

Then China Blinked: How the Beijing Olympic Torch Relay defined China's Games-based External Strategy

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It all started on 10 March of this year which was the 49th anniversary of the uprising by Tibetans in 1959 against Chinese rule in Tibet – which had been restored formally and officially in 1951 following the establishment of the Peoples Republic of China in 1949.

While little detail is available about the events of that day, it is clear that simmering tensions and discontent of almost half a century, intensified and exacerbated by Beijing's international projection and promotion of China's contemporary standing in Olympic Games year, gave rise to a spillover from sentiment into active dissent. Several hundred monks demanded the release of other monks who had been detained since the previous year's protests and demonstration on the occasion of the 48th anniversary of the 1959 uprising.

But last year was not the Olympic year: this year was. And the opportunity in Tibet was not missed by the demonstrators, and the response from Beijing and from Chinese authorities in Lhasa was an escalation from the annual norm. Tension, friction and inevitable flash-point saw major clashes on 14 March in which shops and business houses – almost all of which were owned and operated by the immigrant Han Chinese so intensely disliked by so many of the Tibetan populace – were stoned and trashed and, in many cases, torched. Police and para-military response was immediate and fierce:

As many as three hundred Tibetan protestors died in the process. Resentment spilled over into other Tibetan communities elsewhere in Tibet proper and elsewhere in China. Demonstrations by Tibetan ethnic

communities and clashes between Tibetans and Chinese authorities were reported in Gansu – especially at the Labrang Monastery in Xiahe County where as many as 5000 Tibetans were involved in protests and riots – and in Qinghai, in Sichuan, and even in Beijing where a reported 100 ethnic Tibetan students held a sit-in protest at the Central University for Nationalities in sympathy with the Tibetan protestors in Lhasa and other Tibetan community centres.

Such then was the background when Politbureau Member, Beijing Party Secretary and BOCOG President Mr Liu Qi arrived in Greece to head the official Chinese and BOCOG delegation at the Olympic Torch ignition ceremony at Olympia on the Peloponnese Peninsula on 24 March. And what a ceremony it turned out to be: members of Reporters Without Borders (Rapporteurs Sans Frontieres – RSF) breached the rather lax Greek and IOC security, and interrupted the solemn speech being made by Liu Qi by holding up placards graphically depicting the five Olympic rings as five interlocking manacles – which were conveyed world-wide in minutes by the attendant TV cameras.

Back in Beijing, there was a rumble of outrage from the Chinese national leadership which described the protest as a “disgraceful attempt to sabotage the Olympic Games”. What was significant in this was that the carriage and management of Olympic matters was taken up by the national – as distinct from the BOCOG – leadership. But no matter: Liu Qi wore the hats of both the BOCOG President and a CCP Political Bureau Member – as well as Party Secretary of Beijing.

In Beijing, at the end of March (following a six-day traverse through Greece), the Torch was welcomed by Party and State leaders (including Hu Jintao), before setting off to visit Centres along the Silk Road, and then pass into Kazakhstan (Almaty), Turkey (Istanbul) – where there was an anti-China demonstration by Uyghurs- and then Russia. On Saturday 5 April, the Torch arrived in Saint Petersburg and proceeded along a 20-km route from Victory Square to Palace Square.

The next day, Sunday 6 April, brought the Torch to London, host city for the 2012 Olympics and host city for the 1948 Olympics – the first since the clearing of the clouds of war which had engulfed Europe from 1939 to 1945, the first since the infamous Games of 1936 in what by that time was, an already substantially jackbooted Berlin.

London, from historic Wembley Stadium, through the City of London, in all, along a 48-km route to the O2 Arena in East London – and through what, to the Chinese leadership, was the horror and the outrage and the shame of pro-Tibet independence protests, physical assaults on the Relay, on Torch-bearers and on the Torch, the ignominy of an enforced change of route, of the retreat of the Torch to the accompanying line of buses, the breakdown into hand-to-hand combat between protestors and Chinese Torch attendants (who were described by both then London Mayor Ken Livingstone and London Olympic Games / LOCOG Supremo Lord Sebastian Coe as “thugs”) – and, perhaps worst and most demeaning of all, the decision by Prime Minister Gordon Brown to meet the Torch at 10 Downing Street – but not to touch it.

