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Hard lines help no one

Well-intentioned protests in the west, most recently during the Olympic torch relay, could prompt a hardline crackdown in China that would do the Tibetan cause no good

• [Andrew Fischer](#)
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When non-violent protests in Lhasa turned [violent](#) on March 14, the western media was filled with rare news about Tibet, mostly centred on the capital. Less attention was given to the eastern Tibetan areas outside the [Tibetan Autonomous Region](#), even though these regions were witnessing the most widespread protests since the 1950s. However, attention has since been diverted to either ludicrous statements by the Chinese government or dramatic media stunts by pro-Tibet demonstrators in the west.

In the ensuing propaganda battle, Tibet itself is again being lost between the two extremes of hardcore Tibetan nationalists in exile and hardliners in Beijing. The result will probably take us further from the possibility of resolution between more moderate voices, with dire consequences for the 98% of Tibetans actually living in Tibet and not in exile.

It is understandable that pro-Tibet demonstrators would take advantage of the Olympic [torch relay](#) to bring attention to a just and long overdue cause. Beijing's own clumsy public relations response, combined with its repressive clampdown in Tibet, has bolstered those who have argued that China could never be trusted and that the only compromise with China is no compromise. But this position is dangerous because it is premised on the idea that there is nothing to lose, buttressed by exaggerated claims of "cultural genocide". Such alarmism mirrors the rhetoric of hardline leaders in Lhasa and Beijing, as if both sides are still living in the age of Mao.

In the hyped war of words, there is a very real danger that Tibetans in Tibet are being put at risk by the uncompromising political agendas set in the west. These are positions taken by people who have nothing to lose in Tibet or, worse, much to gain by riding the bandwagon of anti-China sentiment.

Conversely, the pro-Tibet media coups are playing into the hands of hardliners in Beijing. This is less obvious from the west, where Beijing's attempts to [demonise](#) the Dalai Lama appear ludicrous at best. Rather, we must understand Beijing's media counter-offensive in light of Chinese public opinion, for this is what matters most in the political struggles for influence within the Communist party.

With this in mind, hardliners in Beijing appear to be stoking up Han nationalist indignation at the suffering of Han Chinese civilians during the one-day eruption of violence in Lhasa, thereby attempting to legitimise an intensification of hardline policies across a region the size of western Europe and to an extent not seen since the days of Maoism.

It is a classic strategy. Oppressors typically capitalise on outbursts of violence from pockets of the oppressed in order to discredit legitimate grievances and more moderate political agendas, and to justify the use of repressive force.

Add the current Olympic torch demonstrations and the Tibet issue is effectively turned into an

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attack on China and the Chinese, rather than on the hard line policies of the current Chinese leadership, in much the same way that the Iraq war was turned into a question of patriotism in the US. In both cases, we cannot have an intelligent critical analysis of policies because hardliners play the nationalist card in their defence.

But Beijing's strategy digs even deeper, into the rarely mentioned reality that the Dalai Lama, and Tibetan Buddhism more generally, is in fact very popular in China. As far as I understand it, the Dalai Lama is keenly aware of this influence and realises that this channel is crucial for resolving the Tibet issue. For its part, Beijing strives to end his popular influence and to discredit his moderate political agenda among the Chinese.

Effectively, the Dalai Lama is waging a public opinion battle with Beijing within China itself, not within the west. Current Olympic demonstrations are not helping him in this battle.

We need to understand that the Chinese Communist party includes many differences of opinion, including some powerful voices in favour of negotiating with the Dalai Lama and genuine autonomy for Tibet. We must support these voices. However, they could be easily scared or forced into silence if nationalist anger were turned against them.

The problem must be clearly discerned; the problem is not with China or the Chinese, it is with the Tibet policies of the last 20 years pushed forward by a hardline faction within the Communist party. Moreover, it is unlikely that this faction will lose power anytime soon. It is also unthinkable that this or any other faction in the Communist party would consider letting go of Tibet. Therefore, we need to discredit the policies, not the leaders, nor their party, and certainly not the country and its citizens. With these concerns in mind, we need to keep our eyes on the ball. Demonstrations and boycotts against the Olympics certainly grab headlines, but they are perceived within China as an attack on China and on the Chinese people, which bolsters nationalist support for hardliners. The collateral damage is often the very people in whose name we demonstrate.

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