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UK sports diplomacy in 2022: events and boycotts

NEW
DIPLOMACY
PROJECT

TOP LINES

- The Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics are putting a global spotlight on China. The UK has the opportunity, through its diplomatic boycott of the Games, to use that spotlight to draw attention to human rights abuses, including against Uyghur Muslims.
- Labour should point out that, although the UK's diplomatic boycott is a positive move, its implementation reflects the fact the Government lacks a coherent and government-wide strategy towards China. Notable examples include its reluctance to actually call it a boycott and the resumption of bilateral trade and investment talks during the Winter Games.
- Labour should use the headlines created by the Winter Games and the boycott to continue to challenge other areas of Government policy towards China, particularly in relation to human rights violations.
- Labour should also use the occasion of this sporting mega-event, and the UK's current political boycott, to challenge the Government on its stand on the Qatar 2022 FIFA World Cup being held in November.
- Labour should call for a diplomatic boycott for the Qatar World Cup and look to provide a definition/framework for future diplomatic boycotts.
- Labour should also focus on ensuring a more transparent and robust process is in place for awarding these sporting tournaments to countries in the first place.

BACKGROUND

The UK is effectively conducting a diplomatic boycott of the Beijing Winter Games

Back in the summer of 2021, then Shadow Foreign Secretary Lisa Nandy called for a diplomatic boycott of the 2022 Winter Games due to the human rights violations the Chinese Government has been carrying out towards Uyghur Muslims. The disappearance of the Chinese tennis player Peng Shuai following her allegations of sexual assault against

former Chinese Vice-Premier Zhang Gaoli and the subsequent boycott from the Women's Tennis Association (WTA) of all their China tournaments boosted the Winter Games boycott campaign.

In July 2021, Parliament [debated](#) the Beijing Olympics and passed a non-binding motion to support a diplomatic and political boycott of the games. This followed an earlier [motion](#), supported by Labour and passed by Parliament in April 2021 declaring that genocide is taking place against the Uyghurs in China. After several months of indecision and back and forth the UK government came out publicly with what was reported around the world as the UK joining a diplomatic boycott of the Games. It is important to note though that the PM himself did not define it as such and said it would "effectively be a diplomatic boycott". The UK is part of several other countries that are carrying out a diplomatic boycott that includes the U.S, Australia, Canada, Japan, and Lithuania. This international buy-in is in part due to the work of a coalition of Chinese dissidents, Hong Kong, Uyghur, and Tibetan activists, alongside networks of lawmakers who have been pushing for a coordinated boycott after initially failing to get the Games relocated to Canada/USA.

In these cases a diplomatic boycott involves the Government/Royal Family not attending any events at the Games, and has precedent, with the British Royal Family and Government [not attending](#) the 2018 FIFA World Cup in Russia in protest against the Russian Novichock poisoning in the U.K.

What is the point of a diplomatic boycott?

Boycotts are one small part within the spectrum of sports diplomacy actions and initiatives that the UK has the potential to carry out. Whilst sports diplomacy is primarily around building positive impact, whether it be the image of the UK or relationships between countries, the vast universal reach of sports does sometimes allow for other more punitive actions that can ultimately enhance UK foreign policy objectives. Diplomatic boycotts of sporting events are criticised by some as ["little more than performative theatre"](#), but they have an important role to play.

1. Diplomatic boycotts such as this one allows the UK to set an agenda for the conversation being held around the Games. The boycott and the reason for the boycotts become part of the conversation surrounding the Games.
2. They also reduce the soft power and reputational gain from the host country, as it reduces slightly the spectacle of the event and takes away part of a possible perception of endorsement from the UK. It avoids giving ["tacit approval of the government of President Xi Jinping"](#).

On this second point it is clear that sporting boycotts, when a country does not even send athletes, is much stronger as it devalues not only the fanfare around the event but the

sporting integrity and value itself. Such sporting boycotts have been implemented in the past: the UK boycotted apartheid South Africa, and the US boycotted the 1980 Games in the Soviet Union. But this option has many drawbacks, particularly for UK athletes.

The value of a diplomatic boycott without an accompanying sporting boycott has been questioned by other world leaders, with Macron describing it as “symbolic and insignificant”. We would argue that symbolism is extremely important and would not recommend a full sporting boycott, but rather argue that a diplomatic boycott still has significant value as a standalone boycott.

