

RESEARCH ARTICLE



Olympic Diplomacy as Contestation: The Legacy of the Beijing Olympics

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ABSTRACT

What Stuart Murray defines as “the dark side” of the relationship between sport and International Relations (IR) – that is, boycotts and protests over Olympic venues, human rights abuses and environmental issues – has often characterised the Olympic Games. Yet, in the last decades, the geopolitics of the Olympics has moved towards the East and different forms of contestation have emerged, becoming both a norm and a tool of contemporary Olympic Diplomacy. Therefore, contestation is not just a potential negative feature of Olympic Diplomacy or its ‘dark side’. Instead, it represents a relevant component of its architecture. The label ‘Olympic Diplomacy as Contestation’ captures the complex mechanisms of the new era of this kind of Sports Diplomacy, which is characterised by non-democratic host countries and clashes between different cultural and political values.

KEYWORDS

Olympics; contestation;
sports diplomacy; Olympic
diplomacy

Sport has always been inextricably linked to politics, as it represents “one of the oldest, most complex, social, and ubiquitous cultural activities humans have ever come up with” (Murray 2018, 52). Despite the “profound connections between sport and international affairs”, this relationship has been long regarded by International Relations (IR) scholars as a “mere backwater” and a “perfunctory aside” (Keys 2013, 348; Keys 2009). However, in the last decade, we have witnessed a growing interest in sport in the history of international relations (Sbetti and Tulli 2016). The time therefore seems ripe for a more effective conceptualisation of sport and diplomacy in IR literature. Since their combined action has significant implications for the overall relations between nations (Peppard and Riordan 1993, 2), the study of the dynamics of global sport may foster a greater understanding of the international environment (Levermore and Budd 2004, 10). Noteworthy is the case of the People’s Republic of Korea and South Korea, which used the opening ceremony of the 2018 Winter Olympics as an occasion to be reunited under one flag in the context of the so-called “Sunshine Policy” (Cha 2009, 1586). ‘Ping-pong diplomacy’ between the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and the United States (US), India and Pakistan’s ‘cricket diplomacy’, Canada and the USSR’s hockey exchanges, and ‘baseball diplomacy’ between Cuba and the US, are just a few examples of sport helping to alleviate existing diplomatic tensions. However, if sport can act as a lubricant for diplomatic

relations by facilitating changes in diplomatic practices (Parrish *et al.* 2016), it can also often lead to hostility and in the worst cases, violence. The interplay between sport as “noble universalism” and “base partisanship” can be traced to its reliance on national differentiation, which is so deep-rooted that some scholars even questioned sport suitability as an exemplar of global culture (Rowe 2003). In this sense, sport and diplomacy are, on the one hand, institutionalised expressions of international society, civility and humanity and, on the other hand, expressions of specific interests. Indeed, as a “continuation of policy with other means”, to mention Carl von Clausewitz (1976, 24), international sport is fiercely contested and contestable.

As will be discussed, contestation in the context of the Olympic Games has gained salience since diplomacy has broadened its scope of action, with new actors, spaces and practices entering the diplomatic frame and thus penetrating the Games too. Today, the Olympics and diplomacy exist together as an inseparable entity which is shaped by each of the two components. By building on the thesis that the fate of global politics is not just decided in government offices (Acuto 2013), we argue that the Olympic Games are objects of transformation influenced by the existing course of diplomatic relations as well as ‘game changers’ of international politics, meaning platforms where dynamics of negotiation and contestation of the international order repeatedly occur.

This article contributes to refining the broad concept of Olympic Diplomacy by introducing the element of contestation in its formulation. Such a theoretical approach is applied to the study of the Beijing 2022 Olympics, which will be further explored within this Special Core.¹ In the first part of the article, we trace the evolution of diplomacy and of the Games in order to introduce the concept of ‘Olympic Diplomacy as Contestation’, which is defined by focusing on three main factors: nationalism, reputation and neo-liberalisation. The second part will discuss the two main modes of Olympic contestation – boycotts and official meetings or statements – in the context of the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics.

The evolution of diplomacy

During its development, diplomacy has been identified as a friction minimiser, the application of intelligence and tact to the conduct of official relations between governments by negotiation and peaceful means. Therefore, its aim is namely fostering mutual trust and productive relationships by enabling states to secure their foreign policy objectives without resorting to propaganda or force (Berridge 2022). With such noble intent, diplomacy has been considered for years as the master institution of international society and a civilised and civilising activity (Butterfield and Wight 1966). However, despite the legal formalities based on the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations (1961) and the centrality of states remaining valid, new actors, arenas and institutions have entered the diplomatic frame and engaged in novel forms of diplomatic action (Hocking *et al.* 2012).

