Two Olympic boycotts: Human rights in the service of imperialist gangsterism

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The US diplomatic boycott of February's Beijing Winter Olympics, announced by the Biden administration on December 6 on the pretext of concern for the human rights of Muslim Uyghurs in the China's Xinjiang region, is a staggering exercise in hypocrisy.

Accusations of genocide and crimes against humanity could be more justifiably levelled against US imperialism for its neo-colonial wars that have devastated whole societies, including Iraq and Afghanistan, and its criminal pandemic policies, which are responsible for the unnecessary deaths of more than 800,000 Americans.

The decision to target the Beijing Olympics recalls the US-led boycott of the Moscow Olympics in 1980 by the administration of President Carter over the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979. The unmistakeable parallels go beyond the utter cynicism with which Washington habitually exploits "human rights" to advance its interests, and highlight the far-reaching aims of the anti-China campaign.

Concern for the Afghan people had nothing do with the boycott of the Moscow games. The Olympic boycott was bound up with a far broader US agenda of weakening and fracturing the former Soviet Union, as the Biden administration is seeking to do today to China.

Abundant evidence is now in the public domain to demonstrate that the Carter administration shifted from the previous policy of containment of the Soviet Union to one aimed at the USSR's fragmentation. Spearheaded by Carter's national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, the White House latched onto Afghanistan, where a Soviet-aligned government had taken power in March 1978, as a means of dragging the Soviet Union into a Vietnam-like quagmire.

Brzezinski, a hardened anti-communist and Cold War strategist, was one of a layer of right-wing ideologues in the US security and intelligence apparatus who regarded Islamist fundamentalism as a political force that could be turned against the Soviet Union—in particular in the Soviet Central Asian Republics and the Caucasus. He approved the establishment of a Nationalities Working Group, including officials from Carter's National Security Council, the CIA, the Pentagon and State Department, to encourage Islamist unrest inside the Soviet Union.

Brzezinski viewed the emergence of armed opposition by Islamic fundamentalist groups inside Afghanistan to the Soviet-backed regime of the Peoples Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) in Kabul as an opportunity to press ahead with his strategic agenda. It is well-known that under Carter, then Reagan, the CIA funded, trained and armed mujahadeen militia in a dirty "secret war" in Afghanistan.

It is less well-known that the US war in Afghanistan began prior to the Soviet invasion in 1979 and was a critical factor in destabilising the country in order to precipitate the intervention. In an interview with *Le Nouvel Observateur* in 1998, Brzezinski candidly acknowledged that it was a lie that CIA aid to the mujahadeen only began in 1980. Carter had signed a directive in July 1979 to provide assistance secretly to opponents of the pro-Soviet government. Brzezinski also wrote to Carter to explain that "in my opinion this aid was going to induce a Soviet military intervention."

While proselytising about "human rights," the Carter White House had no compunction in collaborating with the Pakistani dictatorship of General Zia-ul Haq, which was heavily involved in fostering Islamist rebels inside Afghanistan, and the autocratic Saudi monarchy, which saw the funding of an Afghan holy war as a means of countering the impact of the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Carter ordered the mending of US relations with Zia, which had frayed with the execution of former Pakistani Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in April 1979.

It was in this context that Carter initiated the boycott of the Moscow Olympics in January 1980 in an effort to ramp up the anti-Soviet propaganda over the invasion of Afghanistan, in particular to boost political support throughout the Muslim world for the CIA's holy war in Central Asia. Eight years of brutal warfare—funded by the CIA to the tune of $3 billion—devastated much of Afghanistan and led to the Soviet withdrawal, which was completed in February 1989.

This was on the eve of the collapse of the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe, followed by the dissolution of the Soviet Union itself in December 1991. While the CIA's secret war in Afghanistan was not the primary reason for the crisis of Stalinism, which lay in the incompatibility of its autarkic national economies with the globalisation of production underway, it was a significant factor in exacerbating the internal economic and political crisis in Moscow.

Afghanistan was also the breeding ground for reactionary Islamist groupings, including Al Qaeda, that in collaboration with the CIA and Pakistani and Saudi intelligence agencies funnelled Islamist fanatics from across the world into Afghanistan.

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Asked by *Le Nouvel Observateur* in 1998 whether he regretted fostering the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, Brzezinski notoriously declared: “What is more important to the history of the world? The Taliban or the collapse of the Soviet empire? Some stirred-up Muslims or the liberation of Central Europe and the end of the Cold War?”

