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With Repression in Tibet, Rethink Olympics

John J. Tkacik, Jr.

Unofficial calls for a general boycott of China's Olympics have gotten Beijing's attention, but Beijing remains confident that Hollywood celebrities are neither serious about nor capable of achieving a boycott.

Make no mistake: The dissent in China's ethnic Tibetan regions has geopolitical as well as moral and ethical implications for U.S. foreign policy. If Washington hesitates to confront—even symbolically—Chinese human rights violations, the world will see it as validating similar behavior by China's numerous repressive client states, from North Korea to Sudan. Unless, with American leadership, the democracies of the world can summon the inspiration to stand up and do something meaningful about Chinese repression, they will have little moral authority to induce the other petty tyrannies around the globe to mend their ways.

The United States should let American athletes compete in Beijing; they've worked hard for it. But America's political leaders should think twice about the serious "public diplomacy" impact of their appearances at the Games.

Tibetan Grievances. No one, least of all the Chinese leadership, can claim to be surprised at Tibetan discontent. According to the U.S. Department of State, China's Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) remains "one of China's poorest regions, and Tibetans are one of the poorest groups; malnutrition among Tibetan children [remains] widespread...."¹

According to 2000 census data, illiteracy among Tibetans was more than five times higher (47.6 per-

cent) than the national average (9.1 percent)—nearly twice as high as in the second-ranked Qinghai Province (25.2 percent). China also seems to be reducing the number of Tibetans employed in local governance. "During the year [2007] state media reported that Tibetans and other minority ethnic groups made up 60 percent of all government employees in the TAR," down from the 70 percent reported in August 2005. "However, Han Chinese continued to hold the top CCP positions in nearly all counties and prefectures, including party secretary of the TAR."²

In addition, Chinese state policies have the apparent result of encouraging considerable non-Tibetan migration into the TAR, confiscation of Tibetan-occupied commercial real estate in Lhasa and other population centers, and reassignment of land-use rights to non-Tibetans. Tibetans report discrimination in employment and claim that "Han Chinese are hired preferentially for many jobs and received greater pay for the same work." It is also more difficult for Tibetans than for Han to get permits and loans to open businesses.³

In short, Tibetans believe that they now have even less say in their own futures and less scope for their efforts than they had just a few years ago.

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The Dalai Lama, as the spiritual and intellectual center of Tibetan political awareness, sought to engage the Chinese central government in a dialogue about Tibet's future. Unsurprisingly, the Chinese leadership spurned his advances, seeing little upside to engagement with the Tibetan Government-in-Exile (TGIE), which has little leverage apart from moral suasion over the Tibetan diaspora.

Beijing believes that time is on its side. The Dalai Lama is 73, and Beijing believes that an ancient compact with the Qing Emperor gives China's central government absolute power to choose the Dalai Lama's successor.⁴ But in 2002, under gentle diplomatic pressure from the United States, China did agree to formal talks in Beijing with a representative of the Dalai Lama.

China's Engagement with the Dalai Lama, 2002–2008. By way of substantive results, China's central government did finally agree that a representative of the Dalai Lama could spend U.S. government grant money on development projects in Tibet that the Chinese government would review, approve, and supervise. Beijing also continued to hint that it was prepared to relax China's propaganda onslaught against the Dalai Lama if he would, in turn, restrain Tibetans overseas from visible demonstrations against Beijing.

Just prior to then-Chinese President Jiang Zemin's visit to the United States in October

2002, TGIE Prime Minister Samdhong Rinpoche appealed to Tibetans and support groups not to protest.⁵ The TGIE (based in Dharamsala, India) also discouraged demonstrations when Chinese President Hu Jintao visited the U.S. in April 2006. One Chinese official reportedly suggested that Beijing might approve a visit by the Dalai Lama, but shortly afterwards, Chinese officials declared that the Dalai Lama's position was irreconcilable with China's *status quo*,⁶ and China's vituperation against His Holiness continues unabated.

At the time, the Dalai Lama had articulated a "middle-way" road map that was to be a compromise between ardent Tibetan independence advocates and China's demand for exclusive authority over the region.⁷ The "middle-way," however, was seen by Tibetan exiles as the abandonment of principle and the surrender of the TGIE's last negotiating chip.⁸ Rather than improving the general atmosphere regarding Tibet, the talks were accompanied by an intensified Chinese diplomatic campaign against the TGIE and a continued propaganda effort against the Dalai Lama personally.⁹

Despite the well-documented repression in Tibet, the Dalai Lama has tried to accommodate Beijing's concerns about Tibetan autonomy in six grueling rounds of formal negotiations that his followers have held in Beijing since 2002. Nonetheless, by March 10, 2008, he had to admit that "on

