



CHINA

AN OLYMPIC HANGOVER?

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American airwaves are typically quiet the last month of summer before Labor Day. Not so in 2008, when U.S. households will be treated to several extended media events. The first, the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing, kicks off on August 8 and continues through August 24. Though far less covered and watched than the Olympics, the Democratic and Republican presidential conventions follow shortly thereafter, August 25–28 and September 1–4, respectively.

Though the Olympic Games and the conventions are obviously dissimilar in many respects, it is worth considering their combined effect on the attitudes of Americans toward China at the height of the U.S. political season. These events are, after all, convened and carefully orchestrated by their organizers for political reasons—overt in the case of the conventions, but hardly ambiguous in the case of the Beijing Olympics.

The Beijing Olympics are, for China, of great symbolic importance. They are another signpost of China's return to global prominence, an occasion that holds deep emotional and historical significance—like its recovery of Hong Kong from British colonial rule in 1997 or its entrance into the World Trade Organization in 2001. China's recent development, which Americans are apt to consider as something new, is for many Chinese a story of a return to past greatnesses and China's rightful place among the top panoply of nations. Before the Industrial Revolution and the arrival of

Western adventurers to China in the early nineteenth century, China had for centuries been comfortably unrivalled as a power in Asia and had represented nearly 30 percent of global economic output. China lost much over the next 150 years and the resulting toll on China's national pride along the way was enormous. Annual growth rates of nearly 10 percent annually for the better part of three decades have done much to restore China's international clout and domestic self-esteem.

For China, therefore, the Olympics are an opportunity to celebrate the country's historical revival and a vehicle to present its new and glorious credentials to the rest of the world. But the story that China's leaders may want to tell the world may not be the story that Americans see and hear. For one thing, Western media are not a uniformly docile crowd. Muckraking makes better copy than even the best state propa-

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ganda. Indeed, China's leadership must be careful to ensure that a lack of tolerance for stories that clash with the theme of the Olympics as national celebration does not become a story in itself.

More fundamentally, the celebration of China's rise that motivates the organizers of the Beijing Olympics will find a less credulous audience outside of China. But the theme cannot help but filter through the media coverage to international viewers, including those in the United States. So Americans will be treated to several weeks of spectacle not just of great sport (in which Chinese competitors seem poised to do extremely well), but of a new and rising power about which they are already highly conflicted.

Concerns about the bilateral trade deficit and perceived economic competition with China, intellectual property violations, human rights abuses, consumer product safety, and other matters have heightened

American awareness of China's rise and the challenges it presents. A spectacular commemoration of China as a rising power is unlikely to quell those concerns. For worried Americans, scenes of China's bustling ports, dramatic new urban skylines, and all the other indicia of modern China that the Olympic organizers will showcase in August 2008 will do little to send the message that China would prefer to deliver: "You have nothing to fear." Indeed, China's otherwise benign celebration will probably contribute as much or more to U.S. popular anxiety about China as any deliberately pot-stirring media report.

Then, just after China's government presents itself through the Olympics coverage, Americans will engage in some political theater of their own. The images from China's Olympic celebration will be fresh as the presidential nominees are declared and campaigns begin in earnest. Juxtaposed against the com-

peting visions of America and its future presented by the rival candidates during the conventions, these images necessarily will raise questions about a U.S. political response to a challenge from across the Pacific.

Anxiety over China already occupies its fair share of the American popular psyche. The Olympics are likely to bring that anxiety into sharp relief at the most politically sensitive time on the U.S. calendar. The unintended effect of China's Olympics celebration may therefore be to force the candidates to respond more actively to popular anxieties over China's rise than they might otherwise be inclined to do. Whether the resulting policy prescriptions recommend a more or less confrontational path will require some soul-searching by the candidates, but the most diplomatically effective route is seldom the most politically expedient. Let the Games begin. ■