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ANALYSIS

JOHN BOWAN
Tel: 0419 732 032
jbowan@bigpond.com

BEIJING 2008 OLYMPIC GAMES: ONE YEAR TO GO

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

With one year to go, the prospects are that Beijing will deliver a technically excellent Olympic Games next year. Nevertheless, the Games are an enormous and complex task, so there is always some potential for things to go wrong.

China is coming under unprecedented international scrutiny on a wide range of issues and the Olympic Games will add to this pressure. Western NGOs and the international media will test the capacity of the Olympic organisers and the Government to deal satisfactorily with difficult issues, including the environment and human rights. Taiwan is already proving a problem on the Torch Relay route.

On balance, however, China can be expected to make a good fist of the Games.

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On 8 August, the Chinese authorities celebrated the one-year countdown to the opening of next year's Beijing 2008 Olympic Games. The scale of these celebrations was extraordinary, setting the scene for what most probably will be an extraordinary Olympic Games. They consisted of 63 events, ranging from sporting and artistic competitions, the launch of the Olympic theme song, 'We Are Ready', specially written for the one-year countdown, and a major spectacular gathering in Tian'anmen Square, involving senior members of the International Olympic Committee, at which invitations were sent out to more than 200 National Olympic Committees around the world to gather in Beijing for the start of the Games of the XXIX Olympiad. This event marked the first time that such a significant ceremony has been held in the Olympic host city, rather than at IOC headquarters in Lausanne.

The last two Games indicate the potential for the atmosphere to change significantly and unexpectedly late in the project. In Sydney, twelve months out, all was going smoothly, giving no hint of the impending ticket controversy or the emergence of erratic and tyrannical behaviour on the part of the top leadership of the Organising Committee in the final run-up. The Sydney Games nevertheless were very well organised and successful. And a year before Athens 2004, the focus was on whether the venues and other infrastructure would be ready in time. As it happened, despite these concerns, the Athens Games were also well organised and successful.

With that reservation in mind, let us attempt to predict how the Beijing Games might go. A Lowy Issues Brief of August 2004 commented as follows: 'with four years to go, the technical

aspects of Beijing's Olympic project are in excellent shape.' Three years later, that judgment stands. Notwithstanding some potential problem areas, the Chinese Government and the Beijing Municipal Government, as well as the Olympic Organising Committee (BOCOG), give every sign of conscientious, sustained, comprehensive commitment to delivering a first-class Olympic Games. From time to time, the most senior leaders give some personal, public attention to the Olympic preparations, underlining the national importance of the project to China. In April this year, for example, President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao, and other senior Chinese leaders participated in voluntary tree planting in Beijing, near the Olympic park.

According to the official Beijing Olympic website, Hu told the volunteers, 'afforestation is a matter that concerns the immediate interests of the people. Every citizen should assume his responsibility and actively participate in planting trees.' Hu said this year is a critical time for Beijing Olympic Games preparation and he hoped Beijing municipal authorities could try their best to usher in the Olympics with a better environment of the capital Beijing. In July, Premier Wen said there would be no talk of extravagance or ostentation in organising the Olympic Games. 'We should save every drop of water and every unit of electricity in the construction of the Olympic venues', the *Beijing News* quoted Wen as saying. Wen also urged developers to ensure the quality and safety of Olympic projects and to consider how they will be used after the Games.

BEIJING 2008 OLYMPIC GAMES: ONE YEAR TO GO**Positive signs****Technical Olympic issues and construction**

On the essential technical issues, Beijing has methodically worked away, doing the necessary work and achieving milestones.

Olympic tickets went on sale in April. More than seven million tickets will be available, 75% of which are for Chinese people, and prices have been set very reasonably. For very popular events, a limit of one ticket per person has been set. Privately, Olympic organisers are expressing some concern about the pressures on them to reconcile the small number of available tickets with satisfying the large domestic demand, and the obligation to meet the legitimate demands of foreigners for tickets (for example, Japan has ordered nearly 200,000 tickets).

Beijing's program of recruitment of volunteers has met a vigorous response. BOCOG announced that as of July 30, a total of 561,296 people had applied to become Games-time volunteers, of whom 318,189 are from Beijing, 206,441 from other provinces and municipalities and 36,666 from Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan and overseas. Some 50,000 volunteers have already received training and a number of them have been designated specialist volunteers and will be assigned to the 2007 Good Luck Beijing test events, which have begun in connection with the one-year-to-go celebrations.

