

Diplomatic boycott of Games is sign of dumbed-down approach to China

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The Australian government has followed Washington, lemming-like, in announcing a [diplomatic boycott](#) of next February's Beijing Winter Olympics.

Just two months out from the Games and facing pressure from Congress to be tough on China, the Biden administration trumpeted on Tuesday that [no American official delegation](#) would be sent.

Prime Minister Morrison said on Wednesday that his decision to do the same was justified by China's diplomatic freeze on Australia for raising 'human rights abuses in Xinjiang and the many other issues'.

The government had a suite of options available. It could have picked its human rights battles with Beijing and worked behind the scenes with neighbours that, like Australia, aren't superpowers.

The idea that if the government really cares about human rights in China or protecting the national interest when Beijing does not take our calls, then a unity ticket with the US and a public venting is the best approach is symptomatic of the dumbed-down manner in which China relations has come to be viewed and handled more generally.

Setting aside the Olympics for a moment, a prominent narrative [spun](#) over the last 18 months is that China started attacking Australia's beef and barley exports in May 2020 because a month earlier Foreign Minister Marise Payne had called for an independent international inquiry into the origins of COVID-19.

It's a simple tale of Canberra just wanting to do what was right and Beijing responding with unreasonable fury.

In fact, China's foreign ministry and its local embassy made [clear](#) their anger was sparked by earlier comments from then-Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton who, fresh off the plane from Washington, had given the strong impression that the Morrison government was co-ordinating with the Trump administration to attack China over the pandemic.

A few days after Payne's call, Morrison himself then took to [Twitter](#) making remarks that seemingly confirmed Beijing's suspicions.

Meanwhile, plenty of countries in Australia's region were struggling to deal with the public health consequences of the virus and wanted to avoid a repeat. Plenty were also far from happy with the Chinese government for its lack of transparency around the outbreak in Wuhan.

But it was only Canberra that failed to grasp or care about the possibility that a US administration might be playing a different game that was tilted towards domestic politics and great power rivalry.

Australian agricultural producers paid the price. And in a reminder that great powers will act in their own interests and can escape costs that smaller players can't, American ranchers cashed in. In the first nine months of 2021 China's imports of beef from Australia [dived](#) by \$US494 million compared with 2019. But the US increased its beef sales to China by \$US1.2 billion.

No one imagines that Australia's diplomatic boycott will make any positive impact on human rights in China. So, the argument is that at least we won't be complicit. Really?

The White House struggled to make the connection and Morrison did no better.

President Biden's press secretary Jen Psaki [said](#) the diplomatic boycott was evidence the US would 'not be contributing to the fanfare of the games', sending a signal to China that it wasn't 'business as usual'.

But common-sense says that fanfare results from the athletic competition. And US athletes, like Australian ones, will still be participating. In the preceding breath Psaki emphasised that, 'We will all be behind [Team USA] 100 percent as we cheer them on from home'.

It would be one thing if Canberra was now standing alongside Tokyo, Seoul, Singapore and Jakarta. But by once again leaping out of the pack in Washington's wake, perhaps soon to be joined by London, all that is confirmed is our reputation for being Anglosphere simpletons.

Many regional capitals are reluctant to send an official delegation to Beijing 2022, not least because of COVID-19 and China's ultra-strict quarantine requirements. Beijing understands this.

On Tuesday, New Zealand [delivered](#) a masterclass in diplomacy by announcing that government ministers would not be going to the Olympics for 'a range of factors but mostly to do with COVID and ... the logistics of travel'.

There's a reason why Wellington has at once been able to defend its values and speak out about the sorry state of human rights in China, while also advancing its interests by maintaining high-level political dialogue with Beijing and undisrupted trade for its exporters.

Before Morrison's announcement, Australian Olympic Committee president John Coates had also [pointed](#) out that protocol meant our ambassador in China would only be invited if the Prime Minister or Governor-General was attending: 'I'm not sure how there can be a diplomatic boycott if we are not invited'.

This latest decision will no doubt win praise from China hawks in government and among the commentariat. But dealing constructively with bilateral tensions is another matter entirely.

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