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**Beyond the playing field: The battle for global in the 21st century***Beyond the playing field: The battle for global in the 21st century**Abstract:*

Sport has historically reflected the political and social dynamics of each era, from the Olympic Games in classical Greece, which symbolised unity and rivalry between city-states, to the spectacles in Rome, used as imperial propaganda. In the 19th century, the rise of nationalism consolidated sport as a symbol of national identity.

In the 20th century, it became a key field for geopolitics, notably during the Cold War as an arena for ideological rivalry and in events such as the 1978 World Cup in Argentina, where it served authoritarian regimes to project power.

Today, sport is an essential *soft power* tool. Emerging countries and powers use mega-events such as the Olympic Games and the World Cup to project prestige and stability in a globalised world. The migration of talent, the development of international competitions and commercialisation have generated dynamics that strengthen national identities, but also rekindle historical tensions. In this context, sport transcends the competitive and consolidates itself as a key platform for the projection of power and the negotiation of influence in an interconnected world.

*Keywords:*

Sport, globalisation, *soft power*, *sportswashing*, Olympic Games, World Cup.

**\*NOTE:** The ideas contained in the *Analysis Papers* are the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the IEEE or the Ministry of Defence.

## Más allá del terreno de juego: La batalla por la influencia global en el siglo XXI

### Resumen:

El deporte ha reflejado históricamente las dinámicas políticas y sociales de cada época, desde los Juegos Olímpicos en la Grecia clásica, que simbolizaban unidad y rivalidad entre ciudades-Estado, hasta los espectáculos en Roma, usados como propaganda imperial. En el siglo XIX, el auge del nacionalismo consolidó el deporte como símbolo de identidad nacional.

En el siglo XX, se convirtió en un campo clave para la geopolítica, destacando su uso durante la Guerra Fría como escenario de rivalidad ideológica y en eventos como el Mundial de Argentina 1978, donde sirvió a regímenes autoritarios para proyectar poder. Actualmente, el deporte es una herramienta esencial de *soft power*. Países emergentes y potencias utilizan megaeventos como los Juegos Olímpicos y la Copa Mundial para proyectar prestigio y estabilidad en un mundo globalizado. La migración de talentos, el desarrollo de competiciones internacionales y la comercialización han generado dinámicas que fortalecen identidades nacionales, pero también reavivan tensiones históricas. En este contexto, el deporte trasciende lo competitivo y se consolida como una plataforma clave para la proyección de poder y la negociación de influencias en un mundo interconectado.

### Palabras clave:

Deporte, globalización, *soft power*, *sportswashing*, Juegos Olímpicos, Mundial de Fútbol.

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### **If this was already the case in the past...**

From time immemorial, sport has been much more than a recreational or competitive activity. In ancient Greece, the Olympic Games, begun in 776 BC, were not only athletic competitions, but also a symbol of cohesion and rivalry between city-states. Despite being contested under a sacred truce (*ekecheiria*)<sup>1</sup>, the Games became an opportunity to demonstrate the cultural, military and political superiority of each polity. The victories of athletes from cities such as Sparta or Athens increased their prestige and consolidated their influence in the region.

In addition to fostering rivalry, the Olympic Games also promoted a sense of Panhellenic unity in a fragmented political context. Thus, politics and sport were never completely separate. Cities competed to sponsor the best athletes, reflecting their power and ability to influence other regions. Even during the Median Wars, in which Greece was pitted against the Persian Empire, the Olympic Games symbolised resistance and reassertion of Greek identity in the face of external threats.

Similarly, in imperial Rome, sporting spectacles, though distinct from the Greek Olympic Games, also had geopolitical implications. Events such as gladiatorial fights and chariot races in the Circus Maximus were used as political tools by emperors to curry favour with the people and project their authority. These spectacles not only served to distract the population from social and economic problems, but also reinforced the image of the empire as an all-powerful entity.

Sport in Rome thus became a means of social control and propaganda. Emperors such as Caesar and Nero organised lavish games celebrating military conquests and the power of the empire, reaffirming their hegemony over subjugated peoples and consolidating their central role in the ancient world.

After the fall of the Roman Empire during the Middle Ages, sport reflected the political structure of the time. Jousting and jousting tournaments were more than sporting competitions: they were a way for knights and feudal lords to demonstrate their military

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<sup>1</sup> UNESCO. *The Olympic Truce (Ekecheiria)*, 2004. Available at <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000133907>  
Note: All hyperlinks are active as of 25 November 2024.

power and consolidate alliances between kingdoms, reinforcing political hierarchy and control of territories.