In May, Beijing announced the route for the Olympic Torch. This involves an extensive international route, taking in Turkey, Russia, France, Britain, the United States (San Francisco), Argentina, Tanzania, India,

Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, Australia (Canberra- perhaps an elegant alternative to making an invidious choice between Sydney and Melbourne, as well as acknowledgement of the ACT Government's contribution to the success of the Beijing bid), Japan, North and South Korea and Vietnam. The announcement also gave some detail about the commitment to take the Torch up Mount Everest, Qomolangma, as the Chinese call it, and indicated how the Chinese authorities intend to embrace Tibet in the Games:

'The transport of the Olympic Flame to Mt. Qomolangma was an undertaking made by China when it was bidding for the Olympics. It symbolized the Beijing Olympic Games desire to take the Olympic Flame to new heights and to celebrate the best of human achievement. The desire also symbolizes the three concepts of the 2008 Olympic Games: a Green Games, a High-tech Games and the People's Games. It symbolizes the victory of the human spirit to be able to persevere, overcome obstacles and attain their goals. The ascent will also highlight the beautiful landscape of Tibet, not unlike how the underwater portion of the 2000 Olympic Torch Relay showcased the Great Barrier Reef in Australia.'

On other technical aspects of Olympic preparation, Beijing is making good progress. The venues are coming along very well. The most spectacular of these is the 'Bird's Nest' main stadium, which has taken its remarkable shape but is not yet finished. The innovative swimming venue, known as the Watercube, designed by Australians, has also taken its striking shape but its interior also remains to be finished. The new Shunyi Olympic Rowing-

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Canoeing Park, built for the Games of the 29th Olympiad, became the first new venue to be officially handed over in July. In August, the venue hosted the 2007 World Rowing Junior Championships, the first of the Good Luck Beijing sports events. BOCOG has announced important decisions in areas like marketing, licensing, accommodation, transport, while so many announcements have been made about servicing foreign media, that the words 'protest too much' spring naturally to mind.

National modesty and international friendship

Chinese athletes are actively preparing for the Games but without any sense of arrogance or over-confidence. On 1 August, the BOCOG website reported comments by Cui Dan, a Vice-President of the Chinese Olympic Committee to the effect that a total of 448 Chinese athletes had been qualified for the Beijing Olympic Games, and the final number was expected to be 550 to 570. Some 1,500 Chinese athletes were under active training for the Olympics. They belong to 28 sports and 55 national teams, he told a press conference in Beijing. Looking at the prospects for the next Olympics, Cui said China faces a challenging situation and strives to lead the second group of gold medalists. China ranked second to the United States in the list of gold medalists in the 2004 Athens Olympics. Some foreign media are speculating that China, host of the 2008 Games, may vie for the first place this time, Cui said. However, he stressed, China is expected to remain in the second group, while the USA and Russia will be in the first group.

Beijing sees the opportunity offered by the Games to emphasise solidarity with other Asian countries, including those, like Japan, with whom its relations are problematic. Its

Olympic website reported in January that Asian athletes, including Liu Xiang, China's great high hurdler, now crowded the IAAF world record list for 2007, which used to be dominated by Russian, American and African sportsmen and women.¹ The report went on to draw attention to 'another Asian "miracle"- the Japanese female runner Kayoko Fukushi, who set the new world record of the half marathon in 67:26 minutes.'

Beijing is also conscious of the impression to be made by the friendliness and good sportsmanship of the people away from the field of play and around the Olympic city. 'The Olympic Games is not simply a matter of competitive sports - it is also a question of raising the quality of the people', was the striking formulation of Zhang Faqiang, vice-chairman of the Chinese Olympic Committee. 'We are still a way off from meeting the demands for a real civilised Olympic Games, so we will continue to do important work on this', he told the *China Youth Daily*. The Beijing media are regularly peppered with appeals for good civic behaviour from the populace and against such anti-social activities as spitting and queue-jumping, while a recent initiative seeks to ban booing and other unsportsmanlike behaviour in the Chinese capital. No doubt the authorities are mindful of an unsavoury performance by a Beijing soccer crowd in 2004, when Japan beat China in the Asian Football Championship final.