And worse, much worse was then to come in the streets of Paris the following day as the Torch, commencing on its path in yet another of Europe’s great capitals and Olympic centres, encountered the fully-panoply of protest and demonstration: starting on the “premier étage” – the first level – of the Eiffel Tower, the Torch set out on what was scheduled to be a 28-km run through the city, but degenerated into a running fight between the “Boys in Blue” and the well organised protestors from Free Tibet, the Falungong, the RSF and others. Organisers were forced to extinguish the carried torch no fewer than five times – and to fall back on the perpetual flame lanterns carried in the escort buses; and, perhaps worst of all, organisers watched as protest banners were unfurled from the Eiffel Tower and from the Notre Dame Cathedral, and as a session of the National Assembly was actually briefly suspended to permit members of all Parties represented in the Parliament – to

move outside the building and display a banner proclaiming “Respect for Human Rights in China”.

And that was when the Chinese leadership blinked: after holding cool and steadfast – irritated and indignant, but still essentially on track, on target and on message – through the events of Tibet Uprising Day on 10 March and the swift move to end the demonstration from 14 through 18 March, and even the debauching of the Igniting Ceremony on 24 March, the Beijing authorities even regained some composure as the Torch made its way from Athens to Beijing and was dispatched on the earliest stages of the Relay: first along the Silk Route centres so richly symbolic of the links first established between imperial China and Mediterranean-centric civilisations and societies of Europe six centuries earlier, then to Russia where Moscow had hosted a Games racked by boycott and controversy in 1980.

But London and Paris changed all that: as the Relay which was designed and intended to traverse the world as a symbol of China’s coming out of China and as a demonstration of China’s readiness to take its rightful place amongst the world’s leaders, including in sport, was thrown into disarray and disorder and retreat in the face of attacks and demonstration by pro-Tibet, pro-Falungong, pro-human rights demonstrators, the Chinese Party leadership stepped into the position and role as manager of the Beijing Olympic Games.

The six years and nine months (i.e. from the date of winning the bid to host the Games in July of 2001 to April 2008) of effective organisation, preparation and arrangement of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games by the BOCOG – the Beijing Organising Committee for the Olympic Games – working hand in glove with the Beijing Municipal Administration, the China National Olympic Committee and the State General Sports Administration (the equivalent of a Ministry of Sport), all done in careful collaboration with the International Olympic Committee – or IOC – through the IOC Coordination Commission for Beijing, was quickly and decisively – and quite unobtrusively – replaced by the CCP – the Chinese Communist Party after the shock of the extreme reaction to the Torch Relay in London on 6 and then in Paris on 7 April.

At which point it is timely for me to pause briefly and explain why and how I was in a position to observe and witness much of this process and development:

In 1999-2000, the then Chinese Ambassador to Australia, HE Mr Zhou Wenzhong (who is currently China's Ambassador to the USA), under instruction from the Chinese Government, was in assiduous pursuit of the ACT Government, requesting then Chief Minister Kate Carnell's agreement to the establishment of a Sister City Agreement between the cities of Beijing and Canberra. Beijing at that time had no fewer than 26 of these "Sister" arrangements – and wanted another one. But Kate wasn't particularly keen, and instructed her then China adviser to come up with a rationale – if one could be found. Not an easy task – until one morning in the shower, the advisor heard on early AM an interview with then IOC President Juan Antonio Samaranch in which the old blue-shirt explained that the Olympic Games of the Modern Era stand on three pillars: Sport, Culture and the Environment.

Bingo! Beijing was known to be on the short list of bid cities – along with Istanbul, Osaka, Toronto and Paris – to host the Games of 2008. And China had pretty fair credentials in culture and was already an emergent world power in sport – but in the field of the environment, China was something of a disaster area. Indeed, the IOC's own preliminary evaluation in August 2000 of the five candidate cities for the 2008 Games had Beijing as a distant fifth of five – much to China's indignation and, more soberly, concern.

So in quite short order, Canberra and Beijing reached agreement and arranged to sign a Sister City Agreement in September of 2000 – the central element of which was Canberra's undertaking to provide inputs into all aspects of the "Environment" component of the Beijing Bid.

Which we did: commencing immediately after the conclusion of the Sydney 2000 Olympic and Paralympic Games, the Canberra team organised and managed a total of some fifteen visits to China by groups of Olympic and events and – most essentially – environment experts with the goal and role of advising on Beijing's Bid.

