



# GNSI DECISION BRIEF

## **Olympic Diplomacy:** The Endurance of Soft Power

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## Olympic Diplomacy: The Endurance of Soft Power

### Introduction

Sporting events have an inherent ability to foster connections, build relationships, and unify groups around a shared objective. Athletes have historically used these events as platforms to impact political movements beyond the sports arena. Mega-sporting events, such as the Olympics, provide a venue for host nations to utilize soft power strategies to project their political values, cultivate their national image, and broadcast their status to billions of viewers across the globe. Soft power, when pertaining to international relations, refers to the ability to influence and shape perceptions through the appeal of cultural and political values rather than through coercion. In today's competitive era of strategic competition, where every international platform helps nations gain an advantage, soft power tactics are equally as important as hard power and coercive strategies.

The International Olympic Committee (IOC), a not-for-profit independent organization that oversees all individual National Olympic Committees, has developed rules and governing principles to help facilitate the Olympic Games. Rule 50 in the Olympic charter prevents athletes from demonstrating any political, religious, or racial propaganda at any Olympic sites and venues.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, the IOC's President, Thoms Bach, claims the Olympic games are not supposed to be political and the games and athletes participating in the event should not be used as political tools.<sup>2</sup> However, since its inception in ancient Greece, the Olympic games—and its athletes—have been political and served as displays of national soft power and for public diplomacy.

### Historical Cases of the Olympics Being Used as an Ideological Platform

When the modern Olympics were reinstated in 1896, the goal was to create a platform for an international sports competition that would promote greater understanding among nations and help foster peace. This vision was soon tested when the games provided a global platform for nations to highlight the intersection of political ideologies with sports. Inadvertently, the Olympics enabled nations to showcase their ideologies, athletes to express their support for various social movements, and rival nations to express their support for or against other countries during periods of unrest.

#### *1936-Nazi Germany*

In 1931, before Adolf Hitler rose to power, the IOC awarded Germany the 1936 Olympic Games. These games later became known as the "Nazi Olympics" as the event staging, choreography, architecture, and even the sculptures lining the grounds, were all carefully orchestrated to project the image, strength and principles of the Nazi government.<sup>3</sup> Before the games began, boycott movements arose in countries such as

the U.S., France, and Great Britain. Had these movements succeeded, they would have resulted in a significant loss of image for the Nazi party on the world stage. The 1936 games were the first televised games and are described as "an object lesson in how an internationally based cultural event movement can be manipulated by a powerful nation to project its image, ideology and influence internationally, and to reinforce its authority domestically."<sup>4</sup>

#### *The 1968 Mexico City Olympics*

During the 1968 Olympic games in Mexico City, Tommie Smith and John Carlos each famously bowed their heads and raised one gloved fist during the American national anthem in a show of solidarity with oppressed Black people around the world. Their display of the Black Power salute is considered one of the most famous moments of political speech in the history of the Olympics and has become an iconic symbol from the civil rights struggle and anti-apartheid.<sup>5</sup> For their display of resistance, Smith and Carlos were condemned by the IOC and sent back to the United States.

#### *Cold War-US and Russia: Moscow Olympics 1980*

Following the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the United States, along with 65 other nations, boycotted the 1980 Summer Olympic Games in Moscow.<sup>6</sup> Some of the U.S.'s allied nations supported the boycott, while still allowing athletes to decide for themselves if they wished to participate. This was not the case for U.S athletes as they "were warned that travel to Moscow for the games would result in them being stripped of their passports."<sup>7</sup> Today, this boycott is seen as having failed to make the Soviet Union pay for their hostility and therefore considered a missed opportunity for sports diplomacy.<sup>8</sup>

### Soft Power Aspects of the Current Great Power Competition

When China hosted its first Olympic Games in 2008, it was seen as a debut for the nation and the event drew in international political leaders, including then U.S. president George W. Bush. The opening ceremony was over four hours long and had 1.5 billion viewers worldwide.<sup>9</sup> Media coverage and commentary on the event's opening ceremony ranged from casting China as an emerging global citizen to criticism that "turned spectacularity and theatrical extravaganza into menace and military might."<sup>10</sup> Since 2008, China has risen to a global superpower and its public image, and internal relations have changed. The recent 2022 Winter Olympic Games in Beijing had a viewership of 2.01 billion unique viewers,<sup>11</sup> but saw a diplomatic boycott from the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, and other partnered nations, meaning nations sent athletes, but no ministers or officials to the games.<sup>12</sup> These boycotts were partially in response to the human rights abuses against the Uyghur population in the Xinjiang province.

