

Faster, Higher, Stronger:

China's 2022 Coronation Plan and the Need to Boycott the Beijing Games

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Introduction

In February 2022, the People's Republic of China (PRC) will host the Winter Olympics. The United States and its democratic allies across the globe are scheduled to send athletic and diplomatic delegations. They are scheduled to do so despite the fact that Beijing is in the process of conducting a deliberate genocide against a religious minority group and that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has a track record of using the Olympic Games as an excuse to tighten repression and control at home. They plan to do so despite the fact that Beijing treats the Olympic Games as a platform through which to propel the CCP's agenda internationally, acquire international resources and prestige, and demonstrate the superiority of China's particular socialist, authoritarian system.

It has been four years since the US National Security Strategy explicitly identified China as a competitor to the United States.¹ The CCP has gone out of its way since then to prove the point. US allies and partners increasingly recognize Beijing's threat to democracy and human rights. Yet all parties still intend to pray at the altar of the CCP for the XXIV Olympic Winter Games.

Attending the 2022 Beijing Games will constitute an implicit endorsement of China's model and global offensive. It will suggest that the United States will play ball, literally and figuratively, as the CCP undermines global norms and stability – and brazenly abuses human rights at home. Supporting these games will also strengthen Beijing's hand: China uses the Olympics as an opportunity to attract international resources and enhance international influence. Beijing has also historically used the Olympics as an opportunity to expand domestic surveillance, repression, and control. Participation in the Beijing Games does not only make the US complicit and signal a lack of competitive will. It also means idly standing by in a way that forfeits a strategic opportunity to convey values-based leadership in the face of CCP atrocities.

Chinese strategic discourse on the Olympics underlines the stakes. Official and academic Chinese commentary on the 2008 Games presented them as a turning point in China's international status – a source of new international influence, new evidence for the “superiority of China's socialist model,” and proof of US inability to challenge China's rise. Discussion in advance of the 2022 Games is more aggressive. A survey of credible Chinese sources on the strategic value of the Olympics suggests that Beijing sees the Winter Olympics as a chance to assert global superiority, not just parity. The upcoming Games are consistently framed in the context of the US-China contest. And where the 2008 Olympics were described as auguring a new era of multipolarity, the 2022 Olympics are projected to mark the arrival of a China-led world order.

¹ “National Security Strategy of the United States,” December 2017, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

A Burnished National Image

An entire corpus of Chinese analysis, commentary, and media discussion revolves around the international status, and power, that the CCP derived from the 2008 games.² All focus on the same basic point. The 2008 Olympic Games granted China new national prestige – and, with it, international influence. Much of the discussion also suggests that the Beijing Olympics bolstered the CCP’s ability to exert control at home, acquire foreign resources, and shape the global environment in its interests.

Xinhua News summed this up in terms of an increase in comprehensive national power: “The Beijing Olympics show that China’s comprehensive national power is growing.”³ A report published by the National Planning Office of Philosophy and Social Science on preparations for the 2008 games struck a similar note: “The Games are a symbol of a country’s international status and prestige, comprehensive national power, and economic development level. They are also a rare opportunity to establish a country’s international image.”⁴

Some of China’s most elite scholars describe this boost in international status as one of the core ambitions of the 2008 Olympics. In September 2008, *World Knowledge* interviewed Yan Xuetong, Dean of the Institute of International Relations at Tsinghua University; Wang Yizhou, Associate Dean of the School of International Studies at Peking University; and Jin Canrong, Associate Dean with the School of International Studies at Renmin University of China, among others, about “international issues in China’s post-Olympics status.”⁵ In that interview, the scholars were asked to describe the core goals of the 2008 Olympics. Yan Xuetong cited “the rise of the nation and improvement in China’s international status,” as well as the “elimination of the ‘China threat theory.’” Wang Yizhou, Associate Dean of the School of International Studies at Peking University, pointed to “demonstrating the increase in overall national

² Yang Yifan’s 2009 “The Impact of the Beijing Olympics on the change of China’s international status,” published in *Strategic Thinking of Cultural Modernization*, found that “as an important platform to showcase China’s development achievements... the successful hosting of the Beijing Olympics has had an important impact...on China’s international status.” (Yang Yifan, “北京奥运会对于中国国际地位变化的影响 [The Impact of the Beijing Olympics on the Change of China’s International Status],” *Strategic Thinking of Cultural Modernization*, 2009.) Xu Shan and Kang Junwen published a 2010 article in *Neijing Technology* called “the impact of the 2008 Olympic Games on the promotion of China’s international status,” finding that “The process of organizing and hosting the Olympics has given China the opportunity to promote, display, and develop its economy, culture, infrastructure construction, and environment.” (Xu Shan, Kang Junwen, “2008 年奥运会对提升中国国际地位的影响 [The Impact of the 2008 Olympic Games on the Promotion of China’s International Status],” *Neijing Technology*, 2010.)

