

The Olympic Games and International Relations: The Case of Beijing 2008

การแข่งขันกีฬาโอลิมปิก กับ ความสัมพันธ์ระหว่าง ประเทศ: กรณีศึกษาปักกิ่งเกมส์ 2008

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Abstract

International sporting events have largely been ignored by International Relations since it neglects the dominant paradigm realist tradition because of its apolitical nature. This article, nevertheless, argues that international sporting events have been used politically and diplomatically by states, particularly by great powers, as a tool for domestic and foreign affairs. A recent instance was the 2008 Olympic Games, held by China, which is used as the case study in this article. By reframing a realist-based framework of states and international sport, the article analyses the importance of hosting the events to China's international strategy its struggle for acknowledged status as a great power and concludes that the 2008 Beijing Olympics were a well-planned political and diplomatic project that China successfully utilized in reaching its goal.

Keywords: international sports events, the Olympic Games, the Beijing Olympics, foreign policy of China

บทคัดย่อ

การแข่งขันกีฬาระหว่างประเทศโดยมากแล้วมักถูกละเลยโดยวิชาความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างประเทศ เพราะการแข่งขันกีฬาดังกล่าวไม่ได้มีความเกี่ยวข้องกับขนบธรรมเนียมซึ่งเป็นกระบวนทัศน์หลักของสาขาวิชาอันเนื่องมาจากลักษณะปราศจากการเมือง อย่างไรก็ตามบทความนี้เสนอว่าการแข่งขันกีฬาระหว่างประเทศถูกใช้ทั้งในทางการเมืองและการทูตโดยรัฐ โดยเฉพาะรัฐมหาอำนาจ ในฐานะเครื่องมือทั้งสำหรับกิจการภายในและการต่างประเทศ ตัวอย่างล่าสุด คือ

การแข่งขันกีฬาโอลิมปิก ค.ศ. 2008 ที่จีนเป็นเจ้าภาพซึ่งถูกใช้เป็นกรณีศึกษาของบทความนี้ โดยการสร้างกรอบการวิเคราะห์ที่มีฐานอยู่บนแนวคิดสังคมนิยม เพื่อศึกษาความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างรัฐกับกีฬาระหว่างประเทศ บทความนี้ได้วิเคราะห์ความสำคัญของการเป็นเจ้าภาพการแข่งขันกีฬาที่มีต่อยุทธศาสตร์ระหว่างประเทศของจีน ซึ่งก็คือความพยายามแสวงหาสถานะมหาอำนาจที่เป็นที่ยอมรับในฐานะมหาอำนาจ และบทความได้สรุปว่าการเป็นเจ้าภาพการแข่งขันกีฬาโอลิมปิกที่กรุงปักกิ่งใน ค.ศ. 2008 เป็นโครงการทางการทูตและการเมืองที่ถูกเตรียมการมาเป็นอย่างดี ซึ่งจีนสามารถนำมาใช้เพื่อบรรลุวัตถุประสงค์ของตนได้อย่างสำเร็จ

คำสำคัญ: การแข่งขันกีฬาระหว่างประเทศ การแข่งขันกีฬาโอลิมปิก โอลิมปิกกรุงปักกิ่ง นโยบายต่างประเทศของจีน

Introduction

'Sport is completely free of politics'

Avery Brundage

The 5th President of the International Olympic Committee (IOC)

'The Olympic idea in the modern age symbolizes a world war that is not expressed through open military action, but that gives anyone who knows how to read sports results a fair idea of the hierarchy of nations.'

Pascal Boniface

The founding Director of Institute for International and Strategic Relations (IRIS)

The above statements stand in sharp contrast to one another; one claims that sport is apolitical, while the other highlights the political utility of hosting international sporting events, particularly the Olympic Games. In spite of employment by states as a tool of foreign policy throughout modern history, international sport, nevertheless, has been neglected by the study of International Relations (IR). The orthodox realist tradition of IR focuses on

the armed forces and military power of states rather than other kinds of tools and power. While this dominant IR paradigm claims to be a practical approach, it does not adequately cover international relations. Rather, because of a preoccupation with the use of force and war, it neglects many instruments employed by political leaders, including the Olympics, which have valid bases from anarchy to power politics. Despite the fact that other traditions of IR focus more on diversified tools and multi-dimensional power, their bases are inapplicable. Liberal internationalist tradition, for example, presupposes the potentiality of international regimes and organizations, which can lead to cooperation among states, and thus to utopianism. From this point of view, in order to study the utility of international sport, realist bases should be applied to the hosting of the international sports events, especially by the great powers. The case of the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games is not an exception, since the aftermath led to numerous debates among IR scholars. More importantly, this article argues, the Beijing Games were a well-planned political project that was a part of China's international strategy. Thus, the article aims to answer the question of why China has shown interest in hosting international sports events in general and the Olympic Games in particular and use them as foreign policy tools. In order to answer this question, the realist tradition toward international sport will first be framed, and then China's strategy for the Olympics will be examined through the realist-based framework. In addition, evidence that illustrates the importance of the Olympic Games will also be considered.