The traditional view of diplomacy in which the roles and responsibilities of international actors are neatly defined is no longer viable. During the Cold War, the practice

¹This Special Core is the result of a call for thematic Special Cores on the relationship between Sport and International Relations open to early-career scholars under 35 years of age that was issued by *The International Spectator* in November 2021.

of diplomacy started to be shaped as a distinctive government-to-people connection, namely “public diplomacy” (Cull 2009). Despite the apparent resemblance with propaganda operations, public diplomacy must be understood as a “listening activity” (Di Martino 2020). This means that public diplomacy is akin to propaganda in its attempt to persuade people what to think but, at the same time, is different in its efforts to listen to what people have to say (Melissen 2005, 18).

Consequently, public diplomacy is an approach rather than an institution, which refers to populations more than states. In recent years, this diplomatic paradigm shift enabled a broad range of non-state actors to become involved in diplomatic practices, such as non-governmental organisations, transnational corporations and intergovernmental organisations. The mobilisation of a country’s cultural resources for diplomatic purposes plays a significant role in this ‘new public diplomacy’. Therefore, “the deployment of aspects of a state’s culture in support of its foreign policy goals” (Mark 2010, 66) has been defined as “the linchpin of public diplomacy” (US Department of State 2005).

Sport, and thus the Olympics, can be considered an important component of public diplomacy. In promoting a state’s cultural achievements abroad through sports resources, public diplomacy acts as a structured form of soft power, which is the ability to obtain preferred outcomes through attraction rather than coercion (Nye 1990). However, soft power and the use of force are not mutually exclusive. In conditions where actors want to contest and challenge the existing order, the combination of elements of hard power and soft power may coexist. On the Machiavellian assumption that it is much safer to be feared than loved, effective public diplomacy strategies may require a mixture of soft and hard instruments.

As public diplomacy has become more assertive and effective, soft power strategies relating to the Olympics have started to increasingly rely on hard power resources. According to Thomas Schelling (1966), in some circumstances, the usual distinction between diplomacy and force is not merely in the instruments, but in the relationship between adversaries. The employment of an integrated approach that draws on both hard power and soft power has been evident during the Olympics over the last decade. The Sochi 2014 Games and the annexation of Crimea served “as a force of domestic consolidation” and “a trigger for domestic soft power” (Grix and Kramareva 2015, 6). Tokyo 2020 was part of a soft power strategy to enhance Japan’s national image following the revision of Article 9 of its constitution in 2014, which allowed the country to engage in collective self-defence for the first time since 1947 (Ilevbare and McPherson 2022). In addition, the Olympic Games have provided non-host countries with a window of opportunity to contest the international order and advance their national agendas through the use of hard power, as was the case with Russia’s invasion of Georgia that occurred on the same day the 2008 Beijing Olympics kicked off. Again, the ‘new era of International Relations’ and, allegedly, the Ukrainian issue have been the subjects of discussion between Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin in the context of the 2022 Winter Olympics, which came as no surprise for some analysts (Middle East Institute 2022).

The evolution of the Games

The international governance of sport began at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries when regular international competitions were established. The distinctive contribution

made by Pierre de Coubertin, the visionary founder of the modern Games, in initiating the modern Olympics in 1896 consisted of the “invention of a tradition [...] in which elements of the Ancient Greek Games, English public-school education [...] and a contemporary French perspective were grafted together” (Horne and Whannel 2020, 103).

The construction of Olympism combined spectacle, ethical principles and an international organisation inspired by Western universalism. The diplomatic discourse was very limited in the formative years of the Games and became more consistent during the phase of the Olympics’ expansionism (1924-56) when an increasing number of states started to participate in the Games. According to Aaron Beacom (2012), the period of the “commodification of the Games” (1960-80), characterised by the development of media rights and sponsorship, was followed by 24 years of “spectacularisation”, which were marked by spectacular opening and closing ceremonies organised by the host country. The Los Angeles Games of 1984 was the tipping point in the shift to a phase marked by ‘neo-liberalisation’. The Atlanta Games in 1996 were held without any governmental support as part of a process of “commercialization of the Games” (Horne and Whannel 2020, 147-8).

