



China Can't Silence Olympic Athletes

Democratic states need to warn Beijing against punishing Olympians who speak out.

By Doug Bandow

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The Beijing Winter Olympics will soon arrive despite foreign opposition. China defeated foreign efforts to cancel, boycott, or move what some activists call the “genocide games,” despite the very late, half-hearted diplomatic boycott issued by the United States and a handful of its allies. But the democratic world can still take one important step: protecting the rights of the athletes themselves.

Cancellation was never likely. That would be both a political and economic disaster involving one of the shrinking number of countries willing to take on the costly international games. Consider that the only remaining major bidder for these games was Kazakhstan—which erupted in bloody protests and a government crackdown last month. As for a boycott, there is little support for a repeat after the tit-for-tat 1980 and 1984 boycotts, which tarnished the Games while achieving nothing significant.

A move also was impractical, with little time, few possible sites, and a global pandemic further limiting options. Only a country willing to bear Beijing's displeasure could step in, leaving just the United States and Canada as plausible substitutes among post-2002 hosts. Nor was the highly political International Olympic Committee (IOC) ever likely to sacrifice the Games on principle.

So on Feb. 4, the Olympics will open. Even then, they will challenge Beijing. There will be no international spectators, only a small, hand-chosen domestic audience, and China hopes to ensure there is no COVID-19 by maintaining a “closed loop,” where the Olympics is sealed off from the rest of Beijing. Although the U.S. diplomatic boycott flopped, it still might increase international attention to the politically charged issue of human rights. Beijing will find that coverage uncomfortable, but how it reacts will determine its impact on China's reputation.

China is likely to botch the job. In recent years, Chinese diplomats have practiced wolf warrior diplomacy. Based on a film that was *Rambo* with Chinese characteristics, this confrontational stance won public applause and government approbation. However, the practice lost friends and made enemies abroad. Beijing now appears to be downplaying but not abandoning insults thinly disguised as diplomacy.

Moreover, China will emphasize control at the Games. Even at the 2008 Beijing Olympics, held long before Chinese President Xi Jinping was reviving Maoist repression, China intensified domestic restrictions, especially over Beijing-area dissidents. The U.S. State Department reported that the regime clamped down on Chinese opposition after promising more access for foreign reporters.

The Foreign Correspondents' Club of China (FCCC) reported that "local authorities continued to infringe upon the freedom of foreign journalists to travel and conduct interviews, and that during the year harassment of foreign journalists rose sharply, particularly in the weeks before and during the Olympics. Between July 25, when the Olympics media center opened, and August 23, the day before the Olympics closing ceremony, the FCCC reported 30 cases of 'reporting interference,' including the beating of foreign journalists, such as Japanese correspondents in Xinjiang.

The Xi government may be preparing to go even further this year, threatening Western visitors if they criticize their hosts. Last week, Yang Shu, the Beijing Organizing Committee's deputy director-general of international relations, sought to put a positive spin on Beijing censorship: "Any expression that is in line with the Olympic spirit I'm sure will be protected," Yang said. Of course, he meant Olympic spirit with Chinese characteristics, such as traveling to China to deliver panegyrics to Xi, likely to be nominated for a third term later this year and without whose leadership the world obviously would be lost.

But woe to any athlete who believes that Olympic spirit means freedom and asks embarrassing questions about the many Chinese locked away in prisons and camps—or uses the Games as an opportunity to criticize the great and powerful Xi; Chinese violations of human rights, which are massive and growing; and People's Liberation Army threats to grab territory and overrun Taiwan. Yang helpfully observed: "Any behavior or speech that is against the Olympic spirit, especially against the Chinese laws and regulations, are also subject to certain punishment." Athletes already have been speaking out. NBA player Enes Kanter Freedom has been vocal in his criticism of Chinese practices and was backed by basketball giant Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. U.S. snowboarder and Olympian Shaun White posed with a Tibetan flag. U.S. ice skaters and fellow Olympians Evan Bates and Timothy LeDuc also sharply attacked Chinese human rights abuses.

Whether that means a quick exit from the people's paradise, with Chinese characteristics; an invitation to have so-called tea with the authorities, never a pleasant exercise; or an extended stay in a special government guesthouse for a few months or years he did not say. The milder options are more likely—but very little is impossible in Xi's China, as individuals like the "two Michaels," Canadians kidnapped and held hostage for years as a political bargaining chip, have found out. Nevertheless, guilt is not a prerequisite for punishment in modern China, and guilt in standing for freedom makes any offense worse.

Having a single host site would be a simple—and entirely traditional—fix for what ails the Games.

Obviously, visitors cannot expect legal immunity playing tourist in China. However, freedom of speech should be respected within the competition, including expressed by athletes and reported by the media. Before an athlete takes a stand or a journalist covers an embarrassing incident and gets hauled away, the United States, Europe, and Asian democracies should confer, set a common plan, pressure the IOC to warn Beijing against abusing its role as host, and prepare a united response to any incident.

To start, this free speech consortium should indicate that punishing foreign visitors would receive widespread media coverage during the Games, thus costing Beijing the propaganda victory it hopes to reap. Friendly states also should warn China that arrests and prosecutions would lead to united opposition against Beijing holding any future Games, meetings, or conferences. If China desires to act as an international host, it must respect international norms and accommodate attendees. Western countries should indicate their willingness to issue travel warnings against visiting China and highlight the risks of heading to a country where the law is no obstacle to the party and political hostages are seized.

Flagrant abuses might warrant a resort to Magnitsky Act sanctions, though their impact is mostly symbolic. Washington could also target the Chinese Olympic Committee and related organizations as well as other Chinese groups that organize international meetings. Maintaining unofficial contacts between China and the rest of the world is an important good. Nevertheless, such sanctions might be a necessary last resort.

The United States, even with allied support, cannot forcibly remake China. However, Washington should make a priority of supporting international norms and protecting Americans when Beijing acts as an international host, especially of something as important as the Olympic Games. If the Xi government wants to burnish its international image, it should live up to the underlying ideals of Olympic competition.

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