

## RESPONSIBLE STATECRAFT

### **US Olympics boycott met with a yawn and a shrug for good reason**

*As usual, Washington looks isolated and impotent, its effort likely to be forgotten before the games begin.*

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The Biden administration has announced a “diplomatic boycott” of the Olympics, keeping American officials home during the upcoming Chinese games. Only a handful of other countries have signed on. Yet another U.S. moral crusade has gone bust.

Perhaps Beijing’s worst human rights abuse is its treatment of the largely Muslim Uyghurs in Xinjiang. Chinese concerns over terrorism are real and the PRC contends that Washington is ill-positioned to complain about excesses in combatting terrorism. Nevertheless, China has locked away a million or more people in reeducation camps and worked to destroy Uyghur culture. These actions cannot be whitewashed; but how we push the issue effectively is the question.

The United States and some allied countries have now blocked products made with slave labor and sanctioned Chinese officials responsible for the brutal policies, but so far these have achieved little practical impact.

Activists also have pushed to relocate or boycott the upcoming Olympic Games. For instance, earlier this year, U.S. Representatives Jennifer Wexton and Mike Waltz laid the sanctimony on thick, explaining why American athletes should want to withdraw from participation in the 2022 games if they are held in the PRC. Wexton and Waltz were less forthcoming on what they planned to sacrifice.

However, such proposals have gone nowhere. Too many people remembered the Carter administration’s 1980 boycott of the Moscow games to protest the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, which was joined by 65 other states (including, ironically, the PRC!). The Soviets retaliated four years later, backed by 17 of its allies. Unfortunately, the mutual recriminations did not help the Afghan people.

Instead, the Biden administration instituted a “diplomatic boycott.” Explained State Department spokesman Ned Price:

“we will not send any diplomatic or official representation to the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing and the Paralympic Games given the PRC’s ongoing genocide and crimes against humanity in Xinjiang, as well as other human rights abuses. Now, of course that does not modulate at all our support for Team USA. ... But, of course, we will not have any official or diplomatic representation that would send a signal that these Games represent anything akin to business as usual in the face of these ongoing atrocities, crimes against humanity, and the ongoing genocide.”

No doubt, the administration is serious about displaying its displeasure at China. However, Washington's action and rhetoric seem mismatched. Compare the response, no "diplomatic or official representation," with the offense, "ongoing atrocities, crimes against humanity, and the ongoing genocide."

Indeed, come February no one is likely to even remember the boycott. When asked if the administration had told other governments of its decision, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki responded: "We have informed them of our decision, and obviously we will leave it to them to make their own decisions." Which so far has been mostly a big yawn.

Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom are joining America. New Zealand said its diplomats would stay home but didn't call its action a boycott. Similarly, Japan's prime minister refused to announce an official boycott while indicating: "It is important to make a judgment by myself at an appropriate time after comprehensively taking into account various issues in consideration of the national interest."

South Korea, which America has defended for seven decades, declined to join the boycott. Explained President Moon Jae-in: The South was "trying to maintain a harmonious relationship with China while building on a solid alliance with the United States." Which meant siding with the People's Republic of China.

Yet Moon was polite compared to French President Emmanuel Macron, apparently still angry over the AUKUS submarine deal. Said Macron: "I don't think we should politicize these topics, especially if it's to take steps that are insignificant and symbolic." He added that he favored actions with a "useful effect," that is, "You either have a complete boycott, and don't send athletes, or you try to change things with useful actions."

Germany's new chancellor, Olaf Scholz, whose Social Democrats long backed friendlier ties with the PRC, said no decision had been made. The new foreign minister is a Green and hawk on China, while the third party in the coalition, the Free Democrats, emphasizes business-friendly policies. European Union foreign ministers are equally divided as they meet to seek a common position.

China dismissed U.S. efforts. In response to the administration announcement, the PRC's foreign ministry promised "resolute countermeasures" and predicted damage to bilateral relations. The spokesman for China's embassy in Washington tweeted: "no one would care about whether these people come or not, and it has no impact whatsoever on the #Beijing2022." The editor of the nationalistic *Global Times* denied that the diplomats had even been invited: "Only super narcissistic people will regard their absence as a powerful boycott. ... You are the people that Beijing residents least want to see."

The Chinese probably are right. Come February American news publications might comment on the absence of U.S. diplomats, but that's about it. The impact on the PRC's reputation will be minimal. And no Uyghurs will be freed as a result.

Joe Biden and his aides were supposed to set U.S. foreign policy right. It is hard to imagine a less competent display of administration policy toward the Olympics. Biden and Secretary of State Antony Blinken should have contacted allied governments, including France, and discussed the idea before any announcement. Then Washington should have assessed the level of support and decided whether to proceed. If so, the allies should have united in a common effort, rather than

followed a US-led attack on the PRC. As it is, Washington is isolated and impotent, its effort likely to be forgotten before the games begin.

The United States and similarly minded nations also should have discussed other options. For instance, how to empower athletes to draw attention to human rights abuses? How to ensure a freer flow of information into China? How to tailor a message for the highly nationalistic Chinese people, who dislike attacks on their homeland? How to convince the International Olympic Committee to consider the status of human rights of governments in awarding future games?

Finally, this PR debacle should remind private activists of their opportunities to act outside of government. A campaign against sponsors, American and foreign, could have gained greater attention and cost Beijing more money. An effort to enlist celebrities to both boycott the games and elsewhere criticize the PRC's human rights record might have won some surprising support — for instance, Tibet long has been a cause celebre in Hollywood.

There are no easy answers in dealing with China. But even good answers aren't likely to succeed without minimal competence in Washington. The Biden administration needs to do better, and soon.

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