1. U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for China—2005*, Tibet addendum, March 11, 2008, at www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2005/61605.htm. For some reason, these data are not covered in the 2008 report.
2. *Ibid.* for the 2005 figure. For these and other data on social indicators in Tibet, see U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for China—2007*, Tibet addendum, March 11, 2008, at www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2007/100518.htm.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Philip Delves Broughton, "Reincarnation Rift," *The Wall Street Journal*, December 4, 2007, at <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB119671930068112223.html>.
5. See Jamyang Norbu, "Tibetans Welcome President Hu?" Phayul.com, April 29, 2006, at www.phayul.com/news/article.aspx?article=Tibetans+Welcome+President+Hu%3f&id=12519&t=1&c=4.
6. Lindsay Beck, "Dalai Lama's Demands Are Obstacle to Talks: China," Reuters, May 26, 2006.
7. Government of Tibet in Exile, "Statement of His Holiness the Dalai Lama on the Forty-Sixth Anniversary of the Tibetan National Uprising Day," Office of Tibet, London, March 10, 2005, at www.tibet.com/NewsRoom/hh2005statement.htm.
8. For example, see Tenzin Tsundue, "Beware the Dragon: Tibet Autonomy Issue Goes Beyond Dalai Lama," *Times of India*, Mumbai (New Delhi edition), April 4, 2005, p. 16, at <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/1067963.cms>.
9. For example, see International Campaign for Tibet, "Nepal Orders Closure of Dalai Lama's Office and Tibetan Refugee Organization," press release, January 27, 2005.

the fundamental issue, there has been no concrete result at all.”

March 2008 Protests. March 10 was the anniversary of the 1959 uprising against China’s occupation of Tibet. This month, protests across Tibet have been met by violent crackdowns.

On March 10, about 500 Tibetan monks at Lhasa’s Drepung Monastery reportedly launched peaceful marches and demonstrations to protest Chinese population, cultural, and commercial policies that over the decades have had the effect of economically disenfranchising Tibetans in their own cities and towns and eroding the social and linguistic cohesion of Tibet’s indigenous people.¹⁰ Chinese police surrounded the monastery, shut off electricity and water, and arrested several monks who had raised Tibetan independence flags. Tibetans also demonstrated in Qinghai Province’s Hualong and Guinan counties and were dispersed by police.

On March 11, 600 monks marched out of the gates of their monastery and again were contained by police. On March 12, two Drepung monks slashed their wrists, and one began a hunger strike. On March 13, several hundred monks from Lhasa’s Gandan monastery and 150 nuns from Qusa temple attempted to demonstrate, and police established a cordon around both buildings that remained in place as of March 16.¹¹

On March 14, monks from Lhasa’s Xiaozhao temple forced their way into the streets and reportedly were beaten by People’s Armed Police, sparking a demonstration by more than 1,000 civilians and prompting “army units” (jundui) in the city to quell the disturbances. Demonstrators became violent, according to reports in U.S. newspapers, as Tibetans burned shops owned by ethnic-Chinese. Chinese government news agencies reported 10 Chinese

deaths, and Tibetan sources say at least 30, and possibly 100, Tibetans were also killed.¹²

Word spread to ethnic Tibetan regions in Gansu Province, about 500 miles from Lhasa. About 400 monks and Tibetan civilians from Amdo Labrang Temple marched in the Gansu town of Xiahe, carrying Tibetan independence flags and shouting “Tibet Independence, Long Live the Dalai Lama and Religious Freedom,” apparently with little interference from police.¹³

On March 15, the authorities reportedly sent regular army units (zhenggui jundui) into Lhasa to conduct “mass arrests,” but further unrest broke out in the four counties surrounding Lhasa: Dazi, Qushui, Linzhou, and Mozhugongka. In addition, 500 demonstrators reappeared on the streets of Xiahe in Gansu, where police attempted to disperse them with tear gas and batons.¹⁴ But the 500 police reportedly fled from the marchers. The demonstrators then turned their wrath on the county government office, breaking windows and overturning cars. They also razed shops owned by Tibetan merchants from India, whom they considered turncoats. By afternoon, Chinese forces with “40 Lanzhou Military Region Army trucks towing cannon” and “20 armored vehicles” stormed the demonstrators; fired on the rioters, killing several and arresting 20; and ultimately occupied the town. About 30 kilometers from Xiahe, “over 100 Lanzhou Military Region trucks and over 20 armored vehicles took up positions at a crossroads and awaited orders.”

