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Sports Diplomacy as a Tool of Soft Power in Contemporary International Relations

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In the domain of International Relations, sports diplomacy is seen as a crucial element, promoting joint actions in alleviating political rifts and strengthening soft power among states. The research work analyzes the diplomatic role of sports, examining how athletic activities and major sports events can contribute to today's global politics. Some of the past and present studies are explored in this research work. The key objective of the study is to effectively elaborate on the role of sports in resolving disputes, cultural connectivity, and nation branding. The study also suggests the dual nature of sports in bridging political divides and linking cultures yet it can be exploited for political agendas and interests. The study also highlights the interplay among sports diplomacy, soft power, and statecraft while arguing sports diplomacy is not a suitable replacement for traditional diplomacy.

Keywords: Diplomacy, Sports, Soft Power, International Relations

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In the domain of International Relations, sports diplomacy is seen as a crucial element, promoting joint actions in alleviating political rifts and strengthening soft power among states. The research work analyzes the diplomatic role of sports, examining how athletic activities and major sports events can contribute to today's global politics. Some of the past and present studies are explored in this research work. The key objective of the study is to effectively elaborate on the role of sports in resolving disputes, cultural connectivity, and nation branding. The study also suggests the dual nature of sports in bridging political divides and linking cultures yet it can be exploited for political agendas and interests. The study also highlights the interplay among sports diplomacy, soft power, and statecraft while arguing sports diplomacy is not a suitable replacement for traditional diplomacy.

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Contents

- [Introduction](#)
- [Introduction](#)
- [Statement of the Problem](#)
- [Research Methodology](#)
- [Objectives](#)
- [Limitations](#)
- [Literature Review](#)
- [Theoretical Framework](#)
- [Sanctions and Boycotts in Sports](#)
- [Conclusion](#)
- [References](#)
- [The Unifying Power of Sports](#)
- [Soft Power of Sports](#)
- [People to People-to-people diplomacy](#)
- [Conflict Resolution and Peace Building](#)
- [Sports, Diplomacy and Politics](#)
- [Diplomatic Use of Sports](#)
- [Ping Pong Diplomacy](#)
- [Cricket Diplomacy](#)
- [Political Use of Sports](#)
- [Propaganda and Nationalism](#)
- [Hosting Major Sporting Events for Political Gains](#)

Introduction

Sports diplomacy is demarcated as the practice of sports in fostering International Relations, building cultural links, and promoting peace and harmony (Mamchii, 2023). In sports diplomacy, diplomatic activities are carried out with representation steered by persons connected with sports and societies within which they are involved. It is the universal nature of sport that passes boundaries without any linguistic, cultural, or national parameters. As a result, sports carry effective communications across the diverse cultures of the globe. Sport is basically uniting

the divided world. Wars must be replaced by sports competitions and organized in sports stadiums instead of fighting and killing each other on battlefields (Auma, 2021). The world is transforming with every passing day with more advancements and changes due to globalization. States have to use different soft power tactics to keep in touch with such transformations.

In today's International Relations, national governments use sports as a tool as they carry the power to influence the masses massively (Bolcay, 2018). International Relations are about acquiring power and



influence, so states usually carry out such activities that influence the people of different states as well to defend their well-being and strengthen their domestic power. As sports bring different cultures together, countries use sports in their people-to-people diplomacy in the field of global politics. Sports emerged as an influential and dynamic tool, nurturing relations and understandings among political entities (Acharya, [2024](#))

Sports are considered to be part of global culture, uniting people and contributing to world peace (Boyacıoğlu & Oğuz, [2016](#)). Global sports organizations can play their role in diplomacy to improve the relations of countries and can reduce the gap between developing and developed countries as sports events offer massive revenue generation. Throughout history, sports have remained an important part of culture and social life. With the change in cultures and social lives, sports also modified from time to time. In the modern world, sports are not only about winning competitions or medals or gaining economic benefits. Sport is now a social phenomenon directly influencing and shaping the lives of the masses.