³ 海外媒体：北京奥运会显示中国综合国力日益强大 [Overseas media: The Beijing Olympics shows that China’s comprehensive national strength is growing stronger], *Xinhua News*, August 13, 2008.

⁴ Yang Hua, “‘2008 年北京奥林匹克运动会我国备战、参赛若干重大问题研究’进展情况综述 [Summary of the Progress of ‘Study on Some Major Issues of China’s Preparation and Participation for the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games’],” National Planning Office of Philosophy and Social Science, Accessed September 13, 2021.

⁵ “知名国际问题专家解读奥运后中国地位 [Well-Known Experts on International Issues Interpret China’s Post-Olympics Status],” *World Knowledge*, September 8, 2008.

strength.” (Wang also called the Games “China’s coming-of-age ceremony:” “The international community recognizes China’s overall strength.”)⁶

Jin Canrong, Associate Dean with the School of International Studies at Renmin University of China, spelled out some of the implications of this coming-of-age. He suggested that with a burnished international image, Beijing would better be able to promote its international agenda: “After the Olympics,” he explained, China’s new “influence will gradually unfold....After the Olympics, China will definitely be more integrated into the international society...and assume more responsibilities.”⁷

Others elaborate on that point, describing the concrete competitive advantages that China’s post-Olympics international recognition provided... In a 2009 article on China’s post-Olympics “national image” in the *Journal of the University of International Relations*, Zhang Li of Renmin University and Nan Pusui of Yuncheng University explain the relationship between national image and international relations – and therefore the implications of China’s Olympic boost.⁸ They argued that “the international image of a country is inseparable from its national and overall strength,” outlining a set of key points:

First, the international image of a country affects its activity space and influence over the international political arena. Second, the international image of a country directly determines its weight and ability to play a role in international exchanges. A country without a reputation will be isolated internationally. Third, the financing capacity of a country on the international market is inseparable from the country’s international image – and international image will also affect the country’s ability to expand foreign trade...It can therefore be seen that the international image is of great significance to a country...[And] after the Beijing Olympics, China’s international image has greatly improved.⁹

Zhang and Nan also pointed to additional, more tactical advantages that Beijing derived from hosting the Olympics. They explain that China honed its ability to “use foreign media for external communication:”

The media shaping a country’s international image is a concrete manifestation of that country’s influence on others – or an extension of that country’s exercise of power over other countries. Therefore, it is a better strategy to use foreign media, especially media

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid. The *2008 China International Status Report* published by the People’s Publishing House in 2008 described a series of “brilliant achievements” in the previous decade of Chinese international policy that lumped the Olympic Games in with encouraging the international community to “curb Taiwan independence.” (Huang Renwei, 2008 中国国际地位报告 [2008 China International Status Report], People’s Publishing House, 2008.)

⁸ Zhang Li and Nan Pusui, 北京奥运会后的中国国际形象分析 [Analysis of China’s International Image after the Beijing Olympics], *Journal of the University of International Relations*, 2009.

⁹ Ibid.

with a monopoly and authority in the world, to establish the international image. Take the Beijing Olympic Games as an example...”¹⁰

They proceed to describe the degree to which foreign media, and Beijing’s ability to ensure positive coverage, “played an important role in shaping China’s image” during the Olympics. They further suggest that in the process, Beijing learned a key lesson about leveraging media outlets’ profit seeking motives and corporate structures:

If you want to make full use of foreign media to spread the image of your country, you must first do a good job with Western media reporters...Foreign media is, at its base, a kind of commercial organization. Its ultimate goal is to make money. We can restrict and influence foreign mainstream media through the hidden rules of business – or influence the decision-making level of these media companies by purchasing shares in them. In addition, since foreign media, and especially Western media, tend to be more open and free, China can actively participate, expressing its own views and positions, and therefore establish its own international image.¹¹

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

Attracting International Resources

In addition to strengthening its reputation in the global arena, the 2008 Olympics allowed Beijing to acquire valuable international resources. For example, as part of its preparations for the Olympics, China launched a series of international technology partnerships. These included partnerships with major private sector players (e.g., Samsung, Visa, and Microsoft), as well as with foreign government and multinational entities. They provided Beijing access to advanced, in many cases security-relevant, technologies.

