

## Sporting Diplomacy: Bridging Soft Law, Global Governance, And Sustainable Development In International Relations

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### Abstract

*How can states leverage international sports events to strengthen their international relations? The main discussion of this research essay is on the tools that the nation-states already have at their disposal. It can be said that sport diplomacy comes under public diplomacy which is uniquely utilized to enhance immediate and long-term relations between states by manipulating or influencing the foreign public to fulfill foreign policy goals. By reviewing the different aspects leading to sports diplomacy, the research essay will look into multilateral diplomacy and discuss the impact and effectiveness of sports as an arena of diplomacy. The most common objectives are as follows.*

- a. *giving an unofficial cause and venue for world leaders to convene and start a conversation.*
- b. *providing information about the host nation and enlightening others about it.*
- c. *bringing together cultural and linguistic differences among the nation-states as a means to come under a common ground through sports.*
- d. *Providing a platform for new trade agreements and legislations.*

**Keywords:** *International, Sports, Diplomacy, Foreign, Public, Policy.*

### 1. Introduction

Countries interact on a daily basis and have continuous interactions on many social, political, economic and military issues. Hence, how such issues are tackled and what foreign policies are implemented are according to the interests of the leaders. According to the Realistic Worldview, conflict can always happen between nations, so the implementation of diplomatic tools such as Sports Diplomacy cannot be the first choice of action (Morgenthau, Thompson & Clinton, 1985). However, the Liberalist Worldview prioritized state interaction, resulting in peace more than the realists. According to them, conflict is an obvious choice, but there are also alternative tools to ensure peace, such as sports diplomacy, economic diplomacy, etc. (Beacom, 2000).

Modern diplomacy can be traced back to the fifth-century Italian city-states, where the aim of diplomacy was to establish a medium of communication between the monarch and state (Rosenberg, 1992). However, nowadays, diplomacy can be said to be the “management of international relations through negotiations” (Ogunseye, 2023). After official diplomatic negotiations between the states come dialogues between other forms of diplomacy. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, new technological communication tools have emerged, such as sports diplomacy (Murray, 2012). It can be rightfully stated that sports have been a major source of unity and competition between nations. Such an event has the power to transcend borders, ideologies, and different national and regional cultures and bring together the notion of competition and camaraderie. In the realm of politics and history, the term “sports

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diplomacy” attracts multi-disciplinary attention, which surrounds discussions between various actors (Houlihan & Malcolm, 2015). The elements included in the phrase are interactions between nation-states and territories as well as non-state actors and different individuals within global sports.

Sports Diplomacy is the utilization of specific sports teams, athletes, or athletic events to become the messengers of nations' diplomatic messages to support international peace, promote peace and build cultural exchange between nations (Murray & Pigman, 2014). A major example of the written piece has been published in the 2014 special issue “Sports in Society”, where authors Geoffrey Pigman and Simon Rofe focused on the theoretical relationship between sports and diplomacy, referring to the London 2012 Olympic Games, Manchester United, Ilie Natase and Romanian tennis and many more (Munt, 2015). The following research essay will discuss the various provisions and aspects leading to the topic. It will establish the soft law notion in the context of international relations. Next, it would investigate global governance and the impact of sports organizations on diplomatic development. Furthermore, the research essay delves into sustainable development aligning sporting events. It will also discuss the enhancement of soft power and Nation Branding. Lastly, it will identify the challenges and criticisms leading to sporting diplomacy.

## **2. Literature Review**

According to Murray and Pigman (2014), there are two different categories of sports and diplomacy. The first category is termed traditional sports diplomacy, which comprises cases and events where global sports were intentionally waged by the government as a tool of diplomacy. This category includes actions such as communication within the states or sporting events taken as a tool to die down diplomatic relations for policy change. For example, in 2018, the People’s Republic of Korea and South Korea rekindled diplomatic relations and took it as an opportunity to unite under one flag (Snyder, 2018). The second category is sports diplomacy for representation, communication and negotiation between non-state actors as a means of continuous sporting competition (Anderson, 2017). This is also known as non-traditional sports diplomacy. For example, in the 2006 World Cup, Germany took major steps in hiring translators from around the world to overcome the negative image of their Nazi background. These steps supported the country to interact with all the negative impressions other nations had in terms of their approach to the modern world (Grix & Houlihan, 2014).

Over the years, to establish sports diplomacy, a number of strategies have been applied. The first strategy applied was Official and Sports Diplomacy Solidarity, which said that in order to utilize sports diplomacy effectively, it is important for a nation's official stance in sports to eventually apply to the country’s specific public diplomacy (Abdi et al., 2018). In general, it means that the sports officials must convey the same message as the country’s diplomatic core (Cha, 2009). For example, according to Chehabi, (2001), when Iran’s national soccer team went to play in the 1998 FIFA World Cup in France, the then-elected President Mohammad Khatami wanted to establish friendlier relations in America by using the World Cup as a tool to enhance political relations which was generally called the Nixon’s ping-pong diplomacy (Shahid, 2012). Again, in 2000, an invitation from America subsided the existing tensions further. However, the inconsistent actions of the President, such as favouring the wrestlers of America and ignoring the Russian Team, neither had a positive impact of this purposeful behaviour on the public of America nor did it conciliate the officials of America (Giahshenas, 2013).

The second strategy was a skilful action, which prompted the utilization of a Competent Cultural Ambassador (Parrish et al., 2022). This helped in achieving the sports diplomacy goals of particular nations implementing this strategy. Sports enthusiasts, athletes, coaches, and officials are all ambassadors for two sets of values (Bardocz-Bencsik, Begović &

Dóczy, 2021). The first is national, which is tradition-specific, and the second is universal, which talks about fair play, human rights, etc. It is because of cultural variations that it is imperative to use caution when using national principles in international interactions. For example, Michelle Kwan, a Chinese-American chosen as an ambassador by the Bush administration, effectively bridged two cultures with her distinct viewpoint. In her capacity as the first American Public Diplomacy Envoy, she demonstrated how prominent athletes can serve as powerful worldwide ambassadors, building strong relationships and fostering favourable perceptions of their nations (Seib, 2009).

The third global strategy that was applied was the High-Performance Strategy. This was subdivided into two major divisions. The first is Best Records, and the second is Best Management (Whitfield & Poole, 1997). The strategy of maintaining the Best Record was absolute in nature. Since the public only remembers the winner of the highest level of competition. Eventually, media attention will also focus more on these individuals and their record of the country (Davenport & Harris, 2017). For example, the failure of a third-world country in a FIFA World Cup semi-final can be taken as a great achievement. However, established countries such as Germany can be taken to be disastrous with this outcome (Moore, 2018). On the other hand, the Best Management division includes managerial aspects that impact the logistics of holding sporting events. Mega-events such as the Olympics and FIFA World Cup need to be managed efficiently. A small error in security management can lead to unexpected sporting results (Jennings & Lodge, 2011). For example, in the 1968 Olympic Games, the decision of the Mexican Government to remove the underprivileged from the country led to worldwide disturbances, protests and negative press (Witherspoon, 2003). Sometimes, even image-building strategies can fail (Nygård & Gates, 2013).

The last strategy that was implemented was the provision of Media Coverage (Li, 2013). In general words, it meant converting the resources of sporting diplomacy to effective diplomatic outcomes. Such action could only be possible if this particular approach were communicated globally with the help of international media. According to Cull (2009), the most favourable way to utilize the tools of sports diplomacy is with the help of media, radio, television, etc. Again, Raney and Bryant (2014) are of the view that media has brought the excitement of sports even in normal households. Hence, from all these coherent strategies, this literature review explicitly covers how sporting diplomacy has been utilized over the years and what strategies have been used to convert resources and establish sports diplomacy in relation to public diplomacy.

### **3. Research Methodology**

The idea of utilizing sports as an instrument of diplomacy among the states is not unique or new to those working in the academic field of political or social sciences. However, there are only examples of its effectiveness, but no concrete evidence has been revealed yet. The following research essay puts forward the past, present and future means of using sports as a tool to promote diplomacy. Firstly, essential books and articles in the field - both academic and press material were analysed in order to establish a general understanding of the topic in this particular research essay. A more detailed reference list can be found at the end of the research essay for a better understanding of the fundamental works in relation to sports and diplomacy. The main academic researchers have been done using the following.

Abdi, K., Talebpour, M., Fullerton, J., Ranjkesh, M. J., & Jabbari Nooghabi, H. (2018). Converting sports diplomacy to diplomatic outcomes: Introducing a sports diplomacy model. *International area studies review*, 21(4), 365-381.

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- Based on their respective findings, this particular research essay identifies different dimensions that have been discussed below.

#### **4. Soft Law in International Relations**

The term "power" is one of the key concepts of international relations (Baldwin, 2013). For a long time, Realists and Neorealists were of the view that interstate relations were the states that were seeking power and demanding to dominate other states. Though in modern society, power is largely an ability to get influenced, however it is usually divided into hard power and soft power (Machiavelli, 1532/2010). Hard power today is aligned with military interventions that do not incorporate other forms of influence, such as cultural or sports events. Therefore, Nye, (1990) concept of soft power is exercised through democratic values, human rights and opportunities. Utilizing soft power incorporates different cultural missions such as language schools, Medals in the Olympics and even the quantity of a country's overall growth. Hence, it can be said that Soft power enhances familiarity by promoting a nation's culture, sports, and resources, by changing the country's global reputation (Rookwood, 2019). A strong and positive reputation is crucial for a country to be an attractive role model. The Influence of the attributes measures a nation's impact on others, including its economic model, digital engagement, and sports performance. Government effectiveness and multi-alignment with common goals also contribute to a country's soft power, making it more influential on the global stage.

Additionally, throughout the history of the US-Japan international relations, baseball has always been important. The visit of Babe Ruth in 1934 was a way to build camaraderie between the Japanese Americans and the American public. Additionally, baseball player Lefty O'Doul's image was utilised to mend ties between the nation-states after World War II (Rofe, 2016). In the modern day, the game still helps in uniting the two forces. It can be said that sports diplomacy can increase understanding, but it's not infallible. The Olympics in Beijing in 2008 and the 2022 World Cup in Qatar brought attention to human rights concerns. Again, interstate rivalries and nationalism were stoked by sports, as the 1972 Olympic basketball final was demonstrated. Furthermore, events such as Russia's invasion following the Winter Olympics in 2014 demonstrate how sports may conceal geopolitical objectives. Another issue is "sports washing," which refers to the use of athletics to deflect criticism of human rights violations, as shown in the instance of Qatar (Rookwood, 2019).

## 5. Global Governance and Sports Organizations

Sports are maintained, controlled and contested by a large number of organisations, which are collectively called global sports organisations (GSO). This GSO can be termed as the main organ of governance whose authority is global. The different organisations included in the GSO are The International Federation of Football Associations (FIFA), the International Olympic Committee (IOC), the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) and the World Anti-Doping Authority (WADA) respectively (Cooper, Heine & Thakur, 2013). Over the years, a more systematic approach to sports governance has been lacking and is long overdue. One of the prime reasons for such lack is the perception of corruption within the major GSOs. However, despite such concerns, the developing body of international sports is more concerned on governing athletes' behaviour and their personal relationship with their organisations and its rules.

Global Sporting Organizations (GSOs) can be broadly classified into three types and fulfil a variety of purposes. First, a few, like FIFA, control sports all over the world. Second, other organizations that manage international athletic events include the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and its associated International World Games Association (Moyo, 2018). Last but not least, several GSOs concentrate on specific tasks, such as FIMS for sports medicine, WADA for anti-doping, and ICAS and CAAS for sports arbitration. These characteristics emphasize global governance, event monitoring, and specialized services in the sports industry. This highlights the variety of responsibilities that GSOs portray.

Excluding market-driven entities, organisations such as the NBA, and continental agencies such as the UEFA, global sporting plays an important role worldwide. Though they do not oversee all the sporting events, big organizations such as the NBA and NHL have a different way of working than their respective GSOs. Unlike other non-governmental organisations, GSOs are mainly known for their commercial significance and their large provisions for income generation. Hence, the Olympics and the World Cup, which claim to be internationally significant cultural phenomena, demonstrate the cultural and economic influence of GSOs in the sports industry.

## 6. Sustainable Development Through Sporting Events

The World Commission on Environment and Development formally introduced the term "sustainable development" in 1987. It is defined as growth that fulfils the requirements of the present without affecting the capacity of future generations to fulfil their personal demands while maintaining proper equilibrium in social welfare, environmental preservation and economic growth (WCED, 1987). Sustainable development is divided into three components for human development, namely, economic, social and environmental (Biggeri & Mauro, 2018). In the current day world, different sporting events or mega-social concentrations promote both social and institutional aspects of sustainable development. The Olympic Movement is one of the main organisations that acknowledges the UNCED baton. It adopted the Agenda 21: Sport for Sustainable Development (Death, 2010). Additionally, the way the MSE organisers take human rights, labour conditions and communication with local communities into consideration can affect societal welfare and create potential inequalities. From an environment point of view, MSE significantly is a part of the carbon emission. Hence, these events lead to the addition of carbon dioxide to the atmosphere, which has grievous consequences. For example, the 2020 Tokyo Olympics had to postpone a lot of its events due to unnatural tropical storms and extremely warm weather conditions, and it is presumed that in future, nearly half of the previous host countries shall not be able to host mega-events (Oblinger-Peters & Krenn, 2020).

Therefore, sporting organizations and event management companies have started incorporating sustainable practices to ensure their commitment to environmental stewardship. The NBA Green initiative by the National Basketball Association promotes environmental sustainability (Trendafilova, Babiak & Heinze, 2013). It encourages actions such as recycling its arenas, installing energy-efficient lighting systems and encouraging the fans of particular teams to use public transportation to reach the event venue. Another significant example is the use of sustainable measures to reduce carbon footprints by Johan

Cruyff Arena, which is the main stadium in Amsterdam and also the home base of Ajax and the Dutch national team (Cade et al., 2013). The arena is provided lighting by more than 4000 solar panels. There are also provisions for collecting rainwater from the roof to water the field. Sports athletes have demonstrated to become loyal advocates for sustainable development, which can impact their fan's perceptions. For example, Serena Williams, who is an American Tennis role model, supports ecosystem sustainability through her vegan clothing brand named "Serena" (D'Olivo & Karana, 2021). She supports a low-carbon lifestyle and also invests in US plant-based protein meat producers and other sustainable start-ups.

### **7. Sporting Events as Platforms for Cultural Diplomacy**

According to some research, permanent and constructive dialogue is important to promote cultural diplomacy as a means to tackle social and political issues (Kozymka, 2014). According to the UNESCO International Charter of Physical Education and Sports, sports are an essential part of showcasing courage, justice, wisdom and self-achievement (Mabillard & Jádi, 2011). Moreover, sports are a common language that is considered to be universal for people around the world. Hence, the term "Olympic Truce" was introduced to bring together different individuals and their cultures (Loland & Selliaas, 2009). This popularity and global attraction to sporting diplomacy allows people to transcend national, cultural, socio-economic and political boundaries. If cultural diplomacy focuses on cultural exchanges as well as mutual understanding, then it can be said that sports are explicitly a part of such an aspect. For example, the UEFA Euro Championship was co-hosted by two neighbouring countries, Poland and Ukraine, in 2012 and thirteen different European Countries in 2021 (Ludvigsen & Petersen-Wagner, 2022). The upcoming championship shall be hosted by the UK and Ireland in 2028 and by Italy and Turkey in 2032. This approach of co-hosting establishes bilateral- relations among the two nations and also enhances communication.

