

## DANGEROUS GAMES

*The most heated competition in the 2008 Olympics could take place not in a stadium but in the Taiwan Strait*

BY JENNIFER LIND

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Since the ancient competitions at Olympia, the Olympic Games have transcended national rivalries and celebrated universal human achievement. Yet throughout modern history the Olympics have also been mired in power politics, international tension, and even violence. In the games following both world wars the defeated nations were prohibited from competing. Nazi Germany used the 1936 games in Berlin to showcase its dramatic resurgence and to intimidate its neighbors with images of German power and unity. South Africa was banned from the games from 1964 to 1992 because of its apartheid laws. And in 1972 the Olympics became a battlefield in the Arab-Israeli conflict when Palestinian terrorists killed eleven Israeli athletes in a hostage crisis. Politics saturated the Olympics throughout the Cold War: the United States led a boycott of the 1980 Moscow games to protest the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and the Soviets organized a retaliatory boycott of the Los Angeles games four years later.

The 2008 Olympics, the first ever to be held in China, will be a similar exercise in politics by other means, starting with a battle for prestige: after the Americans dominated at the Athens games in 2004, China and Russia agreed to cooperate to best America in Beijing. The official Chinese goal is to win 110 medals—seven more than the United States won in Athens. To this end China and Russia will exchange coaches and share training methods and facilities. (Chinese Olympic organizers have promised that in return for Moscow's assistance they will instruct Chinese fans to cheer for Russian athletes at any event in which no Chinese athlete is competing.) In 2004 China's sports minister, Yuan Weimin, told U.S. Olympic Committee Chairman Peter Ueberroth before the Athens games, "Don't worry—we will not topple you. But we are making this effort."

What may turn out to be of far greater concern than medal counts, however, is the possibility of war—specifically, between China and Taiwan. Why? Because Taiwanese leaders may gamble that the 2008 Olympics will provide them with their best chance to declare formal independence from the mainland. With the world's spotlight trained on Beijing, they may reason, China might not attack, as it has vowed to do in the event of such a declaration. After all, military conflict would jeopardize the games and create an international embarrassment for China. Moreover, it would drive investors away and possibly lead to economic sanctions that would damage China's flourishing economy. The danger, of course, is that Taiwan will act and Beijing will carry out its threat despite the costs.

The 2008 Olympics will not be the first to highlight the rivalry between Taiwan and China. After the establishment of the People's Republic of China, in 1949, the International Olympic Committee authorized Taiwan's Olympic committee to represent China—meaning that "Chinese" athletes were

actually Taiwanese. When the PRC gained the Chinese seat at the United Nations, in 1971, the IOC subsequently recognized Beijing's Olympic committee; since then athletes from mainland China have represented the nation at the Olympics. (The IOC later worked out a deal with Taipei that allowed Taiwanese athletes to compete, but only as part of the "Chinese Taipei Olympic Committee." The team is prohibited from using its national symbols; its athletes don't carry Taiwan's flag or hear their national anthem when they win medals.)

Taiwan nationalists recognize that the Chinese have a lot at stake in the games. Just as Japan and South Korea (hosts in 1964 and 1988, respectively) viewed their Olympics as emblematic of their national achievement, so Beijing sees the 2008 games as an opportunity to demonstrate that it has moved emphatically beyond developing-country status into the ranks of the world's greatest nations. China's aggressive quest for a higher medal total reveals how much importance the country puts on the Olympics. (Taipei, meanwhile, is considering the idea of hosting a future Olympics. Premier Frank Hsieh has proposed a campaign to host the 2020 games, arguing that it would boost global recognition of Taiwan. Advocates also argue that hosting the Olympics would bolster Taiwanese security, because Beijing would not dare attack the island in the preceding years.)