As the modern nation state was consolidated in Europe during the 18th and 19th centuries, sport took on new significance as a symbol of national identity and unity. With the rise of European imperialism, sports such as football, cricket and *rugby* expanded and also served to contribute to the consolidation of the identity of colonial powers. In the 19th century, the popularisation of sport coincided with the rise of European nationalism, and was used to foster social cohesion. In addition, and demonstrating its importance beyond the borders of states, sport became institutionalised internationally, with the creation of bodies such as the International Olympic Committee (1894)<sup>2</sup> and FIFA (1904)<sup>3</sup>, resulting in competitions that reflected the rivalry between nations.

The revival of the modern Olympic Games in 1896, spearheaded by Baron Pierre de Coubertin, occurred against a backdrop of European imperialism, where powers sought to project their power. Although Olympic ideals promoted peace and friendship between nations, the Games quickly became a showcase for geopolitics.

In the 20th century, sport established itself as a geopolitical tool, especially during times of great international tension. Key examples include the 1936 Berlin Olympics, hosted by Nazi Germany, where Adolf Hitler used the event to promote Aryan supremacy, although the victory of Jesse Owens, an African-American who won four gold medals, challenged his ideology.

During the Cold War, the Olympic Games and other sporting competitions became symbolic arenas of confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union, which used these sporting events as an ideological, political and propaganda platform to demonstrate their power and present their economic and political systems as the most successful, seeking to establish themselves as role models for the rest of the world.

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<sup>2</sup> SUREDA i CARRIÓ, J. *El Comité Olímpico Internacional ¿un nombre para la eternidad?*, in: *Papers: revista de sociología*, N.º 41, (issue dedicated to: Actores internacionales).1993, pp. 143-158.

<sup>3</sup> MARTÍN PÉREZ, F. *FIFA: Más de un siglo de historia del fútbol*, in: *BBVA*. 14/4/23. Available at: <https://www.bbva.com/es/fifa-113-anos-historia-del-futbol/>

Similarly, large-scale sports boycotts became a powerful political tool during the final stretch of the Cold War, exemplifying, once again, the intersection between politics and sport. More than thirty African countries boycotted the 1976 Montreal Olympics over New Zealand's participation in the Games after playing a *rugby* match in South Africa, a nation banned for practising *apartheid*<sup>4</sup>.

Years later, the United States led a 60-nation boycott of the 1980 Summer Games in Moscow to protest the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan; in response to the US boycott, the Soviet Union decided not to participate in the 1984 Los Angeles Games, justifying its non-attendance on the grounds that security measures did not offer sufficient guarantees.

Similarly, the 1978 World Cup in Argentina was used by the Videla dictatorship as a tool to project stability and order, despite the brutal repression in the country.

### **... What will not happen in today's global world?**

But although the geopolitics of sport has deep historical roots, in recent decades it has taken on a new dimension thanks to globalisation, the advance of communications and the impact of social networks.

In the field of *soft power*, sport plays a key role: how can a country attract positive attention and win the sympathy of global public opinion? In the past, a show of military force, however controversial, used to command admiration and respect. In today's context, however, similar actions tend to be met with disapproval and rejection, provoking more condemnation than admiration. Instead, success in sport and the organisation of international sporting events have become more effective ways of projecting global influence and prestige<sup>5</sup>. International sporting competitions, such as the Olympic Games and the Football World Cup, have evolved into strategic platforms

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<sup>4</sup> PÉREZ, Marta. *La política y los Juegos Olímpicos: los distintos boicots a las ediciones olímpicas*, in: *Mundo Deportivo*. 26/4/24. Available at: <https://www.mundodeportivo.com/juegos-olimpicos/20240426/1002234486/politica-juegos-olimpicos-boicots-ediciones-olimpicas.html>

<sup>5</sup> BONIFACE, Pascal. *La geopolítica del deporte*, in: *CIDOB*. 1/7/21. Available at: <https://www.cidob.org/publicaciones/la-geopolitica-del-deporte>

that allow countries to project their *soft power*, influence global public opinion and reinforce their prestige in the international arena.



Source: Own elaboration

Sport has ceased to be a mere competitive spectacle and has become a field of geopolitical dispute of great relevance. International sporting competitions not only generate passions and national pride, but have also become a key arena for the projection of the power of states and other entities. Globalisation and the growing interconnection between countries have made sport a vehicle for influencing public opinion and projecting an image of power, stability and prestige. Thus, emerging nations and established powers invest substantial resources in the organisation of mega-events, using them as platforms to strengthen their *soft power* and exert influence at the international level.

The relationship between sport and geopolitics is stronger than ever. Countries use sport not only as a diplomatic tool, but also as a reflection of their global aspirations and influence. Through sporting events, nations negotiate power, build image and, in some cases, avoid major conflicts. Sport has become a platform where global political

and economic dynamics manifest and compete, demonstrating that victories on the sporting field can have repercussions that transcend the playing field.

In this context, globalisation has transformed the sporting arena, facilitating the migration of talent and the development of competitions that transcend national borders. This has given rise to new international dynamics, especially in relation to athlete transfers and the commercialisation of major sporting events.