Statement of the Problem

Sports evolved as a significant diplomatic tool in International Relations yet its usefulness in obtaining foreign policy goals is not systematically analyzed. Sports act as a bridge in dismissing political divides. Sports also sometimes promote nationalism which leads to boycotts and hooliganism. The study aims to explore how far sport can have an impact on global politics.

Research Questions

1. How sports diplomacy can influence diplomatic relations of states and through what mechanisms does it work?
2. How was sports diplomacy utilized in the past and how it can be used in the present and future to further improve diplomatic ties?

Research Methodology

The data used here is collected through already existing literature. Various journals, books, reports, governmental reports, and media sources have been utilized in exploring the research work. The academic literature is mainly collected through scholarly articles, books, and conference papers on sports diplomacy. Governmental reports and policy reports by foreign ministries and international organizations are examined to make research work more comprehensive and valid.

It is also analyzed that while exploring such reports and articles, the study aims to avoid biases.

Objectives

- To study the role of sports diplomacy in past and present in International Relations.
- To estimate the influence of sports diplomacy in resolving disputes and soft power projection.
- To classify the finest practices and challenges in applying sports diplomacy strategies.
- To deliver policy commendations for governments and international organizations on leveraging sports for diplomatic interests.

Limitations

Sports have a crucial yet limited role in restoring peaceful diplomatic relations. It serves for the temporal time period and its achievements are often imperceptible. The findings may not be applied universally. National governments and mainstream media may misinterpret the outcomes of sports diplomacy. In some cases, the effects of sports diplomacy might emerge over extended periods.

Literature Review

In "Sport Diplomacy: A Review of How Sports Can Be Used to Improve International Relationships" (2017), the scholars Trunkos and Heere have stated that sports are always at the disposal of states to exert influence in global affairs. Sports are also used in the domain of public diplomacy to establish abrupt and lasting ties among nations. By impelling the lives of the people at a wider range, objectives abroad can easily be achieved. In International Relations, nations try to obtain their diplomatic goals and sport is the best tool to serve these interests as it provides ground where participants can discuss their issues. It also improves the nation's image. But sometimes sports can also deteriorate the relations as in the case of El Salvador and Honduras. There are various instances where sports diplomacy succeeded in bringing harmony among rivals. The best example of improving diplomatic relations can be seen through the lenses of Ping Pong diplomacy between the USA and China. In 2002 Japan and Korea had to negotiate with each other as both states were jointly hosting the FIFA World Cup. Sports diplomacy can improve mutual understanding while solving any conflict or enhancing trade (Trunkos & Heere, [2017](#)).

In the book, "Nation Branding and Sports Diplomacy: Country Image Games in Times of Change" (2023), the writer Dubinsky has described that sport has

been used since ancient times for posing the positive political image of states. From Greek city-states to present modern states, sports have been used for public diplomacy and nation branding. Sports are globalized now affecting all states. Events like the Olympics provide the basis for countries not only to compete with each other but also to set their positive image in the world. The outbreak of Covid 19 influenced the sport activities. It affected the way sports were played and practiced. Still, states used different methods to show the best image to the world through different sports events. Different athletes were treated as goodwill ambassadors during the pandemic to promote humanitarian and social services but sometimes these sports celebrities make controversies as well. For example, Tennis star, Djokovic missed several grand slams due to his opposition to vaccination guidelines. In that way, these athletes can affect the minds of common people. So sports and athletes can shape the image of their respective states (Dubinsky, [2023](#)).

In a research report "Sport Diplomacy: a Tool For Foreign Policy (2017)," the researcher Georgios stated that sports can be used to achieve foreign policy goals. There are various techniques using sports to gain external policy objectives. With its capacity to interconnect with far-away audiences, increase public interaction, and enhance trade, commerce, business, and diplomatic practices for the development of International Relations. These are the ways through which sport is facilitating foreign policy. Sport is a vehicle to promote political agenda, diplomatic tactics, and economic development. Soft power like cultural exchanges through sport can provide an environment to dismiss conflicts. Because of globalization, diplomats and players are well aware that they are being watched and observed. They can influence the masses so their every move is measured. Diplomatic and sports initiatives have a great impact on the lives of the general public. So sports are being used at national, cultural, and nongovernmental levels to achieve foreign policy goals (Loizou, [2017](#)).

Theoretical Framework

Soft power theory is referred to as the capability to intimidate through means of attraction rather than force (Baniya, [2021](#)). The theory of Soft Power was basically used by Nye in the 1980s where he defined soft power as the capability to compel others without using any real force. Through soft power, the behaviors and preferences of various actors can be influenced at the global level (Salinas, [2024](#)). Countries influence others by injecting cultural values, ethics, and principles. The

influence of soft power can be seen in places where the government is less involved like cinemas, sports, media channels, etc.

Sports are also a tool to acquire soft power, build a positive image, and be helpful in branding any nation. Sports diplomacy has the power to create a peaceful environment among the nations. Sports is a language understood by all that surpasses political and cultural boundaries (Krislov, [2024](#)). Sport is a platform where different communities unite, express love for the games, and in the end, learned something about each other. In this global world, sports are probably the only source where various communities of the world are connected to each other. Sports diplomacy has a meaningful impact on International Relations and there is a need for effective policies to maximize its potential (Ramabadran, [2024](#)).

The Unifying Power of Sports

In this divided world, sports are exceptional unifying connective tissues, uniting the people of various communities and cultures (Ein, [2018](#)). Sports are not just about physical competitions, they are a language understood all over the world irrespective of their cultures, backgrounds, or political lines (Ayaan, [2023](#)). Various sports around the world whether football, cricket, table tennis, or basketball, these sports ignite the passion of people. Sports capture their minds and hearts and through shared experiences, barriers of disunity and division can be reduced. During any major sporting competition like FIFA or the cricket World Cup, masses move towards the hosting nation to support their teams, players, and culture on the grounds. These sporting mega-events are a great source of uniting people of different races, creeds, and nationalities. Even the hostile nations sit together during high-profile contests like Pakistan and India during cricket matches.

Sports provide a unique platform for connecting sporting entities. This phenomenon is known as sports diplomacy, highlighting the capability of sports to prevail over cultural and political differences (D'Souza, [2024](#)). Sports competitions often put us on opposite sides but still, they can connect us. There are various instances where sports bring political entities together. For example, the most obvious case of sporting diplomacy was ping pong between the two antagonizing parties, America and the PRC. In the 2018 FIFA World Cup, South Korea beat Germany which eventually led to Mexico qualifying for the next round. It was a rare moment in sports history where fans from both sides were celebrating. Mutual respect and unity can be seen

through such games. The pursuit of victory and honor through sports has not only attracted a vast number of people but also connected them throughout history (Miranda, [2019](#)).

According to former Secretary General of UN Kofi Anan, "Sport is a language understood by all. It can unite people around the world irrespective of their bloodline, class, religion, and economic or political status. Due to the social nature of sports, it can escort instructors, athletes, and fans together around the world with a common goal (Dossaji, [2022](#)). International sporting events, leagues, and continental games bring people together. For example, fans support their favorite players and teams when they are in action, bringing people across the communities together.

Soft Power of Sports

Soft power is basically the capability of nations to indirectly reorient International Relations in their favor without any coercive means (Bourg & Gouguet, [2023](#)). Whenever there is any mega sporting event, the world becomes a global village. Due to massive shared love and its universality, sports crosses all political borders and ideologies. It is a rare domain in global geopolitics where power faces no rejection. Various countries apply sports diplomacy in their foreign politics which allows them to persuade or seduce others instead of real force. Hosting major sporting events presents the achievements, values, and capability of the hosting nation to effectively organize an event (Dubber, [2015](#)).

In the field of International Relations, Australia is an excellent example of exerting influence in the Pacific region by using sports in its foreign policy (Shuk, [2024](#)). Australia is making good progress through sports diplomacy because sports have a crucial position in its decision-making with advanced facilities and immense opportunities for athletes and coaches. The Australian government is well aware of the impact of sports on the lives of its own population and the communities in the Pacific. Sports diplomacy is an intentional tactic played by nations through the systematic organization of games, contestants, and sporting events by governments and other entities (Akhmetkarimov & Aminova, [2021](#)). The purpose of sports diplomacy International Relations is to engage, and create a more positive outlook with the ultimate goal of shaping the perceptions of the masses.

Sports are basically a parameter and code of conduct that efficiently completes sports-related tasks while embodying impartiality and feasibility (Xiaoqiao & Lihui, [2014](#)). The connection between sport and soft power is problematic as how to estimate power generated by

hosting any mega event like the Olympics or FIFA is uncertain. Hosting mega-events can lead to high commercialization with a huge impact on local and global spheres (Gouveia, [2022](#)). Sport can be used to enhance power and cooperation as its unique utility in both the cultural and diplomatic arena.

People-to-people diplomacy

Sports diplomacy is a crucial part of public diplomacy plus a reflection of soft power in global relations (Özsari, [2018](#)). Sports are basically physically oriented activities but in diplomatic spheres, sports diplomacy is shaping ideas and connecting nations through sports contests. In a society, sport acts as a vehicle for positive social changes and promotes humankind's values (Didier & Nzeyimana, [2020](#)). From ancient history to modern days, sports remains the most peaceful and influential tool in connecting diverse parts of the world. Sports diplomacy is not only important in branding the image of nations but their affairs can also be shaped through public interactions (Kobierecki, [2019](#)).

Sporting events are classic mediums to fortify public diplomacy because they are broad, enthusiastically reverberating, and global in nature (Wang, [2024](#)). Sport is a source to exchange cultural, social, and political values as it attracts a massive number of people. Playing together and watching together can help in better communication and understanding. People can directly interact with each other. Their positive interaction can lead to improvement in public perceptions, influencing decision-makers, and as a result, political rifts can be relaxed for a while. Sports diplomacy in many cases succeeded in enhancing people-to-people interactions and fostering cultural values (Chanda & Pathan, [2024](#)).

Sports are a source of social integration, connecting people of different cultures, backgrounds, and nations (Khalid & Agawane, [2024](#)). Sports cross all kinds of social barriers and promote unity and understanding among the people. Utilizing sports through sports diplomacy, the bond between people of different colors, geography, religion, and race can be strengthened (Bukhala, [2018](#)). Sports offer everyone equal opportunities to show their talents at the domestic and global levels. Sports are believed to be just and fair for all races, cultures, and religions.

Conflict Resolution and Peace Building

Sports are not only credited as an entity for overcoming or averting conflicts among nations but also for fostering peace and cultural links between nations and their people (Grix & Brannagan, [2024](#)). Sports can lead to

reconciliation among the adversary states (Cárdenas, 2019). Sport-related projects can be initiated among victim societies to promote social inclusion, breaking all societal obstacles and building bridges among the adversary groups. In recent times, the attention to understanding the part of sports diplomacy in resolving conflicts has been enhanced (Darnell, 2011).

Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) evolved as a prominent source of mediation in unprivileged societies predominantly in the developing nations (Cárdenas, 2012). Due to SDP, sports act as a sociocultural source to start reconciliations and reconstruction to avoid a wide range of conflicts (Giulianotti, 2010). Sports can assist in promoting reconciliation, CBMs, and building trust among diverse communities. This process can lead to healing, encouraging resiliency and normalcy can be restored.

During these recent years, sports personalities and organizations intervened in several conflict-affected zones and encouraged efforts to restore peace and harmony there (Serena, 2009). In 2005 sports were recognized by the world community as a peace-building factor and that year was celebrated as World Sport and Physical Education Day. The world body, UNO also termed sports diplomacy an effective tool in preventing disputes, establishing peace, and building trust.