All this helps explain why Taiwanese nationalists—including both President Chen Shui-bian and former President Lee Teng-hui—might see the Beijing games as an opportunity. But would they really be so bold (some would say foolhardy) as to declare independence? And are they right to think that China would refrain from attack? The most likely answers to those questions are "maybe" and "no," respectively—which raises the discomfiting prospect that unless cooler heads in Taiwan can prevail, China and Taiwan may be headed for a cross-strait war.

**F**rom Taiwan's perspective, the approach of the Beijing Olympics coincides with the closing of other windows of opportunity for independence. President Chen's term ends in 2008; thus he may be tempted to move toward sovereignty before a more conservative government—one favoring reunification with the mainland—can take office. (Taiwanese leaders may also suppose that a bid for independence would be more propitiously launched while George W. Bush is still in office, since his administration—despite its recent rebukes of Taipei—is known to be both hawkish on foreign policy and committed to the defense and spread of democracy.)

Additionally, the changing military balance in the region does not favor Taiwan. Currently Taiwan's military defenses are strong. It has formidable maritime power with which to repel a Chinese invasion or thwart a naval blockade. But Chinese military modernization increasingly threatens to shift the balance of power toward Beijing. Better to strike now, independence advocates may argue, under cover of the Olympics and before Taiwan's strategic advantage erodes further.

Moreover, in the larger scheme of things the other prospects for Taiwanese independence do not seem very good. President Chen and his Democratic People's Party (DPP) obviously face constraints from all sides. The United States has warned Taiwan that an outright declaration of independence would reduce the likelihood of American military support. A majority of the Taiwanese people oppose any provocation that could lead to war. Most say they prefer the status quo; typically fewer than 30 percent say they want independence from the mainland. Thus committed Taiwanese nationalists may seize on the Beijing Olympics as a seductive opportunity. In this scenario Taipei would begin to move toward independence this year or next, calculating that Beijing would be compelled to restrain itself until after the Olympics and hoping that China and the rest of the world would meanwhile come to accept the new status quo.

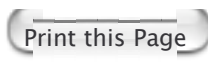
The world would probably view a sudden and overt Taiwanese declaration of independence as reckless and provocative. A subtler approach, such as scheduling a national referendum on independence, would be viewed much more sympathetically worldwide, but it might also provoke a Chinese military response (as

Beijing has threatened). Both China and the United States have sharply criticized the DPP for trying to establish the referendum as a political instrument in Taiwanese politics—as President Chen tried to do in March of 2004, when he called for a referendum on bolstering defenses against Chinese missiles and on pursuing talks with the mainland.

Beijing has explicitly warned Taipei against any Olympics opportunism. Former Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan has speculated that President Chen “might try some adventure” in the years before 2008. The deputy director of the PRC’s Taiwan Affairs Office, Wang Zaixi, said, “It is extremely dangerous for the Taiwan authorities to miscalculate the situation that the motherland would tolerate ‘Taiwan independence’ in consideration of economic development and the hosting of the Beijing Olympics.” Another official in the Taiwan Affairs Office has said that China “will safeguard our sovereignty and territorial integrity at any cost”—including the loss of the Olympic Games. Writing in a Chinese magazine, Major General Peng Guangqian cautioned that even if the Olympics were at stake, territorial sovereignty “always takes” first place. Beijing is also invoking Olympic symbolism to reassert its sovereignty over Taiwan. When describing the route that the Olympic torch would travel through China, Liu Qi, the president of the organizing committee, said that it “should cover as much ground as possible, including all provinces, regions, and”—pointedly—“Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan.” Taiwan’s Premier Hsieh has rejected Beijing’s proposed route, arguing that Taiwan and China are two different countries.

In the face of such martial declarations by the Chinese and warnings from the United States, Taiwanese leaders may decide that the prudent course is to do nothing. But the Olympics do seem to present independence advocates with an opportunity that, however dangerous, may prove to be their best. In which case the most heated competition of 2008 could take place not in a Beijing stadium but in the Taiwan Strait.

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