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Under Foreign Pressure, Chinese Support Their Government BY DENNY ROY

Denny Roy, Senior Fellow at the East-West Center, argues that “the Chinese public has become a force to be reckoned with, both for the Chinese leadership and for foreign governments. But the Chinese masses are not hankering for an overthrow of the CCP or for the avoidance of confrontations with outside countries at the expense of what they perceive as Chinese sovereignty and prestige.”

Much of Western, and particularly American, engagement with China has assumed a substantial division between the Chinese people and the Chinese government. This accords with how Westerners view their own political development and how China fits the West’s expectations of an authoritarian (read: politically less-developed) country. Chinese political ideology, on the other hand, envisages a tight harmony between the state and its people, obviating the need for a multiparty system or popular election of national leaders. To be sure, practice has not always measured up to theory in Chinese politics, producing due cynicism among the Chinese. The Chinese people are increasingly well-informed about governance shortcomings at home, from tainted food scandals to preferential treatment for families with connections to Chinese Communist Party (CCP) officials. Nevertheless, outsiders are prone to overestimating the gap between the Chinese masses and their leaders. In fact, recent events have narrowed this gap. Foreign criticism often fans a defensive nationalism that bonds the Chinese people with their leaders, and there is a considerable degree of uncoerced assent among Chinese citizens for several important official Chinese policies—facts that foreigners should take note of because they have important implications for China’s foreign relations and consequently for the policies of the governments that work with Beijing.

China’s successful hosting of the Olympic Games is not only a source of national pride, it was also the latest episode of bonding between the Chinese people and their government. Earlier this year, Chinese authorities departed from the practice of their Maoist past and heavily publicized official relief efforts after the Sichuan earthquake, taking advantage of the opportunity to demonstrate that the central government cares about its people. The run-up to the Olympic Games, particularly the controversy-plagued journey of the Olympic torch through gauntlets of protestors in several countries, evoked an outpouring of national support among Chinese at home and abroad for the Beijing Olympiad despite the event’s massive cost and drain on resources.

Many of the pre-Olympic anti-China protests focused on Tibet. The issue is highly polarizing, with the Tibetan independence movement’s claims of a Chinese genocide at one end of the spectrum and the CCP’s claim of a benevolent intervention at the other end. Most of China’s dominant Han ethnic group—comprising of over 90 percent of China’s population—tend toward the CCP view, believing that the traditional Tibetan socio-political system was backward and unjust, that Tibetans are better off as a result of CCP rule, and that Tibetan independence activists should be more grateful for the benefits available to their region through association with the PRC.



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The West’s human rights policy toward China, including efforts to publicly embarrass China through such means as the U.S. State Department’s annual country-by-country reports on human rights violations, is designed to give voice to a collection of concerns among Chinese citizens that their own government represses. Outsiders may hope that Chinese society cheers foreign pressure on Beijing to grant greater civil liberties and to implement the rule of law, but in reality most Chinese accept the CCP’s social contract: continued one-party rule and an emphasis on “social harmony,” including limited political freedoms, provided the authorities continue to expand opportunities for economic prosperity.

Most of Chinese society is sympathetic to the CCP’s arguments that the Party’s human rights record, as defined in terms of social and economic rights, such as alleviating poverty, is actually favorable. The Chinese people also believe that introducing multiparty democracy would risk unleashing chaos and the loss of China’s recent and hard-earned gains and that the West’s pressure on China to politically liberalize is a smokescreen disguising foreign interests in keeping China weak. Under these circumstances, blunt and open foreign pressure on the Chinese government creates resentment rather than gratitude among Chinese society.

The Chinese people have also accepted years of CCP instruction on how to think about Japan and Taiwan. On the Taiwan issue, the Chinese public has digested the PRC’s long-standing position that the island belongs to “China” even if the inhabitants wish differently. There is no shortage of Chinese willing to send their young male relatives to fight in a war against “separatism” if that becomes necessary. Many in the top Chinese leadership would prefer to set the Taiwan issue aside and concentrate on economic development. However, the Chinese public will not allow the leadership to remain passive in the face of perceived moves toward formal Taiwan independence.

Since early in this decade, Chinese leaders have sought improved relations with Japan, but the Chinese public prevented Beijing from moving forward too quickly. Chinese society was not ready to bury the hatchet. This was proved in a series of anti-Japan demonstrations in 2005, which clearly went further than the Chinese authorities wanted and placed the ruling regime in the delicate position of trying to satisfy public demands without seriously damaging the relationship with Tokyo. Japanese Prime Minister Fukuda Yasuo’s willingness to skip Yasukuni gave the Chinese leaders domestic political cover, and they jumped at the chance for a summit meeting in May 2008, during which Chinese President Hu Jintao showed that he had learned from Jiang’s bad experience and stayed low-key on the history issue.

Protests by foreigners in support of Tibetan independence and efforts to shame the Chinese government over human rights shortcomings or perceived belligerence toward Taiwan or Japan are less likely to win approval than to provoke angry nationalism among the Chinese public. Indeed, public opinion may lengthen or deepen the diplomatic damage caused by words or deeds the Chinese consider offensive. The Chinese people may be slower than their leaders to forget and move on, while Chinese leaders are averse to leaving themselves vulnerable to accusations that they are insufficiently patriotic. The Chinese public has become a force to be reckoned with, both for the Chinese leadership and for foreign governments. But the Chinese masses are not hankering for an overthrow of the CCP or for the avoidance of confrontations with outside countries at the expense of what they perceive as Chinese sovereignty and prestige. Criticism of China should factor in the likely impact of domestic public reaction. China’s neighbors should not cease standing up for their own interests or for international norms, but in doing so they should not assume that the Chinese people will side with foreigners against their own government.

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