Sport for development (SFD) is broadly used as a tool by various entities for numerous contexts and purposes. Although sports for development is not on the agenda of SDP, capitalizing on sports by states or political administrations presents another instance of how sports arrived in the sphere of International Relations (Svoboda & Šafaříková, 2021). Sports diplomacy has also contributed to attaining Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Pakistan and India, the two nuclear hostile neighbors with a bitter past, sometimes enjoy, celebrate, and connect with each other through cricket rivalry even during unpleasant days (Aslam & Hussain, 2017). Cricket diplomacy remains the most peaceful and successful tool in normalizing their relations by changing the public's perspective and sentiments. Pakistan and India had fought several wars and were still busy undermining each other but whenever situations were likely to be out of their hands, cricket proved to be a source to connect people and under the shadow of such games political dialogues took place (Iftikhar, 2017). Cricket and other sports like hockey and football can play a vital role in political settlements if such sports are given a fair opportunity. Both nations are cricket lovers and cricket had a psychological and emotional effect in their lives.

Sports, Diplomacy and Politics

Sports diplomacy in fields of International Relations, politics, and history engrossed multidisciplinary curiosity in the debate over the relation of various actors (Postlethwaite, Jenkin, & Sherry, 2023). As sports diplomacy finds a suitable place in global politics questions are arising as to whether sports and politics are separable or whether sport is a tool of politics. It is quite hard to define both terms, politics and sports. The relationship between sport and politics is as is the distinction between diplomacy and politics in International Relations (Murray, 2024). Till the passing of the 19th century sport was mainly applied for martial objectives for the formation of national identities. But it is also obvious that the first nations in history used both sports and politics for various purposes. So basically sports and politics have been together since the beginning and are inseparable moving parallel to each other.

In the 20th century, substantial developments were observed in relation to politics and sports (Edmonson, 2024). Sports and politics are an integral part of contemporary International Relations. There are many instances where both sports and politics are implemented together. During the Nazi era in 1936, Olympic Games were used to promote the national agenda. The Munich Games of 1972 turned out to be a massacre after 11 Israeli athletes were abducted and killed by pro-Palestinians. Modern events like the Olympics or FIFA World Cups especially in Middle Eastern countries emphasize the role of politics in sports. Sports events and organizations continue to promote cultural links and cooperation among people and their national governments to reduce separation and division among them (Esherick, Baker, Jackson, & Sam, 2017).

Sports might be perceived as neutral and irrelevant to politics, but it is not true (Dosari, 2021). Sports are socially practiced games between individuals and states, so with the involvement of states, politics enters the field of sports. In contemporary International Relations, there is a prominent relationship between sports and global politics, as global swings are underway with liberal domination and the emergence of some non-Western powers (Lee & Krieger, 2024). The Olympic boycotts during the 1980 and 1984 games by the capitalist and communist powers highlight the involvement of politics in sports.

Diplomatic Use of Sports

In the present era of global politics, sports diplomacy

shined as a prominent factor in enhancing international cooperation, dialogues, and mutual understanding (Mirzayeva, 2024). Sports diplomacy is about relaxing political tensions and enhancing cooperation and CBMs through sports. Sports are used and discussed at diplomatic levels to shatter the shadows of mistrust and conflict. There is no universal theory or definition that describes exactly what sports diplomacy is (Postlethwaite, Jenkin, & Sherry, 2023). From the state's point of view, sports diplomacy is connected to the complex and complicated nature of International Relations. The early scholarly work shows sport as a tool to propagate governmental agenda.

The international mega sporting events have contributed several times to better cultural and diplomatic relations on the global stage, showing an excellent connection between sports, culture, and diplomacy (Goytom, 2024). The interaction through sports builds understanding, respect, and a positive image among the masses. In contemporary International Relations, the hosting of mega-sporting events is basically defining the relations between the countries (Wang, 2024).

Ping Pong Diplomacy

Sport is a global spectacle and a political tool with massive potential and prospects (Cherniaev, Trusova, & Martynenko, 2019). History is full of such examples where countries used those tactics to accomplish national interests. The ping pong diplomacy ratified that datum as it proved to be a major development between two antagonist parties US and China. In 1971, the 31st Championship Table Tennis was held in Japan and China was eventually part of it (Kobierecki, 2016). Although China strongly opposed and boycotted almost every sports event in which Taiwan was participating as a separate nation. But to avoid isolation, China agreed to send its team and it was the first time that U.S. and Chinese players were to interact with each other. The US and PRC did not recognize each other diplomatically and Ping Pong diplomacy opened that window (Bridges, 2020). The US was also interested in establishing ties with China and the Ping Pong games were just diplomatic tactics to check public reaction and it worked for both nations.

