The Cost of the Beijing Olympics: A Conversation with Representative Cathy McMorris Rodgers

TRANSCRIPT

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• Congresswoman Cathy McMorris Rodgers, U.S. Representative, Washington’s 5th District, and Ranking Member of the House Committee on Energy and Commerce
• Nury Turkel, Senior Fellow, Hudson Institute

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Nury Turkel:

Good afternoon. Thank you for tuning in for this important discussion today. I am Nury Turkel, a senior fellow here at the Hudson Institute. As the Beijing Winter Olympics reached their conclusion, we have found them to be, as expected, a horrifying example of yet another authoritarian power using the context of the games to whitewash human rights abuses—in this instance, genocide.

Beyond the corruption of the International Olympic Committee itself, American corporations have stood by their decision to sponsor an event held against this backdrop of genocide. My guest today has played an active role in addressing this issue, most recently with NBC as the event broadcaster. I am honored to be joined by Representative Cathy McMorris Rodgers.

Representative McMorris Rodgers represents Washington's Fifth Congressional District. She was first elected to the House of Representatives in 2004. From 2012 through 2018, she served as the chair of the House Republican Conference. Representative McMorris Rodgers is currently serving as the ranking member of the House Energy and Commerce Committee.

As tension in the U.S.-China competition reaches a boiling point, Representative McMorris Rodgers serves as a voice of clarity in championing American values and human rights both at home and abroad. Thank you, Representative McMorris Rodgers for joining me in today's conversation.

Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers:

It's great to be with you, Nury.

Nury Turkel:

Thank you so much. The international community has failed to learn from the past mistakes such as the Berlin Olympics in 1936 or even Beijing in 2008, the lead up to which saw a string of increasing human rights abuses that has been widely reported. Can you give us your assessment? Can you give us your assessment of how the Beijing Olympics have played out and the implication for the international community?

Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers:

Yes. Well, my assessment is that this grand experiment to open up China and influence it to embrace democracy has failed. And now they're influencing us. And I might just start by sharing with you some opening remarks about how I see this playing out right now. I really appreciate the attention that you and the Hudson Institute are bringing to this issue and being so vigilant because during the opening ceremonies in Beijing, the Chinese Communist Party presented us with a version of their country and the ruling party that really is far from complete.

Their official motto this year: "Together for a Shared Future." In 2008, the last time they hosted, it was "One World One Dream." But China's vision of one world, their shared future, is not one that values human rights, from forced labor to suppressing free speech, surveilling and disappearing their own citizens, the genocide of Uyghur Muslims.

The Chinese Communist Party continues to cover up its human rights violations. And the International Olympic Committee, their official corporate partners, and others have remained silent. These Olympic
Games were the perfect opportunity for companies to do the right thing, to send a message to the world and to the Chinese Communist Party that they're willing to defend freedom, human rights and human dignity for all.

I sent letters along with my Republican colleagues on the House Energy and Commerce Committee to the International Olympic Committee corporate partners. We appealed to them to send a message and defend human rights, to stand for more than just their bottom line. We've seen others stand up to the CCP. We saw this with Peng Shuai. She was a Chinese tennis player who disappeared after she accused a government official of sexual assault.

Now, the Women's Tennis Association responded by pulling its tournaments out of China entirely. They put Peng Shuai's freedom and safety before their market share in China. Or look at Enes Kanter Freedom who played for the Boston Celtics until he was recently traded. He's a courageous advocate for the rights of Uighur Muslims and other minorities in China. We need more people like this.

China continues to commit these heinous acts because it believes it can do so without consequence, because their influence and their controls extend way beyond their borders, even penetrating into the U.S. So, this grand experiment, the grand experiment to open up China and for us to influence China to embrace democracy, it's failed.

Beijing is successfully persuading American companies, celebrities, and athletes, and others to be a part of their propaganda machine. I believe it is time that we must stand together. We must stand with organizations like the Women’s Tennis Association. Advocates like Enes K. Freedom and others who defend human rights. And I am dismayed that we see more organizations and companies remaining silent.

And many, when we ask, they hide behind the toothless UN principles. These are principles that have been co-opted by China and other authoritarian countries to protect themselves from the consequences of committing crimes against humanity. By doing and saying nothing, they are providing the legitimacy to the Chinese Communist Party and its practices. They’re tyrannical. Rule through fear behavior has no place in the 21st century.

And it's time that we stand up for integrity and the virtues of our society that we value most. Virtues like freedom of speech, the rule of law, entrepreneurial enterprise, and others. And this cannot end with the Olympics either. It isn't just the International Olympic Committee partners who need to fight for these virtues. We also need big tech companies to be more transparent about how they're sharing America's data with China and how they platform CCP propaganda.