There was a “large scale demonstration” at Luqu County’s Langmu Temple and a protest by monks and civilians at Hezuo townships’s temple, which was “suppressed by people’s armed police” as was a second demonstration that evening. Tibetan students at the Hezuo teachers college also exchanged blows with the college’s Communist Party cadres.¹⁵

10. For the Tibetan view of these grievances, see “Statement of His Holiness the Dalai Lama on the Forty-Ninth Anniversary of the Tibetan National Uprising Day,” March 10, 2008, at www.dalailama.com/page.70.htm.

11. This chronology is taken from a private e-mail, in Chinese, which appears to be from an ethnic Tibetan source.

12. *Ibid.* See also Gordon Fairclough and James T. Areddy, “Tibetan Challenge to China Leaves at Least 10 Dead,” *The Wall Street Journal*, March 15, 2008, p. A1 at <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB120548761807136401.html>.

13. *Ibid.*

14. *Ibid.* See also Jim Yardley, “Tibetans Clash With Chinese Police in Second City,” *The New York Times*, March 16, 2008, p. A2, at www.nytimes.com/2008/03/16/world/asia/16tibet.html.

One-hundred Tibetans marched and handed out leaflets in Dazi county, Sichuan province, and they too were dispersed by police.¹⁶

On March 16, protests and arrests continued in Lhasa despite police curfews and controls, particularly in the area of the Shannan Saye temple. Demonstrations spread to Sichuan's Abei Tibetan district, where seven Tibetan monks, students, and herdsman were reportedly killed by police, and a prominent Tibetan was arrested at 4 p.m. By mid-morning, telephone contact with the district had been cut, and several hundred police were reportedly deployed in the area to keep peace. More than 1,000 police were sent to block demonstrations in nearby Ganzi Tibetan district in Sichuan. Monks and civilians also demonstrated in Qinghai province's Hainan Tibetan district. They, too, were dispersed by police.

On the evening of March 16, 500 Tibetan students at Lanzhou's Northwest Nationalities University, also in Gansu, staged a silent sit-in on campus and put up big character posters that described the Tibetan demonstrations elsewhere in China. Tibetan language students at a teachers college in southern Gansu also expressed sympathy for the protests, only to have their campus locked down and students prohibited from leaving the premises. Finally, there were also reports of Tibetan student activities at the Nationalities University in Sichuan's capital at Chengdu, even with a major police presence on campus.¹⁷

What the Demonstrations Mean. In authoritarian states, dissent is outlawed, and when frustration with state policy boils over, there is little room for compromise. Certainly, a large number of communities in China are deeply frustrated with corruption, pollution and environmental decline, disease and health risks, arbitrary arrests and property confiscations, and the lack of labor bargaining rights and religious freedoms.

These groups would like to make their voices heard in Beijing, but when they protest, the state is inclined to arrest them. When demonstrations get too large for arrests, the state is inclined to shoot people, as they did in the farming village of Xichang in July 2005¹⁸ or the sleepy Guangdong coastal town of Dongzhou in December 2005.¹⁹

Unlike most political interest groups in China, the Tibetans' unique language and ethnic cohesion gives them an advantage in coordinating and communicating protests, and thereby circumventing Chinese state telecommunications and Internet surveillance instruments. The Tibetan demonstrations this month will be put down only with the Army's help. Even then, violence cannot be China's permanent answer—unless, of course, Beijing is willing to imprison and kill a lot of people.

Regrettably, as starkly demonstrated at Tiananmen Square in 1989, the Chinese state is quite willing and equipped to do this. The monopolistic Communist Party is all-powerful, and dissent is illegitimate. This has been the focus of American uneasiness as China shoves Canada out of first place as America's top trading partner and, in the process, amasses vast mountains of American currency and debt. America stands for freedom and toleration, and Americans are repelled by genocide in Sudan and killings in Burma, North Korea, Uzbekistan, Zimbabwe, and many other places.

China, on the other hand, sees such behavior as perfectly legitimate and essential to "development models suited to national conditions."²⁰

China as Patron of Authoritarianism. In November 2007, Mr. Yuan Peng, a respected scholar at the China Institute for Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), a think tank run by China's foreign intelligence ministry, noted wryly that, "In the world today, just about every

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.* Protests were also noted at the Panchen Lama's Bushilunbo Temple.

18. See Howard W. French, "Riots in a Village in China as Pollution Protest Heats Up," *The New York Times*, July 19, 2005, p. A3, at www.nytimes.com/2005/07/19/international/asia/19china.html.