Just three years later, Al Qaeda carried out its terrorist attacks on the US, which were exploited by the Bush administration to launch its “war on terrorism” and the criminal wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Behind the Beijing Olympic boycott

Forty years after Carter’s boycott of the Moscow Olympics, US imperialism is targeting China, which it regards as the most serious threat to its global hegemony. If the emergence of Al Qaeda is referred to as the blowback of the CIA’s secret war in Afghanistan, then China’s staggering growth could be considered the economic blowback from Nixon’s 1972 rapprochement with Mao Zedong in an anti-Soviet alliance. That paved the way for capitalist restoration and the transformation of China into a giant cheap labour platform for global corporations.

The US shift from collaboration with the Chinese Communist Party regime to confrontation is well underway. The Biden administration has accentuated all the aggressive diplomatic, economic and military measures against China that began with the Obama administration’s “pivot to Asia”—supported to the hilt by Biden as vice-president—and accelerated under Trump.

The COVID-19 pandemic has greatly intensified the political and economic crisis in Washington and the fears in American ruling circles that time is running out. More and more nakedly, the US is preparing for war, both to destroy the threat posed by China and direct immense social pressures at home outward against an external enemy. The strengthening of US ties with Taiwan, undermining the basis of diplomatic relations between Washington and Beijing, is a clear indication that the US is putting itself on a war footing.

The boycott of the Beijing Olympics is just one element of a broad anti-China strategy, yet it bears the imprint of the criminal actions of the past. It is no accident that the hue and cry for the new Olympic boycott is about the “human rights” of the Muslim Uyghur minority in China. The US, via the CIA, has and is undoubtedly intriguing with various Uyghur organisations to foment unrest inside China.

As in 1979, when Carter signed his directive to aid the Afghan mujahadeen, the full extent of US involvement is a closely-guarded secret. What is known is that exile Uyghur organisations such as the World Uyghur Congress and the American Uyghur Association have longstanding ties with American propaganda outlets like the Voice of America and Radio Free Asia, and have been openly funded by a CIA front, the National Endowment for Democracy.

Washington routinely dismisses China’s justification for repressive measures inside Xinjiang as necessary to combat “terrorism.” Yet, there have been sporadic violent attacks by Uyghurs on Han Chinese inside Xinjiang and elsewhere in China. Until quite recently, the US State Department continued to list the Uyghur organisation, the East Turkestan Islamic Movement/ Turkistan Islamic Party (ETIM/TIP), as a terrorist organisation—originally a quid pro quo by the Bush administration for China’s support for the US “war on terror.”

The links between the CIA and militant Uyghur Islamists become even murkier in the Middle East, particularly in Syria where the “war against terrorism” was no barrier to the US siding with Al Qaeda and ISIS-linked militias in the civil war against the Syrian regime of President Bashar al-Assad. Among those militias were no small number of Uyghur fighters, some of whom had been engaged in the Islamist groups fighting against the US occupation of Afghanistan. Various estimates of the number of TIP fighters in Syria are in the thousands—recruited from the Uyghur diaspora in Turkey, where the Turkic-speaking Uyghurs have some political support, particularly from the extreme right.

The extent of US engagement with Uyghur separatists may not be known, but the lesson of the CIA’s secret war inside Afghanistan makes clear that Washington rules out nothing. Xinjiang is also strategically significant as the western-most region of China, with significant energy resources. It is the pathway for oil and gas pipelines and transport through Central Asia that form part of China’s massive infrastructure scheme—the Belt and Road Initiative—to link Asia to Europe and counter the US encirclement of China. Washington no doubt calculates that the destabilisation of Xinjiang would be a powerful blow to Beijing.

How does the current Olympic boycott compare to the 1980 boycott of the Moscow Olympics? A handful of Washington’s closest allies—Britain, Australia and Canada in particular—have to date joined the Beijing boycott, as compared to some 65 countries that did not attend the Moscow Olympics for various reasons. The contrast is a broad indicator of the historic decline of the position of US imperialism and the degree to which the Cold War bloc led by the US has itself fractured amid rising geo-political tensions.

It would be wrong to assume, however, that the relative weakness of the US makes it less dangerous. Rather, in its decline, American imperialism is all the more ready to resort to desperate and reckless measures. The boycott of the Beijing Olympics and the lies about Uyghur genocide are simply the public face of intense behind-the-scenes plotting in the White House, the Pentagon and the CIA for destabilising and eliminating China as a threat, including by military means.

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