

A Strong U.S. Response to the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

Hosting the Olympics is a privilege—and it is clear that China is not a suitable actor to host the 2022 games.

China's gross human rights abuses, genocide against the Uyghurs, and COVID-19 cover-up set the stage for the U.S. to lead a global effort demanding accountability.

The Biden Administration should take a tiered approach, starting by building a coalition to pressure the IOC to postpone the Olympics and find a new host country.

If the International Olympic Committee (IOC) has its way, this time next year, Beijing will have hosted the 2022 Winter Olympics, and become the only city in the world to host both the summer and winter games.¹ China will also have scored a major propaganda victory, proving that when it comes down to it, human rights are not really a serious concern for the U.S. and its friends around the world who profess to care.

The Olympics are the most prestigious, esteemed sporting event globally and it is a privilege for a country to be selected as host. China's track record as host, and its current severe ongoing human rights violations, make it a poor choice to host such a privileged sporting event. In its role as host of the 2008 Summer Olympics, China came under sharp criticism for systematic human rights violations that occurred

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amidst its host tenure, including possible exploitation of workers involved in building the Olympic infrastructure² and alleged use of child labor in products sold at the games.³

Now with Beijing slated to host the Olympics again, the circumstances are far more foreboding. China's human rights record has worsened, not improved. Under President Xi Jinping, persecution of various groups—religious believers, human rights lawyers, and citizen journalists—has intensified. Today, in fact, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is actively carrying out genocide and crimes against humanity against the Uyghurs, a Muslim minority in China. The CCP is subjecting Uyghurs and Tibetans to various forms of forced labor, shuttering churches, irrevocably altering the state of freedom in Hong Kong, threatening aggression against Taiwan and in the South China Sea, and, just within the past year, systematically covered up critical information in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. This is just to name a few areas of concern.

While the IOC claims that it is not a political organization, its decision to select China as host country was a political one—one that put the rights of people inside the host country behind the privileges of the government slated to host the event.

Amidst the pandemic, the IOC postponed the 2020 Summer Olympics in Tokyo to 2021.⁴ That decision was made on March 24, 2020, just a little over four months before the games were originally supposed to start, on July 23, 2020. Of course, this was done in agreement with the host country, but the agility with which the IOC responded to changing circumstances during the pandemic demonstrates that it is, indeed, practically possible to shift the timeline for hosting the games. It should, therefore, also be possible to postpone the 2022 Olympics in order to select a new host country, given the gravity of China's ongoing abuses at home and transgressions abroad. It is not too late to postpone.

The Biden Administration has made cooperation among allies and partners the bedrock of its foreign policy. In early April, the Biden Administration took steps in concert with the European Union, the United Kingdom, and Canada to sanction CCP officials for their role in perpetrating atrocities in Xinjiang.⁵ This type of multilateral action could set the stage for a global effort to pressure the IOC to postpone, and select a new host country for, the 2022 Olympics.

Historical U.S. Response to Controversial Olympics

The 2022 Beijing games are not the first time the Olympics have been entangled in political and human rights concerns. The 1936 Berlin Olympics occurred under the regime of Nazi Germany. In 1972 and 1976, even though

the U.S. Olympic team as a whole did not boycott, the American track and field team boycotted its events over apartheid in South Africa.⁶ And, in 1980, the U.S. led an official boycott against the Moscow Olympics in response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

The U.S. responses to various Olympic controversies have been mixed. In crafting its response to the upcoming Olympics in Beijing, the Biden Administration should consider some of the most relevant historical developments to craft a more effective response in 2022.

The Berlin Olympics, 1936. The State Department's recent atrocity determination for Chinese Uyghurs prompted comparisons between the 2022 Beijing Olympics and the 1936 Berlin Olympics, which Hitler used to paint a false image of a tolerant and peaceful Nazi Germany.⁷ Beneath the veneer of the Olympics, the Nazis had already implemented the infamous Nuremberg race laws and opened the Dachau concentration camp.⁸ Despite this, President Franklin Roosevelt deferred to the American Olympic Committee, which maintained its disposition of separating politics from sports, and ultimately paved the way for U.S. participation in the 1936 games.⁹

The Moscow Olympics, 1980. The U.S. has only boycotted the Olympics once: the 1980 summer games in Moscow. Against the backdrop of the Cold War, the Carter Administration led more than 60 countries to boycott the Olympics in protest of the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan—a decision earning the Administration the ire of many U.S. athletes.¹⁰ While the boycott was intended to undermine Soviet prestige and pressure a withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Soviets ultimately remained there for another decade.¹¹ Furthermore, the USSR and its allies retaliated by boycotting the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics. Based on these results, the U.S. must carefully weigh the efficacy and costs of all prospective responses to the 2022 games before undertaking a boycott. In particular, the U.S. should do what it can to avoid punishing American athletes.