In 2022, China committed to a mission of hosting a “green, sharing, open, and clean” Olympics games and reinforced its commitment to reducing the negative environmental impacts of the games.<sup>13</sup> For the first time in the history of the games, all Olympic venues were powered by green energy. This globally broadcasted commitment came after the signing of the 2015 Paris Agreement and the U. S.’s formal withdrawal in 2020.<sup>14</sup> By committing to hosting a large sporting event powered by green energy, China gained a platform to demonstrate their leadership in this field.

### **Sportswashing by both Authoritarian and Democratic Governments**

Authoritarian governments, with a history of human rights abuses and violating basic democratic values can utilize sportswashing to improve the perception of their nation. Sportswashing is “the use of an athletic event by an individual or a government, a corporation, or another group to promote or burnish the individual’s or group’s reputation.”<sup>15</sup> In general, watching sporting events and participating in a sports fandom commands a large amount of attention, providing an opportunity for authoritarian governments, like Russia and China, to show audiences across the world that the political manifestation of “democracy is [not] the only viable path to prosperity and security, while encouraging more authoritarian approaches to governance.”<sup>16</sup>

Even governments promoting liberal democratic values can effectively use sportswashing to cover up aspects that run contrary to a fair and equal society. For example, the 1996 Olympic games set in Atlanta, Georgia was notorious for the methods employed to displace the houseless population. The city of Atlanta issued one-way tickets to the poorest residents and made them sign agreements not to return. Similarly, there are reports of the houseless and migrants being evicted ahead of the Paris games.<sup>17</sup>

Essentially the Olympics and other mega-sporting events confer legitimacy to the host nation, the participating athletes, and the nations they represent— even if the IOC president claims otherwise. The United States and its allies need to collaboratively

develop coherent proactive strategies to promote their own soft power and defensive strategies to counter the narrative set in place by authoritarian hosts.

### **Future Opportunities for Sports Diplomacy**

Starting this summer, the U.S. and its allies will host the next four Olympics—Italy 2026, U.S. 2028, Canada 2030, Australia 2032—with the likelihood of the winter 2034 games being hosted in the U.S. by Salt Lake City again. The next decade will be a great opportunity to exert cultural and political influence to boost positive perceptions of democratic societies among the international community through the channels of sports diplomacy. U.S. athletes can—and have been—used as goodwill ambassadors. The Department of State even has a sports diplomacy program with an annual budget of \$6 million.<sup>18</sup> Mega-sporting events allow the U.S. and its allies to engage in sports diplomacy to “strengthen and promote new international relationships and diplomatic opportunities”<sup>19</sup> International sporting events are profoundly intertwined with international relations and diplomacy. For example, four days after Russia housed the most expensive Olympics games ever, they invaded Crimea on February 27, 2014.

Even though the Olympic Games can be used to distract or sportswash, they can also be used to show what could be. For instance, for the 2018 Winter Games held in South Korea, the IOC arranged for North Korean athletes to participate in the games. Both countries marched in the opening ceremony under a Korean Unification Flag and fielded a unified team in the women’s hockey game.

Mega-sporting events provide a legitimate venue for diplomats to engage in sports diplomacy, especially since viewership for the Olympic games is expected to reach anywhere between 2-3 billion unique viewers in 220 countries, with the last Summer Games in 2021 reaching 3.01 billion people across TV and digital platforms.<sup>20</sup> Narratives matter, and how a country tells its national story to the rest of the world is crucial in shaping perceptions—hosting and participating in the Olympics is the largest venue for exerting soft power internationally.

## **Decision Points**

- 1. When the U.S. hosts the 2028 Los Angeles Summer Olympics, and potentially the 2034 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City, what aspects of American culture and values should the U.S. strategically broadcast to the world that would increase American prestige? How do American game planners avoid claims of sportswashing?**
- 2. Should the U.S. advocate to limit or block participation of nations with documented war crimes or human rights abuses? If so, how it this best accomplished towards soft power objectives?**
- 3. What are some defensive strategies to counter soft power tactics used in future mega-sporting events hosted by hostile nations?**
- 4. Should the U.S. government allocate more funding to the Department of State’s Sports Diplomacy program during the year leading up to the Olympics?**

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