

In light of the latest events, the question is how Beijing can disperse – or at least appease – the Olympic genies that have been released from the bottle. Excessive expectations and demands for changes in China from abroad are hardly helpful, and neither is it very productive for both sides to retreat behind walls of self-righteousness.

Time plays a role since, with three months to go to the opening of the Games, there is still ample opportunity for protests and incidents. The list of problems in China that can draw criticism is long enough. And the media will hardly be interested in de-escalating emotions. After all, a totally uneventful torch relay hardly raises circulation or ratings.

The Chinese government has in the meantime hired Western PR companies to help them tackle their image problem. However, for the time being, falling back on “classical” methods of propaganda and mobilisation seems to be their strategy of choice. Due to fear of terrorist attacks and incidents, visa restrictions for travelling to China have recently been introduced and there are rumours that foreign students might not be allowed to stay in Beijing during the Olympics.

It can only be hoped that, behind the scenes, alternative strategies and a more flexible approach are being discussed by the Chinese decision-makers. A grand

symbolic gesture of the Chinese government – for example, ratification of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights – could be made, but would not necessarily change the human rights situation on the ground. For more long-term and sustainable solutions, more time is needed than the brief period remaining before the Olympics. Even if the Chinese leadership were to decide to take substantive steps in this direction, there is a danger that these would be perceived as merely tactical under the present conditions.

Western politicians should make it clear that China's core interests are understood and not called into question. Positive steps should be publicly acknowledged as such. China's security concerns – like the fear of terrorist attacks before and during the Olympic Games – should be taken seriously and not be denounced as convenient excuses for repressive measures. Good advice and proposals for solutions should be communicated to the Chinese in private talks and not through public shaming and blaming. Of course, this approach will trigger less attention from the media than a meeting with the Dalai Lama.

But even with private formats, the main question remains whether China's leaders can find their way back to a more open attitude that does not reject any criticism as an undue interference in China's domestic affairs. The offer to enter a dialogue with the private envoy of the Dalai Lama could be a first positive sign in this direction.

A continued confrontation along the fault lines that have become visible in the past weeks not only bears the risk of a nationalistic backlash in China (with repercussions even on the sports dimension of the Olympics). More importantly, it would also strengthen those circles in China that have been advocating a less compromising attitude towards Western ideas and proposals, and that are not willing to discuss any matter with other countries which they perceive as a matter of China's sovereignty.

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