



CHINA AND THE 2022 OLYMPICS

February Report



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Introduction

The Olympics are a major sporting event that occurs every four years, in both a summer and winter setting, consisting of multiple sporting events with athletes from all over the globe. The recent 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing, China is the most recent iteration of this international sporting event that receives significant political and media attention. However, this last month has demonstrated the conflicting dynamics that sporting events face in states that are confronted with human rights violations, such as the current situation in China.

Aim of the Report

The high-profile nature of the Olympic Winter games coupled with the infamous track record of Human rights violations in China and high levels of censorship have facilitated the China team's February report. Concretely, the objective of this article is to examine and determine the manner and impact in which the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing have had on issues such as censorship, freedom of the press, mass surveillance, human rights, and social justice. The report intends to achieve this by examining issues and developments in the geographical region of China during a period ranging from the 4th to the 20th February to identify clear instances of the aforementioned issues as well as their impact and effect on Chinese society and the international community.

The report systematically examines the symbolism and importance of the recent winter games to the image building goals of the Chinese regime and the inherent domestic juxtapositions that relate a starkly different reality and perception, identifying and analyzing instances of censorship, the nature of the censored content and the impact of the recent western diplomatic boycott. The report concludes with a summarization and conclusive statement on the current state of human rights and freedom of speech in China amongst the backdrop of the 2022 winter games.

China's International Ambition and Domestic Juxtaposition



Winter Olympics Games Entrance. @Shinnosuke Ando / Unsplash, 2022

3.1. The Winter games: a juxtaposition

The Olympic games were meant to be the stage on which China could project its increasing importance as an economic and normative actor in the international system. National Pride is the main reason behind the hard work the states invest in for the Olympics, as the competition is not only between athletes and champions but also across national lines. The hosting countries invest billions in the games in order for them to raise the bar higher every year. In fact, we can find three major categories of costs, with the first comprising of general infrastructures such as transportation and housing to accommodate athletes and fans; the second relating to constructing specific sports infrastructure required for competition venues; and the third and final aspect comprising of operational costs, including general administration as well as the opening and closing ceremony and security. China didn't mention all of these costs in the budget of the Olympics, claiming that they would have spent on the infrastructure even if the Olympics had not taken place in Beijing. A notion that has since been criticized as expenditure that could have been used constructively in another manner. (Teh and Stonington, 2022, Insider)

This year, for Beijing, the ability to host the Winter Olympics is worth the financial expenditure as a prestige project, aimed at “Most important of all to China's leader, Xi Jinping, the Olympics are a chance to demonstrate to the world his country's unity and confidence under his leadership.” (Brasher, 2022, New York Times)

Unfortunately, behind all this urge to project a carefully cultivated image of a powerful and modern state, there are still clear and explicit instances of human rights violations happening behind the scenes on a daily basis.

3.2A harsh reality

There are harsh realities that still manifest under this image projection mentioned behind the hard work invested by the Chinese authority to perfect their image and stand as a leading country economically and from a touristic point of view lies violations of all kinds. The Olympics are only benefiting the state and the leaders but are keeping the “spotlight” off and directed away from the realities that the Chinese population faces.

One thing has become certain, “the genocide against Uyghurs doesn't stop” for the Olympics. That is why, many Uyghurs living outside China, that have been trying to stay in contact with their family members, called for the boycott of the Olympics amidst everything happening in Xinjiang. Zumretay Arkin, an Uyghur Muslim who is originally from China and whose family is still in the province of Xinjiang, has been unable to contact them for years. “While China's authoritarian government tries to keep attention focused squarely on the Winter Olympics in Beijing, Arkin and other activists want to make sure the world doesn't forget about the grim reality for the country's Muslims.” (Ott, 2022, CBS news).

On another hand, the Chinese leaders have never confessed about the violations and crimes against humanity that they were perpetrating and kept denying all the international accusations about genocides, discrimination, violations and abuses against Uyghurs and other Muslims. They never addressed the issue from the point of view of human rights to which the Uyghurs are entitled,, always stating that the concentration camps are merely centers for education, job training, and here to combat extremism within the Uyghur community, in Xinjiang. In this regard, many countries decided to boycott the Olympics as diplomatic pressure.

For example, the Biden administration declared a “diplomatic boycott” for the Winter Games in Beijing, so U.S. athletes and their teams took part, but no official U.S. government representatives were there.



American protests in front of the white house condemning the Uyghur Genocide.
@ Kuzzet Altay / Unsplash, 2022

The Olympics taking place regardless of everything seems to Zumretay Arkin as if the international community is telling these minorities that they are aware they are suffering but will focus on it as soon as the Olympics end, so they can 'get back to their genocide'. (Haley Ott, 2022, CBS news).

"It's just something horrible to say to an entire ethnic group and an entire people — that their genocide doesn't matter in the context of the Games," (Haley Ott, 2022, CBS news). Many countries decided to have the same position as the United States such as Canada, Denmark, Belgium, Austria, Australia, Japan, Netherlands and some more. This was an important step towards the "Diplomatic boycott" the civil society and activists were asking for, but it was in no way enough regarding everything happening in Xinjiang.