19. For an example of the several score news reports, see Howard W. French, "Chinese Pressing to Keep Village Silent on Clash," *The New York Times*, December 17, 2006, at www.nytimes.com/2005/12/17/international/asia/17china.html.

single one of America's adversaries is China's friend."²¹

No doubt, Mr. Yuan had in mind North Korea, Burma, Iran, Syria, Zimbabwe, Cuba, Belarus, Uzbekistan, Eritrea, and Sudan—the ten countries identified by the U.S. Department of State just last week as the “world's most systematic human rights violators.”²² China's support for these (and other) abusive dictatorial regimes around the globe has become a public relations headache for Beijing as it prepares to host the Olympic Games this summer. But it should also pose problems for the U.S. Administration. As CICIR's Mr. Yuan points out:

There are some Americans who are pressuring China on Sudan's Darfur, Burma and other issues by threatening a boycott of the Olympic Games, but in the broader perspective, this is private behavior. U.S. President Bush and his father have both already responded by agreeing to attend the Olympic opening ceremonies.²³

No one can be gratified that China's long history of repression of its Tibetan minority has once again blown up in Beijing's face, but it is not as if Beijing ever adopted any negotiating stance but intransigence in dealing with the deepest fears of Tibetans, both inside and outside of China. And when China's Tibetans vent their frustrations in peaceful protests, China's reflexive reaction is police—and ultimately military—repression.

What the President Should Do. The United States has considerable leverage with Beijing.

With any other country, the immediate U.S. reaction to violent crackdowns on peaceful demonstrations would be to threaten and then impose some sort of commercial and/or financial sanctions. The purpose is not so much to inflict economic pain, because most such countries do not trade heavily with the United States. Rather, the purpose is to delegitimize the regime in the eyes of its people.

It is debatable whether uncoordinated, unilateral trade sanctions have ever inflicted useful pain on any country; given the hypermagnitudes of the U.S.–China trade relationships, it most certainly would not do so with China.

But America cannot simply call for “restraint.” Doing so would be the moral equivalent of staring slack-jawed in the face of serious human rights abuses.

In August, President Bush and his retinue of more than 500 high officials, aides, factotums, security and communications specialists, and drivers will descend upon Beijing. The President's presence in Beijing, and all its attendant hoopla and media coverage, will make quite an impression on the world's newspaper readers and CNN-watchers. In short, he will not have the luxury of anonymity at the Beijing Olympics.

20. For example, see Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “China's African Policy,” January 12, 2006, at www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx/t230615.htm. (“[C]ountries in Africa have been conscientiously exploring a road to development suited to their national conditions and seeking peace, stability, and development by joint efforts.”) See also Luo Hui, “*Jin Richeng hui Li Changchun: Chaozhong Renmin Chuantong Youyi Bu Ke Po*” [Kim Jong Il sees Li Changchun: The traditional friendship between the peoples of the DPRK and China is unbreakable], Xinhua News Agency, September 12, 2004, at www.people.com.cn/GB/shizheng/1024/2778612.html. (“China will continue to support North Korea's party and people in their insistence on the socialist road to development, and support the North Korean comrades in their exploration for development models that are suitable to this nation's [DPRK's] actual situation.”) See also Mark Landler, “For Many Burmese, China Is an Unwanted Ally,” *The New York Times*, December 31, 2001, p. 1. (Chinese President Jiang Zemin said Burma “must be allowed to choose its own development path suited to its own conditions.”)
21. Yuan Peng, “Yuan Peng: Meiguo san da shouduan yan huan Zhongguo jueqi” [Yuan Peng: America's three major methods of postponing China's rise], *Guangzhou Ribao*, November 23, 2007, p. A20, at http://gzdaily.dayoo.com/html/2007-11/23/content_86129.htm.
22. See Introduction to *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2007*, U.S. Department of State, March 11, 2008, at www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2007/100464.htm.
23. Yuan writes: “duiyu Aoyun, xianzai Meigui you xie ren yi Sudan Daerfuer, Miandian deng wenti xiang Zhongguo shiya, weixie dizhi Ao yunhui, danshi, zongtishang lai kan, zhexie zhi shi minjian xingwei. Meiguo Zongtong Bushi he lao Bushi duo yijing daying chuxi Aoyunhui kaimushi.”

But the President of the United States need not lend his prestige to China's global debut as host of the Olympic Games—prestige that China craves. If President Bush hopes to influence China's behavior, not just with Tibetans, but with Beijing's many friends around the world that are "America's adversaries," he must leverage his attendance and that of his family and even his father. He should also have a confidential chat with British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, who also plans to be in Beijing, and the leaders of other democracies. Nothing flashy need be arranged.

President Bush needs only to let it be known, quietly, that he is rethinking his participation in the Beijing Olympics, and his press spokesmen need only respond to questions with a shrug of the shoulder and a noncommittal grunt.

China will get the message.

—*John J. Tkacik, Jr., is Senior Research Fellow in China, Taiwan, and Mongolia Policy in the Asian Studies Center at The Heritage Foundation.*