So, with a year to go, the scene seems to be well set for what Liu Qi, the Chairman of BOCOG, who is also a member of the Politburo of the Chinese Communist Party, recently called 'a high-level Olympics with distinctive characteristics.' This latter expression has been

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used increasingly frequently and seems to imply that the Games should give greater emphasis to specifically Chinese cultural features than to the traditionally Olympic features of the Lausanne brand. This is a source of some quiet concern to some in the IOC, although the public tone of IOC commentary on Beijing's preparations has been uniformly laudatory. The Australian Olympic Committee is pleased with the arrangements being made by the organisers for their team, being particularly impressed with the Olympic Village, and is confident that Beijing will do a good job.

The IOC has painful memories from Atlanta in 1996, when the local organisers treated the Games as an essentially domestic event, which they were entitled to badge with the five rings, and will be most anxious to avoid a similar experience in China. This concern may help to account for the unprecedented decision for the invitation ceremony to be held, with senior IOC participation, in Beijing, rather than in Lausanne. The IOC President, Jacques Rogge, is taking the opportunity provided by this to spend some three weeks in China and Hong Kong, which will provide a major opportunity for serious talks with the Chinese leaders, who, rather than BOCOG itself, are behind the calls for 'distinctive characteristics'. Rogge is much more likely to raise uncomfortable issues in a principled way than his predecessor, the pliable, old-style diplomat, Samaranch.

The Chinese have made a few gestures towards internationalism, for example, the announcement of Steven Spielberg as an artistic consultant on the opening and closing ceremonies. Spielberg has in any case threatened to resign from his position over the Darfur issue but there is little reason to expect

the Beijing organisers to draw on his expertise to any great extent: his main value to them is in the symbolism of his presence. While BOCOG is drawing on foreign expertise, international personnel are essentially in Beijing as consultants and advisers, rather than having line responsibilities, as has been the case in other Games, such as Sydney's.

Problem areas

There are some potential problem areas, which is inevitable in a project as enormous and complex as the Olympic Games. They include:

The environment

The involvement by Chinese leaders mentioned above indicates the salience of the environment issue for China and the Beijing Games. It is also a matter of increasing concern to the IOC and to National Olympic Committees (NOCs), who will be sending their athletes to Beijing. The environment is a complicated issue, which is important for the Games but not one on which the Chinese organisers have total control. There is a world of difference between managing the environment as an issue in an Olympic bidding process and making lasting improvement to the environment of a rapidly growing city of seventeen million people. As Australian Olympic Committee President, John Coates AO, said in Beijing in August, there is certainly a will to improve the Beijing environment but there may not be a way.

During the bid process, Beijing cleverly turned its weakness on this issue into a strength, by emphasising the environmental improvement the Games project might potentially bring. China's environmental problems have assumed

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an increasingly important place in international attention, in the light of the debate about global warming. Environmental 'good news' stories dominate the BOCOG website, but whether there is any relationship between the frequency of these and any improvement in actual air and water quality is not clear. The IOC and NOCs, like the Australian Olympic Committee, are concerned about the potential health hazards for athletes of the combination of heat and air pollution and are planning medical measures to deal with contingencies.

What Beijing seems to have in mind are a series of short-term 'quick fix' measures, like banning vehicles and closing down factories, which may have an ameliorative effect during the Games themselves but will leave no environmental legacy down the track, something by which the IOC sets a great deal of store. During the one-year-to-go celebrations in Beijing, Rogge said that air pollution could lead to some events at the 2008 Beijing Games being postponed. He said that sports with short durations would not be a problem, but endurance sports like cycling were examples of competitions that might be postponed or delayed.

The impact of Rogge's remarks could be gauged by the response of Wang Junyan, the director of cycling events for the Games, who, according to the BBC, commented that postponing events might not be an option because race schedules have already been decided. She went on: 'Rogge's comment reminds us that we have to work harder to fix environmental problems.' The BOCOG website quoted Rogge as saying, during his visit to Beijing, that BOCOG had done 'a fantastic job' on environmental issues and that 'programmes driven by the Games related to

environment are building best-practice examples not just for today but for future generations in China.' This shows that even phlegmatic Belgians are not above resorting to diplomatic flattery and hyperbole.