It is clear that the diplomatic boycotting of the games was a decision taken by liberal democracies, but many other leaders, such as Putin, decided to attend the games and said countries taking a human rights stand are 'wrong'. (Ingle, 2022, The Guardian).

China got approval from many states for the work it did to the winter games and all the infrastructure that got in place. According to human right activists, the media outlets covered the event, the athletes were praised, and, the genocide "was put on hold" and "China Had Uyghur Athlete Be Olympic Torchbearer To Distract From Genocide". (Karanth, 2022, Huffpost).

Censorship in the Context of the 2022 Winter Olympics



A skier covers her mouth in tape before the race.
@ Badiuaco / Human Rights Watch, 2021

Technology has become the fundamental key in China's strategy to ensure control and surveillance over citizens since the coronavirus pandemic. However, such measures have been adopted, and somehow overused, during the Games as well, producing significant controversy and concern about data breaches and free speech-related issues.

The Chinese dissident artist and rights activist, Badiucao, clearly forewarned people of the incoming scenario, and one of his works was meant to depict the Chinese government's attempt to prevent athletes from speaking out against human rights atrocities in China (Worden, 2022).

In this regard, the MY2022 app is a prime example of the pervasiveness of the government's censorship apparatus. The app has been mandatory for all attendees of the event, including athletes, reporters, members of the press, as well as audience members and stakeholders, who had to download MY2022 fourteen days before their departure for China. Besides the collection of medical information and passport details, the multi-purpose app also provided for a large censorship keyword list, approximately 2,442 keywords such as "Xi Jinping", "The Holy Quran", "Dalai Lama", as much as a feature to signal politically "sensitive" matters (Knockel, 2022).

4.1. Main targets for censorship in the Olympic Village

As far as censorship and surveillance are concerned, China's aim to carefully tailor its global reputation and cover-up its responsibilities for oppressing the Tibetan people, committing the Uyghur genocide, and dismantling the Hong Kong democracy in the world's eyes, led the government to impose strict measures within the Olympic Village as well, directly involving athletes and reporters.

By way of illustration, Beijing 2022 organisers selected Dinigeer Yilamujiang, an Uyghur skier, to light the Olympic Cauldron during Friday night's opening ceremonies. Besides the general dismay that emerged from this controversial choice, after the ceremony, as much as after the competition, Yilamujiang exited through a separate aisle, without passing through the mixed zone where she could be interviewed by journalists. Instead, she only granted an interview to the Chinese state broadcaster, during which she expressed gratitude for being selected as a torchbearer for the ceremony (Kilgore & Shepherd, 2022).

During the same ceremony Sjoerd den Daas, a Dutch reporter, was forcefully dragged away by the Chinese security officers while he was reporting live to the Dutch public broadcaster NOS, on February 4th, 2022. Daas's camera was consequently shut off and his equipment was almost confiscated by the Chinese police (O'Neill, 2022). Even though the International Olympic Committee (IOC) has repeatedly described the incident as an "isolated event", the reporter has declined the IOC statement, affirming that such episodes were becoming commonplace within and around the context of the 2022 Winter Olympics.

4.2. The role of the International Olympic Committee

Within the context of the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing, the International Olympic Committee, the leading authority organising the Games, played a very controversial role. Even though several countries often called for a diplomatic boycott of the Games, the IOC's decision to stage the Olympics in Beijing referred to the aim of celebrating humanity and safeguarding peaceful competitions while remaining politically neutral, as President Thomas Bach repeatedly asserted (Allen-Ebrahimian & Baker, 2022). However, IOC's attitude to turn a blind eye to all ongoing contentions produced significant disdain among the international community.

As far as neutrality is concerned, debates emerged around Rule 50 of the Olympic Charter, which concerns demonstrations and propaganda, stating that "No kind of demonstration or political, religious, or racial propaganda is permitted in any Olympic sites, venues or other areas" (International Olympic Committee, 2021, p. 95). Nevertheless, some have criticised the IOC implementation of Rule 50 to the 2022 Games for being a silent justification and contribution to the Chinese aim to achieve the censorship of athletes and facilitating the cover-up of its own violations.

Furthermore, the IOC has been broadly criticised for its faint response to the case of Peng Shuai, a Chinese tennis star and three-time Olympian, that has been at the centre of international attention and concern. The athlete had disappeared for weeks after she accused China's former vice-premier Zhang Gaoli of sexual assault, in a post on Weibo, a Chinese social media platform. Shuai's suspicious disappearance, as much as the government's effort to demonstrate that nothing had happened by immediately taking down her Weibo post and suspending web searches referring to her case, has raised growing concern (Bansinath, 2022).

