

SPORTS DIPLOMACY: DEVELOPMENT AND PRACTICE

(Review article)

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Abstract

Sports, with their ability to appeal to people across borders, have become a valuable tool for governments of many countries to pursue higher political interests. This research elaborates on the manners in which sports diplomacy, as a composite part of public diplomacy, is put to practice in modern international relations. It finds that sports diplomacy has a beneficial effect on, among other things, improving public perceptions of countries, promoting countries' political influence and the spread of their culture and values, as well as fostering the peace.

Keywords: *public diplomacy, country brand, Olympic Games, international sports manifestations, foreign policy, diplomacy and sports collaboration, traditional diplomacy, cultural influence*

INTRODUCTION

Sports, in their many forms, have the power to reach a wide portion of the world population, to inspire passion and interest in demographics not limited by age, gender, culture, or social background. Hence, sports are an appealing tool that countries often use for diplomatic purposes. This symbiosis of fields manifests itself most often in the form of organizing international sports manifestations, hiring renowned figures in the world of sports as country emissaries, or sending political signals through sporting events. However, it is greatly more flexible and diverse in its approach than the traditional diplomatic activities. This practice, referred to as "sports diplomacy", is hardly a new development and examples of its application in foreign affairs of the great powers can be traced back to the Cold War era. Nevertheless, sports diplomacy today has a more prominent, more official place in international relations due to the incorporation of institutional measures dedicated to its development in many states.

Regardless of the history of inclusion of sports in foreign policy, only in the last few years there is a noticeable trend among political scientist in tackling this portion of public diplomacy. The redirection of the focus toward sports diplomacy in research on international relations is an indication of, first, the increased relevance of public diplomacy in the modern globalized world and, second, the importance attached to sports as an alternative tool of foreign policy. As Murray (2011) notes, the collaboration between diplomacy and sports

should not come as a surprise, given the representative character they share:

„ ... sport and diplomacy naturally gravitate toward one another: both institutions are staffed by patriots representing their state as a privilege of international duty and whether it is the roundtable or the running track, both sports people and diplomats want to win for their state. Therefore, there is an obvious symbiosis.” (Murray, 2011, p. 11)

This paper reflects on the expansive interest among leading economic powers in the inclusion and development of sports diplomacy. The research shows that sports are on the agenda of official diplomatic strategies and that it is increasingly utilized to serve higher political, security and economic goals. Through individual representative examples, this paper explores how sports diplomacy can be applied in the context of expanding cultural influences, mitigating international conflicts, and promoting country brands.

Sports Diplomacy as Soft Power

Since the beginning of the 20th century, diplomacy has evolved to accommodate the fact that public opinion is ever more influential in international relations. The actions of diplomatic officials are under the public's watchful eye and dependant on the interpretations media give to diplomatic achievements (Stearns, 1979).

Hence, changes in traditional diplomacy were needed. Traditional diplomacy, which refers to relations between symmetrical actors, i.e. representatives

of states or international organizations, made way for communication with the general public in third states. This expansion in diplomatic competences is called *public diplomacy*. It serves to address foreign audiences and modify their opinions with the aim of increasing a state's international influence and implementing its foreign policy goals (Ushkovska (Ушковска), 2013). Public diplomacy represents a battle for the hearts and minds of the global auditorium. What Harvard professor Nye (2004) calls "soft power", the power of opinions, often proved equally important to military might, particularly because public diplomacy boosts a state's credibility and legitimacy in the international arena (Melissen, 2005).

Yet, public diplomacy represents a lot more than simply giving statements to the foreign press; it implies engaging diplomacy with foreign audiences by utilizing the export nature of literature, music, film, and, ultimately, sports. Sports diplomacy, as a subcategory of public diplomacy, has recently become a part of the diplomatic science lexicon. Nevertheless, it is not a new development in international relations by any means. What makes sports diplomacy uniquely appropriate for the spread of political influence of states, regionally and beyond, are the specific attributes of sports as a universally appealing activity. Various sports disciplines, such as football, basketball, and tennis, enjoy a popularity that transcends national borders, language barriers, as well as ideological and religious differences. Successful athletes and champion teams inspire respect and inspiration across all social strata. Acknowledging the broad and receptive audiences, politicians and diplomats find ways to strategically direct the appeal of sports towards promoting their agendas, interests, and values. According to former US ambassador James Cain, sports can be more effective than classic power politics and its concept of "the stick and the carrot" (according to: Murray, 2011).

Sports diplomacy has had a history of application in the power struggles between leading countries. Sporting events, as seemingly apolitical social gatherings, often served as a forum for sending political messages which strengthen traditional diplomatic measures. The Olympic Games have been repeatedly used as an arena for placing political pressure on other actors in the international order. Examples can be seen in the boycott of teams representing countries that failed to condemn South Africa's apartheid, the USA boycott of the 1980 Olympics in Moscow (in sign of protest against Soviet troops entering Afghanistan), and the retributive boycott of the Olympic games in Los Angeles by the Soviet Union four years later. These and similar actions show that the political conflict of the Cold War had penetrated deep into the sporting fields.

