



The Tokyo Olympic Summer Games

June 15, 2021

Japan and the International Olympic Committee (IOC) have [vowed to go ahead](#) with the 2020 Olympic Summer Games beginning on July 23, 2021; the games were postponed in 2020 due to the global Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. Japan has curbed the pandemic to under [14,200 total deaths](#) out of a population of around 125 million. The virus has continued to spread, due in part to the emergence of more communicable variants [and Japan's slow progress on vaccinating the population](#). In April 2021, the Japanese government [declared new states of emergency](#) in several cities, including Tokyo. As of mid-June 2021, Japan's daily infections averaged [under 2,000 per day](#), with around [5% of Japan's population](#) fully vaccinated.

Japan's national vaccination campaign started in mid-February—about two months after many other developed countries. A cautious vaccine approval process and a cumbersome bureaucratic approach to vaccination led to a slow rollout, but the pace of vaccinations increased in June. By the middle of June, around [800,000 shots were being administered daily](#) and between [8% and 10% of the population of the greater Tokyo region](#)—primarily the elderly—had received at least one dose. Japan trails behind the United States and other countries in vaccinating its population, presenting increased risk for any Japanese athletes, volunteers, and spectators that may attend the Games.

Olympics a Political Test for Suga

A significant portion of the Japanese public opposes holding the Games and disapproves of the government's handling of the pandemic, according to [opinion polls](#). Proceeding with the Games could imperil Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga's premiership. [Japanese public health experts](#), the [leader](#) of the largest opposition party, and some major [newspaper editorial pages](#) have urged Suga's government to reconsider, citing the risk of an international outbreak and further spread of the virus within Japan. In May, the State Department issued a Level 4 “do not travel” advisory for Japan due to “a very high level” of COVID-19; in June it lowered the advisory to a Level 3 “[reconsider travel](#)” warning. Suga inherited the challenge of hosting the Games from his predecessor Shinzo Abe, who resigned in August 2020. Suga's approval ratings have fallen to new lows over his handling of the pandemic, and ahead of key political challenges: in September his ruling Liberal Democratic Party is expected to hold a leadership election, and parliamentary elections are to be held by October.

Tokyo's options for canceling or postponing the Olympic Games are limited. The IOC, the city of Tokyo, the Japanese Olympic Committee, and the organizing committee of the Olympic Games are all parties to

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the host city contract. Under [section XI](#) of the contract, only the IOC is “entitled to terminate this Contract and to withdraw the Games” from Tokyo if any one of five contingencies occurs. Nevertheless, some commentators have [suggested](#) the Japanese government could “pull legislative or immigration levers to block the event.”

Public Health Measures

Japanese and IOC Olympic officials have imposed [many mitigation measures](#) to attempt to contain possible outbreaks among the over 10,000 athletes expected to attend. No international spectators are allowed, [but Japan has invited small official delegations](#). All athletes must test negative upon entry into Japan, are required to undergo a strict 14-day quarantine, and thereafter are to be tested daily during their stay. Olympic officials estimate that about 80% of the athletes will already be vaccinated. Japanese volunteers may receive priority for receiving the vaccine.

Athletes are to be confined to the Olympic Village and return to their lodging immediately after their competition, avoiding restaurants and public transportation in [Tokyo](#). Given these precautions, Japanese businesses may not see the same commercial boost that usually accompanies hosting the Olympics. Further, with Tokyo potentially under a [state of quasi-emergency](#) during the Olympics, Japan will likely lose some of the national marketing that would showcase the city.

International Considerations

Japan’s eagerness to have a successful Olympic Games may be influenced in part by its long-standing tension with China, which is to host the Winter Olympics in 2022. The unusual proximity between the Summer and Winter Games [has sparked a sense of diplomatic and organizational competence competition between the two Asian rivals](#). To many Japanese, the possibility that China could host a more successful Olympics just six months later could be seen as an indicator of China surpassing Japan on the world stage.

Some [Members of Congress](#) and [international human rights advocates](#) have called for boycotting China’s Games due to its actions in Hong Kong and against ethnic minorities, particularly the Uyghurs. Japan [has avoided such calls](#). Although Japan has recently criticized China’s actions on human rights, including during an [April 2021 summit](#) between President Biden and Suga, it also favors a stable relationship with China.

President Biden and other world leaders at the June 2021 [Group of Seven \(G7\) leaders’ meeting](#), which included Suga, reiterated their support for the Tokyo Games proceeding with public health measures in place. This lessens the chance that these countries will pull out of the Games, a chief concern for Tokyo. Suga invited Biden to attend the Games when they met for a summit in April; it is unclear if the United States will send an official delegation given the ongoing pandemic. Normally, the Olympics—and particularly the Opening Ceremonies—provide a venue for international diplomacy in a celebratory setting. Public health concerns are likely to limit interactions between leaders and officials, but the presence or absence of a high-ranking official to represent the United States could be seen in the context of support for Japan.

Author Information

Emma Chanlett-Avery, Coordinator
Specialist in Asian Affairs

L. Elaine Halchin
Specialist in American National Government

Mark E. Manyin
Specialist in Asian Affairs

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