In parallel, the widening of the Olympics movement to emerging states, especially towards the East, marked another transformation. The first Asian country to host the Olympics was Japan. The Tokyo Summer Olympic Games in 1964, the Seoul Summer Olympic Games in 1988 and the 2008 Beijing Games, all demonstrated Asia’s burgeoning importance on the world stage and promoted its peaceful rise and integration – or rehabilitation in the Japanese case – into the international order. More recently, the ‘Asian Olympic Games’ of the last five years – namely PyeongChang 2018, Tokyo 2020 and Beijing 2022 – epitomised the resurgence of Asia on the geopolitical chessboard and the attempt to contribute to Olympism.

In becoming ‘truly global’, the Olympics began to mirror the complex macrocosm of global politics. The 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics, for example, showed the world that Russia could use the event to implement foreign policy goals through multiple channels, both emotional and coercive (Simonyi 2014). The 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics welcomed diplomatic visits from more than 30 countries, thus boosting the PRC’s international prestige. At the same time, they reiterated the “mutual support for the protection of China’s and Russia’s core interests, state sovereignty and territorial integrity”, thus opposing any “interference by external forces in their internal affairs” (Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and PRC 2022).

By providing an additional means for states and other agents to pursue their strategic interests (including conflicts) and display national power, in parallel, the Games increasingly became subject to a high level of criticism. The Sochi Olympics in 2014, followed by the Rio Summer Games in 2016 and Beijing Winter Olympics in 2022, opened an era of ‘BRICS countries’² Games’ which has led to the systematisation of international concerns and more recurrent forms of contestation. Western governments contest non-democratic countries as Olympic venues; in turn, emerging countries used the Games to contest the current liberal international order.

²The BRICS countries are an association of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. The grouping has held annual summits since 2009.

All things considered, the evolution of the diplomatic paradigm and the Games' realignment to the East require a redefinition of the concept of Olympic Diplomacy, which should include the theme of contestation at multiple levels.

Olympic diplomacy as contestation

Contestation represents primarily an act of discontent or criticism towards an issue, event or institution, and is a component of politicisation, namely “transporting an issue or an institution into the sphere of politics – making previously unpolitical matters political” (Zürn 2019, 978). Contestation in the IR context pertains to proposing a divergent understanding and interpretation of existing institutions and norms. As Antje Wiener (2014) argues in her *Theory of Contestation*, contestation exists in international relations *per se*, understood as relations between different national actors. International relations are inter-cultural in their nature. It follows that in their heterogeneity, the shared interpretation of norms is not intuitive and, therefore, contestation should be expected. Since its inception, the liberal international order has experienced ideological and geopolitical contestations that have intensified with the resurgence of nationalism in Western politics as well as the decline in US power relative to emerging states, such as the PRC (Alcaro 2018). However, contestation should not be interpreted only as a destabilising force (as in the case of polarisation), but also as the condition for a more shared understanding of the meanings of norms that can eventually generate norm legitimacy (Deitelhoff 2020). As ‘contestedness’ represents a meta-organising principle of global governance, the Olympic Movement – which is an institution of global governance composed of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), the International Sports Federations (IFs) and the National Olympic Committees (NOCs) – is also subjected to the dynamics of contestation, which have become stronger as the fundamentals of the liberal international order have been increasingly contested.

That said, we argue that contestation underpins both the diplomacy of the Olympics and the diplomacy *through* the Olympics (Beacom 2012). The diplomacy of the Olympics concerns non-state actors that act to “mediate estrangement” between different subjects through the universal language of sport (Derian 1987). Olympics *through* diplomacy, instead, refers to states and agents of states that use the Games as a conduit for pursuing organisational objectives. Contestation fits into these types of diplomacies as a vertical force (people versus elites) and horizontal dynamic (elites versus elites), respectively. As a consequence, the categories of Olympic Diplomacy defined by Beacom (2012), namely *state diplomacy* (the pursuit of a range of foreign policy objectives), *support diplomacy* (the diplomatic infrastructure that provides significant assistance for athletes and support teams), *Olympism as diplomacy* (the diplomatic architecture within which Olympic discourse takes place, with the IOC playing a key role) and *multi-stakeholder diplomacy* (activities of the multiplicity of actors who are pursuing competitive advantage in a range of social and economic areas), can all be permeated by contestation (36-7).