Moreover, sport has the capacity to reinforce national or regional identities, and sometimes to exacerbate historical tensions, as in the case of the rivalry between Argentina and the United Kingdom in football after the Falklands War.

In what follows, we will analyse how these interactions have shaped the role of sport in today's geopolitics and its influence on international relations.

### **Sport diplomacy: sport as a tool for political influence**

Sports diplomacy has established itself as a key tool for building bridges between countries, especially in conflict situations. Politics is no longer the only instrument of power in today's societies; new actors have emerged who sometimes have a greater capacity for influence than the states themselves, *who used to control the world, country or company, but now have to share it with others who challenge them in the political, business or social sphere* <sup>6</sup>.

In the contemporary diplomatic environment, conditions are ideal for sports diplomacy. The emergence of 'new' diplomatic actors -civil society organisations, multinational corporations and intergovernmental organisations, and even influential celebrities- has consolidated expressions such as 'poly-lateral' or 'multi-actor' to describe the vertical and horizontal networks that characterise modern diplomacy<sup>7</sup>.

Sport diplomacy is based on the idea that sport has the unique ability to transcend political, cultural and social boundaries, offering a neutral space for dialogue and

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<sup>6</sup> NAIM, Moisés. *The End of Power*. Basic Books, 2013.

<sup>7</sup> MUNT, Valeria. *Game, Set, Match: Sports and the Future of Diplomacy*, in: *CUNY Academic Works*. 2015. Available at: [https://academicworks.cuny.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1557&context=cc\\_etds\\_theses](https://academicworks.cuny.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1557&context=cc_etds_theses)

cooperation. Unlike traditional diplomatic channels, which can be subject to tensions and rivalries, sport offers a universal language that can smooth differences and create common ground.

In this dynamic environment, international athletes can be used to augment a foreign policy message; complex diplomatic relations can be bridged through sport or even, as with the ban imposed on *apartheid* South Africa, sport can be used as a punitive tool.

World leaders have recognised the potential of sport to build diplomatic and cultural relations, taking advantage of large-scale events such as the Olympic Games and football World Cups.

Sport, as discussed above, through its ability to capture global attention, allows countries to demonstrate their organisation and showcase their cultural identity without resorting to tense political negotiations. Rather than generating conflict, sporting events can provide a neutral platform to foster dialogue and cooperation based on common interests, which can help overcome political and cultural barriers.

Sports diplomacy has become a larger institutional space than even the United Nations, currently, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) has 206 National Olympic Committees compared to the 193 member states of the UN. This is because the IOC recognises as Olympic participants territories that are not sovereign states (members of the UN) such as Puerto Rico, Hong Kong and territories such as Palestine and Kosovo. This reflects the IOC's openness towards regions with their own sporting identity, beyond international political divisions. The same is true of the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), which includes more countries than the UN itself, as it recognises independent teams such as Scotland, Wales, England and Northern Ireland. This fact deserves some reflection, and explains the recognition of the capacity of sport as a potential tool for development and peace<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> BADILLO MATOS, A. *Las dos Coreas y los juegos olímpicos de invierno*, in: Real Instituto Elcano. 16/2/18. Available at: <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/comentarios/las-dos-coreas-y-los-juegos-olimpicos-de-invierno/>

An exemplary case of sports diplomacy was the collaboration between the two Koreas during the 2018 Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang, where they competed under a unified flag and formed a joint women's *hockey* team. This historic collaboration was made possible through complex negotiations that used sport as a vehicle to bring two traditionally warring nations closer together.

The formation of a joint women's *hockey* team between the two Koreas not only symbolised a step towards reconciliation through sport, but also marked a milestone in North Korea's diplomatic opening. The presence of Kim Yo-Jong, sister of the North Korean leader, at the Olympic Games was interpreted by many analysts as an unprecedented gesture of rapprochement and willingness to engage in dialogue between the isolated North Korean regime and South Korea, something that had not been seen for decades. In this way, it was demonstrated that, through sport, it was possible to find points of convergence that transcended politics.

Another telling example is the diplomatic exchange on cricket between India and Pakistan, where the sport has played a pivotal role in the complex relations between the two countries, marked by decades of political tensions, border disputes and religious differences. Since the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 into Hindu-majority India and Muslim-majority Pakistan, the two nations have fought four wars. However, cricket has proved to be a means of temporarily easing those tensions, serving as a bridge that unites their peoples across their differences <sup>9</sup>.

In 2004, following the Kashmir crisis that left the two nations on the brink of war, a series of cricket matches promoted by the two governments helped reduce tension and allowed for the opening of negotiations on security and borders.