In this regard, several have called on the IOC to use its authority to ensure Peng's safety, but little has been done. Even though the IOC President met with the tennis star three times, no public mention was made of Peng's allegations nor her reason not to compete, instead, the IOC decided to handle the case with "quiet diplomacy", not publicly contributing to the furor over the situation (Keh, 2022). Apparently, the IOC's intent to directly intervene to ensure the well-being of Peng has not been successful, and it has generated more questions than answers.

The Diplomatic Boycott of Western Democracies



Tibetans calling for the boycott of the 2022 Beijing Games.
@Norbu Gyachung / Unsplash, 2022.

Following the several massive human rights violations perpetrated by the Chinese government against Uyghurs, Tibetans, among other ethnic and religious groups, more than 200 organisations and several countries opted to announce a diplomatic boycott of the 2022 Games. In this regard, most democratic government officials have decided not to attend the Winter Olympics while condemning China's human rights record.

Unlike the Moscow and Los Angeles Games, which occurred in 1980 and 1984 respectively, where hundreds of athletes did not compete because of political concerns, the 2022 Beijing Games did not prevent athletes from participating in the competition (Mather, 2022). With regards to athletes' defiance, even though several competitors spoke up against China, a growing agreement increased about not supporting a "sporting boycott", since several athletes had lost their only chance to compete in the 1980s Olympics.

5.1. A "symbolic" boycott

Among the countries that announced the diplomatic boycott in Beijing, led by the United States, and joined by the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, Lithuania, Denmark, and New Zealand, emblematic is the case of India, the world's most populous democracy.

Indeed, differently from other countries, India announced a last-minute boycott after seeing images of the People's Liberation Army Qi Fabao selected as a torchbearer at the Ceremony. Qi Fabao is celebrated by the Chinese government as a hero since he fought in the bloody 2020 India-China conflict at a disputed frontier in the Himalayan region. Almost 20 Indian soldiers lost their lives in the conflict, and four were casualties among the People's Liberation Army. India has interpreted Fabao's involvement within the context of the Olympics as an inappropriate political move (McCarthy & Mogul, 2022).

Notwithstanding the governments' attempt to diplomatically boycott the 2022 Games, these symbolic actions will most likely have no impact on the Olympic context nor on China's domestic policies. Indeed, China almost dismissed certain governments' stand, accusing the United States, Britain, and Australia of having used the Games to advance political objectives, violating the Olympic spirit (Vasavda, 2022). The Chinese Embassy in Washington stated that, "Politicians calling for boycott #2022BeijingOlympics are doing so for their own political interests and posturing. In fact, no one would care about whether these people come or not, and it has no impact whatsoever on the #Beijing2022 to be successfully held" (Pengyu, 2021).

Furthermore, some have broadly criticised the diplomatic boycott announced by democratic States, since it turned out to be a meaningless action which, instead, did not play any role in reducing China-led crimes against humanity. In this regard, Sebastian Coe, World Athletics President stated that "claiming non-engagement between Government officials rarely bears fruit" (Berkeley, 2021).

5.2. Internal protests

Around the context of the 2022 Olympics, a significant resistance emerged also from people who are directly oppressed and abused by the Chinese domestic policies, to protest against the government even with little media coverage compared to Western outlets.

By way of illustration, a Hong Kong activist, Koo Sze-yiu, was detained ahead of the Winter Olympics after planning to demonstrate on February 4th with the aim of reporting unlawful cases of imprisonment in Hong Kong (Cheung, 2022). Unfortunately, Koo Sze-yiu's case shows how hard it is for citizens to protest and disagree in China, which repeatedly violates the freedom of speech, expression, opinion, and assembly.

For this reason, often the only chance for people to raise their voice requires protesting outside their country, as it happened in Switzerland a day before the 2022 Games' opening ceremony, when approximately 500 Tibetans carrying flags marched before the International Olympic Committee building, demonstrating against Beijing hosting the Olympics (Millard, 2022).

Conclusion

The Winter Olympics continues to demonstrate the underlying domestic policies that the Chinese regime are implementing as a means of pursuing an international and foreign-orientated policy. Thereby effectively oppressing and undermining its domestic population and severely limiting human rights and freedom of speech in the state to reduce sedition and criticism.

Consequently, the Winter Olympics 2022 has become another platform on which the Chinese regime has been able to pursue an agenda of legitimization — one that has however over the course of its run been able to demonstrate cases of the hypocrisy of the regime and the inherent oppressive policies that it pursues.

The Olympics were clearly the “way out” for the Chinese authorities. They tried to show a “picture perfect” of their regime, which is contradictory to everything they have been doing for years. The diplomatic boycott put in place maybe did not have a big impact but it was a message sent to the leaders to know that the international community is witnessing what is happening.

The winter games, a world celebration, happened in the same exact place where violations are taking place, its systematic manipulation has placed human rights and the freedom of speech in a dangerous position by establishing a precedent that threatens their protection so more severe sanctions must be put in place to stop the crimes against humanity perpetrated against minorities in China, not only for a short period of time.

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