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U.S. Policy Options for the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics

THE ISSUE

The 2022 Winter Olympics are scheduled to take place in Beijing—despite the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP's) well-documented and gross human rights violations. Over the past few years, the CCP has carried out ongoing genocide and crimes against humanity against its Uyghur Muslim population, undermined democracy in Hong Kong, and systematically covered up critical information about the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the gravity of these violations, many in the U.S. and around the globe are considering how to respond to the International Olympic Committee's (IOC's) selection of China as host of the 2022 Winter games.

HOW HAS THE U.S. RESPONDED TO PROBLEMATIC OLYMPICS IN THE PAST?

The U.S. response to the selection of problematic Olympics hosts has varied:

- **Berlin Summer Olympics, 1936.** When the Nazi regime was selected to host the Olympics in 1936, the U.S. participated without reservation, giving the impression that the U.S. did not care about the persecution of European Jews.

- **Moscow Summer Olympics, 1980.** In contrast, the U.S. fully boycotted the 1980 Olympics held in Moscow in protest of the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan. The boycott did not result in the desired policy outcome—the Soviet Union's withdrawal from Afghanistan—until 10 years later. The boycott was deemed an ineffective diplomatic maneuver that unduly punished American athletes whose Olympic dreams were dashed.

- **Beijing Summer Olympics, 2008.** In 2008, when Beijing was selected to host the Olympics the first time, severe human rights violations accompanied its host tenure, including the eviction of 1.5 million Beijing residents from their homes to clear space for Olympic facilities, the exploitation of migrant workers forced to build Olympic infrastructure, and the extra-judicial imprisonment of those who raised concerns over the violations.

SHOULD THE U.S. BOYCOTT THE 2022 OLYMPICS?

- **In short, no.** Whenever concerns over human rights arise, and despite its ineffectiveness during the Moscow 1980 Olympics, the international community defaults to the idea of a boycott. The desire to act, and not grant undue credence to the Nazi regime, is a good impulse.

- **Exploring alternatives.** However, there are other options—options that do not punish American athletes, and also do not fail to hold human rights violators accountable. The U.S. should consider and explore policy options beyond a boycott, especially given the historical failure of boycotts to generate the desired policy outcome.

WHAT ARE THE STRONGEST U.S. RESPONSES TO BEIJING'S SELECTION AS HOST OF THE 2022 WINTER OLYMPICS?

- **The IOC's response to the Tokyo 2020 Olympics.** In addition to problematic hosts, the 2020 Tokyo Olympics were postponed in the midst of the pandemic to stop the spread of COVID-19. It is clear that the IOC is able to respond with agility in the face of severe international concern. The decision to postpone the 2020 Olympics to 2021 was made in March 2020, just four months before the Games were to be held in July.

- **Postpone and move.** The most practical response is to postpone and move the 2022 Olympics. The U.S., in concert with allies around the globe, should press the IOC to postpone the Olympics for the purposes of selecting a new host country. Given the Biden Administration's commitment to coordinating U.S. policy with allies, this would be an opportunity to present a strong, unified, global stand against Beijing's egregious human rights record. Moving and postponing the games would hold Beijing responsible for its violations without punishing athletes.

- **The backup plan: a diplomatic boycott.** If, and only if, the U.S. and its coalition of allies are unable to postpone and move the Games, should the same coalition pursue an alternative diplomatic boycott where participants send only government officials to the extent necessary to guarantee the safety of athletes participating in the Olympics.

- **Make diplomatic participation contingent on transparency.** The coalition should press for access to political re-education camps in Xinjiang as a precondition to full diplomatic participation in the 2022 Olympics if still held in Beijing.

- **Athletes' solidarity with the Chinese people.** If athletes participate under a diplomatic boycott, they should look to historic examples of Olympic protests as inspiration to show their solidarity with those suffering under the CCP. Some examples include refusing the traditional flag dip to the host country's government representatives during the opening ceremonies of the 1908 London Summer Olympics, and the "black power" raised fists at the 1968 Mexico City Summer Olympics. Such moves would send a powerful message to the CCP and to the people of China that the international community is on their side.