Despite the 2008 terrorist attacks in Mumbai<sup>10</sup>, which led to the suspension of the peace dialogue, sport once again served as a diplomatic tool. In 2011, during the Cricket World Cup, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh invited his Pakistani counterparts, President Asif Ali Zardari and Prime Minister Syed Raza Gilani, to watch

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<sup>9</sup> MUNT, Valeria. *Op. cit.*

<sup>10</sup> In 2008, ten Pakistani members of the Lashkar-e-Taiba terrorist group carried out twelve coordinated attacks in Mumbai that lasted a total of four days. The attacks killed at least 164 people, including civilians and security personnel, and nine attackers.

the semi-final match together in the Indian city of Mohali, located in the state of Punjab. This symbolic gesture helped restore peace talks, suspended since 2004, and improve bilateral relations. In an act of goodwill, Pakistan released an Indian national who had been imprisoned for 27 years, reinforcing the positive impact of these sporting events <sup>11</sup>.



Pakistan and Indian Ministers Yousuf Raza Gilani and Manmohan Singh, respectively, united for cricket in Mohali. Source: AP/BBC

Beyond being a channel for formal diplomacy, sport fosters understanding and tolerance between countries with different cultures and value systems. Sports teams made up of players from diverse backgrounds can promote diversity and inclusion, while sports figures can use their visibility to advocate for peace and social justice.

A clear example is football, which has been used to address political and social issues. Such was the case of the Turkey-Armenia match in 2008. One of the main sticking points in the ongoing war of words between Turkey and Armenia is Turkey's refusal to acknowledge the Armenian genocide, which claimed the lives of 1.5 million people during the First World War. In 2008, the two teams were to play a World Cup qualifier, and the Turkish president accepted an invitation from the Armenian president to watch it together. In another gesture of goodwill, Armenia eased visa restrictions so that Turkish fans could also attend the match in Armenia. The match opened new diplomatic channels between the two countries in the hope of thawing relations in the future.

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<sup>11</sup> CALATAYUD SORIANO, D. *Sports diplomacy as an actor in global Spain*. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union and Cooperation. Secretariat of State for Global Spain, 2019. Available at: [https://www.exteriores.gob.es/es/ServiciosAlCiudadano/PublicacionesOficiales/Diplomacia%20Deportiva\\_L.pdf](https://www.exteriores.gob.es/es/ServiciosAlCiudadano/PublicacionesOficiales/Diplomacia%20Deportiva_L.pdf)

FIFA, as the world's leading football body, has shown that the sport can be a powerful tool for promoting unity and combating discrimination. Through initiatives such as the *Say No to Racism* campaign, launched in 2002, and the *Football for Hope* campaign in 2005, the organisation has worked to eradicate racism and promote inclusion both inside and outside the stadiums. These actions not only send a strong message against hatred, but also use football as a global platform to promote respect, equality and the defence of human rights. The 2010 World Cup in South Africa was a symbol of how, despite a past marked by *apartheid*, the country managed to unite people of all races around football. South Africa's selection as host of the World Cup reflected a vote of confidence in its ability to leave behind a past marked by deep racial divisions.

In doing so, FIFA demonstrated that, used effectively, football transcends entertainment, having the power to transform societies, promote peace and combat discrimination, setting a precedent for future sporting events.

In conclusion, sport diplomacy not only facilitates relations between states, but also promotes social cohesion and world peace. Through the spirit of fair competition, respect and fair play, sport has the power to connect nations in an increasingly interdependent global environment. Investing in sport diplomacy is not just a short-term strategy, but a commitment to a more peaceful and collaborative international future.

### **From the transformative power of sport to the strategic use of sport: The phenomenon of *sportswashing***

As we saw above, sport has an undeniable potential to promote unity, inclusion and peace on the global stage. However, this same power can also be used for less noble purposes. For less than a century, political leaders have recognised the immense power of sport as a tool of influence. During this time, many authoritarian regimes have harnessed its potential to consolidate their propaganda, strengthen social

cohesion and project an image of power and grandeur both domestically and internationally, a practice known as *sportswashing*.

The term *sportswashing* refers to the use of major sporting events, elite teams or sports sponsorships to divert attention from human rights violations, corruption or political repression, and thus project a more positive image to the international community. This practice not only illustrates how sport can be instrumentalised to launder a country's reputation, but also how sports diplomacy can be manipulated to hide deep-seated problems under a façade of celebration and competition.

Authoritarian regimes in the East are increasingly challenging Western hegemony, driving a reconfiguration of the global order. Thanks to their ability to make decisions in a more agile and centralised manner, in contrast to slower, more bureaucratic democracies, they are gaining ground on the international stage. At the same time, the rise of nationalism as a political force is consolidating in various regions of the world, acting as a bond that reinforces the internal cohesion of these states in their quest for greater global influence, and the world of sport shows obvious reflections of this change.