Thus far, the USA is at the forefront among great powers in developing an institutional framework for sports diplomacy as an expression of "soft power" and recognizing the long-term effects of strategic sports diplomacy. The U.S. Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, part of the U.S. Department of States, indicates

sports diplomacy as one of the priorities for harnessing closer ties between the USA and other countries. Particularly, the Bureau opened a dedicated unit, called the "Sports United", dedicated exclusively to sports diplomacy, which makes the USA leaders in institutionalizing sports diplomacy, integrating it into official foreign policy strategies. The purpose of this unit is endorsement of American sports and culture to foreign audiences through establishing youth exchanges, sending renowned athletes as sport envoys, and approving grants for the promotion of sport education of young people from select countries (U.S. Department of State, 2014). According to the Bureau's official web site, this initiative has already encompassed thousands of participants from over a hundred countries around the world (U.S. Department of State, 2014), which speaks of two facts. First, the levels of interest shown for the sport exchange programs is an evident indicator of correctly positioning sports as a tool that opens lines of communication across linguistic and ethnic differences. Second, USA authorities invest in these programs due to an identified propaganda potential of sports diplomacy in exporting American cultural influence.

Sports Diplomacy in Service of Peace

Analyzing the overall dimension of sports in political and diplomatic affairs, certain characteristics that make sports highly appealing for maneuvering international relations come to the fore. Namely, sports as a discipline rely on the principles of inclusion, team spirit, respect for the opponent, fair play, discipline, and tolerance. These traits contributed to the United Nations naming sports as a mechanism for promotion of world peace that should be fostered and encouraged. The UN philosophy on the matter is that sports have the potential to transcend short-sighted ambitions for ego-centric achievements and recognitions of individuals and states. Instead, it can play the role of a motivating, mobilizing, unifying force that builds bridges of international communication and peace. In the years between October 1993 and October 2014, the UN General Assembly made a total of 24 resolutions that call upon the systematic inclusion of sports in the peacemaking and sustainable development efforts internationally (United Nations, 2014). With this idea in mind, the UN Office on Sport for Development and Peace (UNOSDP) was founded, while April 6th was named International day of the same cause.

The unique benefit of sports diplomacy lies in knowing that, as part of public diplomacy, it requires low costs, but offers relatively high results, due to sports' ability to look beyond cultural differences that are often the very source of international conflicts. Therefore, this kind of diplomacy is applicable for sending signals of desired rapprochement between two or more states with strained relations. A school book example of this - the diplomatic steps taken between China and the USA in 1971, known as ping-pong diplomacy. In an attempt to

improve political relations with the USA, China issued an invitation to the American ping-pong team for several friendly games. Such a move was unconventional given the decades-old lack of interaction between the two countries, but it served as an overture in normalizing diplomatic relations between both countries, as proved by President Nixon's visit to Beijing just a few months later (Murray, 2011). The next year, the USA returned the favor by inviting the Chinese team to a game in basketball, an act of particular diplomatic importance due to the calculated choice of sports. As Lin, Lee, & Nai (2009) explain, given the Chinese dominance in ping-pong, and USA's success in basketball, both sides had the opportunity to come out as winners and retain their dignity.

A more recent example is the so-called cricket diplomacy between India and Pakistan, which to a great degree follows the above-mentioned rapprochement recipe. The prolonged conflict between India and Pakistan, exacerbated by a series of terrorist attacks such as the one on Mumbai in 2008, essentially created strained and adversarial political relations between the neighboring Asian countries, continually hampering peace talks. However, in March 2011, India's Prime Minister extended an invitation to his Pakistani colleague to attend together a game at the Cricket World Cup in India, where their teams competed against each other. This symbolic offer of an olive branch was based strategically on the mutual passion for cricket as a unifying element, which was viewed as a constructive method to step away from the dominant antagonistic rhetoric and to create an opportunity for an alternative approach to the peace talks. The resort to sports diplomacy, in a situation where classic diplomacy has failed, served to initiate new meetings between high government officials on both sides (Murray, 2011).

Sports Diplomacy and Country Brands

The necessity to create a recognizable country brand represents a response to the rising emphasis on national identities, challenged by the trends of globalization and homogenization of international relations. Public diplomacy and country branding are mutually concordant policies. Both, while having an important domestic dimension, are primarily directed toward foreign audiences and address the perceptions those audiences have of certain countries. Building a country brand is a significant element of foreign policy. The difference between a successful, concise brand and a weaker, undefined one influences considerably a country's appeal for foreign investments and tourism (Ushkovska (Ушковска), 2013). However, country brand creation involves a wider and more coordinated approach and is dependent on contributions of representatives of several social and professional sectors, not the least of which film, music, sport, and architecture.

Often, activities in these sectors form and shape country brands quite independently from determined

strategies of political elites. For example, the success of Serbian tennis players in the past decade and their rising popularity on a global level, undoubtedly, resulted in improving Serbia's international image, which for years carried the stain of oppressive nationalism and genocidal wars. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this research of sport diplomacy, we focus on sport's incorporation into government measures for country branding. The most popular of these measures, due to its range and impact, both short-term and long-term, seems to be organizing the Olympics. The Olympic Games are so established as an expression of strong sports diplomacy that we could even discuss of a separate sub-category: Olympic public diplomacy.