In the BRICS Games era (2014-22), host countries became bearers of a message of contestation against the liberal order designed without their inclusion. In terms of support diplomacy, for instance, at the Beijing 2022 Olympics, US embassies were accused of helping to sabotage the Winter Olympics by allowing the departure of the employees working at the embassies and consulates in the PRC due to the pandemic

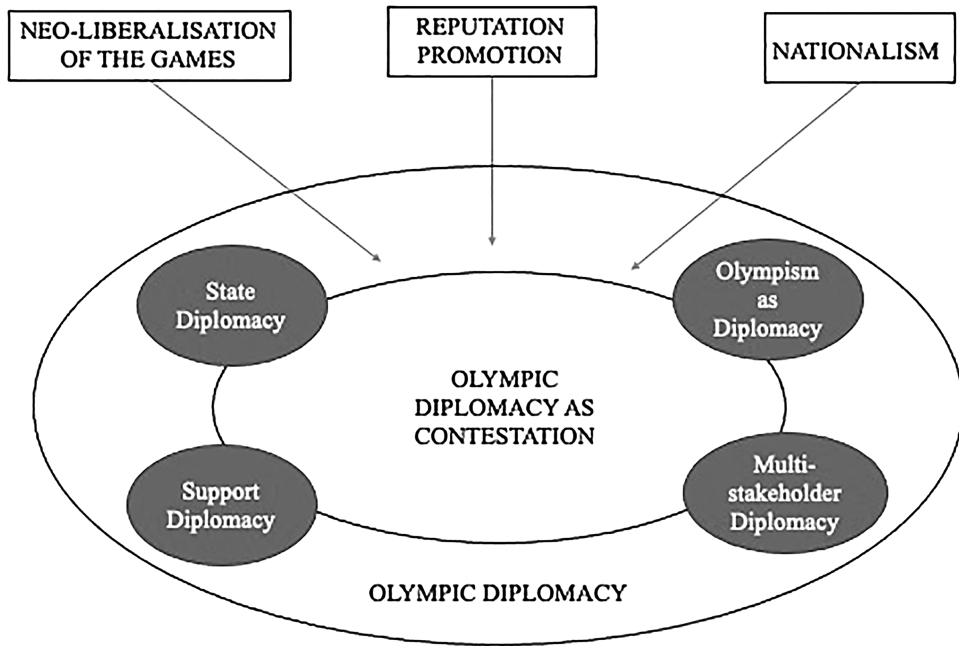


Figure 1. Olympic diplomacy as contestation

(*Global Times* 2022a). Again, notwithstanding the idea that the Olympic movement should not engage with political issues, the 2022 war in Ukraine “put the Olympic Movement in a dilemma” (IOC 2022a). The IOC decided to take a stand recommending that IFs and sports event organisers should not invite or allow the participation of Russian and Belarusian athletes and officials in international competitions. Such an important precedent may have significant implications for the future of international sports governance and its unity, as it could potentially lead “to greater attention to humanitarian and human rights considerations, but also to increased fragmentation” (Goretti 2022, 1). Finally, contestation emerges as an intrinsic feature of multistakeholder diplomacy. Indeed, the broadened scope of the actors engaged in the Olympic debate leads *per se* to a pluralisation of positions that may cause contestations.

Against background of these forms of contestation, we propose the notion of ‘Olympic Diplomacy as Contestation’ to explain a relevant component of the relationship between sport and IR, and not only its ‘dark side’. It concerns state diplomacy but in a broader context of multilayered forms of contestation, which can be explained by focusing on *nationalism*, *reputation promotion*, and the *neo-liberalisation* of the Olympics (Figure 1).

Nationalism and contestation

Nationalism is a fundamental element of international sports. Indeed, sport, diplomacy and nationalism are inextricably connected. Sport practices represent a seductive agent of cohesive commonality through which the national populace can participate in “membership” of the nation (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). This “collective glue” contributes to

the theoretical concept of the nation as an “imagined community” (Anderson 2006). Subsequently, the modern nation has come to be embodied in and expressed through sport, which is a “uniquely effective medium for inculcating national feelings” (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). In other words, sport is a generator of national sentiment and a powerful means of underlining one’s sense of national identity. If national identity is the “expression of difference from others based on perceived membership of a community”, nationalism represents “the systematic transformation of this sense of the difference between groups of people into an antagonistic orientation toward other peoples, nations, and states” (Hargreaves 1992, 123). In this light, nationalism is a “political construct” in which the Olympics, as a “cultural construct”, participate in building a national identity (Ibid). As Susan Brownell (2005) argues, the revival of the modern Olympic Games has played a role in the process of identity creation in the West, “and the US’s participation in those games contributed to the formation of its own identity as a Western power” (1182). In contrast, the formation of the PRC’s identity through the Games had first to face the problem of Orientalism and overcome its reputation as ‘the sick man of Asia’ attributed to it by Western countries. As showcased by Michelle Cabula and Stefano Pochettino’s (2023) article within this Special Core, whilst the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics mainly served this purpose, the 2022 Winter Games emphasised the ‘Chinese characteristics’ of the mega-event and highlighted the superiority of the Chinese model: for example, in containing the pandemic and equipping Beijing with sustainable Winter facilities – as it has been investigated in Francesca Vomeri and Maurizio Gregori’s (2023) contribution in this Special Core.