Take, for example, “digital Olympics” cooperation between China and the European Union. In April 2003, China’s Ministry of Science and Technology and the European Commission announced that Europe would “inject hundreds of millions of euros of funds for digital Olympic cooperation projects into the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games,” as well as the establishment of a China-Europe Digital Olympics Working Group. the China-Europe Digital Olympics Working Group, jointly established by China’s Ministry of Science and Technology and the European Commission in April 2003.¹² Described as a platform for “China-EU digital Olympics cooperation,” the group’s scope included cooperation on information security, e-commerce, smart cards, logistics, traffic management, and satellite technologies.¹³ Its sub-projects included an IPv6 EU-China Digital Olympics Project involving cooperation between the Institute for Network Sciences and Cyberspace of Tsinghua University and France Telecom’s Beijing R&D Center, in which they cooperated to establish an IPv6-based Olympic information management network and service platform.¹⁴ This is just one example of Beijing’s ability to seize a window of opportunity that may come along only once every four years.

¹² Zhu Feina, “中欧就北京 2008 奥运开展合作 [China and Europe cooperate on Beijing 2008 Olympic Games],” *China Economic Times*, April 2003.

¹³ 中欧启动数字奥运科技合作 [China and Europe Launch Digital Olympic Technology Cooperation], Ministry of Science and Technology, April 2003; “IST-001970 ECOSPLAN Project,” China-EU Digital Olympics Strategic Framework Cooperation Project, September 23, 2004.

¹⁴ 重大国际合作项目 [Major International Projects], Tsinghua University Institute for Network Sciences and Cyberspace, Accessed September 13, 2021.

Strengthening Government Control

Beijing also used the games as an opportunity to increase repression and government control at home. The CCP's 2008 preparations saw an acute, and well-documented, increase in restrictions on freedom of speech and expression. They also saw labor abuses and forced evictions in service of large-scale mobilization and construction. For example, *Human Rights Watch* found that China forcibly evicted citizens in order to build Olympics-related infrastructure and forced migrant workers out of the city in advance of the Games. China also intensified control over domestic and foreign media and imprisoned Chinese citizens who raised concerns about Olympics-related human rights abuses.¹⁵

The CCP also dramatically expanded its surveillance network in Beijing and across China in concert with the Olympic Games, granting it unprecedented information on, and control over, its citizens. Much of the new surveillance infrastructure targeted the Uyghur minority, today victims of a deliberate genocide at the hands of the People's Republic of China. A forward-looking 2005 article in *National People's University* but Ren Hai of the Research Institute of the State Sports General Administration alludes to this, if in sugarcoated terms. Ren explains that the 2008 Games would not only "enhance China's international reputation," but also "strengthen national identity, enhance social cohesions, enhance social integration capabilities...and enhance the government's administrative capabilities."¹⁶

¹⁵ "China: Olympics Harm Key Human Rights," Human Rights Watch, August 6, 2008. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2008/08/06/china-olympics-harm-key-human-rights>

¹⁶ See: Edward Wong and Keith Bradsher, "China Orders Highest Alert for Olympics," *The New York Times*, August 4, 2008. <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/04/sports/olympics/04china.html>

A Zero-Sum Competitive Context

Chinese discourse places the Olympic dividend in the framework of a zero-sum international competition. Beijing's strength did not simply rise in 2008. It rose relative to that of other countries, within a model geared toward primacy. For example, *The Study on the 2008 Olympic Games' Promotion of China's International Status and Prestige*, a research project funded by China's National Social Science Fund and led by the National Philosophy and Social Sciences Planning Office, explains that the 2008 Games not only developed a "political platform," accelerated "China's economic development," and improved the "international public opinion," but also "demonstrated the *superiority* of the socialist system" (emphasis added) globally.

