

Abstract— This brief focuses on the United State’s role in the Diplomatic Boycotts of the 2022 Winter Beijing Olympics. It considers U.S. motivations, future responses, and alternatives for the U.S.

Keywords— U.S, China, Diplomatic Boycott, I.O.C, Uyghur

I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Tensions rise between the U.S. and China as a result of the U.S.-led diplomatic boycott of the 2022 Winter Beijing Olympics. This brief explains the reasoning behind the boycott, as well as the past efficacy of such practices. Finally, it analyzes the possibility of further action from the U.S. in response to the current state of relations.

II. OVERVIEW

In December of 2021, the [U.S. announced a diplomatic boycott](#) of the 2022 Winter Beijing Olympics. As such, President Biden’s administration will not send any official representation to the games.⁶ China has responded to the boycotts stating that they [violate the spirit of the Olympics](#), which have historically prohibited the inclusion of political agendas during the event.²¹

A. Pointed Summary

- U.K, Canada, and Australia have joined the U.S. in diplomatic boycotts of the 2022 Olympic Games
- China responds to U.S.-led boycotts with accusations of “political posturing”

B. Relevance

Other nations have joined the United States in the diplomatic boycott, [namely the U.K, Canada, and Australia](#).²⁸ Although athletes from the nations will participate in the games, the U.K, Canada, and Australia have announced that they will follow the U.S. by not sending any official representatives to

the games. With now four western nations announcing diplomatic boycotts against the Beijing Olympic Games, Chinese response has intensified, as China has called the boycotts ["political posturing" and a smear campaign](#).²⁸

III. HISTORY

The U.S. boycott of the Beijing Olympic Games has come as a result of Chinese repression of Muslim [Uyghurs](#), a predominantly Turkic-speaking ethnic group primarily from China’s northwestern region of Xinjiang.¹⁸ The offenses began as a result of the Chinese government launch of its [“Strike Hard Campaign against Violent Terrorism”](#) in May 2014.¹¹ Under the guise of counter-terrorism, Chinese officials have formed “re-education camps” for nearly 11 million Uyghurs in the region and detained [some eight hundred thousand to two million Uyghurs](#) and other Muslims, including ethnic Kazakhs and Uzbeks.¹⁸ While information about the camps is restricted and limited, detainees who have fled report [prison-like conditions](#), with cameras and microphones monitoring their every move, as well reports of torture, sleep deprivation, and sexual assault.¹⁸ Through the militant camps and nationwide campaigns against religious extremism, China is attempting to eliminate all forms of Islamic expression and practices, which has garnered international criticism.

A. Current Stances

Biden’s press secretary, Jen Psaki, has cited these [“crimes against humanity”](#) committed by the Chinese government in Xinjiang against the Uyghur Muslim population as the prime reason for the U.S. boycott.¹⁹ The U.S. has accused China of perpetrating genocide against the Uyghur population via forced re-education camps, imprisonment, forced labor, forced sterilization, and other human

rights abuses. Calls for the boycott were accentuated after Chinese tennis star [Peng Shuai](#) disappeared from the public eye after alleging that a senior Chinese official sexually abused her [Shuai has been spotted in public (according to Chinese state media journalists), and her safety and freedom are still in question at the moment]⁷. Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau also cited the current situation in Xinjiang as the reason for a diplomatic boycott. The boycott has been met with nearly universal support, however, Republican Senator Tom Cotton (R-AK) called for the Biden administration to [fully boycott the game](#).²⁶ However, a full boycott is unlikely, as precedent demonstrates that full boycotts undeservingly punish athletes and rarely lead to political victories.

China's foreign ministry spokesperson, Zhao Lijian, responded to the boycotts by stating that the U.S. is boycotting, "[out of ideological prejudice and based on lies and rumors](#)."² Zhao also stated that China would respond with 'resolute countermeasures', which can be interpreted as China threatening to either diplomatically or fully boycott the 2028 summer games held in Los Angeles. Zhao also stated the US should "stop politicizing sports." Thus, the boycott likely will not help U.S.-China tensions, which are already tense due to the [current and impending Taiwan crisis](#).³ However, as demonstrated in the past, boycotts don't have a profound effect on foreign policy.

B. Tried Policy

For instance, in response to the 2013 passing of the Russian "[gay propaganda](#)" law, which explicitly cracked down on LGBT imagery and relationships in Russia, Barack and Michelle Obama boycotted the 2014 Winter Olympics held in Sochi, Russia.¹² The Winter Olympics are not primarily attended by world leaders, but the Obama administration's boycott was significant. This is because as a form of protest against the bill, the Obama administration sent sports legend and LGBTQ activist Billie Jean King to the [closing ceremonies](#).²⁷ The Obama administration used the 2014 boycott to demonstrate their prioritization for the rights of LGBTQ individuals, but beyond that,

the effects were limited, as the "gay propaganda" law continues to be in place to this day.

