

Don't Boycott The 2022 Olympics Because They're In China

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Forcing athletes to stay home might feel good but it would do nothing to improve Beijing's approach to human rights.

China's human rights violations are both widespread and well-documented. Yet so far Western criticism has had little impact on Beijing's behavior, whether in Hong Kong, Xinjiang, or elsewhere on the mainland.

Some of China critics advocate boycotting the 2022 Winter Olympics, set to take place in the PRC. The 2008 summer games gave Beijing a major propaganda boost; the Xi regime no doubt plans to turn next year's competition into another self-love fest. A boycott would tarnish the competition and embarrass the hosts.

So far the Biden administration has said nothing publicly, though it reportedly has begun talking with allies about the games in light of the Trump administration's determination that Beijing's treatment of the Uyghurs is legal genocide, a conclusion endorsed by Secretary of State Antony Blinken. Congressman Tom Malinowski argued: "If you're going to accuse a government of genocide, you can't then have an Olympics in that country as if it's a normal place."

The boycott idea is worthy, but good intentions are not enough. Such a stand would not improve human rights in China.

Twice assigning the world's premier sporting event to one of the world's most repressive nations in little more than a decade demonstrates the need to rethink eligibility rules. Not that there is any easy answer.

Excluding undemocratic states would mean ruling out many potential hosts and might cause an exodus from the Olympics, perhaps even triggering the establishment of a competing contest. Moreover, how authoritarian would be too authoritarian? Setting a standard requires more than claiming to know it when one sees it. Anyway, Olympics games are already assigned through 2028, with France, Italy, and the U.S. next up. Focusing on 2030 won't do anything to aid oppressed Chinese.

Republican legislators have introduced a resolution urging the International Olympic Committee to strip Beijing of the upcoming contest. But the IOC is unlikely to reverse itself, especially so late, after a host country has invested so much. In October, Hunter College's Teng Biao, a Chinese human rights lawyer, met with the Committee for the same purpose. He complained, "We were given the same response Olympic officials once gave to justify the Nazi Games—that politics and sport should be kept apart."

Moreover, the competition is set to begin less than a year from now, leaving little time to prepare a new venue. Perhaps the games could be delayed or returned to a past host with facilities in good working order. But the 2014 host was Russia, which presumably would be ineligible under a human rights standard. Four years later, South Korea held the winter games, but, having suffered commercial retaliation from Beijing for deploying the THAAD missile defense system, the republic would be reluctant to risk further Chinese displeasure. Other potential candidates might be equally reluctant to court retaliation from Beijing.

With the games almost certain to go forward in China, British MPs are pushing for a boycott. Olympics controversies are not uncommon. Spain and the Soviet Union stayed home in 1936 when the games were held in Nazi Germany. In 1956, four countries abstained to protest the short-lived invasion of Egypt by Britain, France, and Israel; three stayed home because the Soviet Union was allowed to participate (despite its invasion of Hungary); and the PRC boycotted because Taiwan was invited.

Eight years later China, Indonesia, and North Korea refused to participate as part of a dispute over an alternative sports contest. In 1976, 29 mostly African nations boycotted after the Olympic Committee refused to ostracize New Zealand, whose All Blacks rugby team had toured Apartheid-era South Africa. Twelve years later, Cuba and North Korea refused to attend because Pyongyang was not made a cohost alongside South Korea. In none of these cases did anyone much miss the absent athletes or nations.

The most important boycott occurred in 1980, when the U.S.S.R. was hosting the summer games. Led by Washington, 66 countries stayed away to protest the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Four years later, Moscow returned the favor, though less effectively, when it boycotted the contest in the U.S., along with 17 of its allies and friends.

The most important impact of the latter two episodes probably was to increase general distaste for mixing politics and sports, which would incline the U.S. Olympic Committee against a redux in 2022. Any serious boycott proposal would have to answer several questions.