Taiwan

The announcement of the Torch Relay led to the first public setback in Beijing's Olympic preparations. The August 2004 Lowy Issues Brief had drawn attention to the useful level of practical cooperation between China and Taiwan on Olympic matters but expressed the view that 'the negotiations on the passage of the Torch Relay through Taiwan, for example, seem likely to prove an extremely complex and challenging exercise in sporting diplomacy.' In April, BOCOG announced that the Torch would fly into Taipei from Hanoi and then head out for Hong Kong and Macao. The immediate response from the Government and Olympic Committee in Taipei was to deny that they had agreed to this arrangement. BOCOG's own statement on the contretemps went as follows:

BOCOG learned from media reports that Taiwan authorities and the Chinese Taipei Olympic Committee said that they could not accept the planned route of the 2008 Beijing Olympics torch relay and we are surprised. The relay of the 2008 Olympic torch in Taipei has been keenly anticipated by our compatriots in Taiwan. They have expressed their wishes to BOCOG in different ways. During preparation for the Games, we deeply feel Taiwan compatriots are looking forward to the torch relay in Taipei as they support Olympic venue construction and participate in Olympic cultural activities.

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To date, the impasse has not been resolved. Taipei's initial objections focused on being the departure point for Hong Kong and Macao, provinces which have recently reverted to China. Beijing effectively dealt with this by announcing that Taipei would be classified as an overseas city. Taipei then refused to accept Beijing's condition that Taipei authorities ban the waving of flags or the playing of anthems during the torch's visit. The IOC will be anxious to see a compromise and for this issue to highlight the Olympic role of international statesman and peacemaker and set a deadline of 26 September for this latest cross-strait torch dispute to be settled. This deadline passed with no resolution in sight. There is now every chance that the Torch relay will not visit Taipei.

International scrutiny

As Beijing's Olympics approach, China has come under greater scrutiny in many ways (much of this may simply reflect the country's emergence as a major world commercial player and would have happened in any case without the Games) and this may have produced improvements in the life of Chinese people. For example, Chinese labour practices, amounting to virtual slave labour in some provinces, have also come under the microscope. In righting these wrongs, the Chinese Workplace Ombudsman has been as active and peripatetic as his Australian counterpart, when the Australian media have identified embarrassing exploitation of the industrial relations regime in Australia. The Chinese central authorities have stepped in to right these wrongs, which seem to have been carried out at local initiative rather than as the result of any national policy. BOCOG itself has got into this act by cancelling contracts with a

number of licensee companies, found guilty of improper labour practices.

One unexpected issue, which has just begun to attract Western media interest relates to the struggle by a Chinese family with Australian connections, the Sun family, to resist eviction from their family shop, which stands on the planned Beijing marathon route. This has the potential to revive negative Western interest in the forced relocation of Beijingers to make way for the Olympics, which was quite salient earlier in the development of the project.

A rather larger Olympic building came along unexpectedly to embarrass the Chinese authorities on 10 August when Ai Weiwei, the designer of the superb 'Bird's Nest' Olympic stadium, was reported as launching a fierce, politically incorrect denunciation of the Games, the Government and some of his colleagues. He attacked the 'disgusting' political conditions in the one-party state and said he would not attend the opening ceremony, or allow himself to be associated with either the Government or the Games: 'I hate the kind of feeling stirred up by promotion or propaganda ... It's the kind of sentiment when you don't stick to the facts, but try to make up something, to mislead people away from a true discussion.....All the shitty directors in the world are involved (Ai mentioned Zhang Yimou and Steven Spielberg by name). It's disgusting.....I don't like anyone who shamelessly abuses their profession, who makes no moral judgment. It is mindless.'

In Western countries, Chinese safety standards in a range of products – food, cosmetics, pharmaceuticals and toys, for example – have come to adverse notice, while repressive labour practices have also been reported. China's

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response has not been the traditional cover-up but to seek to deal with these issues in a signal and cautionary style. In June, the Chinese Government announced it had carried out more than 10 million food market inspections in the past year alone. Problems were found in more than 360,000 businesses, with about half being shut down. Inspectors also confiscated 16,000 tonnes of food. This followed bad international publicity, involving the sentence and execution of Zheng Xiaoyu, the former head of the country's Food and Drug Administration and a 62-year-old Communist Party apparatchik, for accepting hundreds of thousands of dollars to falsify documents that approved fake medicine over a seven-year period.

The Beijing Olympics has had the unexpected effect of attracting adverse Western comment on the closeness of China's commercial relationship with Sudan and creating an impression that China is supporting Sudan's repression in Darfur. Steven Spielberg's response to this is mentioned above. The impact of outside scrutiny and pressure can be gauged from Mia Farrow's rhetorically asking Spielberg if he wanted to be the Leni Riefenstahl of the Beijing Olympics, an emotive reference to the 1936 Berlin Games. (Mia Farrow is a leading protagonist of another current initiative, the organisation of an alternative Olympic Torch Relay, planned to tour countries that have experienced genocide, as a further demonstration against Khartoum over Darfur).

