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Boycotting China Olympics: Is there any ‘right’ way to go?

Ted Galen Carpenter

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A growing campaign is underway in the United States and some other Western countries to boycott the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing.

There is a wide range of proposals, varying greatly in scope and severity. The mildest version suggests a “diplomatic boycott,” in which political leaders from other countries would refuse to attend the games as a protest against the Communist government’s increasingly repellent human rights record in both Hong Kong and Xinjiang. The harshest option would be a comprehensive boycott, in which countries angry at Beijing’s conduct decide to bar their athletes from participating in the games. A middle option would refrain from restricting the athletes, but would add a boycott by corporate sponsors to the diplomatic shunning.

One of the latest influential figures to advocate a diplomatic boycott is Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi. “We cannot proceed as if nothing is wrong about the Olympics going to China,” Pelosi told Congress’ Human Rights Commission and the Congressional-Executive Commission on China during a May 18 hearing regarding the games. Referring to allegations of extreme human rights abuses by the Chinese government against the Uighur minority in Xinjiang, Pelosi contended that “For heads of state to go to China, in light of a genocide that is ongoing while you’re sitting there in your seats, really begs the question: What moral authority do you have to speak about human rights any place in the world if you’re willing to pay your respects to the Chinese government as they commit genocide?”

The Speaker stressed that she was not recommending that American athletes be prevented from participating in the games, only a “diplomatic boycott, in which leaders of democratic countries refuse to attend as a way of showing their displeasure. Two months earlier, Sen. Mitt Romney, R-Utah, came out in favor of the middle option in a New York Times op-ed. “As the Beijing Olympic Games approach,” he stated, “it is increasingly clear that China, under the control of the Chinese Communist Party does not deserve an Olympic showcase.” Romney rejected the idea of a comprehensive boycott, however. “Prohibiting our athletes from competing in China is the easy, but wrong, answer.” The right approach, he contended, “is an economic and diplomatic boycott of the Beijing Olympics.” American spectators, other than families of the athletes and coaches should stay home, and American corporations should likewise shun the venue. Romney even suggested that instead of sending a traditional delegation of political and diplomatic figures to attend the games, “the president should invite Chinese dissidents, religious leaders and ethnic minorities to represent us.”

A few weeks after the appearance of his op-ed, Romney, along with Sen. Tim Kaine, D-Va., introduced legislation to implement the diplomatic phase of his proposed boycott. In late April, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee overwhelmingly approved that measure as part of the proposed Strategic Competition Act of 2021.

Although she stopped short of advocating a commercial boycott, Pelosi seemed to imply sympathy for Romney's approach, blasting Olympics sponsors who "look the other way on China's abuses out of concern for their bottom line." She added: "If we don't speak out against human rights violations in China for commercial reasons, we lose all moral authority to speak out for human rights anywhere."

A decision by corporate sponsors of the games to withdraw their endorsements and financial support would undoubtedly have more substantive bite than a diplomatic gesture, but it would place American (and other) corporations in a bind. Most of those companies have multifaceted — and quite lucrative — business relationships in China. Those relationships would be put in serious jeopardy if PRC authorities decided to retaliate (as they likely would) against firms that signed on to a commercial boycott. Yet, if the campaign for such a boycott gains traction, targeted corporations might well anger customers in the United States and other Western countries if they continue their sponsorship despite calls to demonstrate tangible dissatisfaction with Beijing's human rights record.

For adamant hardliners, even the combination of a diplomatic and commercial boycott is deemed insufficient. Romney's hawkish GOP colleague, former U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley, came out in favor of a full-fledged boycott. She conceded that the move "would be a terrible loss for our athletes," but that factor "must be weighed against the genocide occurring in China and the prospect that empowering China will lead to even greater horrors down the road."

A coalition of some 180 groups representing Tibetan, Uighur, and Hong Kong dissidents, as well as more general human rights organizations, issued a statement advocating a similar course. Various petitions, including one hosted by Change.org, are circulating in the United States and other countries demanding that Beijing's right to host the 2022 Winter Olympics be "revoked." The Change petition compares the present situation to the international community's willingness to let Adolf Hitler go ahead with the 1936 Olympics.

At present, there appears to be insufficient domestic and international support to replicate the policy that Jimmy Carter's administration adopted in 1980 for a comprehensive boycott of the Moscow Olympics. With Pelosi's endorsement, however, a diplomatic boycott of the Beijing games is now a very real possibility, and given the growing bipartisan calls for taking a stance against Beijing's human rights abuses, the combination of a diplomatic and commercial boycott is no longer a long-shot.

The Biden administration should summarily reject the Carter strategy of blowing up the Beijing Olympics. Carter's myopic move not only wrecked the 1980 games, it led to retaliation by the Soviet Union and its allies that did the same to the 1984 games. It violated the entire rationale of

keeping politics out of the Olympics as much as possible. It was a tragic, poisonous action that should not be repeated.

U.S. policymakers need to think carefully before embracing even one of the milder boycott strategies. A diplomatic snub undoubtedly would convey appropriate disgust regarding the PRC's conduct on human rights with respect to both Hong Kong and Xinjiang. It may be appropriate for the world's leading democratic power to take a firm stance and make such a moral statement.

However, how much support Washington would get internationally for a diplomatic boycott is uncertain; even some Western governments might hesitate to antagonize Beijing unless there was greater reason to believe that it would lead to some worthwhile policy concessions. Prospects for extensive international cooperation on an economic boycott are even more problematic.

The brutal reality is that embracing an Olympic boycott in some form might give U.S. political leaders and human rights organizations satisfaction, but nothing the United States and its allies do with respect to the Olympics is likely to change Beijing's policies on human rights. It would be best to take up the torch through diplomatic channels and not on the playing field.

Ted Galen Carpenter is senior fellow for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute.