Totalitarian Olympic Rule

The Winter Olympics are coming soon—February 4-20, headquartered in Beijing with ski, bobsled and luge venues 75 kilometers northwest in Yanqing, and some of the key ski venues 180 kilometers to the northwest in Zhangjiakou. There has been a lot of concern among competitors, who note that the skiing events will rely entirely on artificial snow, since these more remote venues receive minimal annual snowfall. Zhangjiakou actually sits on the edge of the Gobi Desert; it is one of the least snowiest spots in all of Asia.

There is also talk of mass boycott over human rights issues in China. Non-boycotters will face the inconvenience of trying to figure out how to manage the travel requirements of getting from one distant venue to another.

But perhaps the most interesting issue about these upcoming Olympics is how the selection process for host cities has shifted in the past couple of decades. In the past, there was vigorous competition among North American, European and Asian cities for the privilege of hosting Olympic events. But in the recent bidding for these games, the North American and European cities have all been silent, taking careful note of the fact that the ‘privilege’ tended to cost billions of dollars in infrastructure construction that would never be recouped by tourist expenditures, and would result in legacy venues all over the landscape which the city didn’t want or need after the TV cameras had departed.

That reality has left the bidding exclusively to totalitarian regimes whose control over their economy is so absolute that the soaring costs of building throw-away venues and housing (and redirecting billions of gallons of water into a desert location) don’t matter very much. The highest bidders are those who are hungry for global legitimacy. Think: Sochi, a city where the snow never falls, and whose hastily-constructed (and expensive) Olympic facilities are now crumbling from disuse. The only serious bidders for the 2020 Winter Olympics were China and Kazakhstan, two nations governed by a single party who have been cited for human rights abuses and mistreatment of foreign contractors.

Never mind that there are terrific skiing venues in the Alps or the Rockies that are visited by millions of recreational skiers every year, while Beijing is desperately trying to use TV coverage of Olympic events to lure tourist skiers into a desert environment. The upcoming games will probably be fun to watch, but you can expect to see more of them in countries where human rights are not a top priority.

Sources:

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