



Beijing's Obvious Hand at the U.S. Olympic Torch Run

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By Rodger Baker

The April 9 Olympic torch relay in San Francisco opened a window into the organizational capabilities of the Chinese government and its intelligence collection apparatus inside the United States. From the coordinating efforts of the city's Chinese Consulate, down through local Chinese business and social organizations, and on to the pro-China supporters who photographed the event, the operation showed an efficiency and organizational capability not seen among the anti-China demonstrators. The run also revealed a high level of sophistication, planning and control in the pro-China camp.

A Day of Confusion

The torch relay in San Francisco proved a mixed bag of anti-China and pro-China demonstrators, as well as spectators simply hoping for a glimpse of the symbol of the Olympic Games. Pro-Tibet and other demonstrators altered their tactics in San Francisco following clashes surrounding the torch run in London and Paris — where pictures of a protester with a Tibet flag trying to snatch the torch from a handicapped torchbearer left the protesters looking worse than China. As a result, the demonstrators in San Francisco planned to impede the progress of the relay rather than attempt to extinguish the torch or interfere with the actual torchbearers. The massive gathering at the beginning of the torch route, and the blocking of a bus carrying Chinese security officials and items related to the torch run, triggered the organizers of the relay to change the route completely. In part, then, the protesters interrupted the relay effectively, though not in the manner they had hoped.

The on-the-fly changes in the torch relay route, which left many spectators waiting down near the piers when the torch was running along the hills several blocks away, allowed the relay to progress relatively smoothly, interrupted only a few times by protesters attempting to block the route or by a few demonstrators bearing little sign of affiliation with the Tibetan or Darfur causes who threw water balloons at the torch. The heavy police and Diplomatic Security Service presence around the torch runners largely kept demonstrators on the sidewalks, while the moving roadblocks and the unclear torch route left demonstrators unsure of where they could amass to intercept it. The security organizers, then, were relatively successful in their efforts to allow all planned participants to carry the torch with minimal interference.

In the end, neither protesters nor security “won” the day. Amid the confusion, however, the groups that showed a very strong sense of organization and planning were the pro-China demonstrators. Their coordination demonstrated the ability of the Chinese government, via its local consulate and its association with overseas Chinese organizations, to rally and coordinate large-scale activities inside the United States — and to use these activities for intelligence collection.

Pro-China Preparation

By 8 a.m. April 9, the pro-China demonstrators were taking up positions along the planned torch relay route, pulling in groups carrying Chinese, U.S. and Olympic flags, and equipped with cases of food and water. However, these were not spontaneous gatherings of overseas Chinese supporting the motherland, as Beijing media have portrayed them. Rather, there was a coordinated effort between local Chinese business and social associations and the consulate to attract, equip, deploy and coordinate the large pro-China turnout. This is in contrast to the Free Tibet, Save Darfur and other anti-China protesters — who often seemed disorganized.

By some estimates, as many as 50 busloads of Chinese from other parts of California were brought to San Francisco. Many of them paid (by some accounts \$300 each) to come out for the day in support of Beijing. They were placed in groups along the anticipated torch relay route and given Chinese and Olympic flags, as well as American flags (the latter a tactical move to show they were not anti-U.S., but rather pro-China — a distinction made all the more apparent by the fact that most anti-China protesters did not carry U.S. flags, and some also were critical of the U.S. government).

In addition to those bused in from out of town, many of the local Chinese business and social organizations were involved in fielding groups of pro-China supporters, and these were similarly equipped. Most groups also were supplied with cases of water and food — something not seen among the anti-China demonstrators, who appeared more a gathering of individuals than prearranged groups. One local Chinese organizer was overheard saying they had spent some \$30,000 on food and water for the day of the torch run — perhaps not a large amount overall, but a clear investment to ensure that there was group cohesion among the pro-China demonstrators.

In addition to many older overseas Chinese posted along the route, there also were numerous Chinese of college age, many representing several overseas and mainland Chinese student associations. Some carried a large flag representing China’s Tsinghua University, which produces many top Chinese officials, and among the others were local chapters of the Chinese Students and Scholars Association. During the run, some of these students challenged the American Free Tibet or Saver Darfur protesters to discussion, asking, for example, whether they had been to Tibet or diverting accusations of Chinese military support to Sudan with counteraccusations of U.S. military activity in Iraq and Afghanistan. In general, the Chinese side kept the confrontations rather civil, seeming to

have been well prepared to respond (suggesting they had been provided with materials on how to respond in advance). On numerous occasions, however, the anti-China demonstrators in these one-to-one confrontations would resort to their own chanted slogans or just shout that the Chinese were liars.

