

## The Wrong Way to Challenge China

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Jim Hoagland

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BEIJING -- Some countries host the Olympics as a coming out on the world stage. Economically resurgent [Japan](#) used the [Tokyo](#) Games of 1964 in such a way. So did [South Korea](#) in 1988. [China](#) as usual is different. The Middle Kingdom will host the 2008 Olympics to bring the world onto the Chinese stage.

For the ruling Communist Party, all that matters is how the Games and the international prestige they can bring to their organizers will play with China's 1.3 billion people. Other nations should keep that difference in mind as they figure out how to deal with China in the run-up to the August 2008 Games. It is not an easy call.

A visit to the bustling construction zone on the edge of [Beijing](#) shows that party officials have mastered the initial physical challenges of installing \$40 billion worth of new infrastructure in a matter of months. An innovative sports stadium with soaring lattices of steel shaped into a bird's nest, two imposing aquatic centers and other facilities are nearing completion well ahead of schedule.

Long lines of hard-hatted workers carrying picks walk at midday through choking clouds of dust as bulldozers add to huge mounds of displaced earth. An Olympic village to house the world's best athletes for two weeks next summer will be finished by the end of this year.

The party command structure has ordered new swimming pools filled and new stadiums built with relative ease. It is not as well suited to handle the clear environmental and political questions that will come next.

How athletes will function under the blanket of smog and soot that often hangs over the Chinese capital is far from clear. Party officials suggest that they will flip a giant "off" switch -- by ordering most factories shut down and most vehicles off the streets during the Olympics -- to clean the air.

The party's likely reaction to political challenge is also unclear. Threats to seek a [U.S.](#) boycott of the Games over China's attitude toward the [Darfur](#) crisis in [Sudan](#) have already come from several Democrats running for president, from 108 members of Congress in a recent letter to the Chinese government and from a clutch of [Hollywood](#) celebrities talking to the media.

Normally I am all for bringing pressure to bear on China's rulers, particularly to get them to acknowledge the truth of their brutal suppression of the [Tiananmen Square](#) demonstrations in 1989 and to move toward the democratic reforms and the end of corruption that the demonstrations demanded. Arms and other trade embargoes should be kept in place to remind the government of its obligations to its people.

But threats to disrupt the 2008 Olympics -- particularly over issues not focused on human rights in China - - may not turn out to be a useful tool for bringing new pressure to bear. This is the rare event that aligns the interests of the party with those of the Chinese people, who have endured centuries of misrule, corruption and humiliation at the hands of Chinese and foreign rulers.

China's rulers will use any blatant foreign "obstructionism" to whip up nationalist fervor and to focus resentment not on the lack of democracy in China, where it belongs, but on outsiders who would supposedly deny the Chinese people a moment in the sun. A smarter approach may be to let the natural pressures for diversity and change, which the Games will bring on their own, assert themselves inside China.

Not even Bao Tong, the ex-party official who is the most outspoken dissident in China today, favors an Olympic boycott under current circumstances. In an interview, he told me:

"The coming Olympics will bring more hope, even as it brings more repression." That is, police controls will be tightened to discourage Chinese contacts with the hundreds of thousands of foreigners the Games will attract. Internal media will also be tightly controlled. "The Olympics will bring more information about the outside world to the Chinese people, but not more information about China to the Chinese people. Still, on balance, it is a good thing," Bao said.

It has been said that after centuries of humiliation and isolation, China seeks revenge against history. Other countries -- [Vladimir Putin's Russia](#) certainly comes to mind -- seek revenge more specifically against neighbors or against Americans and Europeans at large.

Revenge directed at inanimate concepts is preferable to revenge directed at specific nations or persons. We should be careful about taking actions that could change that outlook.

[jimhoagland@washpost.com](mailto:jimhoagland@washpost.com)