Framing states and international sporting events

International sport is not recognized by the orthodoxy of realist tradition because its concentration is narrowly confined to the power of states

defined in terms of military capability. However, the work of E. H. Carr is exceptional and applicable to unconventional power and tools. In *The Twenty Years' Crisis*, Carr proposed that, while military power is the most significant type of power, there are other types of power that are important to states: economic power and power over opinion. The former, according to Carr (1939: 119) is 'the minor and more civilized weapon', but its effect is similar to that of military power. The latter, Carr said, is "not less essential for political purposes than military and economic power, and has always been closely associated with them...the popular view which regards propaganda as a distinctively modern weapon is, nonetheless, substantially correct". (Carr, 1939: 120).

The concept of power over opinion has been reintroduced by Joseph Nye under the well-known term "soft power". According to Nye (2004: 5) soft power is "the ability to shape the preferences of others" by utilizing "a different type of currency (not force, not money) to engender cooperation - an attraction to shared values and the justness and duty of contributing to the achievement of those values". The article proposes that this facet of power is the most relevant to international sport.

This proposition corresponds with *Sport and International Politics*, a classic textbook by Barrie Houlihan. In this book, Houlihan described international relations theory on sport in terms of three traditions: realism, liberalism, and globalism. According to Houlihan, realism, which this article draws on, allows international sport to be used by states in four ways. First, hosting or participating in international sporting events is a means of obtaining international recognition as a legitimate sovereign state in the international community, since legitimate international status is a prerequisite for joining international sports organizations, most of which are intergovernmental organizations (Houlihan, 1994: 38-39). The Olympic Games, particularly the

Opening and Closing Ceremonies, as Torres pointed out, provide channels for *de facto* recognition punctuated by actual cooperation in sports competition (Torres, 2011: 8-9).

In this way, international sporting events are remarkable platforms for emerging states to pursue international recognition. In the 1970s, there was contention between Beijing and Taipei over whose government was the legitimate representative of the Chinese people. Political manoeuvring between Beijing and Taipei in the Olympic Games continues, and will be discussed further in this article. Second, international sport can be used explicitly to foster and sustain a sentiment of national identity (Houlihan, 1994: 39), which can, to some extent, enhance the legitimacy of an unpopular government, especially in developing states (Cornelissen, 2010: 3013). Third, international sport can be utilized as a tool of foreign policy (Houlihan, 1994: 39) because it is “a low-cost but high-profile resource for publicizing their policy on international issues or towards specific states”. (Houlihan, 1994: 9-10) This usage can appear in many forms, from boycotting sporting events as sanction and retaliation to sporting diplomacy to improve relations. The U.S. boycott of the Moscow Olympic Games in 1980, for example, was a high-profile response publicizing U.S. disapproval of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (Houlihan, 1994: 10). Another instance is the ping-pong diplomacy of the 1970s, a mutual effort to improve relations between Beijing and Washington during the Cold War (Houlihan, 1994: 10).

Finally, international sport is not value-free; it accompanies the concept of hegemony as part of a cultural package that comprises a significant non-military element of hegemony or great power status. Power over opinion or soft power can be seen throughout international history: many former imperial powers as well as present and emerging great powers have

attempted to host international sporting events, particularly the Olympic Games (Houlihan, 1994: 40).

In cases of emerging powers, hosting international sports events, Cornelissen argued, are viewed by the BRICSA states (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) as part of certain agendas: “events are used to showcase economic achievements, to signal diplomatic stature or to project, in the absence of other forms of international influence, soft power. Furthermore, generally informed by different (in the main, political) motives, and facing different sets of local urban, environmental, political, and economic conditions from their counterparts in the developed world, emerging powers can reshape the way in which events are viewed, planned for, and commercialized and in which they impact upon stakeholders”. (Cornelissen, 2010: 3010). Thus, following Cornelissen’s argument, the hosting of international sporting events can be a platform to great power status as well as an opportunity to promote, negotiate, and redefine a global value that comes with the events. To create a comprehensive explication, the framework will be grounded in either Houlihan’s explanation or Cornelissen’s argument.

The aforementioned starts with Carr’s concept of power and then examines relevant literature on sport and international relations. In the case of Beijing 2008, the framework of realist tradition and international sporting events can be framed as follows:

International sporting events are not autonomous from politics; rather, they are always the result of diplomatic and political efforts by states competing to host the events. As such, they are political projects.

International sporting events are high-profile arenas for states seeking an international recognition and asserting their government’s legitimacy. Thus, it can also be used by states proclaiming the

illegitimate status of oppositional government. More importantly, unlike international organizations, these sporting events are in the spotlight not only among states, but also among non-state actors, including ordinary people.

International sporting events can be used to publicize a state's political agenda. For host states, these events are opportunities to proclaim various achievements, particularly economic achievements. Furthermore, hosting these events, especially the Olympic Games, is an important non-military element of being a great power, and is thus the key to achieving acknowledged status. For other states, these events can be low-cost but high-profile tools for foreign policy in which they can broadcast their stances on international issues or policy towards a host state (in the case of a boycott, for instance).