The Beijing Olympics, 2008. In 2008, the IOC idealistically hoped that hosting the games in Beijing would accelerate China's opening to the international community.¹² Correspondingly, Chinese officials promised to improve human rights conditions.¹³ Groups like Human Rights Watch, however, warned that hosting the Olympics would likely worsen human rights in China by prompting further abuses, including silencing of dissidents and the press, forced evictions, and brutal crackdowns on migrant workers, beggars, and other marginalized groups.¹⁴ Many of these predictions came true. Some 1.5 million Beijing residents were, in fact, evicted from their homes; migrant workers were exploited, with some not getting paid for a year, if they were paid at all; and those who objected to the disruptions caused by

the Olympics were often extra-judicially imprisoned.¹⁵ These concerns were compounded by a critical reminder of the importance of a free press with the CCP's cover-up of the 2008 tainted milk scandal, when melamine-laced milk powder killed six infants and sickened 300,000 others.¹⁶

Meanwhile, organizations like Save Darfur and Olympic Dream for Darfur campaigned for China to stop supporting Khartoum's genocidal regime ahead of the games.¹⁷ These groups were effective in getting China to urge the Sudanese government to accept a United Nations peacekeeping force in the midst of the genocide in Darfur.¹⁸ In response to human rights concerns, world leaders including German Chancellor Angela Merkel and British Prime Minister Gordon Brown boycotted the Olympic opening ceremony.¹⁹ While President George W. Bush expressed concerns about China's human rights record, he characterized the Olympics as an apolitical celebration of sports and attended them.²⁰ The 2008 Olympics are a cautionary tale; the international community should learn from its mistakes and use the 2022 Olympics as an opportunity to hold China accountable for violating civil and political liberties, as well as the most basic human rights.

Potential Responses to Beijing as Host of the 2022 Olympics

There is no consensus on how the U.S. and the world should respond to Beijing hosting the Olympics less than a year from now. While many were concerned about Beijing's selection from the start, calls for actions have intensified since the Uyghur atrocity determination was issued by the U.S. government in January 2021. An increasing number of civil society and legislative actors are weighing in:

The idea of a boycott has gained some traction. A coalition of 180 human rights groups, for example, is petitioning governments to boycott the Olympics to avoid further emboldening China's authoritarian behavior.²¹ Several Members of Congress have echoed these calls. Resolutions were introduced in both the House and the Senate last year calling on the games to be rebid. This year, the issue has been raised again in the House, in the form of a resolution urging a boycott absent a host country change of the Beijing games.²²

But there is no agreement yet in Congress on how to respond. Senator Mitt Romney (R-UT) wrote a *New York Times* op-ed advocating for an economic and diplomatic boycott of the Olympics.²³ This more limited form of a boycott would still permit U.S. athletes to compete, but would eliminate U.S. government participation at the games so as not to grant legitimacy to the CCP propaganda that will no doubt be on display during the opening

ceremonies and throughout the games. Others, like Senator Ted Cruz (R-TX), oppose any form of boycott. Senator Cruz believes that the best way for the U.S. to stand against China's abuses is for American athletes to "go to Beijing next year; proudly, bring home medal after medal; and show the world what it means to compete on behalf of a free society."²⁴

Should the U.S. decide to undertake a full boycott of the 2022 Olympics, however, it will no doubt have the effect of punishing American athletes—many of whom have trained to compete in the Olympics their entire lives. More limited boycotts, like the one suggested by Senator Romney, still permit athletes to compete without inadvertently granting legitimacy to Beijing or whitewashing the horrors the Chinese regime is committing against Uyghurs and other groups. A limited boycott, however, does not send nearly as strong of a message as postponing the Olympics in order to select a new host city. The embarrassment that Beijing would incur from having its host privilege revoked would not only be unprecedented, but would represent a critical junction for the world to decide whether to repeat the mistake of 1936.

The idea of a boycott has likely gained traction because it is something that the U.S. government can control. Most of the other more popular recommendations, such as pressuring NBC not to broadcast the Olympics,²⁵ pressuring Olympic sponsors to withdraw their support and advertising from the Olympics,²⁶ or encouraging journalists to cover China's human rights during the games,²⁷ rely on buy-in from civil society and the business community. In other words, something that democratic governments cannot control. But, just because something is *possible* (in this case, a boycott) does not mean that it will deliver the desired results, nor that it is the most effective means of responding to Beijing's abuses, which merit unequivocal condemnation.

