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Making the Most of the Beijing Winter Games

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CHICAGO – The 2022 Winter Olympics, set for February 4-20, have been riddled with controversy ever since they were announced in 2015. Many expect the Chinese government to use its role as host to solidify its political power both domestically and internationally. The US-led diplomatic boycott of the Games to protest China's alleged human-rights violations against Uyghurs in Xinjiang has frustrated both the Chinese authorities and human-rights activists.

The controversy is not baseless, but they reflect myopic perspectives. A sober assessment suggests that the Winter Games also are likely to have some important long-run benefits for both China and the wider world.

All host countries seek to bolster their national prestige through the Games, but this is probably not China's primary motivation for staging them. After all, China will be hard pressed to beat out the traditional major contenders in winter sports from North America and northern Europe. In the previous Winter Games, Norway, Germany, Canada, the United States, and the Netherlands each won 20 or more medals. China won just nine in total, and only one gold (in men's speed skating).

By contrast, China often is a top medal winner at the Summer Games. In the 2004 Athens Olympics, it had the third-highest total and the second-highest gold medal count, leading to hopes that, with enough investment, it could come out on top in the 2008 Beijing Summer Games. In the event, China took home the most gold medals and trailed the US by just two in the total medal count.

But no amount of money could transform the country from a Winter Olympics straggler into a global winter-sports power in just five years. Although large parts of the Chinese population live in very cold climates, the history of poverty in modern China meant that the country lacked not only the infrastructure but also the culture for winter sports like downhill skiing.

For China, hosting the Winter Games is about much more than prestige in athletics. The

government has approached the event as an opportunity to build an entire winter-sports industry from scratch. In addition to budgeting \$3.9 billion for Olympic infrastructure and facilities – a miniscule amount compared to the \$43 billion budgeted for the 2008 Summer Olympics – China has fostered economy-wide investment in winter sports. In 2016, the government's Five-Year National Fitness Program committed \$237 billion to reinvigorating the sports industry, with a focus on winter events. Some 400 ski resorts were built across the country between 2014 and 2017, with a goal of 800 by this year.

Consumer demand for winter sports, together with investment spurred by the Games, have provided jobs and created a burgeoning tourism industry in many rural locations. All large public expenditures can boost employment. But unlike the Summer Games or other major infrastructure projects, which tend to be based in major metropolitan areas, the Winter Olympics and the nationwide winter-sports push required significant construction in less economically developed areas.

Previously impoverished mountain areas are now home to ski lifts, hotels, and restaurants, all connected to larger urban hubs with new rail lines and highways. The Winter Games thus have become an instrument for reducing urban-rural inequality – one of China's most urgent economic problems.

China's new enthusiasm for winter sports also provides a unique opportunity to build affinity and respect between the Chinese people and the West. In a period of heated political rhetoric and mutual suspicion, athletics and sports culture offer avenues for rapprochement. After all, nowhere is Western culture more popular in China than in basketball and soccer arenas, where fans marvel at the sheer athletic ability of top players.

In addition to hundreds of millions of Chinese viewers with a new interest in traditionally Western winter sports, there also will be a new generation of Chinese superstar athletes who have been training with coaches and specialists from countries like the United Kingdom and Canada. The trust and affinity established by these personal interactions likely will have a wider positive influence on understanding and trust between people in China and the West.

That brings us to the recently announced boycott, which applies only to Western diplomats and officials, not athletes. The move has been criticized as insufficient by human-rights activists, and as too harsh by ordinary Chinese, many of whom are baffled and offended by it. Moreover, the fact that some Western powers have not signed on to the boycott may weaken America's future bargaining position.

But these concerns overlook the policy's potential usefulness. A diplomatic boycott of the Beijing Games could be just the political innovation needed right now. Given the lack of transparency over the Uyghur situation, the US government is in a delicate position. It is called upon to act by many constituents – and its own political ideology – but lacks the necessary information to do so. As the US learned all too painfully after the war in Iraq,

acting on imperfect information can have long-lasting negative consequences.

The diplomatic boycott thus offers a middle way. Unlike the Cold War-era US boycott of the Moscow Summer Games in 1980 and the Soviet boycott of the Los Angeles Summer Games in 1984, all athletes will be able to compete. The soft-power influence of the Olympics will not be undermined completely. The Chinese can voice their unhappiness without resorting to stronger measures that would result from an attempt to derail the Games entirely. Most importantly, a diplomatic boycott maintains the distinction between politics and sports – politicians and citizens – at a time when de-politicization is exactly what the world needs.

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