One of the most notorious examples of *sportswashing* is the case of Saudi Arabia, which is trying to rebuild its image and prepare for a world without oil, with sport being a key element of its strategy, investing billions of dollars in organising high-level sporting events. While other nations have been influential in world sport in the past, such as the Soviet Union, the Warsaw Pact countries and later China, competing fiercely against Western powers, nothing has ever been as evident as Saudi Arabia's vast investments in a multitude of different sports in recent years.

Since Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund (PIF) took over Newcastle United in 2021, the club has spent more than £400m on transfers<sup>12</sup>. Domestically, the Saudi league had little international exposure until the signing of Cristiano Ronaldo by Al Nassr in January 2023 sparked a revolution in the *Saudi Pro League*. From then on,

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<sup>12</sup> PROUD, Liam. "Petrodollars, goals and human rights: Saudi Arabian money storms the bench in the Premier League", in: *El País*. 9/10/21. Available: <https://elpais.com/economia/negocios/2021-10-09/petrodolares-goles-y-derechos-humanos-el-dinero-de-arabia-saudi-asalta-la-banca-en-la-premier-league.html>

European football stars such as Neymar, Karim Benzema, Sadio Mané and N'Golo Kanté joined the Saudi league, which in that transfer window broke records by spending \$957 million, second only to the Premier League<sup>13</sup>. This strategy has put the *Saudi Pro League* on the global football map and, of course, seeks to consolidate the country's image as an emerging power in the sport. On top of all this, Saudi Arabia will host the 2034 World Cup, having been announced as the sole bidder.



Karim Benzema y Cristiano Ronaldo Fuente: Ámbito.

Similarly, in October 2021, at the same time as FPI bought Newcastle United, the Saudis dropped a bombshell on the golf world by pledging to invest \$2 billion in a new competition called LIV Golf. After much controversy, the PGA Tour, the premier US tour, and LIV Golf reached a deal, whereby the Saudi fund will inject £1 billion (about €1.2 billion) in exchange for two seats on the PGA Tour board, including the position of chairman<sup>14</sup>.

In the same approach, the latest step in the country's huge investment in elite sport, Saudi Arabia this year hosted the finals of the WTA Tour, the women's tennis tournament that brings together the world's top eight players, as part of a three-year deal that increased the prize money to a record \$15.25 million, a 70 per cent increase

<sup>13</sup> AS. *Cristiano Ronaldo, Neymar, Benzema? Discover the 'All Star' eleven of Saudi Arabia.* 2/9/23. Available in: <https://as.com/futbol/fotorrelato/cristiano-ronaldo-neymar-benzema-descubre-el-once-all-star-de-arabia-saudi-f/>

<sup>14</sup> PALOMAR, R. *The agreement between LIV Golf and the PGA Tour, in the hands of the players,* in: *Sport45.* 2/9/24. Available at: <https://www.sport.es/es/noticias/golf/acuerdo-liv-golf-pga-tour-111229776>

over 2023. However, since it was announced that the WTA Finals would be held in Riyadh, debate has swirled around the moral and political implications of this choice<sup>15</sup>

Not to mention investments in Formula 1, boxing and horse racing, which continue to seek to improve its international image while deflecting criticism of its human rights record, which includes accusations of repression of dissidents, discrimination against minorities and restrictions on women's freedoms.

Another notable case is that of Qatar, which has made a substantial investment in France since the early 2000s. The purchase of PSG for €70 million (a tiny sum compared to other Qatari investments in France), followed by other larger investments in transfers, has provided an unrivalled showcase for all Europeans to put the country on the map ever since.

But then, in 2010, it was chosen to host the 2022 World Cup. Despite allegations of inhumane working conditions faced by migrant workers in the construction of the stadiums, and concerns about minority rights, Qatar used the event to project an image of progress and modernity. The Gulf monarchy invested an estimated \$220 billion in the mega-event<sup>16</sup>.

Qatar's choice for the World Cup was highly controversial, with criticism raining down on FIFA, with accusations of corruption in the selection process<sup>17</sup>. However, the country managed to focus the world's attention on its impressive stadiums and ceremonies, to change perceptions and assert its position in the Arab world and beyond, deflecting the focus of criticism.

An article published by the University of Copenhagen<sup>18</sup>, analyses whether authoritarian regimes can improve their international image by organising major sporting events, such as the World Cup in Qatar.

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<sup>15</sup> FENDRICH, Howard. *Saudi Arabia will host the women's tennis WTA Finals for the next three years*, in AP. 4/4/24. Available at: <https://apnews.com/article/wta-finals-saudi-arabia-riyadh-4b7052f076b0d3098d78706f3a5654f8>

<sup>16</sup> DÁVILA MIGUEL, J. *¿Hipocresías en el Mundial de Catar?*, in CNN. 3/12/22. Available at: <https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2022/12/05/opinion-hipocresias-en-el-mundial-de-qatar/>

<sup>17</sup> BBC News World. *Qatar 2022 World Cup: FIFA's controversial history with authoritarian governments*. 26/9/22. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-63752575>

<sup>18</sup> GLÄßEL, C., SCHARPF, A., & PEARCE, E. J. *Does Sportswashing Work? First Insights from the 2022 World Cup in Qatar*, in: *Journal of Politics*, 1-11. 2024. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1086/730728>

Based on surveys conducted in Germany before and during the tournament, the authors conclude that, contrary to expectations, the start of the World Cup did not improve perceptions of Qatar among respondents. However, there was an increase in sympathy towards the Arab world in general. In addition, the event also led to an increase in criticism of the German media and the state of democracy and social inclusion in Germany.

These results suggest that, while *sportswashing* efforts may not directly improve the reputation of an authoritarian host country, they can generate collateral effects such as increasing polarisation in foreign democracies and strengthening positive perceptions towards their region in general. Thus, while *sportswashing may not work* as desired by authoritarian regimes, it has significant and complex effects on public opinion in other countries.

This research provides an initial perspective on how international sporting events can be used as tools of soft power, while revealing the limitations and risks associated with such attempts to enhance the image of an authoritarian regime.

*Sportswashing* poses significant ethical dilemmas for both sports organisations and the athletes who participate in these events. On the one hand, international events can encourage openness and cultural exchange between countries; however, accepting funding from regimes that use sport to enhance their image could imply a form of complicity with their domestic politics. Organisations such as FIFA, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and Formula 1 face the difficult task of expanding sport's reach without legitimising questionable governments. At the same time, athletes find themselves in a dilemma: boycotting competitions as a form of protest or competing so as not to jeopardise their professional careers, which adds considerable moral and professional burden.

Distinguishing between sports diplomacy and *sportswashing* is not an easy task, as both practices may appear similar on the surface, but differ in their purpose and impact. While sports diplomacy aims to promote understanding and cooperation between nations through the values of sport, *sportswashing* focuses on using sporting

events as a propaganda tool to improve the image of regimes that continue to violate fundamental rights.

This distinction is becoming increasingly difficult to discern as economic and strategic interests become intertwined in today's geopolitics. This calls into question the ethical responsibility of sporting institutions in selecting venues for their competitions and accepting sponsorships that, in some cases, legitimise practices contrary to the principles of equality and fair play that sport represents.

### **Olympic Games: A global stage for power and strategy**

The Olympic Games is the sporting competition that best illustrates international conflicts and dynamics. As mentioned in the introduction, its global relevance is largely due to its massive impact as a cultural and media phenomenon, capable of capturing the attention of audiences in all corners of the world. However, this influence is not without its critics and controversies. The historical nature of the Games, with roots that reflect elitist values and a Western view of sport, has been questioned. As has the IOC's secrecy, perceived as an undemocratic and non-transparent institution<sup>19</sup>.

Throughout history, the Olympic Games have been the scene of numerous episodes of geopolitical tension. From alternative competitions, such as the Friendship Games organised by the Soviet bloc in response to US-led boycotts in the 1980s, to ideological clashes over the medal table, the Olympics have served as a symbolic arena of confrontation between powers, highlighting the constant interplay between sport and politics.

In this sense, the Olympic Games in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are not only a showcase for sporting rivalries, but also a platform where nations seek to project their *soft power*, assert their sovereignty or challenge established international orders.

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<sup>19</sup> GÓMEZ, David. *Geopolitics of the Olympic Games: medals, boycotts and nationalism*, in: The World Order. 25/7/4. Available at: <https://elordenmundial.com/geopolitica-historia-juegos-olimpicos/>

This was the case of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, which it would not be unreasonable to say marked a before and after in the history of sport and world geopolitics. They represented China's definitive entry as a global superpower, not only because of the economic and technological magnitude of its organisation, but also as an affirmation of the political regime that sought to legitimise its model before the international community. The opening ceremony, with its meticulous precision and deployment of resources, was an unmistakable message of power and unity, designed to astonish the world and consolidate the image of a state on the rise.

However, this showcase of modernity and progress was not without its tensions. The Games were a focus of international criticism related to human rights, China's control over Tibet and its growing influence in global affairs. Nevertheless, the organisational feat and sporting success, with China topping the medal table, served as a *soft power* tool that reinforced its position in the international system <sup>20</sup>.

However, the rise of its influence did not stop there. Its evolving geopolitical role became even clearer at the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics, which became a new arena of global rivalry, especially with the United States and its allies.

Washington led a diplomatic boycott of the event, citing "genocides and crimes against humanity" in Xinjiang and allegations of human rights violations in Hong Kong. This gesture, supported by allies such as the UK, Canada and Australia, did not include the absence of athletes, but sought to undermine the legitimacy of the event and China's international image<sup>21</sup>.