So far, the IOC has stood firm in its selection of Beijing, asserting that host city choice "does not mean that the IOC agrees with the political structure, social circumstances or human rights standards in its country."²⁸ However, the IOC agreed in 2017 to begin requiring host cities to adhere to U.N. Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights—though these compliance measures will not take effect until the 2024 Olympics.²⁹

The IOC has long sought to divorce politics from sporting events, but that is impossible when the host country sees the Olympics as an inherently political opportunity.³⁰ While the IOC lacks direct legal accountability, it is clearly not immune to pressure. The decision to postpone the Tokyo Olympics is a case in point. While there is a great need to increase accountability for the IOC and its decision-making, a comprehensive overhaul of

accountability mechanisms is not a necessary precursor to a postponement of the Olympic games if international support to postpone and select a new host country is strong enough.

How the U.S. Should Proceed

A significant bipartisan consensus has developed around the need to hold the CCP accountable for a range of human rights violations, particularly the atrocities it is carrying out against Uyghurs in Xinjiang. There is not only domestic political will to do something, but also international coalitions forming to address abuses. The U.S. should mobilize those same coalitions to pressure the IOC to postpone the 2022 Olympics.

The Biden Administration currently does not have a public position on the Olympics. The pressure to develop a position will no doubt grow in the coming months. Congress and the Administration should consider the following, tiered approach:

- **Build an international, bipartisan coalition to pressure the IOC to postpone the 2022 Olympics for the purposes of selecting a new host city.** It is clear that China is not a suitable actor to host the 2022 Olympics. Its horrific human rights record should disqualify it. The IOC is already committing to making human rights a factor for consideration when selecting future hosts of the games starting in 2024. It is not too late to postpone the 2022 Olympics, given that the decision to postpone was made on an even shorter timeline during the pandemic last year. A coalition of actors, including those already acting in concert with the U.S. to hold China accountable for atrocities committed in Xinjiang, such as Canada, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom, in tandem with U.S. partners in Asia, such as Australia, India, Japan, and South Korea, among others, should generate momentum to pressure the IOC to postpone and select a new host for the next Winter Olympic Games.
- **Lead (if the IOC refuses to select a new host) a coalition that makes diplomatic participation in the Olympics contingent on accountability and transparency.** The coalition should request access to the camps in Xinjiang as a precondition for full participation in the 2022 Olympic games. If China refuses, the U.S. and other coalition members should organize a diplomatic boycott of the games and refuse to send any government officials beyond what may be required to facilitate participation and security of their athletes.

- **Improve accountability of the IOC.** At the very least, Congress should take steps to hold the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Committee (USOPC) accountable for the way it conducts itself in the context of the IOC. The USOPC serves as “the coordinating body for all Olympic-related activities in the United States.”³¹ In the past, the Carter Administration considered revoking the USOPC’s tax-deductible status,³² and others have suggested the possibility of revoking their federal charter.³³ Because the USOPC is federally chartered, it is privately funded, but oversight comes from the federal government.

Civil society and the business community should:

- **Protest on their own if the IOC refuses to move the Olympics.** There are examples of this in Olympic history, from the American athlete who broke tradition by refusing to dip the U.S. flag before the host country’s dignitaries (which has become U.S. custom) at the opening ceremony of the 1908 Summer Olympics in London,³⁴ which gave way to other traditions, like the “black power” raised fists at the 1968 Summer Olympics in Mexico City. The USOPC has already indicated that it will not punish American athletes who protest at the 2020 Olympics.³⁵ One can imagine the signal that could be sent by every national team refusing to dip its flag as it passes the box where China’s leaders are presiding.
- **Increase coverage of China’s human rights violations during the games if the IOC proceeds with Beijing as host.** Journalists who travel to China to cover the Olympics have a duty to speak on behalf of the Chinese people whose rights are being violated by their own government. Coverage of atrocities in Xinjiang, human rights violations in Tibet, and restrictions on freedom of speech, religion, and assembly should be front and center in their coverage.
- **Decide not to broadcast the Olympics or withdraw advertising support and other means of support if Olympics proceed with Beijing as host.** While it is ultimately a private company’s decision to participate (or not) in the Olympics, civil society pressure campaigns around the Olympics have historically gained traction. Many advertisers during the Olympics have also been accused of relying on supply chains tainted by Uyghur forced labor. While many businesses have responded well—weighing the risks of continuing to do business in

the region, upping the ante on efforts to vet supply chains for forced labor, and revised policies to ensure that third-party suppliers are not likewise tainting their supply chains—other businesses have not been so conscientious. The business community should weigh carefully any decisions to grant credence to the CCP’s propaganda during the Olympic games and consider the reputational risks of doing so.

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