The resurgence of nationalism in the PRC and in Western politics is increasingly questioning the principle of internationalism, which is not only one of the pillars of the liberal international order but also of Olympism. As the “Olympic paradox” suggests (Mandell 1976, 80), the dialectic of nationalism and internationalism is manifest in sport and even more in the Games. Olympic diplomacy can only reflect this tension. On one hand, it highlights the Games’ apparent universalism while, on the other hand, developing diplomatic protocols (such as the flying of the Olympic flag) that enhance the countries’ particularisms (Beacom 2012, 7).

As the Olympics began to contribute to the creation of global citizenship, they have expanded from Greece, the cradle of Western culture, to the PRC, the cradle of Asian civilisation, thus shifting from a Eurocentric approach “to a more truly global philosophical foundation” (Roche 2002; Kelly and Brownell 2011, 7). Although such a transition challenges universal citizenship built on Western values and the liberal international order as a normative project, it may produce a more shared Olympism. As Brownell argues, “if we are now entering an era of *postmodernism* and *postcolonialism*, then we need to abandon the modernist and colonialist assumptions in Olympism in order to arrive at a *post Olympism*” (Brownell 2004, 52). This means, in other words, that forms of contestation in the context of the Games may contribute to the heterogeneous side of Olympism and globalisation (Hargreaves 1992).

Reputation promotion and contestation

Reputation promotion and nation branding are also entrenched in nationalism. As Goran Bolin and Per Stahlberg (2010) state, “the two logics of nationalism and nation

branding exist simultaneously. The question is to what extent these two logics compete or reinforce each other” (97). Nation branding has been defined as “the phenomenon by which governments engage in self-conscious activities aimed at producing a certain image of the nation state” (82). To a certain extent, nation branding enhances nationalism as it employs the symbolic resources of nationalist discourse and reaffirms the nation as a legitimate entity in the globalised world (Aronczyk 2008). By considering the nation as a brand, and therefore as a market-oriented entity defined according to the principle of competition (Fehimović and Ogden 2018), host nations are compelled to compete for visibility in a globalised sport environment marked by competitiveness.

Such a landscape, typical of marketing campaigns, puts the countries in a contest that triggers different levels of contestation. On the one hand, the international audience may not recognise the reality and truth of those ideas or brands projected by the host country and thus protest against them, as the European media analysis of the 2022 Winter Olympics by Veronica Strina and Michael Göbbel (2023) within this Special Core has highlighted. On the other hand, the promotional message of the host country may be based on the contestation of other countries’ brands, which corresponds to what William Callahan (2015) defines as “negative soft power”. Accordingly, rather than simply describing the country’s positive achievements and aspirations, the PRC’s discourse is also anti-Japanese, anti-American and anti-Western, and builds “the positive Chinese self through the negative exclusion of Otherness” (2). In the specific case at hand, the *Global Times*, the English-language tabloid newspaper under the auspices of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), published many anti-Western articles during the 2022 Winter Games. For example, one headline cited “Hysteric Western media reaches new low attacking Olympic panda mascot” and explained how the Games proved the existence of two worlds, “one of hatred espoused in the West, and one of hope and embracement in China” (Smith 2022). Another piece titled “Beijing 2022 is a success, but West wants to rewrite reality at Olympics” argues for the existence of a Western “organized effort to attack and discredit China” in order “to forge a new Chinese threat” (Rosendale 2022). The underlying message conveyed by Chinese media is that the success of the 2022 Games “represents a heavy slap in the face of some Western countries” and “reflects the failure of West’s smear propaganda” (*Global Times* 2022b). The emerging role of negative soft power in the context of the 2022 Beijing Olympics will be further developed in Cabula and Pochettino’s (2023) article within this Special Core.

Neo-liberalisation and contestation

As early as the end of World War II, Olympic sport had been conceived as a vehicle for Americanisation, “essential for the continued success of American capitalism at home and abroad” (Marvin 1981, 81). As “neo-liberalism increasingly became the common sense of international political economy from the 1980s onwards”, the Olympics started to represent first and foremost an economic investment opportunity (Horne and Whannel 2020, 139). The Los Angeles Games of 1984 was the tipping point in the shift toward neo-liberalisation. The neo-liberalisation of the Olympics has involved indirect public subsidies going to the IOC and other attempts to enhance the reputational status and attractiveness of host locations. With the development of an expansionist

diplomacy aimed at making the Olympics attractive from an economic and political standpoint, the IOC started to invite developing countries to the games (Ross and McDougall 2022). Part of the rationale behind this decision was the geopolitics of expanding markets (Müller and Steyaert 2013). As BRICS countries will account for 50 percent of global GDP by 2030, they constitute a fertile ground for sponsors (Luša 2017). The shift of the two biggest organisers of sports events - the IOC and FIFA - towards holding mega-events in developing market economies and the 'global South' (South Africa's World Cup in 2010, Brazil's World Cup in 2014, and Rio's 2016 Olympic Games) connects with efforts to link sport and social development. Similarly, the PRC's economic boom is having a major influence on the possibility of building a new sports industry empire in the Far East. On 31 July 2015, Beijing defeated Almaty in the bid to host the 2022 Winter Olympics despite not having a winter sports tradition or natural snow. The IOC saw a huge business opportunity in the PRC, which has encouraged more than 340 million people to embrace winter sports and attracted more than 40 commercial partners, including 11 of the biggest Chinese corporations, such as Sinopec, the Bank of China and the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) (IOC 2022b).

As a component of an "evolving global cultural economy", the Olympics have shifted from being seen as a *movement* to an *industry* and finally a *system*, meaning "a network of distributed parts, hubs, and switches which exhibits contradictory tendencies" (Horne and Whannel 2020, 192). Such a transition, accompanied by the rise of non-democratic actors in the global political economy of the Olympics, has debunked the belief that the Games should only be hosted by countries that conform to Western ideals of democracy and human rights.

Figure 1 summarises the above-mentioned causes of 'Olympic Diplomacy as contestation' and its modes of action.

Olympic diplomacy with contestation characteristics

After discussing how contestation is created by the entanglement of *nationalism*, *reputation promotion* and *the neo-liberalisation* of the Games, we now outline how it operates in practice. Our understanding of the occurrence of contestation in contemporary Olympic Diplomacy can be summarised into the following three modes: boycotts and partial boycotts; meetings and joint statements; and media contestation, which will be explored in Strina and Göbbel's (2023) article within this Special Core. Indeed, the Beijing Winter Olympics constitutes the case study of this Special Core and a trailblazer for future studies on the mechanisms of contestation in the context of the Olympics.

Boycotts and partial boycotts

Boycotts associated with the Olympics may appear "somewhat ironic as one of the original ideas behind the establishment of the modern Games was to create a free international sporting community" (Horne and Whannel 2020, 141). Yet, boycotts have normally occurred at the Olympic Games for three main reasons: "as part of the Cold War; because of apartheid, 'race' or imperialism; and in terms of nations being divided by political or ideological differences" (Ibid). As a common practice of traditional

sports diplomacy, over time, boycotts have reflected significant changes in the characteristics of international relations and the distribution of power. There are many cases of Olympic boycotts that we cannot list in this article including: the 1980 Moscow Olympics, which were boycotted by the US and 65 countries in protest against the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan; if we consider self-isolation as a form of boycott, then we should mention the years from 1956–80 when the PRC refused to participate due to the inclusion of Taiwan (officially the Republic of China); as well as the case of South Africa, which was ineligible to compete between 1964 to 1988 due to its racial segregation policy known as Apartheid. Overall, the Cold War decades marked a period when the Olympic Games became “the site of more highly focused symbolic political contestation in which the boycott became a significant political weapon” (Horne and Whannel 2020, 138). The range of actors and the characteristics of each boycott have been shaped “by the geo-political context within which the Games [were] taking place” (Beacom 2012, 135). The political demonstrations and boycotts in the 21st century have evolved from an activity dominated by states towards an instrument in the hands of a variety of actors. As a result, these forms of contestation have been more subtle compared to the mass boycotts of the 20th century Olympic Games (Dubinsky 2019).