The organization of the pro-China contingent was further demonstrated by its self-policing efforts. While the anti-China demonstrators ignored the barriers along the route and moved into the streets, far fewer pro-China demonstrators did so. When one did cross, the pro-China group would shout at them to return behind the barriers and “follow the rules.” There was clearly a concerted effort to make the Chinese demonstrators appear as the more controlled, more peaceful and less confrontational participants — part of a broader PR strategy. When confronted by a large group of pro-Tibet demonstrators, for example, the Chinese often simply ignored the repeated cries of “China lies, people die” and instead broke into song, effectively ending the exchange.

Instigation and Intelligence Collection

There was at least one exception to the restraint shown by the pro-China demonstrators, however, suggesting they were not entirely the innocuous gathering they sought to portray. On numerous occasions, individuals or small groups carrying cameras would seek to incite the anti-China demonstrators to acts of confrontation or violence, frequently by parading through the middle of a group of Free Tibet or Save Darfur demonstrators with a large Chinese flag, walking back and forth through the group. In some cases, small scuffles broke out — and pictures were snapped — though the anti-China demonstrators soon deployed individuals to try to keep the two opposing sides separated. The same day, Chinese media ran photos of pro-Tibet demonstrators shoving pro-China demonstrators, “proving” their point that the Tibet supporters are violent.

It was no accident that the photographs appeared so quickly in the Chinese media. In addition to the demonstrators, numerous individuals were sent out with cameras. Although cameras are expected at such an event, many of the photographers were collecting images either for Chinese propaganda purposes or to identify anti-China demonstrators in order to identify pinpoint “troublemakers” who might be planning to attend the Olympics in Beijing. With their pictures on file, Chinese authorities can then either deny their visas or monitor them more closely when they arrive in China.

In addition, Beijing has been trying to locate the organizers of anti-China protests and demonstrations overseas, ones who may be planning action in China, in order to infiltrate their groups and gather intelligence on their planned activities. This is not new for Beijing — as the Chinese Embassy official who defected in Australia a few years ago demonstrated by revealing the details of Chinese infiltration of and spying on Falun Gong supporters in Australia. Beijing also has been seeking out U.S. and other foreign academics for their insights on potential demonstrations in Beijing, hoping to get information about

individuals and tactical details of plans in order to pre-empt or at least effectively counter them.

In addition to the intelligence collection efforts and the careful organization and coordination of the pro-China demonstrators in San Francisco, electronic countermeasures also were used to disrupt the communications and activities of the anti-China demonstrators. In some cases, the cell phones of the anti-China organizers were spammed with prank calls and text messages in order to limit their effectiveness as a coordinating tool — particularly as the torch changed routes. There also were unconfirmed cases of limited cell-phone jamming, likely using the short-range cell-phone jammers that were popular a few years ago. These created intermittent and isolated interference with cell-phone reception, further deteriorating the communications and coordination ability of the anti-China demonstrators.

Beyond San Francisco

Furthermore, China did not limit its activities to San Francisco. It also organized a smaller response to the Dalai Lama's visit to Seattle, Wash., a few days later. Chinese Consul General in San Francisco Gao Zhansheng sent a letter to University of Washington (UW) President Mark Emmert urging him and other UW officials to refrain from meeting with the Dalai Lama or from giving him a platform for political or "separatist" activities. Additionally, the Chinese Students and Scholars Association sent an open letter to the UW leadership and met briefly with Emmert and Provost Ed Taylor, asking them to limit the Dalai Lama's opportunity to use his visit for political reasons. Several hundred pro-China students also staged a demonstration outside the Dalai Lama's speaking venue in Seattle on April 14, using the Internet to coordinate banners, chants and actions.

Throughout the United States there have been reports of other group actions by Chinese students and activists, from Internet-based activity promoting boycotts of French goods following the Paris torch relay to a push to "correct" foreign media coverage of the Tibet riots and the Tibet issue overall. But there also have been more aggressive instances. For example, at least one Chinese student at Duke University received threats after attending a pro-Tibet rally, while others have had their personal information, including their phone numbers and Chinese identification cards, posted on the Internet bulletin board hosted by the university's Chinese Student and Scholar Association (the association denied responsibility, saying those postings were the actions of individuals). The students' concern, however, is that the information will get back to Chinese authorities and thus undermine their future prospects in China or even lead to further harassment of themselves or their families.

China has had a long reach into the Chinese community in the United States for quite some time, and frequently uses this community for espionage, both within the community itself and against American companies, the military and the technology and political spheres. Also, Chinese consulates in the United States have helped facilitate pro-China gatherings

in the past. However, while it already was known that China was anxious to restore its image after the Tibet unrest and the trouble with the torch run in London and Paris, the effort and coordination Beijing exhibited in San Francisco, through the consulate and local Chinese business and social organizations, was rather impressive.

There are no estimates of the number of pro- and anti-China demonstrators at the San Francisco event, though the former easily totaled several thousand. Additionally, the actions of the pro-China camp, along with the supporters' placement along the anticipated route, demonstrated a much more centralized and coordinated organization than the anti-China groups — and revealed the depth to which the Chinese government can organize and deploy its overseas population, even in the United States.

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