Similarly, Ren argued in his 2005 article that in successfully hosting the Olympics, Beijing would prove the strength and longevity of its socialist system – despite assault from the West:

The collapse of the Soviet Union at the end of the 20th century greatly weakened the power of socialism in contemporary international society...Some hostile forces in the world have predicted that China's political system will follow the path of the Soviet Union and collapse....The rapid rise of China has exceeded the expectations of all anti-China forces in the world...The socialist political system under the leadership of the CCP is the most prominent feature that distinguishes the Beijing Olympics from those of any other country....Our friends hope that China will use this Olympics to further determine its own position in the international arena, expand its influence, gain more say in international affairs, and play a greater role, while hostile forces are trying to use these Olympics to make China implement the changes they want.¹⁷

Additional discussion suggests that such competitive framings are mainstream, as is the attribution of Beijing's success to its centralized system. In a 2005 report on China's Olympics preparations, the Vice Chairman of the Chinese Olympic Committee placed the whole endeavor in a military context:

The two powers of the United States and Russia have shifted their targeting to China, and both countries have increased their preparations for war...This has created invisible and strong pressure on China's competitive preparations. We must calmly face this, firmly gasp the changes, and take the initiative in the competitive landscape...We must earnestly strengthen ideological and political work so that it can truly become the lifeline of war preparations.

Others attribute China's perceived superiority to the government's centralization -- to Beijing's ability to determine how, where, and what resources, including people, move within its system. In a 2008 interview, Jin Canrong was asked what specifically about China's model impressed the

¹⁷ Ren also argued that the Olympics would provide an invaluable opportunity to dispel the "China threat theory," therefore providing China with the "peace and development" that it needed in order to continue its international development.

international community at the 2008 games. He pointed to Beijing's "ability to mobilize," in terms of people, infrastructure construction, and movement control – an ability fueled by the labor abuses, forced evictions, and broader authoritarian control against which the international community recoiled. Yu Wanli of Peking University¹⁸ argued, similarly, that "the advantage of [China's] system is that it can concentrate on doing big things." "China's first place in the gold medal count reflect[ed] the advantage." But it applies more broadly: "This advantage is not only reflected in the sports field, but also in others such as economics, politics, and society."

And throughout, the context – implicit and explicit – of this discussion about China's relative competitive posture is that of a US-China contest. One of the questions posed to Wang Yizhou, Yan Xuetong, Jin Canrong, Shen Dingli, Yu Wanli, and Zhang Guoqing in the September 2008 *World Knowledge* interview offers a clear example:

This Olympic Games, there have been many interesting and metaphorical events and scenarios. China has achieved first place in the gold medal count. But the United States deliberately emphasized that it was "the first in the total number of medals." Does this reflect the US's unwillingness to admit its defeat in sports, or does it also suggest the US's unwillingness to admit its decline in the world's political and economic structure?

Jin focuses on protests against China's human rights record that obstructed the Olympic torch relay's route through North America and Europe as a tactical manifestation of the US-China competition. He argues that the failure of those protests to hamper the success of the Games shows Beijing's triumph over "pressure from the West."¹⁹ Ren describes the "China threat theory" emerging in the West, as well as "demonization" of China on the part of the US, and suggests that the Games are an opportunity to defuse such arguments so that Beijing can preserve the international openness necessary for its further development.

Still, little in the 2008 discussions suggests that Beijing saw itself emerging from the Olympics as an overall victor. Yes, China's relative power, influence, and competitive prospects were newly clear – as were the speed with which they had developed. Yes, it had displayed systematic advantageous vis-a-vis the United States. But Chinese sources did not suggest that China had emerged from the 2008 Olympic Games as the dominant global power.²⁰ Rather, Beijing's rapid rise and relative success were presented as auguring a new era of multipolarity. Yu Wanli is clear on the subject:

¹⁸ Yu Wanli has since been fired for impregnating a student.

¹⁹ "The pressure from the West further united the Chinese people, especially during the torch relay. Both overseas Chinese and young people came together. This was unexpected by the planners who hindered the torch relay. On the contrary, the status of the Western media in the hearts of the domestic public declined; the media ultimately failed to inspire its leaders to boycott the opening ceremony."

²⁰ On the contrary, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs took pains to stress in a press conference after the Olympics that for all Beijing's success, China was "still a developing country."

