

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

January 20, 2022

Ms. Susanne Lyons
Chair of the Board of Directors
U.S. Olympic & Paralympic Committee
27 S. Tejon Street
Colorado Springs, CO 80903

Ms. Sarah Hirshland
Chief Executive Officer
U.S. Olympic & Paralympic Committee
27 S. Tejon Street
Colorado Springs, CO 80903

Dear Ms. Lyons and Ms. Hirshland:

As United States athletes prepare for the 2022 Olympic Winter Games in Beijing, China, we write to express our concern regarding recent reports that the Chinese government, controlled by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), has promised our athletes “free” access to social media platforms and websites in Beijing’s Olympic Village.¹ When taking into account the CCP’s well-known record on data gathering, human rights, and authoritarian regulation of their own citizens, we urge the U.S. Olympic & Paralympic Committee (USOPC) to take every necessary precaution and opportunity to educate our athletes before they leave for the Olympics.

As bipartisan members of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence (HPSCI), we are keenly aware of the threat that the Chinese government poses to data security as well as a free and open internet. We are concerned that offers from the Chinese government to open their internet censorship regime, also known as the “Great Firewall,” for the Winter Olympics – something the CCP refuses to do for their own citizens when the eyes of the world are not watching – will give our athletes a false sense of security. It is critical that the USOPC takes necessary steps to ensure our athletes’ data privacy and security.

As you know, China previously hosted the 2008 Summer Olympic Games. As noted by Human Rights Watch, “[t]he run-up to the Beijing Olympics [was] marred by a well-documented surge in violations of the rights of free expression and association, as well as media freedom.”² *The New York Times* reported in July 2008 that the Olympic Village press center was unable to access pages that discussed topics ranging from Tibet to Tiananmen Square as well as websites like Amnesty International or Radio Free Asia.³

Today, the Chinese government continues to disregard human rights, and the CCP has grown more overt with their geopolitical ambitions. Of the coming 2022 Winter Olympics, Human Rights Watch Director of Global Initiatives Minky Worden writes, “The IOC failed to punish Chinese leaders for breaking their empty Olympic promises — and in 2015 awarded Beijing the 2022 Winter Games. Since then, President Xi Jinping’s government has arrested journalists,

¹ <https://www.axios.com/beijing-china-olympics-internet-censorship-35e1cd8e-0af4-4175-825b-19ec68fd8e34.html>

² <https://www.hrw.org/news/2008/08/06/china-olympics-harm-key-human-rights>

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/31/sports/olympics/31china.html>

women's rights activists and lawyers; dismantled freedoms in Hong Kong; and committed crimes against humanity in Xinjiang, including mass detentions, torture, sexual abuse and cultural persecution of Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims.”⁴

None of us should be naïve to the fact that any overture from the Chinese government to grant Olympic athletes and participants uncensored access to the internet comes with risk. If China intends to open its Great Firewall only through special SIM cards, which would be inserted to an individual's own device and purchased through the Beijing 2022 Rate Card program, we believe our athletes and their personal information and data could be vulnerable to the Chinese government's efforts to maliciously access and exploit their data.⁵

As Team USA prepares for the coming Winter Games, we are pleased to see that the USOPC has urged American athletes to leave their personal electronic devices at home, following the example set by the Dutch Olympic Committee (NOCNSF), the British Olympic Association, the Australian Olympic Committee, and others.^{6,7,8} Though we would recommend that the USOPC make the use of “burner phones” a requirement, we would also encourage the USOPC to make it easier on our athletes by providing the devices to those who request them.

As well, the USOPC should commit to formally training every American athlete about the risks to their data security and privacy and steps everyone should take to ensure they are as protected as possible. This includes making use of virtual private networks (VPNs); not inserting external devices, like USB drives, into personal devices; avoiding logging on to personal accounts, social media or otherwise; and more. The National Counterintelligence and Security Center (NCSC) provides several resources on this matter.⁹

Finally, we urge the USOPC to take any necessary steps to protect our athletes' free speech and personal security. On January 18, 2022, *The Globe and Mail*, a Canadian newspaper, reported that security flaws in the phone application that is required for athletes and team officials could leave user calls and data vulnerable to being intercepted.¹⁰ According to the reporting, this application is not only the property of a Chinese state-owned company; it also “includes a feature to allow users to report ‘politically sensitive content’ to MY2022. It is not clear with whom the information would be shared.”

The 2022 Winter Olympic Games in Beijing, China, should be a time when athletes from around the world come together to compete on a global stage. Unfortunately, the decision by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to keep this year's games in China casts a sobering shadow over the coming events. As veteran NBC sports commentator Bob Costas mentioned during a December 2021 interview with CNN, “This is tricky terrain now for NBC and for other Americans. We don't know what sort of peril anybody might be in if they speak forthrightly.”¹¹ Many nations, including the United States, have announced a diplomatic boycott of the games.

⁴ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/01/03/beijing-olympics-human-rights-world-cup-qatar-sportswashing/>

⁵ <https://www.voanews.com/a/china-to-crack-open-great-firewall-for-winter-olympic-athletes-6356402.html>

⁶ <https://www.si.com/olympics/2022/01/14/athletes-competing-beijing-games-urged-use-burner-phones-disposable-computers>

⁷ <https://www.reuters.com/lifestyle/sports/dutch-athletes-warned-keep-phones-laptops-out-china-media-2022-01-11/>

⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2022/jan/12/boa-offer-team-gb-athletes-temporary-phones-over-china-spying-fears>

⁹ <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/ncsc-how-we-work/ncsc-know-the-risk-raise-your-shield/ncsc-awareness-materials>

¹⁰ <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/politics/article-security-flaw-found-in-smartphone-app-for-olympians-in-beijing/>

¹¹ <https://www.msn.com/en-us/sports/esports/bob-costas-shares-personal-story-on-beijings-playbook-of-repressing-criticism/vi-AARyiOd>

We are proud of our U.S. athletes for their hard-earned accomplishments, but we are also concerned about their well-being while in China. We urge the U.S. Olympic & Paralympic Committee to take the necessary steps to protect our athletes, to acknowledge the reality of the Chinese government's efforts to suppress free speech and mine personal data, and to ensure Team USA is well prepared for the 2022 Winter Olympic Games.

Sincerely,



Brad R. Wenstrup, D.P.M.
Member of Congress
House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence
House Ways and Means Committee



Raja Krishnamoorthi
Member of Congress
House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence
Committee on Oversight and Reform



Darin LaHood
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