It was 1971 when Americans visited China twice, first when US tennis players played friendly matches in China and the second was the visit of a diplomat Henry Kissinger (Millwood, 2022). Sports between the two was basically the turning point in their political relations. With the visit of Kissinger, trust was building especially over

PRC recognition, the Taiwan issue, and Vietnam's war (Xu, 2022). After the communist revolution of 1949 in China, the relations between the PRC and the US were pigeonholed by boycotts, trade embargos, and rivalry.

The Sino-American alliance was broken soon after the US started to support nationalists in China, although they were defeated, still they managed to control the island of Taiwan militarily (Triakiotis, 2011). The US also recognized the government of nationalists which further complicated their relations with China. The relations between China and the Soviet Union in 1969 also deteriorated with clashes at the border. U.S. did not support an escalation of tensions with the chances of WW3, so all they wanted was to turn these events in their own favor (Carter & Sugden, 2012).

The relations between China and the US improved and the Cold War climate was diverted a little bit due to the continuous efforts of some diplomats and table tennis players (Hong & Sun, 2000). After the revolution, China changed its stance over boycotting several sporting bodies for political gains. Only sport is not sufficient to normalize or deteriorate diplomatic relations (Qingmin, 2013). During the early 1970s, Chinese leadership realized the importance of sports and introduced 'friendship first, competition second' in the field of sports.

During the Cold War era, it was common to send coaches to other states to get new knowledge and skills but also to enhance public diplomacy (Kuo & Kuo, 2021). Sports were basically used as political tools to normalize the heightened tensions. After the visit of President Nixon of China in 1972, Chinese influence has also increased gradually in the Pacific region (Allgood, 2012). The reason for its increase in its influence is its economic policies and also due to improved relations with the US through ping pong diplomacy, interaction with the rest of the world also increased.

The outcome of the Ping Pong diplomacy during the Cold War era stunned the global stakeholders (Noyes, 2004). Sports can throw away hostilities and adversities between states and ping pong is such an example where two rival states established their diplomatic relations (Hoque, 2024).

Cricket Diplomacy

The relations between two South Asian neighbors, Pakistan and India mirror power politics, making them adversaries, contesting for interests and identity (Misson, 2022). Living with the logic of power politics, both nations are surviving with security dilemmas and militarized geopolitics. Cricket is believed to be the most

famous sport in the sub-continent especially in Pakistan and India (Aslam, Hussain, & Ali, 2020). Both nations are full of cricket craze and is the only sport to unite them in grounds.

The idea of cricket diplomacy was presented by General Zia during Pak-India matches in Jaipur in 1987 (Eleferenko, 2024). Cricket can be used as a strategic diplomatic asset to negotiate, settle differences, to enhance communications and interactions. Cricket instead of serving conflict resolution and confidence building between India and Pakistan, is being used for reconciliation after some kind of dispute management (Moolakkattu, 2021). Pakistan and India can utilize cricket diplomacy for confidence building and it can be helpful in restoring peace and reinforcing peace talks.

Cricket is often regarded as a tool to endorse goodwill and negotiations between Pakistan and India during intense political scenarios (Bhuiyan, 2024). Memories of the past still haunt the minds of the masses and highly contesting matches between India and Pakistan ignited their feelings which several times led to controversies among players and eventually made headlines in mainstream media. Since partition, territorial disputes have been the main obstacles between India and Pakistan which is halting peace talks (Flamenbaum & Neville, 2011). Instead of fighting over Kashmir and other territories, both can jointly adopt economic cooperation and other measures to solve their long-lasting issues.

Political Use of Sports

Sport is a vital tool to serve political ends of various kinds. Since the political leaders have seen the potential of sports in modern times, they seem to make it political (Jönsson, 2012). Sports have such potential that it crosses all political borders. Decision makers and governments usually review their policies regarding participating in sporting events as sports represent national unity and excellence with a direct impact on political judgments (Sam, 2003). Sports are part of national policies because they can shape long-term future plans.