The United States' failure in the gold medal list at the Beijing Olympics was due to the rapid rise of the host country and the increasing strength of other countries in the world, which undermined the United States' advantages. This corresponds to the current world political and economic changes that are emerging: As the United States Council on Foreign Relations Chairman Richard Haas pointed out, the world structure is moving towards "multi-polarization."

Climbing the Podium

Today's environment is different. The stakes are higher. Where Beijing took pains to stress after the 2008 Games that China remained a "developing country," now the CCP is willing explicitly to describe China as "a major country." The CCP sees itself and its system as a challenger to the United States for global leadership – and the 2022 Games as a chance to prove as much.

"For China, the Winter Olympics will be a diplomatic opportunity to showcase the image of a major country," reads a February 2020 online commentary headlined "Why the country attaches so much importance to the 2022 Winter Olympics."²¹ The piece goes on to stress that only seven other countries – the United States, Germany, Italy, Japan, Canada, and Russia – have hosted both the winter and the summer Olympics. And no one city has ever hosted both. China and its capitol city therefore have not only matched, but also exceeded the world's other leading players. The article further stresses that China has done so in spite of, and as a "counterattack" to, the United States and Europe:

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, European and US countries have thrown dirt at China in an attempt to undermine public opinion... The holding of the 2022 Winter Olympics is a powerful counterattack to these unreasonable expectations.²²

This framing echoes across a range of popular and mass media Chinese discussions. For example, a March 2020 article in *Chenlong Observation* argued that the United States had proved itself "useless at blocking" the Winter Olympics. Still, the article warned, "we cannot relax our vigilance against the United States."²³

The human rights risks have risen alongside the geopolitical stakes. Beijing's human rights abuses have only become more severe and brazen – and more dangerous for international norms – since 2008. Beijing's surveillance system at home has only expanded. And the 2022 Games are likely to mark a turning point in the CCP's authoritarian control and repression. Unless the US, its allies and its partners, and their private sectors take a hardline stance, now, this will happen with the implicit support and technological resources of the international community

²¹ "为什么国家这么重视 2022 冬奥会 [Why the Country Attaches So Much Importance to the 2022 Winter Olympics]," Baijiahao, February 2020.

²² "为什么国家这么重视 2022 冬奥会 [Why the Country Attaches So Much Importance to the 2022 Winter Olympics]," Baijiahao, February 2020.

²³ 2022 年冬奥会将在中国举办，美国还会暗中使绊吗？ [The 2022 Winter Olympics will be held in China. Will the United States still stumble in secret?], *Chenlong Observation*, March 18, 2020.

Meeting the Standard: Boycott and Expel

If the United States, its allies, and its partners participate in the 2022 Olympic Games, they will be endorsing China's authoritarian, repressive system. They will also be fueling it. Participation in the Beijing Games does not only make the US complicit and signal a disinterest in strategic competition. It also means aiding and abetting CCP atrocities. That directly contradicts global democratic norms and values. It also directly contradicts those of the Olympic Games and the International Olympic Committee.

Some have advanced a diplomatic boycott as an alternative. That is insufficient. It could even be counterproductive. Beijing would treat, and message, a diplomatic boycott just as they did protests along the torch relay path in 2008 – as a half-hearted, failed attempt to challenge China's inevitable rise; proof that the United States, its allies, and its partners have no alternative to, and are no match for, the Chinese Communist Party.

In 1980, 65 countries, led by the United States, boycotted the summer Olympics in Moscow. They did so in protest of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. That model – in which the United States assumed values-based leadership to protest a country's flagrant disregard for international norms – is the one to replicate today. It would be painful for the athletes. But a world in which China is able to expand its influence, and its repression, unchecked, and in which the United States loses its ability to take a stand, will be more painful.

Moving forward, the expulsion of the South African National Olympic Committee from the International Olympic Committee during apartheid also offers a valuable framework for action. In that case, a known, documented abuser of human rights faced international consequences for its actions. Beijing is in the process of committing a genocide against an ethnic and religious minority population within its borders. US, international, and multilateral bodies increasingly recognize as much. The Chinese Communist Party has no interest in playing by the rules. And it is high time that the international community stood up for itself and for those within China's borders who lack the power to do so.

The 2022 Games deserve to be boycotted. China deserves to be expelled from the IOC.