For its part, China responded with a show of diplomatic skill, hosting more than 30 world leaders, including key figures such as the UN secretary general and the head of the WHO, as well as leaders from Europe, Latin America, Africa and Asia. Particular attention was paid to the backing of Gulf powers such as Qatar, the United Arab

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<sup>20</sup> OSPINA VALENCIA, J. *Balance de Olimpiada Pekín 2008: entre admiración y críticas*, in: DW. 24/8/8. Available at: <https://www.dw.com/es/balance-de-olimpiada-pek%C3%ADn-2008-entre-admiraci%C3%B3n-y-cr%C3%ADticas/a-3590477>

<sup>21</sup> FRANCE 24. *Boycotts, covid and controversy mark the final stretch of the Beijing Games*. 2022. Available at: <https://www.france24.com/es/minuto-a-minuto/20220103-boicots-covid-y-pol%C3%A9mica-marcan-la-recta-final-de-los-juegos-de-pek%C3%ADn>

Emirates and Saudi Arabia, all traditional US allies, which was evidence of Beijing's growing influence in strategic regions.

The event also consolidated the alliance between China and Russia, symbolised by the prominent presence of Vladimir Putin and his meeting with Xi Jinping shortly before the opening ceremony. This closeness translated into a joint declaration of "boundless" friendship that reinforced the anti-Western bloc and preceded the start of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, underlining the strategic use of sport as a vehicle to position alliances and challenge the Western-led global order<sup>22</sup>.

The Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games, held in 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, exemplified, once again, how sport can function as an arena for global tensions and strategies. This event reflected the interplay between the management of an unprecedented health crisis and international power dynamics. Japan used the Games to project its *soft power*, presenting itself as a model of resilience and organisational capacity in adverse circumstances. Strict biosecurity measures and the absence of the public, while unpopular, reinforced this narrative while facing domestic criticism about the costs and appropriateness of holding the event in the midst of a pandemic.

The global political context was also reflected in the competition. Russia's exclusion under its national flag as a result of the state doping scandal showed how sport can be used as a tool for political sanction. The participation of Russian athletes under the name of the Russian Olympic Committee (ROC) represented a delicate balance between Olympic ideals of unity and geopolitical realities<sup>23</sup>.

Likewise, the competition between the US and China transcended the medal table, becoming a symbolic demonstration of their struggle for global leadership. Narratives about Taiwan, competing as "Chinese Taipei", and tensions linked to Hong Kong

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<sup>22</sup> MESCHOULAND, Mauricio. *Juegos Olímpicos, paz, seguridad y geopolítica: París 2024*, in: El Universal, 27/7/24. Available at: <https://www.eluniversal.com.mx/opinion/mauricio-meschoulam/juegos-olimpicos-paz-seguridad-y-geopolitica-paris-2024/>

<sup>23</sup> PANJA, Tarik. *Russia was banned from the Olympics, why is it all over the place?*, in: The New York Times, 24/7/21. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/es/2021/07/28/espanol/rusia-olimpiadas-tokio-2020.html>

reflected disputes over China's influence in the region<sup>24</sup>. In parallel, historical tensions between Japan and South Korea were also present, underlining how the Olympics can become a mirror of unresolved rivalries.

We see how in this geopolitical dynamic of international competitions, the Olympic Games have become a strategic battlefield, where national interests mix with major international tensions.

In this context, the response of Russia, excluded from international competitions due to its involvement in doping in 2014 and subsequently the invasion of Ukraine, has been significant.

At the recent Paris Olympics, the exclusion of delegations from Russia and Belarus, a measure implemented after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, became one of the most notorious decisions in the international sporting arena. Although certain athletes from these countries participated under the category of Neutral Individual Athletes (NIAs), this decision was widely criticised by Ukraine and some of its allies, their presence was strictly regulated: they could not compete under their national flags or use their anthems or emblems, and their achievements were not reflected in the official medal table. In addition, they were banned from participating in opening ceremonies, a move that underlines the International Olympic Committee's (IOC) approach of condemning international aggression without fully punishing individual athletes. This policy seeks to balance the political message with the principle of preserving the inclusive spirit of sport<sup>25</sup>.

But back in June, the city of Kazan hosted the BRICS Games<sup>26</sup>, one of the alternatives for Russian sport to exist outside of international frameworks and challenge the West's traditional dominance of sport. These games hosted the original members of the BRICS group (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) and the

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<sup>24</sup> WOO LEE, Jung. Tokyo 2020, East Asian geopolitics and Olympic diplomacy. Center for Sports Communication & Media. The University of Texas at Austin. Available at: <https://olympicanalysis.org/tokyo-2020/section-1/tokyo-2020-east-asian-geopolitics-and-olympic-diplomacy/>

<sup>25</sup> CNN. *Why is Russia not participating in the Paris 2024 Olympics?* 25/7/24. Available at: <https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2024/07/25/por-que-rusia-no-participa-juegos-olimpicos-paris-2024-trax/>

<sup>26</sup> INFOBAE. *The fifth edition of the BRICS games kick off in the Russian city of Kazan.* 12/6/24. Available at: <https://www.infobae.com/america/agencias/2024/06/12/la-quinta-edicion-de-los-juegos-de-los-brics-arrancan-en-la-ciudad-rusa-de-kazan/>

new members (Iran, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Argentina, Egypt and Ethiopia).