How has China responded?

China has, as predicted and expected, used the Olympics for propaganda. Not only through the event itself, but also amplifying particular stories, such as [Eileen Gu's decision](#) to compete for China over the USA, or promote propaganda through certain channels such as [Youtube](#).

China has responded critically to the numerous boycotts, denying claims of genocide as rumour and saying that diplomatic boycotts go against the spirit of the Olympics. The official response their foreign ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin was to say that: "[The United States, Britain and Australia have used the Olympics platform for political manipulation](#)" and that they would “pay the price”. The irony of this should not be lost as China has previously [boycotted](#) the Games between 1956-1980 over Taiwan's inclusion.

Question marks around UK Government's China strategy

Although the Government has taken a position and not sent officials to the Olympics, its overall China strategy remains unclear, and arguably contradictory, with different actions taken undermining each other. As mentioned above, the UK refuses to actually call this diplomatic boycott a boycott, which arguably weakens the desired effect of the boycott in the first place. More surprisingly, the Government has just [restarted trade and investment talks](#) with China just as the Games started. This move, and certainly its timing, undermines the diplomatic boycott and its desired effects and is a clear example of how sports diplomacy should be integrated into UK foreign policy strategy.

Future diplomatic boycotts: one eye on Qatar

Since Qatar was awarded the rights to host the 2022 World Cup back in 2010, there has been a constant murmur of criticism from many. In recent years, Qatar has invested heavily in hosting sports events in what many describe as blatant sportswashing – covering up more negative perceptions of the country with a positive association with sports. This criticism has focused on the [human rights abuses](#) including the lack of women's rights, freedom of expression, and in particular the use of forced labour and

migrant workers. Although there have been some policy changes by the Qatari government to address this, the change has not been significant, with the Business and Human Rights Resource Center [recording](#) 197 allegations of labour abuse against Qatar since January 2016, 54 of which have been from the last year. Other [issues](#) such as women's rights and freedom of expression have been highlighted as concerns. The England football team has also [expressed concern](#) at the human rights situation, and although to date have been focussed on the sporting side of things (qualification for the World Cup), there is a strong chance that some players will voice concerns or criticisms in the build up, during, or after the World Cup. The Norwegian Football Association has also said it is [considering a full sporting boycott](#), under pressure from fan groups and Norwegian clubs.

This is then compounded by a number of other criticisms from within the sport towards a country with little football tradition, a national team full of nationalised players, and a World Cup being played at the wrong time of year so as to accommodate the extreme conditions not suited for football. In many ways this raises the profile of the human rights issues and puts more pressure on Qatar. But there is a risk for the UK, were it to politically boycott, of mixed messaging with a lot of the criticism being handed out is to the football world, FIFA, corruption etc, which would not be the primary focus of a UK political boycott of the World Cup.

This potential boycott would be in line with the UK's recent stance with political boycotts of the 2018 FIFA World Cup in Russia and these 2022 Beijing Winter Games.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As we begin a year with two high profile sporting events, Labour should:

1. Support and amplify the discussion of the Government's diplomatic boycott to raise the issue of China and human rights violations whilst also probing inconsistencies in the UK's China strategy such as Boris' noncommittal use of language that this would "effectively" be a diplomatic boycott rather than actually be one and the resumption of trade talks in the middle of the Games. Labour should put pressure on the Government to clarify its stance and objectives.
2. Use the current boycott to call for a similar action to take place in Qatar. Point out similar human rights abuses, and the precedent of previous boycotts/UK leading role on this. By taking a stance early, the UK can be a leader on this front.
3. Use the 2022 Winter Olympics and 2022 Qatar World Cup as examples of the need to pay greater attention to the awarding of major sports events to authoritarian states. The UK should be proactive on this front where it will be easier and more influential to oppose the awarding of the events in the first place.
4. More specifically, call for a review for the process by which the IOC awards the Olympics and the Olympic Charter. The only mention in the 2021 version of the

Charter of human rights is the practice of sport as a human right. Labour should call for both a more rigorous inclusion of human rights and a stricter application of those included. One might argue that China's disappearance of Peng Shuai is a direct violation of the one human right they reference.

About the author

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