Sport as a tool for cultural diplomacy has already recorded many successes, both at the regional and international levels (Busolo, 2016). From the ancient Greek era, sport has been an instrument of diplomacy. The Greeks introduced the Olympic Competition to address the Greek god Geus (Pococke Ottley & Rutt, 1852). The Games were held every four years, lasting up to 3 months. However, modern sports from the 19th and 20th centuries onwards have portrayed cultural competencies through the establishment of the International Olympic Committee, which organized the Olympic games in Athens and consecutively different other organisations such as the International Football Federation FIFA (Bale & Christensen, 2020). From a political point of view, the involvement of sports in cultural diplomacy can be due to goodwill before 1939. However, the shift occurred when Hitler exploited the 1936 Olympics to further his agenda before World War II. During the Cold War, the USSR placed a strong emphasis on sporting victory (Redihan, 2017). There was, nevertheless, room for sports-based cultural diplomacy to promote amicable ties. In the 1970s, American ping-pong players visited China as part of "ping-pong diplomacy" to foster understanding. With an emphasis on fair play, UNESCO introduced the International Charter of Physical Education and Sport on a global scale in 1978. Following the end of the Cold War, the European Commission drafted the European Sports Charter in 1992. Additionally, international competitions have given the leaders the platform to interact in non-conflict settings to strengthen soft power and international influence. This was demonstrated during the FIFA World Cup 2018 in Russia, where dignitaries held constructive discussions and promoted the host country (Koch, 2018). Large-scale exchanges between Russians and foreign spectators throughout the event fostered harmony, dismantled boundaries, and improved the world's opinion of Russia.

### **8. Soft Power and Nation Branding Through Sports**

According to Fan, (2010), Nation Branding can be defined as a process of creating, monitoring, evaluating and managing the image of the nation with the view of developing a country's reputation within a target audience. This definition puts more focus on the

process and actions that the stakeholders uphold to improve the nation's image management. Over the last few decades, Sporting Diplomacy has been enhanced in countries that have been utilizing it for different purposes. With special mention, sporting diplomacy has hugely impacted in National branding, attractiveness and global reputation (Deos, 2014). Therefore, in recent years, sports have been helping a country to develop its appeal and influence by offering good opportunities for diplomatic engagement (Gibson, Qi & Zhang, 2008). Within different varieties of mega-events, sports mega-events have come to be of prime relevance since hosting such events has become an object of policy for enhancing the number of nation-states “as a means to develop international visibility” (Cornelissen, 2007). These are the means to achieve international prominence and national prestige.

An important example of this approach has been evident in China in the 2008 Olympic Games, which was only done to increase the global image. Again, more recently, in 2016-2050 Chinese Football, a medium and long-term development plan have been initiated which aligns with the notion of national branding and economic attractiveness (National Development and Reform Commission – People’s Republic of China, 2016). Such action prompts the making of a powerful nation with the promotion of economic and social development of the Chinese Dream. Again, sporting diplomacy is also used to re-brand a nation. For example, the Sydney Olympics in 2000 helped in identifying Australia as a tourist destination for the next 10 years (Moyo, 2018). Again, Germany hosted the 2006 FIFA World Cup, which helped the nation to emerge as a softened and boosted country that can be a bidder for hosting mega-sports events to enhance its reputation (Cornelissen & Maennig, 2010).

Additionally, it is often perceived that sports diplomacy has a common tendency to allow a nation to further its interest internationally. For example, Australia launched a plan in 2015 that links sports to national goals in order to strengthen ties, promote growth, and increase diplomatic influence. However, with a 2030 deadline, this plan seeks to advance Australian sports and assist athletes throughout the globe in advancing national goals (Cooper, Heine & Thakur, 2013). It also contributes to the growth of investment, trade, and tourism. Again, similar to a "corporate diplomacy" concept, sports diplomacy involves planning events with a variety of players, influencing media narratives, and building a country's reputation (Hutchins & Rowe, 2012). In the end, sports are used as a political instrument to represent a country's ideals internationally. For example, Japan introduced the Sport 4 Tomorrow (Set) Consortium, which incorporated the Foreign Ministry (Lengrand, 2019). This established strategy puts focus on cooperation with the developing countries. This strategy serves as an approach to enhance or stabilize mutual understanding between Japan and other countries. Another example is France specifically trying to include sports diplomacy in this diplomatic relationship by linking it with the economic interests of the nation (Rofe, 2016). France takes sports as the key to building the attractiveness of the country. It particularly has its own sports ambassador and also has strategies that prioritise networking and making sport an indispensable part of French Economic Diplomacy.