The Kremlin's creation of new institutions to compete can be seen as it appears in point 5 of the Karaganov doctrine<sup>27</sup>. According to the logic of this doctrine, it would be a matter of developing sports institutions representative of the "world majority", through various groups, as in this case the BRICS<sup>28</sup>.

Other international competitions organised by Russia to highlight its influence in global sport and subvert the Olympic order have been the World Friendship Games, originally planned for September 2024 in Moscow and Yekaterinburg and subsequently postponed to 2025, and the Future Games, held last February, a tournament that combines traditional sport with high-tech digital technologies.

However, this strategy could also see a consolidated advance of geopolitical power in the East, led by China and Russia, which are accelerating the transformation towards a multipolar world order.

Simultaneously, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict left a deep mark on the Paris Olympics, with both countries using the Games to push for international recognition and diplomatically isolate their adversary. The Palestinian delegation petitioned the IOC to exclude Israel<sup>29</sup>, arguing human rights violations, a rejected request that sparked protests in Paris, some with bomb threats. This led to heightened security for the Israeli athletes, who were protected 24 hours a day from the risk of attacks. Meanwhile, the Palestinian delegation, consisting of only eight athletes, used the Games as a platform to make their struggle visible and reaffirm their national identity, especially after the Israeli offensive in Gaza severely affected the Palestinian sports sector, destroying infrastructure and claiming the lives of hundreds of athletes and coaches. This context not only highlighted the influence of international conflicts on

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<sup>27</sup> The Karaganov doctrine is a geopolitical approach associated with the Russian political scientist of the same name. Although the doctrine is not formally codified, it refers to a set of ideas that have influenced Russian foreign policy since the 1990s, especially on issues related to the post-Soviet space and Russia's power projection.

<sup>28</sup> THE GRAND CONTINENT. *De-Westernising sport: Putin's Russian strategy towards the Olympic Games*. 4/8/24. Available at: <https://legrandcontinent.eu/es/2024/08/04/desoccidentalizar-el-deporte-la-estrategia-rusa-de-putin-frente-a-los-juegos-olimpicos/>

<sup>29</sup> RTVE. *Falsehoods, hoaxes and context about the Paris 2024 Olympic Games*. 31/7/24. Available at: <https://www.rtve.es/noticias/20240726/falsedades-bulos-sobre-juegos-olimpicos-paris-2024/16199459.shtml>

the Games, but also the double standards that some critics associate with the global picture, an issue that was compounded by additional tensions between protesters and the Israeli delegation, who reported constant hostility and threats. The Olympics thus became a reflection of the deep political and social divisions that still separate these two nations.

As it could not have been otherwise, Paris 2024 transcended the sporting, becoming a reflection of today's geopolitical fractures, where sport remains a dual space: an arena of convergence and, at the same time, a field for contesting global narratives and tensions.

## Conclusions

While sporting events have proven to be an effective platform for fostering peace and unity, sport diplomacy can also reflect the complexities and contradictions of global geopolitics. From historic boycotts during the Cold War to the more recent phenomenon of *sportswashing*, in which authoritarian regimes seek to legitimise their image through the sponsorship of sporting events, diplomacy through sport does not always have positive results.

The sports sector has increasingly become a key arena where countries deploy their soft power strategies to gain recognition and legitimacy in a world characterised by growing tensions and fractures. It not only accompanies traditional strategic power, but can also act as a spearhead for it, allowing certain countries to project an image of strength and modernity. In an international environment where nationalism is resurgent and power struggles are constant, some states have chosen to use sport as a key tool to consolidate their global position, reinforcing their national identity and generating diplomatic and economic benefits.

Recognition as a power is no longer limited solely to the military or economic sphere; now, in an environment of global geopolitical competition, the visibility and prestige that sport provides has become an indispensable component of state power. By carving out a niche in the sporting landscape, countries are able not only to enhance their international reputation, but also to attract investment, promote tourism and

consolidate their influence in the global arena. In this sense, sport has become an essential showcase: being a great power now means having a prominent presence in the sporting arena, thus completing the strategic toolkit necessary to exercise comprehensive power. This trend is evidence that change is underway and that, although the future is uncertain in both the sporting and geopolitical spheres, sport will continue to be a symbolic battleground in the struggle for global hegemony.

With these dynamics at play, sport not only reflects the metamorphosis of the global order, but also stands as a space where countries deploy their capacity to influence and reshape international perceptions in an attempt to redefine their place on the global stage.

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