The Sochi Olympics in 2014 inaugurated the ‘diplomatic boycott’, which aims to snub host nations while allowing athletes to compete. At Sochi, former German president Joachim Gauck was the first major political figure to boycott the Games in response to Russia's human rights violations thus setting “an example” (*Spiegel International* 2013). At the Beijing 2022 Winter Games, the diplomatic boycott was first and foremost functional to the US and the PRC's respective narratives. President Biden used it to fuel the competition between Washington and Beijing. In turn, Xi promoted the story of an America anchored to its hegemonic position and suppressing the rise of a peaceful China (Cha 2022). As will be illustrated by Strina and Göbbel's (2023) article in this Special Core, the participation of many countries in the diplomatic boycott at the Beijing 2022 Olympics was accompanied by ambiguous justifications. In most cases, it is not easy to assess whether the boycott was about protests over human rights abuses or because of Covid-19. Some actors, such as India and Japan, decided not to send a diplomatic delegation but refused to define the action as a ‘boycott’. It is unclear whether some actors decided to join the Games just because they feared the PRC's retaliation.³ Overall, however, the absence of several countries' diplomatic delegations at the 2022 Beijing Olympics paradoxically depoliticised the Games, making any future predictions and generalisation hard to formulate.

Meetings and joint statements

Sport provides an unofficial reason and location for international leaders to meet and dialogue (Trunkos and Heere 2018). Informal sports summits and bilateral meetings have often occurred during the Olympics. As hosting the Olympics means being “open for business”, signing trade agreements before and during the event is common practice

³The participation of France and Italy, for example, may indeed relate to the geopolitics of the Games that will see the two countries as hosts of the Olympics in 2024 and 2026, respectively.

(Rose and Spiegel 2011). However, during the BRICS phase of the Games (2014-22), geo-economical agreements and joint statements were increasingly used by host countries to project their world view. The Sochi Olympics exposed to the world a nationalist Russia that also fitted into the logic of sovereignty, unity and normalcy in order to promote the idea of the 'Russian world' (Makarychev and Yatsyk 2014).

At the Beijing 2022 Olympics, President Xi met with more than 30 foreign leaders. Individual meetings with the presidents of Central Asia countries were fundamental to discussing infrastructure investments relating to the Belt and Road initiative (BRI) and energy cooperation. The meeting between Xi and Zhaparov, the president of Kyrgyzstan, underlined the need for coordination in various fields, such as agriculture, medical care and firefighting (*Xinhua* 2022). Beijing also emphasised the importance of its good relationship with Pakistan and pledged closer cooperation under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor investment program (Embassy of the PRC in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan 2022). Among the leaders from the Middle East, key figures from Egypt, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar and Saudi Arabia attended the Games and deepened their bonds with the PRC (*Global Times* 2022c). The case of Qatar is of particular importance in light of it hosting the FIFA World Cup in November 2022. At the Winter Olympics, Xi stressed that the PRC and Qatar should firmly support each other by safeguarding their reciprocal national sovereignty, independence, security and stability, as well as their sports development. Beijing's emphasised its support for Qatar in hosting the FIFA World Cup 2022 and the 2030 Asian Games, and also sent two giant Chinese pandas to the Emirate ahead of the World Cup as the first example of 'panda diplomacy' in the Middle East (McSpadden 2022).

The 2022 Beijing Games also presented the opportunity to deepen the cooperation between the PRC and Latin America. Argentina officially joined the BRI after a meeting of the respective presidents on 6 February (NDRC PRC 2022). In addition to the Memorandum of Understanding on BRI Cooperation, the two countries also agreed to cooperate on issues including green development, the digital economy, aerospace, the BeiDou Navigation Satellite System, technological innovation and agriculture (*Global Times* 2022d). As Argentina held the rotating presidency of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) in 2022, its strategic role in strengthening Sino-Latin America relations is self-evident. As for Europe, the bilateral cooperation between Poland and the PRC and between Belgrade and Beijing was brought to a new level. President Xi expressed Beijing's readiness to take an active part in Poland's endeavour to become a logistic hub and support its efforts to become a key point in China-EU industrial and supply chains (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2022).