First, would anyone else back the U.S.? The militarily threatening but economically isolated Soviet Union was a much easier target than the PRC. Beijing announced that it would retaliate against any nation that spurned the games, a promise it almost certainly would keep. For instance, China targeted Norway, which hosts the Nobel committee, after Chinese dissident Liu Xiaobo received the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize; six years passed before the two governments finally repaired relations, after Oslo issued an excruciatingly obsequious statement dictated by the PRC.

Today, even American allies exhibit profound reluctance to confront Beijing over political and trade issues. Most Asian and European states have significant economic ties with China; the investment accord inked by Europe and the PRC late last year offers Beijing even more leverage. Joerg Wuttke, president of the EU Chamber of Commerce in China, told the *Washington Post*: “I’ve spoken with European ambassadors and friends here, and the appetite to take on China with a boycott is zero.”

A solitary, or almost solitary, holdout by the U.S. might make some people feel righteous, but it would likely be counterproductive. It would look like a politically motivated bout of moral vanity at the expense of athletes who would lose the opportunity to compete. (It is easy to argue

on behalf of a supposedly noble cause if someone else is paying the price.) Worse, a unitary action would highlight America's isolation, even impotence, making any future effort at coalition building more difficult. Finally, Beijing would feel emboldened, more convinced that no one was prepared to confront even its worst behavior.

Second, would anyone else be willing to take the lead in promoting a boycott? No one wants to be caught between the U.S. and China, especially since any campaign pushed by Washington would be seen as part of a new cold war. Mike Pompeo's ostentatious efforts to conscript Asian and European nations for America's attacks on the PRC failed badly. Add to that Washington's infamous inconsistency on human rights: attacking adversaries for violations while ignoring even worse crimes by friends. Many nations would automatically dismiss a U.S. effort, even if led by the Biden administration. A boycott campaign would have greater credibility if organized by someone else.

Third, would walking away from the 2022 contest diminish opportunities to highlight Beijing's violations of human rights? The Olympics brings enormous numbers of foreigners and substantial amounts of media coverage. Could governments and athletes use the competition to highlight Chinese misbehavior? Would a boycott focus coverage on the U.S.-China dispute rather than on China's mistreatment of its people? Would an America-only refusal to attend galvanize foreign opinion against the U.S. or Beijing?

Fourth, would such action help the oppressed? Embarrassing the Chinese leadership might feel good, but would that lead to an improvement in the treatment of Uyghurs or others? Or would the Xi government respond with even tougher controls over its own population? Beijing already spends more on internal security, meaning holding its own people in bondage, than on its military. A high-profile attack from America or others likely would send the regime into a defensive crouch. Would a boycott cause other governments to treat the PRC in ways that would benefit China's people?

Fifth, would a boycott be seen by China's population, and especially the young, as an attack on the nation rather than on the regime and its policy of repression? The PRC's future will be determined by its own people, not foreigners. The best hope for positive reform is an internal demand for change. Younger Chinese don't like government restrictions on their lives but even more dislike attacks on their country. A boycott, especially one led by the U.S. tarnishing China's reputation, would risk driving people to support the Beijing regime. That would strengthen the position of Xi and other hardliners and make political reform more distant.

Finally, are there alternative measures to take to highlight Chinese human rights abuses? There could be, for instance, a diplomatic boycott, in which top government officials and celebrities around the world avoided the games. Or a high-profile campaign might urge sponsors to withdraw their backing. Or a boycott of game advertisers could be organized. All of these could dispel public displeasure and encourage discussion without punishing athletes.

The claim that the Olympics should be politics-free deserves debate, which next year's contest makes more urgent. However, the best time to disqualify states from hosting the Olympics is before the games are awarded. A change of venue or mass boycott of next year's competition is about as likely as Xi Jinping becoming a born-again democrat.

It would be better for Western athletes, activists, and governments to set more modest objectives and find other ways to publicize Beijing's crimes and aid Beijing's victims. This approach would better give substance to the Olympic Charter's commitment to the "preservation of human dignity" and "respect for universal fundamental ethical principles."

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