The time is gone when athletes were used to showing their physique and talents through sporting events but now sports become part of communication politics (Budiasa, 2024). With sports being played all around the globe, the interaction between the masses and political entities is also increasing. There is also a misperception about making political use of sports and how to make them separable from politics (Bell, 2008). Sports and politics go parallel together in many cases.

Athletes have no political rights in sports or they cannot express any political idea to the masses as such ideas are suppressed by the sporting regime. But sometimes some politically oriented ideas are approved by the sporting bodies for the time being like Black Lives Matter or equal rights for the LGBTQ community (Meeuwssen & Kreft, 2022). The politics of sports have transformed since 2020 with the transformation of traditional beliefs of sports power and influence (Cashmore, Dixon, & Cleland, 2023).

Propaganda and Nationalism

Since the 20th century, sport has become a source of propaganda. Sports nowadays are multinationals and several multinational business organizations use sports for propaganda (Igova, 2017). Highly contesting sports lead to nationalistic feelings which political entities in return use for their own favor. In the modern world, sports represent the national identity or nationality of the sporting entities (Brentin & Cooley, 2015). Such national identities and national branding lead to the involvement of governments to propagate their own national interests.

Sports are being used as a soft tactic by authoritarian regimes not only to build a nation but also to brand national image and respect on the global stage (Koch, 2013). Such soft authoritarian regimes rely on positive tactics rather than hard tactics to enhance political power. Sports are transforming from a cultural-historical to socio-political phenomenon in this globalized world (Korneeva & Ogurtsov, 2016). Sports are institutionalized in this modern era due to high high-yielding economic market and information society.

Hosting Major Sporting Events for Political Gains

Sports have become an inclusive market where importance is given to the dominant culture and political economy (Culpan & Meier, 2016). Just like commodities and services in the market, players are also used for services based on contracts.

One can see the relationship between sport and politics as a perfect couple for a perfect marriage (Lin, Lee, & Nai, 2009). There are many instances where countries intervened in sports for political gains. The ranking system in sporting events especially after the inclusion of the former USSR in the 1952 Olympic Games, media started to present medals of winning nations and states used them for socio-political gains (Štaud, 2014).

Sanctions and Boycotts in Sports

The Russian invasion of Ukraine sanctions on the Russian sporting team's inclusion in international events and Qatar's hosting FIFA World Cup have again reignited debates over relations between sports and politics (Belcastro, [2023](#)). Different kinds of sanctions and suspensions are forced upon players, teams, organizations, and states when they are believed to be involved in undesired activities. From Hitler's power show through the Berlin Olympics to the present day, the Olympics display the political position of states (Noshadha & Duka, [2023](#)).

Sanctions and boycotts usually reduce or completely cut interactions due to the behavior of states unresponsive of international law or human rights (Loland, [2021](#)). The Berlin Games of 1936 also labeled as Nazi Olympics were controversial facing boycotts from various nations (Baka, Taylor, & Haycraft, [2023](#)). Melbourne Olympics of 1956 also met with the same fate with the USSR invasion of Hungary and the Suez crisis looming at that time.

Conclusion

However, despite such challenges and limitations, sports diplomacy has remained a defining soft power instrument in International Relations. In a true sense, the soft power of sports diplomacy is not fully meant to resolve conflicts but to minimize the chances of conflicts during a highly hostile political environment, opening the channels of communication and fostering grassroots connectivity. To realize the full capability and potential of sports diplomacy, it is important to continue political dialogues, and efforts to be made for confidence-building measures (CBMs). Sports must be protected from zero-sum nationalistic perspectives. The politically oriented propaganda, boycotts, and identical sentiments are undermining the potential of sports diplomacy as a neutral diplomatic asset. Sports alone cannot mend the highly contested relations but can provide essential assistance in minimizing the hostility. Sports diplomacy can promote cultural exchanges and keep hopes alive for the peaceful coexistence of nations.

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