We need to enact policies that prevent an over-reliance on resources like critical minerals that are sourced in China. And we should foster innovation at home by embracing an open, entrepreneurial, market-based economy that encourages innovation, lifts people out of poverty, saves lives, and improves the world around us. Human rights, free markets—these are not values the CCP shares. And the more we embrace these values and openly reject the abuses of the Chinese Communist Party, the less confident it will feel that they can continue to commit these atrocities without consequence.

So, I really appreciate the chance to be with you, Nury, and be able to just highlight these issues, going into more depth about these issues and how they’re on display right now during the Olympics.
Nury Turkel:

Thank you very much. Thank you for your leadership. I am particularly grateful that you mentioned, or you called out, the United Nations. Secretary General Guterres not only has not said anything about the ongoing genocide, he showed up in Beijing, attended the opening ceremony.

The fundamental principle 2 of the Olympic Charter states that, "The goal of Olympics is to place sport at their service of harmonious development of humankind, with a view to promoting peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity." How does this line up with the IOC's consistent response to criticism—to its turning a blind eye to atrocities carried out by host nations—that it is not its role to solve geopolitical problem?

Time and time again, we're seeing the IOC being complicit every time they give this kind of platform to a regime starting with 1936. It's just proving that we've been wrong all along and they've been complicit in atrocious crimes committed against vulnerable people.

Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers:

Yes. They got it wrong in 1936. And they got it wrong again in 2022. Clearly, the society that the Chinese Communist Party is trying to build doesn't, as the Olympic Charter States, doesn't embody the "harmonious development of humankind." And it is the CCP that is failing to “promote a peaceful society” or "preserve human dignity."

That's what the Olympic Charter states. And yet, the International Olympic Committee, they have decided to remain silent. They have been silent on the Chinese Communist Party's abuses. They have decided to stay silent when it comes to highlighting where the CCP is falling short of these goals. And I have a lot of questions about how they believe this is somehow protecting the athletes.

The International Olympic Committee has basically been complicit in the propaganda campaign, whether it was involving Peng Shuai. Peng Shuai was a former Olympian herself. And the IOC has done very little, nothing to really protect the current athletes from experiencing the same kind of surveillance as those that are living currently under the CCP rule.

And I don't think that their partners, their partner corporations are blameless either. Many of these companies are following the same playbook as the IOC. And they are citing the Olympic Charter. They are hiding behind the UN's guiding principles on business and human rights. And I just want to be clear here, there is nothing binding with these principles. They don't represent international law. They're really toothless.

And it's a significant pivot by many of these American companies to no longer their focus being on advancing American virtues and principles to others around the world. Now, there is this pivot to many of them saying, "Well, we're headquartered in the United States of America but we're these global companies. And now, we're abiding by the UN's guiding principles on business and human rights."

And that kind of an approach, what the UN lays out is solely an aspirational vision for corporate behavior. And unfortunately, it's also been manipulated by China. When you look at the role of China at the UN and how they are co-opting the UN's goals and principles, that is all being eroded now by Beijing and other authoritarian regimes as a way to protect themselves from the consequences of committing crimes against humanity.
Nury Turkel:
Thank you. You and Congressman Bob Latta sent a congressional letter to NBC to inquire as to the level of influence that the Chinese Communist Party has had on the 2022 Winter Olympics programming. You also sent a letter before that to the IOC partner corporations asking whether they had stand up for human rights. Did they ever respond?

Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers:
Yes, they did respond. And I appreciate the company's responsiveness. But I also will say I was disappointed in their response. To date, I have not seen the Olympic sponsors speak out against the known atrocities by the Chinese Communist Party. And that's my biggest concern is that they are not speaking out against forced slave labor, against religious persecution, against genocide, against surveilling, against disappearing citizens.

The world right now is more focused on China. And during the weeks leading up to the ceremonies and since the games got underway, the world is certainly focused on China, and yet these American companies are not speaking out. I believe that on behalf of the Olympians that they're supporting, that they should be using this moment to show bold and clear leadership on the world stage.

Here, you have the Women's Tennis Association having the courage to speak up against the Chinese Communist Party and their atrocities. Why don't these other corporations? I hope and I had hoped that they would rise to the occasion, but it just seems less and less that they are willing to do that as we are nearing the end of these games.

Nury Turkel:
It's hard to imagine that Beijing would have had this kind of fanfare without the support of corporate sponsorship. Coca-Cola, for example, as you may recall, came to testify in Congress. And they cannot even acknowledge the existence of the genocidal practices or accept genocide committed by the Communist Party.

And yet, they are so quick to criticize our own government when there's an issue domestically such as the voting rights issue in Georgia because there is no cost for them to do that. But it will be very costly for them to do anything or say anything in China, which is mind-boggling. And in relation to the NBC letter, it's worth noting that NBC saw a nearly 50% decline in the viewership of the opening ceremony this time.

