

→ Mark your confusion.

→ Purposefully annotate the article (1-2 mature, thoughtful responses per page to what the author is saying)

→ Write a 250+ word response to the article.

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Inside Growing Calls to Boycott the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics

China's alleged genocide in Xinjiang is fueling controversy around the Games

By Alex Hickey for *Morning Brew*, March 24, 2021

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) has always stuck to the line that, like Thanksgiving dinner, the games should never mix with politics. But, just like Thanksgiving dinner, it always does.

With the 2021 Winter Games less than a year away, the IOC is trying to rein in growing calls to move the games out of China and to avoid an international boycott.

The host is in some boiling hot water

For the last four years, in the Western Chinese province of Xinjiang (pronounced shin-jaang), government authorities have detained an estimated 1–2 million Uighurs (wee-grs) and other members of predominantly Muslim ethnic minorities.

Reports from the region detail harrowing stories of family separation, abuse, torture, forced labor, sterilization, rape, and more. Uighurs who have so far avoided detainment are still subject to mass surveillance and are restricted in their ability to travel and practice their religion.

- For the record: China says its "education camps" are part of a deradicalization program to fight terrorism and poverty.
- Narrator: No one outside China is buying that.

In fact, some governments have seen enough to call Beijing's actions in Xinjiang genocide. With not even 24 hours left on the clock, the outgoing Trump administration broke out the label for the first time since the US government used it against ISIS in 2016. President Biden's administration has stuck with the designation, and in February, Canada and the Netherlands followed suit. This week, the US, Britain, Canada and the EU slapped sanctions on a handful of Chinese officials with links to the alleged genocide campaign.

- **Side note on terminology:** While mass killings may be the first thing genocide brings to mind, per the 1948 UN Genocide Convention, it also includes the intent to fully or partially destroy a population by inflicting serious physical or mental damage, creating harmful living conditions, preventing reproduction, and/or forcibly separating children to new care.

So will the US send athletes to bobsled in a country it just said is committing genocide? Probably.

The Biden administration has left the door open about whether it will support a boycott, calls for which began picking up steam last September after a coalition of 160+ human rights groups called on the IOC to move the games out of China. Things hit a boil in February when an even larger coalition of 180+ groups, including many with ties to Tibet, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the Uighur community, said the IOC is "refusing to act despite the clear evidence of genocide" and called for a boycott.

As of late February, the IOC is reportedly looking into requests to move the games out of China. The committee has told human rights groups that China made "assurances" about human rights conditions...but since details haven't been made public, the groups haven't been able to verify anything.

Olympic boycotts have happened before

In 1976, 22 African countries led a boycott of the Montreal Games after New Zealand was allowed to participate. The island country's rugby team had previously defied the UN's call for a sporting embargo and played in apartheid South Africa, which itself was barred from the Olympics.

In 1980, in response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, 65 countries including the US and China skipped the Moscow Olympics. To pay back the favor, the Soviet bloc boycotted the 1984 Games in Los Angeles.

Those may be the exceptions rather than the norm, as calls to boycott often fizzle out before the opening ceremony. Controversy over Russia's anti-LGBTQ+ laws didn't stop Western countries from attending the 2014 Sochi Olympics. And over 80 nations still sent delegations to the 2008 Games in China despite the Communist Party's crackdown in Tibet.

The US and Canadian Olympic Committees have said they don't want a total boycott, arguing it will only hurt athletes without actually fixing the problem. Sen. Mitt Romney called for a partial boycott where athletes participate but spectators, businesses, and diplomats stay away; but some other prominent Republicans have called for full ones.

Zoom out: In theory, the easiest way to avoid these situations would be to ban countries with human rights violations from hosting. In practice, the only viable location left would be Mars 2080, sponsored by SpaceX.

Of course, businesses could take the lead, but...



For one thing, there's a lot of money at stake in the Olympics. During the 2018 Winter Games, NBC charged \$700k–\$750k for 30-second ad spots in primetime US broadcasts. Top global sponsors pay (at least) an estimated \$100 million per four-year cycle.

Companies including Airbnb, Visa, Coca Cola, Intel, GE, Panasonic, Procter & Gamble, Samsung, and Toyota are already signed on as top brand partners for the 2022 Games.

- On March 23, a human rights group coalition sent an open letter to Airbnb CEO Brian Chesky asking his company to drop its sponsorship of the Beijing Olympics and questioning its stated commitment to "social responsibility."

Brands are used to making concessions to Beijing in order to access China's massive consumer market. Even acknowledging what's happening in Xinjiang, let alone condemning it, could risk the years of effort and investment they have made in China.

And Beijing knows how to hold a grudge. Remember the incident with the NBA's Houston Rockets?

In October 2019, the team's General Manager Daryl Morey tweeted support for pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong. Which made Beijing Andy-punching-the-wall mad.

The state TV network and Chinese tech giant Tencent pulled Rockets games from broadcast and some Chinese companies dropped ties with the league, costing the NBA hundreds of millions of dollars, per Commissioner Adam Silver. When the NBA tried to defuse the situation by (kind of) apologizing, it caused another backlash at home, as American politicians accused the league of prioritizing profits over human rights. The Chinese state network waited almost a year before airing Rockets games again.

It wasn't an isolated incident. That same year, China suspended broadcasts of Arsenal soccer games after player Mesut Özil criticized the government's treatment of Uighurs.

Outside of sports, American tech companies have taken down apps or scrubbed results from search engines to appease Beijing. Retailers have apologized for not including Taiwan in maps of China printed on t-shirts. Hollywood has a rule to avoid the three Ts (Tibet, Taiwan, and Tiananmen Square) if it wants its movies to play in China.

- Disney faced its own scandal last year when credits for its live-action Mulan film thanked several Xinjiang organizations with ties to Uighur imprisonment.

Bottom line: Corporate Olympic partners may face some difficult questions from consumers who want accountability about where and how sponsorship money is spent. And while it's not every day a global superpower is credibly accused of genocide, most governments aren't expected to boycott the games either and risk China's wrath. Beijing has already threatened to "retaliate fiercely" with sanctions against anyone who does.

Response option(s):

- After reading the article, what is one main idea that you find most remarkable (meaning, "most worthy of a remark" -- so it can be interesting, concerning, confusing, alarming, offensive, etc)? What is it that you find so remarkable? Explain.
- After reading the article, what additional questions do you have? Research these on your own and write about what you find.
- Summarize any point made in the article and respond.