This strategy is apparent in the People's Republic of China. The development of Chinese diplomacy as a whole essentially went hand in hand with the great economic and political rise of the country in the past twenty years. Government officials, wishing to boost growth and to project an image of a reliable and peaceful nation that takes good care for its population, decided it was indispensable to neutralize certain negative perceptions the global public has of China (Ushkovska (Ушковска), 2013). Namely, the country was criticized for disrespecting human rights, for the oppression of Tibet, as well for the unresolved Taiwan issue. Furthermore, in the past several years, many Asian countries, as well as the United States, began to fear Chinese progress and stirred up debates on its potential economic and military threat. Consequently, at the 16th Congress of China's Communist Party in 2002, a new national plan was presented for the development, modernization, and "peaceful rise" of China (d'Hooghe, 2005) – a plan that was based significantly on the mechanisms of public diplomacy.

One important public diplomacy instrument that China values is organizing world sporting events through which it can improve the country's visibility, show itself in a positive light before a global audience, and capitalize on its cultural potential (d'Hooghe, 2005). People's Republic of China hosted the Summer Olympic Games in 2008, the most expensive Olympic Games this far, and hosted the Asian Games only two years later - decisions that fulfilled the goals of the Chinese public diplomacy with regard to strengthening the country brand. These sports manifestations proved effective in correcting perceptions of the growing power of China, representing Chinese culture and values in an exceptionally positive light, and creating new opportunities for international trade and export of Chinese products (Aryabaha, 2010). So much so, that China aims at organizing the winter Olympics again in 2022.

A second example can be found in the United Kingdom. About three years ago, British Prime Minister David Cameron launched a campaign to promote the country abroad, in preparation for the London Olympics and Queen Elizabeth's diamond jubilee in 2012. The goal of the campaign was to reinforce Britain's brand as a country of fantastic sport, music, and history, empha-

sizing the word *great* in the name *Great Britain* (Ushkovska (Ушковска), 2013). According to the British online newspaper *The Telegraph* (2011), the UK government spent £510,000 in developing the country brand, expecting a return on its investments in over a billion pounds in profits for British companies and an increase in the number of tourists by 4 million. Talking about UK's brand, Cameron stated: "We want to extend an invitation to the world to take a fresh look at everything we have to offer... Britain today is simply a great place to visit, study and work. A great place to invest and do business." (*The Telegraph*, 2011) A crucial part of these efforts for strengthening the country brand was the engagement around the greatest global sporting event – the Olympic Games.

Shortly prior to the London Olympics in 2012, as well as the Paralympic Games that same year, a report was issued on the measures and progress of UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office's public diplomacy, as well as on the accumulation of its benefits. The report (FCO, 2011) declares that organizing these two major sporting event is a once in a generation opportunity to gain momentum and renew United Kingdom's reputation as a global leader in front of the entire international community. The report also contains several recommendations for the direction of British public diplomacy in that crucial period, but also projections of the political and economic goals to be attained. Among them, accenting UK's offer as a tourist destination, promoting British society's culture and values, as well as organizing a trade event parallel to the timing of the Olympics, so as to utilize the surge of visitors from the business sector and maximize the country's commercial gains (FCO, 2011). It is obvious that none of these goals is directly correlated to sports, which speaks to the fact that sports in this context are seen as a tool in the hands of diplomacy for pushing through higher national policies. This is precisely what makes Olympic public diplomacy, or sports diplomacy in general, an appealing strategy for a number of countries.

CONCLUSION

Sports, as a tool of diplomacy, become ever more often a part of official strategies for the promotion of countries and their political interests. This research shows that sports diplomacy is already on the agenda of the most developed economies and where the great powers take action, the rest soon follow in their lead. Even though sports and sporting event have had their application in sending political signals and implementing government objectives for quite some time, the increasing institutional and systematic framework for sports diplomacy in the last decade demonstrates its growing relevance in international relations. This is due, mainly, to the perceived traits of sports as a universally appealing activity which simultaneously stimulates a healthy competitive spirit and unites regardless of societal or cultural differences. This is analogous to interstate rela-

tions where there's a parallel need for competition and collaboration. Hence, sports diplomacy serves as a forum through which political leaders can reach a wider auditorium.

Furthermore, sports diplomacy is a valuable instrument of public diplomacy when countries wish to send subtle messages to foreign audiences, with a tendency to attract new supporters for their country, or endanger the international influence of their rivals. In addition, sports diplomacy is a useful method to initiate classical diplomatic dialog between two or more actors in the international orders with strained, or completely broken, relations. The potential of sports to overcome negotiation blockades and political conflicts among states can be directed, according to the United Nations, toward establishing global peace. Sports diplomacy is also a relevant element in the building of a recognizable country brand, an aspect which gains increasing attention, regardless whether the country in question is an already established political power or a nation on the rise. For that purpose, many countries direct their public diplomacy toward organizing major sporting events, such as the Olympic Games and the World Cup in football. Despite the steep initial investments, countries embrace this type of sports diplomacy due to the predicted long-term political and economic benefits.

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