In the event, the Canberra team effectively wrote the Environment Chapter of the Beijing Bid – and then went on the re-draft and edit the balance of the total seventeen chapters of the Beijing Candidature File – which was then formally submitted to the IOC by then Beijing Mayor and Bid Committee President Mr Liu Qi in late January 2001.

Next came the preparations for the crucially important visit to Beijing by the IOC's Evaluation Commission – which saw the Canberra team again heavily involved in the long drafting and coaching and rehearsal sessions to prepare the Beijing Bid Committee presenters for their presentations to – and grillings by – the IOC inquisitors.

And finally, the assault on the citadel: the preparation of the Beijing Bid presenters for their presentations to their Annual General Meeting of the IOC at the World Trade Centre in Moscow in July of 2001 – in open competition with Beijing's rivals from Istanbul, Osaka, Toronto and Paris.

That Beijing won the vote and the bid on Friday 13 July is now a matter of record. That this was a rare moment of sublime joy, which the Canberra team shared with the 300-odd members of the Beijing Bid Committee and the staff of the Chinese Embassy in Moscow – and with a number of ecstatically delighted IOC members – is a recollection that will live for ever with the Canberra team leader.

Thereafter, an ongoing role with the soon-to-be formed BOCOG over the following seven or so years was pretty much a formality, and the opening of a Beijing office to assist in servicing the workload an inevitability.

Crowning it all was the selection of the Canberra team leader in March of this year, to run a leg of the Beijing Olympic Torch Relay in Beijing on Thursday 7 August – the eve of the Opening Ceremony of the Games of the XXIX Olympiad.

Hence tonight's address.

But back to the Relay – and the silent takeover. On the surface, nothing much appeared to change, but behind the façade, things hardened up.

Clear threats to the integrity of the Games and of Beijing and of China began to be identified – and articulated. Seriously bad guys – such as the Dalai Lama and Nicholas Sarkozy and supporters of the Falungong, and members of the East Turkestan Liberation Front in Xinjiang, and critics of China's stance in relation to Darfur and Zimbabwe – began to be identified and criticised and threatened with retribution. The Chinese media began to fill with stories and graphic pictures of China's security organisations and personnel as they prepared to defend the Games against enemies. The Central Government announced the promulgation of new "temporary" but highly restrictive visa issue regulations for people wishing to visit China. And the media glowered and bristled with warnings that those who might seek to mix politics with sport would surely come to a bad end.

At this point, I need briefly digress once again to establish perspective on the bad elements and enemies with which the Chinese leadership saw the Games as being confronted:

- Xinjiang Moslem Uyghurs and Tibetan Buddhists come from "Autonomous Regions" of China – but are broadly regarded as suspect and as potential separatists – who are inclined to defy the constitutional requirement for Chinese citizens to "promote unity" (In this context, it is notable that, broadly speaking, Mongolians and Zhuang and Manchurians essentially exculpate by subscribing to the "promote unity" dictum.

- Christians are essentially foreigners or aliens from the Chinese mainstream or are a tiny and insignificant minority – as they have been ever since the days of Matteo Ricci or Marco Polo.
- Foreigners who would not only interfere in China’s internal affairs – such as Icelandic pop-singer Bjork who ended a concert in Shanghai by saying into the auditorium microphone “Tibet, Tibet, Tibet”, or Steven Spielberg who resigned his Olympic Opening Ceremony advisory role because of his opposition to China’s position on Darfur – have a particularly high level of unacceptability.
- Adherents to the Falungong or Falu Dafa are actually the very worst because they are entirely and unmistakably Chinese – and largely Han Chinese – who actually deny and oppose the legitimacy of rule of China by the current leadership (i.e. the Party) and who consequently threaten the security of the State (To this extent, the Falungong is far worse than, say, the Guomindang or any of the other “Patriotic Parties” which unquestioningly accept the authority and the legitimacy of the CCP).

But back to the Torch in its final legs on the way to Beijing.

Ironically, in a rather macabre twist, nature intervened in the form of the awful earthquakes in Sichuan in May: as the response of China’s leadership – particularly of Premier Wen Jiabao and of President and Party Leader Hu Jintao – in spearheading the massive national relief mission, captured the hearts and convictions of people worldwide, include of countless millions who had been growing disillusioned at aspects of China’s heavy-handed official approach to the Games. The sincere and candid human face of China – at a time of national calamity – was compelling.