The value of these meetings goes beyond the declarations of cooperation and the signing of formal agreements. They signal the start of a new era of international relations not defined by the US. From this perspective, it is worth reflecting on the joint statement issued by the Russian Federation and the PRC on 'the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development' formulated during the Games. On 4 February 2022, Xi held a three-hour meeting with Putin just before the Beijing Winter Olympics opening ceremony. For Xi, it was the first face-to-face meeting with a foreign head of state since the outbreak of Covid-19. For Putin, it was the third bilateral visit abroad since 2020 (Jochheim 2022). The joint declaration made clear the contestation towards those actors that "continue to advocate unilateral approaches to addressing

international issues” and “interfere in the internal affairs of other states, infringing their legitimate rights and interests, and incite contradictions, differences and confrontation” (Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and PRC 2022). The idea that “it is only up to the people of the country to decide whether their State is a democratic one” goes explicitly against those powers who want to take part in the discussion and “attempt to impose their own ‘democratic standards’ on other countries” (Ibid). The fact that the Joint Statement was announced during the Winter Olympics and a few weeks before Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is no coincidence. The opposition to NATO enlargement and the PRC’s support of Moscow’s proposals to create long-term legally binding security guarantees in Europe mark the first time since 1959 that Beijing has taken a definitive stance on a major European security issue in support of Russia (Jochheim 2022). Such a landmark document clearly shows the two actors’ views of what a new world order should look like while challenging and contesting the current one. Working as the host country’s voice amplifier, the Games made clear to the world the Chinese idea of ‘multipolarity’, which defines the first of a number of ‘momentous changes’ for a ‘new era’ of international relations. This marks a new era for Olympic Diplomacy too, which is characterised by non-Western and non-democratic countries’ determination to make significant changes to the *status quo* by undermining the force of liberal arguments and preferences.

Final remarks: contestation as the new normal

The main contribution of this Special Core is to decode the wave of contestation that Olympic diplomacy has faced since non-democratic countries began hosting the Games, in particular since 2014 when the Sochi Games inaugurated what we have defined as the BRICS phase of the Games (2014-22). This period opened a new era for the Olympics and, more generally, for international relations, in which civil society and a wide range of actors started to be more engaged in mega-event management and diplomatic practices.

As part of the fabric of world politics, contestation has always been part of the Games’ diplomatic discourse. However, its increasing deployment suggests that the diplomatic representation of the Games has reached a new stage. Although the modern Games have always been politicised, contestation has been exacerbated since the Olympic claims of universality encountered non-Western values. Systematic protests over human rights abuses, government bodies’ transparency and urban legacies driven by a growing number of actors have started to pose questions about how contestation works and how Olympic diplomacy should deal with it. Although there is not a single global anti-mega-event movement, there is an established way of protesting against the Games (Boykoff 2017). Recent decades have seen protest movements, on-site demonstrations by transnational activists and anti-Olympic groups become more organised and connected with each other. The IOC is increasingly targeted by protests that undermine its credibility and question its neutral role. With more non-democratic countries joining and hosting the Games, dissent has been growing and, at the same time, harshly suppressed by these regimes through coercive instruments.

As the Beijing 2022 Olympics kicked off, hundreds of protests over the PRC’s repression of the Uyghur minority and its human rights abuses spread worldwide. From Istanbul to Tokyo, Uyghurs, Tibetans and activists called for a boycott of the Games due to

Beijing's human rights violations. The disappearance of the Chinese tennis star Peng Shuai after she accused the retired Vice Premier Zhang Gaoli of sexual abuse was at the centre of international concern. The IOC was severely criticised by international human rights groups for its poor management of the situation and supporting the Chinese government's efforts to silence Peng. In the days leading up to the Beijing Winter Games, Yang Shu, deputy director general of Beijing 2022's International Relations Department, remarked that any protesters that violated "the Olympic spirit" or Chinese law could be subject to unspecified punishment by the host country (Davidson 2022).

Not only are protests and resistance to protests by host states and the IOC becoming "the new normal", as Beacom suggested (2012, 191), so too is this kind of two-way contestation, which sees the host country as a contestator of the international order and the builders of the liberal order as contesters of host countries. As a result, contestation has become a key component of Olympic Diplomacy. Remarkably, however, contestation does not necessarily lead to a weakening of norms, but it may also work to redefine those norms based on a more widely shared understanding and thus eventually enhance legitimate governance in the global realm. Hence, one may even ask whether the BRICS era of the Games, including the PRC's contribution, not only challenged the established understanding of Olympism, but also simultaneously contributed to redefine and re-legitimise it. This might pave the way for a more shared Olympism or even lead to a post-Olympism – an era when Coubertin's ideals are increasingly questioned and contested.

Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful to the journal's editors Leo Goretti and Daniela Huber for their unwavering support and constructive advice.

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