And it seems consumers are becoming increasingly aware of the ways in which the network and sponsors have been complicit. The Canadian network has also reported a significant drop. One of the questions you included in your letter to NBC requested that they answer as to whether or not they believe that the CCP had influenced the IOC. And I'm sure that could have generated very interesting response from many corporate executives.

And what have you noticed about the ways in which corporations try to dodge responsibility? And what should be done on the legislative level to address this? And we have existing laws. Some of them may not directly apply to this particular circumstance, as you know.
Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers:

Well, what we're seeing is that these companies are remaining silent. And it suggests that they're afraid of retaliation from the CCP. Whether it's Coca-Cola or NBC or other corporate sponsors, it just seems like they're more interested in their bottom line. And my question is, "What's the red line?" When are they going to stand up? When are they going to speak out against the Chinese Communist Party?

If it isn't the human rights abuses that we have all heard or if it's the silencing or disappearing citizens, surveillance, slave labor, genocide, what is the red line? And by doing nothing, what they're doing is they're condoning this growing list of abuses and the CCP effort to bend these businesses to their own will. So many of these businesses have told me, "Well, Cathy, you need to recognize that this is a growing middle class and such a large market." I just ask them, "When are they going to be leaders for human rights, human dignity, human value?"

I believe that America is a special country and that we have a special responsibility. And that it really is fundamental for the United States of America to lead on human rights, human dignity, human value. So, when it comes to legislation, the Republicans on the House Energy and Commerce Committee and I, we have been working on increasing support for the Consumer Product Safety Commission to hire more staff directly at our ports so that we can take action against illicit goods.

You think about goods that are made from the hair of Uyghur women. We need to be making sure that we are monitoring what's coming into our ports. And unfortunately, it just seems like there's ... Whether it's corporations or others are more interested in trying to outspend China. We've seen Democrats in Congress that they're moving forward on policies right now that are only going to make us more dependent upon China.

I think about all of the masks, all the money that we put into buying masks from China or buying tests from China or moving to more wind and solar and batteries, all these supply chains that are controlled by China. We need to be focusing on what's going to make sure that we can control supply chains and that we can make America more competitive.

But ultimately, I would just underscore that it's the consumer pressure that's going to be the most persuasive. And these companies are going to respond as American consumers stand up and they say, "We are appalled by China's actions and we expect you to lead and also take action as a corporation."

Nury Turkel:

You're absolutely right. No one should underestimate the power of the consumers. When they act, the investors will notice. And also, the business managers who are running the company would know that the consumers, buyers are not complicit using the products made by fellow human beings who are enslaved.

Let's talk about the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act that you supported. I'm personally very grateful that Congress passed this bill against all the odds. We have had obstacles, challenges—particularly those in the climate activist community pushed against this bill to become a law. And we also know that the business community did not want this law to be put into place.
And now, we had the enforcement. What kind of challenges that you see for this bill to be fully enforced? Without enforcement, this becomes another legislation that makes us feel good being passed but no impact.

**Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers:**

True. That's a good question and I think an important point. I'm really pleased that we were able to get the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act signed into law. It's a first step and it's an important step that we're taking. But clearly, as you were underlining, it's going to take more than the United States to deter China from committing these crimes against the Uyghurs and others.

And we need more international partners. We need more allies to be speaking out. Many of the international organizations don't seem to be taking the problem seriously. I'm dismayed that if you think about some of the supply chain issues that we encounter, the fact that some in Congress want us to be really focusing on solar and wind and batteries, that those supply chains are controlled by China. And the environmental groups have not been willing to speak out based upon human rights and human dignity and speak out against the Uyghur labor that is involved in these supply chains.

And so, that's where we need to continue to sound the alarm and to and to challenge and encourage other organizations, other allies, other corporations that do business in China to take action and to speak out and to defend human rights for all. America has been a beacon on the hill. America has long stood for human rights, human dignity.

We're not perfect, but that is certainly a foundational principle, a virtue that we cherish. And we need to be leading the way. And American partners and other international entities need to be joining us.

**Nury Turkel:**

I think it's fair to say that this bill that Congress passed is one of the major legislative efforts to address some of the lingering issues in the U.S.-China relations. If it's fully implemented, I would say that this will be beneficial to U.S. long-term economic interest and national security, as you eloquently described early on. Why do we have to depend on Communist China on certain consumer products and critical products or equipments, if you may?

And I'm glad that you mentioned batteries. You have also spoken regarding green policies and the Biden administration highlighting "dangerous dependence upon China and its use of slave labor and abusive practices in the renewable EV supply chains." What do you think is the next step should be that the administration or we as a country should take to address these issues?

**Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers:**

Well, the next step is to recognize the importance of American energy and stop shutting down American energy. It's to recognize that it's the United States of America that is leading in reducing carbon emissions. China is emitting more carbon than the rest of the world combined. And yet, we see where the United States of America is ... Whether it's the Keystone Pipeline or other permits that are being shut down here, we're tamping down American energy.
And I believe American energy is so important. It's important to our quality of life. It's important to our economic competitiveness. It's important to national security. It's also important on the geopolitical front. And so, energy and American energy independence, American energy dominance and continuing to lead clean energy solutions need to be embraced. It's one of the best ways that we can counter China.

But right now, we're seeing this war on American energy and what it's doing. It's weakening us. And as the United States says, whether it's corporations or the current Biden administration that is focusing on wind and solar and batteries, supply chains that are dominated by China, that's making us even more dependent upon them, dangerously dependent upon China. And we saw that highlighted during COVID that we were dangerously dependent upon China for important supplies around the mask and PPE.

And so, we need to really assess the environmental agenda right now that is making it more difficult to resource domestic sources for critical minerals, and as well as the chemicals needed for advanced manufacturing. If we're going to do manufacturing in the United States, then we have to have access to these minerals and to these chemicals. And so, that's why I'm focusing, with my colleagues, many colleagues of mine in the House, to increase the domestic supply of critical minerals.

We need to be able to access critical minerals and metals if we're going to manufacture in the United States. And right now, there's this keep-it-in-the-ground movement that applies whether it's fossil fuels or critical minerals. That's only playing to China's advantage. That's playing to their strengths. So that's where we need a smart approach.

We need to root our energy agenda in reality. We need to secure a cleaner energy future but do it the American way, which will mean embracing the benefits of American resources, innovation, and reliable energy, and also securing these energy supply chains right now.

**Nury Turkel:**

Yeah, absolutely right. Not only the national security, economic security, it also goes to the competition issue. How can we compete with a country that uses slave labor on these critical supplies? Our country that can make vaccines in 10 months should be able to make those solar panels and batteries at home. So, I think the people spreading these “it takes 10 years for us to catch up on China's solar panel” are not being honest. We could do better. It's good for America. It's good for American economy.

You have also spoken out on big tech in connection with the CCP. What do you think Congress should do to address the issues confronting our societies, such as Chinese state actors taking advantage of data collection and even social media platforms themselves, without compromising freedom of speech? Should the United States likewise be banning platforms like WeChat? There is no equivalent of WeChat anywhere around the world, and TikTok, which are proven to be directly complicit in censorship and even the Uyghur genocide itself?

**Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers:**

Well, first, I really appreciate that the Trump administration took some tough measures on entities that had ownership that was closely associated with the Chinese government. And that was important. And that was a pivotal moment. Unfortunately, what we're seeing with the Biden administration, it seems
like they want to make nice. There's reports of them approving transfers of semiconductor technology to Huawei for its advancement in the auto sector.

On the Energy and Commerce Committee, my colleagues and I have been working on legislation around big tech and legislation to protect the privacy of Americans' personal data. I believe that we need a national privacy law where we have legislation to address big tech’s close relationship, troubling relationship, with China, especially when it comes to the security of the personal information of Americans.

So, we have a big tech accountability platform. It’s a comprehensive framework for a national privacy standard in the United States because we know that big tech collects a tremendous amount of data. And we know that China has collected a huge amount of America's personal and identifiable data just in recent years. So, we need to make sure that we’re putting Americans first, especially as it relates to their data and their information.

And we need to know what China is doing with the data that they have collected and what big tech’s relationship is with the Chinese Communist Party. Because China, we’ve seen time and time again that they abuse the data that they have on citizens. They have all kinds of surveillance. They have collected a ton of data. And now, I’m very concerned about the amount of data that they have on American citizens.

And so, we’re working on a package of bills to hold big tech accountable, both for that personal information on Americans here and the importance of a privacy law, but also some transparency when it comes to their relationship with the Chinese Communist Party.

**Nury Turkel:**

With those insightful comments, we will close our event today. In conclusion, I'd like to remind our viewers that the stated goal of the Olympic Movement is "to contribute to building a peaceful and better world by educating youth through sport practice without discrimination of any kind and in the Olympic spirit, which requires mutual understanding with a spirit of friendship, solidarity and fair play."

In keeping with the spirit, we can only conclude that at best, the IOC is guilty of severe dereliction of duty, but it has become clear that the reality is worse. The IOC has been actively complicit and the international community, the United States’ leadership in particular, must take swift action to bring justice.

I want to thank Representative McMorris Rodgers once again for taking the time to join me today for this important conversation. Thank you very much.

**Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers:**

Good to be with you.