

China, the Olympics and Global Leadership

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The whole world, it seems, views China as the next great global power. A trip to Beijing does little to dispel that impression. Out of the welter of dust, noise, welders' sparks, flotillas of cement mixers and construction cranes, the setting for the 2008 Summer Olympic Games is taking shape. A visitor feels inconsequential in the chaotic vastness of this epic undertaking.

But looking down on the scene from the half-finished Morgan Centre, the luxury apartment complex (where annual rents are \$800,000) and seven-star hotel that is arising beside the Olympic site, one is awestruck not only by the project's grandeur, but by its design daring. Below, like some latticed popover, is the Herzog & de Meuron-designed "birds nest" Olympic Stadium. Beside it is the stunning "water cube," or Aquatics Center, of Chinese/Australian design.

It is hardly surprising that after the Games, the Chinese Communist Party's leaders plan to vacate their retro pavilions in

Zhongnanhai, the cloistered compound beside the Forbidden City, to move to a new "campus" adjacent to the Olympic Green, China's new power center. China's leaders view the Olympics not only as a national celebration, but also as the greatest national coming-out party in history.

Feeling the Promethian energy unleashed in Beijing, it is easy to believe in China's aspirations to restore itself to a position of global wealth and power. Indeed, over the past half-century, when the Chinese have put their minds to it, they have always demonstrated extraordinary fortitude and resolution, whether in embracing Mao's revolution or in the equally unfettered way in which they are realizing the economic counter-revolution unleashed by Deng Xiaoping.

But, to become a truly "great nation," China must make two great leaps. First, it must become more comfortable playing an active and constructive international role. China is now deeply involved in the world, especially the Third World, because of trade. But it maintains a nineteenth-century notion of sovereignty – namely, that a

country's national territory, its leaders have an absolute right to do whatever they want without outside "interference." This view is not only out of step with international trends, but it also inhibits China from playing a useful role in world crises.

China's leaders fear that if they begin to pronounce on the domestic record of other nations, much less join in sanctions or United Nations peacekeeping missions, they will help establish a precedent that would allow others to intrude on domestic Chinese affairs. But the Chinese government has just had a wake-up call in Sudan, from which China imports 50% of its oil. After doing little to pressure Sudanese strongman Omar al-Bashir into admitting UN peacekeepers to stem the killing in Darfur, China suddenly found the promise of an unsullied Olympics at risk.

The actress Mia Farrow, for example, suggested that the 2008 Olympics might be remembered as "the genocide games." This got the Chinese leadership's attention. In a matter of days, an emissary was dispatched and al-Bashir relented. It was an important moment in China's evolution from a defensive to an offensive player on the international scene.

China's second challenge concerns its hybrid capitalist/Leninist system of governance, which may not

function well enough without democratic feedback and the rule of law. Party leaders may not become sufficiently attuned to the needs of China's people to respond to problems like corruption, environmental degradation, or peasant unrest before crises make them unsolvable.

Although hardly democrats, President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao already are expending large amounts of time and resources on divisive social problems in the countryside, where Mao's revolution started, but where income growth has lagged. Hu and Wen have cancelled national agricultural taxes, made rural schooling free, launched a new rural medical insurance plan, and guaranteed that, since there is still no title for holding private agricultural land, peasants are entitled to renew their long-term leases.

So China may be edging towards a whole new way of interacting with the world and dealing with its people; its curious authoritarian capitalism may be inching towards some new, and possibly viable, model for long-term development. But, as Mao always noted, theory should not be confused with practice, and the sustainability of such a model remains untested. Indeed, no state run by a Communist Party has yet managed to reform itself sufficiently to modernize and develop successfully. In this,

China is a both pioneer and a developmental curiosity.

What kind of nation China aspires to be, and where it is ultimately headed, is still something of a conundrum. Right now, China's focus is not on grand political visions for the future, but on grand visions for a Beijing reborn to impress the world. Beneath the surface are many threatening cracks. But to drive past the Olympic Green in Beijing will help make many Chinese believe that perhaps the center will hold in this unprecedented and unusual experiment of nation building.

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