### **9. Sports Diplomacy in Conflict Resolution**

Global conflicts and their resolutions are specifically intertwined with migration since it marks a key factor in sports diplomacy (Mabillard & Jádi, 2011). Within the realm of international sports, both highly talented and susceptible mobility of athletes contributes to the identification of politics and their societal connections. It is often observed that realpolitik and ethical aspects of foreign policy are taken into account while bidding for mega events and labour migration in elite sports. Through athletic achievement, nation-states are in a continuous tiff for securing competition to establish status, by frequently applying possible means. On the other hand, a strategy that is ethically grounded can foster international collaboration and enhance the development of the nation through sports in connection with the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Nowadays, athlete migration has become a common tool for resolving disputes and highlighting the common ideologies in the international sporting industry.

In the arena of finding peace and resolving disputes, there is a continuous recognition of a potential connection between conflict resolution, sports and the maintenance of peace. Though there are a lot of negative aspects of commercialization and political tensions in the sports industry, there are various examples that highlight the ways in which sports have contributed to unifying communities and providing a solution to the conflict. For example, The African National Congress leaders formed a football league in Robben Island, also known as the Makana Football Association. This association follows the rules of FIFA. This was done as a means of survival in the global market and intentional creation of a space of dignity during imprisonment. Additionally, Nelson Mandela used this sport to reconcile in Post-Apartheid South Africa, especially during the Rugby World Cup in 1995. Furthermore, FC Barcelona's FutbolNet Program, the English football clubs and the role played by Didier Drogba in the Ivorian Civil War also establish the ways in which sports can reduce bridges between both nations, enhance peace-building measures and promote communication (Henry, 2012). Hence, the Sports Development and Peace (SDP) sector has been provided with a major opportunity of establishing the positive impact of sports in conflict resolution.

## **10. Challenges and Criticisms of Sporting Diplomacy**

**10. 1 Sports Washing:** Developed countries such as China, Russia, Qatar have been subject to criticisms for utilizing cultural and sports diplomacy in diverting attention from real concerns of social and human rights issues. Qatar received criticism and faced controversy for emitting carbon in the FIFA World Cup and also made it to the newspapers regarding migrant worker deaths.

**10. 2 Impact of the Environment:** The recent FIFA World Cup was criticised for polluting the environment on the facilities provided in the event. This raises genuine concern for environmental sustainability even after the false promises of carbon neutrality.

**10.3 Migrant Worker Rights:** Over the years, the World Cup preparations have been highlighted on reports of the death of numerous migrant workers and also the violation of their human rights. Different researchers are of the view that the future hosting events should be responsible and include inclusive approaches.

**10.4 Lack of Government Coordination:** The majority of the time, the Government of the United States have been called out to manage future events since many of the events are streamlined and have coordination issues. Most of the time, they are unable to handle the challenges of policy changes in areas of environmental sustainability, human rights, immigration, equality and national security.

## **11. Conclusion**

In conclusion, this research essay's analysis of the complex dynamics of sports diplomacy highlights the field's varied applications in international relations. Sports-related soft power and cultural impact play a major role in a country's international standing and brand. But the obstacles which include rights for migrant workers, environmental issues, and government cooperation—highlight how important it is to take responsible and sustainable measures. Sports diplomacy is becoming a powerful weapon for encouraging understanding, overcoming differences, and, when used responsibly, contributing to conflict resolution and peace-building on a global scale as the world navigates geopolitical challenges. Sport has a huge impact on our daily lives and, like other global cultural phenomena like popular music, food, and dance, it involves a universal language that is understood by all.

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