But in a final pre-Games reassertion of the stark reality, the Chinese Communist Party’s Secretary for Tibet, Mr Zhang Qingli, took the podium as the Torch Relay reached Lhasa on 21 June and was re-united with the flame which had been triumphantly carried to the top of Qomolangma (or Everest,

as some in this room would know it) during the previous month, and declared in ringing tones: “Tibet’s sky will never change and the red flag with five stars will forever flutter high above it”.

“We will certainly be able to totally smash the splittist schemes of the Dala Lama clique and protect Tibet and China’s stability, and guarantee the safety of our country and contribute to the success of the Beijing Olympic Games”.

This demarche proved to be too much even for the historically cautious and conservative IOC which promptly wrote a letter to the BOCOG “to express our regret that statements of a political nature were made at the Tibet torch relay closing ceremony”.

In the weeks which ensued, this exchange framed the relationship between the owners of the Olympic Games and the hosts of the 29th Olympiad: neither relented, neither withdrew, neither recanted.

Which essentially remained the tableau as the Games rolled around, and former gymnast Li Ning – minus several kilos of paunch as a consequence of his rigorous pre-Games diet of “gruel” – soft-shoed his aerial course around the upper reaches of the birds nest and set his torch to the touch-paper of this vital chapter in China’s destiny.

So where to from here?

The Chinese leadership has been more than satisfied with the results and the outcome of Beijing 2008 – even though there will be no comprehensive and finite articulation until after the conclusion of the Paralympic Games on 17 September:

- The Games succeeded, and did so without serious attack on or breach of Chinese security
- The Games infrastructure of Beijing – including of the venues and the events and the support and service systems of transportation,

accommodation, movement of people into and out of Beijing and China, worked well.

- The ceremonial of the Games was triumphant without being unduly or self-indulgently triumphalist - despite China's clear victory in securing the largest number of gold medals; China achieved an emphatic confirmation that it can perform with authority and panache at this level and in this type of major world event.
- Beijing and China secured the required imprimatur from IOC President Jacque Rogge – even if it was not in the Samaranchian formula of “The Best Games Ever”.

And so the scene is set for next steps: as Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd said in Beijing in an address to the Business Club Australia on Opening Ceremony day, Friday 08 August, “Beijing is not the end: Beijing is the start of the path to the Shanghai World Expo of 2010”. And so it clearly is – and more of this in a moment.

Meanwhile, between now and Shanghai 2010 World Expo will be other major and highly visible and intensely demonstrative international and national events in China:

- In 2009, the China National Games – which is sort of the Chinese domestic equivalent of the Olympic Games – will be the biggest and grandest National Games ever – and will showcase, inter alia, more than one hundred Chinese athletes who will carry the kudos and the impact of being Olympic medallists.
- Also in 2009, there will be the World Winter Universiade which will be staged in the city of Harbin, capital of Heilongjiang Province, home of China's already renowned annual Ice Sculptures display, and impending centre of winter sports and leisure and recreation – and yet another carefully calculated announcement of a Chinese challenge to the erstwhile established order of superiority of Western European,

North American and Japanese winter sport and leisure and recreation and tourism centres.

- In 2010, the Shanghai 2010 World Expo will run for six months from 1 May until 31 October and will – if you will pardon this fearlessly bold prediction – easily exceed the grandeur and the scope and the impact of the Beijing Olympic Games, as Shanghai at the head – expresses and puts on display the power and the potential of the whole body of the Chinese dragon – in overall economic achievement, in technological development, in sustained pace of economic growth, in determination to win the fight against the ravages of massive environmental degradation and pollution of waterways and of the air over China – and puts all of this on open display to the world.
- And as soon as the Shanghai 2010 World Expo is over, it will be on to Guangzhou where, in December, the Asian Games will feature not only contests in the 43 sports of this forum, but also a demonstration event in the form of a 20-20 contest in cricket as China announces its arrival in yet another domain which has heretofore traditionally been remote from and shrouded in mystery to China and the planners and architects of China's engagement of the world.
- And, in the meantime, it now seems highly likely that China will have announced that the city of Harbin will lodge a bid to host the Games of the Winter Olympics of 2018 – a campaign for which will culminate with a vote by the members of the IOC early in 2011.

Kevin Rudd said it: "Beijing 2008 was just the beginning".

Thank you