More notably, in late 1979, the [Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan](#), which strongly hurt U.S.-Soviet relations.¹⁰ In response to the invasion, President Jimmy Carter threatened not to send the U.S. team to the 1980 [Moscow Summer Olympics](#) if the Soviets continued to occupy Afghanistan.¹⁷ Carter's main goal was to move the Olympics as he was afraid of a situation akin to the 1936 Berlin Games, where Adolf Hitler and the Nazis were able to gain a [copious amount of propaganda](#) while essentially banning Jewish athletes from the games, German or otherwise.⁴ Once the date of Carter's ultimatum for the Soviet Union to withdraw from Afghanistan (February 20th) came and went, Carter and his administration put pressure on the USOC (U.S. Olympic Committee) to vote on the USA's participation in the games. In response, in 1984 the Soviet Union was a no-show at the Los Angeles Games. The boycott itself was popular at the time with, according to one Gallup Poll, two-thirds of the nation supporting the boycott. However, the boycott itself was unsuccessful in its goals; the games went as planned in Moscow (With the USSR scoring a propaganda victory as it was easily able to sweep the medal count), and the Soviet Union stayed in Afghanistan until 1989.

IV. POLICY PROBLEM

A. Nonpartisan Reasoning

Unlike the full Moscow boycott in 1980, current diplomatic boycotts are unlikely to halt expected broadcast and procession of the Games. Although government officials will be precluded from attending, Olympic athletes — even those in protest — have [said](#) they still plan to compete.¹⁹ [Rule 50](#) of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) also forbids political protest during the events. Nevertheless, the boycott certainly undermines the Olympics' potential to bring international prestige to China amid the pandemic. Zhiqun Zhu, a professor of political science at Bucknell University, [summarizes](#) the boycott as ultimately "more symbolic than substantial".¹⁵

B. Stakeholders

Meanwhile, China has accused the US of using the Olympics for “political manipulation” and warned of [countermeasures](#).²³ Scott Kennedy, a China expert at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, [believes](#) that Beijing could restrict bilateral dialogue, delay visas, or limit the presence of journalists at the Olympics.²³ China’s foreign ministry has already exchanged heated rhetoric with the U.S., [stating](#) that “no one cares whether they [the politicians] come or not.”²⁵ Further, Chen Weihua of a Chinese state media publication has [called](#) for China to boycott the Los Angeles 2028 Summer Olympics. Overall, while having no substantial impact on the Games or China’s human rights abuses, the boycott risks raising tensions between the United States and China.¹⁹

V. POLICY OPTIONS

While Chinese representatives have dismissed the move as “[irrelevant](#),” other countries (i.e., New Zealand, Canada, etc.) have followed the U.S.’ lead in announcing they would not send delegations to the games. A powerful signal no doubt, the move is ultimately just that—a signal, with no tangible impact on the ability for China to hold the games. There are a number of alternatives, however, that would have such an impact:

- 1) Relocation. In July 2021, an effort led by Senator Markley and Rep. McGovern attempted to persuade the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to postpone and relocate the Olympics “[if the host government \[did\] not end its ‘egregious human rights abuses.’](#)”²⁴ As late as that August, [John Ratcliffe](#), former Director of National Intelligence, was calling on the IOC to relocate the games for China’s alleged role in the COVID-19 pandemic.²⁰ Such efforts, however, have been largely unsuccessful, and the Biden administration’s announcement of its diplomatic boycott signal a begrudging acceptance that the

games will be held in Beijing. Of the many paths forward, relocation was the most radical – causing a severe economic loss for China.

- 2) Sponsorships. With the 2016 Rio de Janeiro games generating “[848 million U.S. dollars in sponsorship revenues](#),” the refusal of typical Olympic sponsors would dampen profitability outlooks for the 2022 Beijing games.¹⁶ To China’s pleasure, such a move has not occurred, as [Omega](#), [Coca-Cola](#), and others move forward with their sponsorship programs.^{13,1}
- 3) Full Boycott. The Biden administration has remained consistent that “[the athletes of Team USA have \[their\] full support](#),” only ever genuinely considering a diplomatic boycott. And for good reason, because while a full boycott would certainly tangibly impact the validity of the games, it would be a dangerous retelling of history.⁹ Of the six past boycotts of Olympic games, the U.S. has been party to one – the 1980 games held in Moscow. A coalition of “[more than 60 nations](#)” refused to compete in the games following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and this Cold War-era sentiment is not one the Biden administration should readily embrace.¹⁴

But the Olympics is far from the only way for the U.S. to condemn Chinese human rights abuses, and attempts by the Biden administration to frame them as such are done [to find an acceptable middle ground](#). It seems the Biden administration has found a way to evade accusations of silence on issues of human rights without resorting to the more nuclear options of forced relocation or full boycotts. Nevertheless, the impact is temporary, as “[Olympic boycotts \[historically\] tend not to work](#)” and “[\[have\] little geopolitical impact](#).”⁸

VI. CONCLUSIONS

In electing to send athletes but not diplomats, the U.S. is striking a political compromise between silence on China’s human

rights abuses and overly-provocative measures. While the decision had largely bipartisan support at home, some, most notably being Senator Tom Cotton, claim the diplomatic boycott is a “[“half measure”](#)” that fails to adequately respond to China’s alleged genocidal actions.⁵

The battle over human rights abuses in Xinjiang will not be won over swimming pools and track events. With the Biden administration [implementing sweeping sanctions](#) on China for their alleged actions of genocide against Uighurs in Xinjiang, what was once a back-channeled issue dormant to the public will come center stage, and the U.S. and its greatest trading partner are now staged to go blow-for-economic-blow.²²

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