China's sensitivity on the subject was shown during the visit to Australia in June by Zhang Zhijun, Head of the Central Committee's International Department. When asked a

question at a public forum about the China/Taiwan Olympic Torch contretemps, he took the opportunity to denounce the international campaign seeking a boycott of the Beijing Games, which he said reflected inaccurate views about Chinese support for Sudan's repressive policies in Darfur. Privately, Olympic organisers express frustration at the criticism they are receiving from international NGOs.

A more striking example of the potential of the Olympic Games to bring unexpected embarrassment to China was the publicity coup of a group of foreign pro-Tibet activists, who on 7 August, a day before the one-year-to-go celebrations, managed to abseil down a section of the Great Wall and unfurl a ten-kilometre high banner, reading (in a parody of the Beijing Olympic motto) 'One World, One Dream, Free Tibet 2008'. The Chinese authorities will be anxious to avoid similar incidents over the next year.

Amnesty International has consistently drawn attention to the lack of improvement in human rights in China as the Games approach and called on the IOC to put pressure on China over the issue. In the latest of such appeals, on 7 August, Amnesty's Secretary-General, Irene Khan, said 'Unless the Chinese authorities take urgent measures to stop human rights violations over the coming year, they risk tarnishing the image of China and the legacy of the Beijing Olympics. Not only are we not seeing delivery on the promises made that the Olympics would help improve the human rights situation in China, but the police are using the pretext of the Olympics to extend the use of detention without trial..... the IOC must promote a positive legacy of the Olympics built

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on respect for human rights.....The Chinese authorities must press ahead with their promises to improve human rights so that when August 2008 arrives the Chinese people can be proud in every respect of what their country has to offer the world.'

Chinese Olympic leaders privately deny that they ever made any promises to improve human rights in exchange for hosting the Games – indeed, this link was made far more definitively by foreign observers than by the Chinese themselves. IOC leaders have not publicly criticised China on human rights but have stressed the right of activists to express their views during the Olympic preparations and during the Games themselves. Leaders like Rogge can be expected to speak frankly on these issues privately to China's leaders and Olympic organisers.

With one year to go, the prospects are for Beijing to deliver a technically accomplished, first-class Olympic Games, although doubts remain about its capacity to deliver on undertakings on the environment and it is far from clear that IOC hopes about an improvement in human rights will be realised. The external scrutiny during the Olympic preparations and the Games themselves will be enormous. China's patience and political sophistication will be tested relentlessly by the Western media and the country's growing strength as a world power will weaken any disposition towards sympathetic marking from world opinion.² Chinese authorities need to be aware that, if any aspects of Games delivery are below gold-medal standard, judgments will be severe. Even for China, the Olympic Games represent a large, complex, and risky challenge.

NOTES

¹ In Osaka in August, Liu, who is by a clear margin China's marquee track and field star, and one of the country's two most popular athletes – the other is NBA basketball star, Yao Ming – added the world 110 metres hurdles title to his 2004 Olympic title and world record. Assuming Liu makes the Olympic final next year, the event threatens to unleash a national emotional response comparable to that created in Australia by Cathy Freeman's victory in Sydney in 2000.

² An amusing example of the cynical media attitudes Beijing will have to contend with was given by Richard Hinds in a recent article in the Sydney Morning Herald: 'As for Beijing itself, the venues are state of the art and ready. Sure, some will think it insensitive to hold the shooting in Tiananmen Square. But while the IOC thought carefully about human rights before giving China the Games, at the end of the day you can't be weighed down by things such as unlawful detention, torture and summary execution when you are busy tackling big issues such as making sure the organisers use an officially approved pommel horse.'

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Bowan is a former diplomat, who served in Australian missions in Lagos, Moscow, Bangkok and Belgrade, and was Ambassador to Germany from 1990 to 1994. From 1983 to 1990, he was Senior Adviser on International Relations to Prime Minister Hawke, and Chief of Staff to Prime Minister Keating in 1995-96. John was Manager for International Relations at the Sydney Organising Committee for the Olympic Games (SOCOG) from 1997 to 2000. In 2000-01, he worked as a consultant in support of Beijing's successful 2008 Olympic Bid. John's company, Litmus Consulting, handles international political, trade and sporting issues.

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