International sporting events hosted by either great powers or emerging powers are also opportunities for states to propagandize and disseminate power over opinion and soft power resources through non-political images. In addition, these events are contests in which international values are reshaped.

International sporting events are a war without shooting because they are used by states, particularly by great powers, for which power politics is the basis of relationships. There is only one gold medal in an event, and therefore, host states, particularly non-democratic regimes, tend to intensify their sport policy in order to be successful at the games, which is equated with national prestige. (Carr, 2001)

The above framework, this article contends, provides extensive patterns of states' usage of international sporting events in the twenty-first

century, a time in which the use of force has become less favourable, as it decreases a state's legitimacy in the international community. An example of this is the American invasion of Iraq. Instead, the unusual tools of foreign policy, which include hosting international sporting events, have become common. Moreover, they result in productive outcomes since political images and threats are concealed effectively by these unconventional instruments. As will be demonstrated in the case of Beijing in 2008, hosting the Olympic Games was an opportunity for China's government to counter the China threat theory, which is a hindrance to China's international strategy, and work for acknowledged status as a great power.

The Beijing 2008 Olympic Games and China's international strategy

Since the Cold War ended, China has experienced *de facto* isolation because of the triumph of the U.S., which was representative of western democracy and liberal capitalism. Subsequently, a new international political and economic system dominated by the U.S., the so-called *New World Order* (NWO), was established. The former Soviet satellite states turned to democracy and were subsequently assimilated by the new system. During the 1990s, liberal values spread, particularly human rights, and became international norms. These were manifested through humanitarian interventions throughout the decade. China, therefore, became an "other" in the international community because its political and economic systems and foreign policy are substantially different.

Moreover, the rise of China, particularly its rapid economic growth and Beijing's increased influence on the Third World, has intensified the West's concern that China's threat has become more explicit, which has led to increased numbers of adherents to the China threat theory. However, these

concerns about China are not new; they can be traced to the work of A. F. K. Organski, a Cold War realist. In *World Politics*, Organski (1958) predicted that China would become a challenger to the U.S.'s position at the top of pyramid and the dominant nation, if it became industrialized (Organski, 1958: 322). Consequently, China has been compelled to deal with what Yong Deng (2008: 105) called the 'China threat theory'.

According to Deng, the China threat theory is a crucial impediment to China's achievement of its international goal: acknowledged status as a great power. Notwithstanding China's flourishing economy and growing military capabilities, during the 1990s, China was *de facto* not acknowledged as a great power, since power without recognition, as Deng points out, fuels the fear of threat (Deng, 2008: 21). Thus, China has had to attempt to overcome this obstacle in order to acquire other states' acknowledgement as a *normal* great power, reengaging with the NWO while simultaneously preserving Chinese characteristics and maintaining the autonomy of Beijing's foreign policy (Caffrey, 2010: 2412). Among Beijing's endeavours, hosting the Olympic Games, Caffrey argued, was a plausible option for attaining China's goal, as the Olympic Games provide great power credibility and are a high-profile tool of foreign policy; however, China's most important motive comes from its apolitical image.

China's intention to use international sport began over two decades prior. As Wei et al. pointed out, the 'Olympic Strategy' (*Aoyun zhanlue*) was proposed in 1985, and subsequently became the blueprint for Chinese sport during the 1980s and 1990s (Wei et al., 2010: 2388). Therefore, Wei et al. added, 'China's ambition to re-establish its national image and status and to inspire national confidence to catch up with the Western powers through Olympic success meant that the Olympic Strategy was the priority.' (Wei et

al., 2010: 2389) The importance of the Olympic Games to Beijing was affirmed by a statement from Wu Shaozu, China's Minister of Sport from 1990 to 2000:

'The highest aim of Chinese sport is success in the Olympic Games. We must concentrate our resources on it. To raise the flag at the Olympics is our major responsibility.' (Wei et al., 2010: 2388)

This responsibility was emphatically accomplished at the Beijing Olympics. However, China travelled a long and difficult road before it was awarded the Olympic Games.

Impediments to China's Olympic bid for the Olympic Games emanated from the China threat theories, particularly concerning China's repressive governance. China's losing bid in 1993 for the 2000 Olympics was an obvious case in which China's domestic affairs, particularly the 1989 tragedy at Tiananmen Square, became a *de facto* justification for denying China's bid if not a *de jure* one (Economy and Segal, 2008: 49). This, as the framework suggests, manifested Olympism, the liberal values attached to the Olympic Games. Furthermore, liberal values, especially human rights, had been strengthened during the 1990s to the point that they became international norms, and thus Beijing faced a dilemma. Yet hosting the Olympics was essential to China's international strategy, despite difficulties conforming to Western values. In 2000, China won its bid to host the 2008 Olympic Games in 2008, due in large part to a promise reflected by a statement made by Liu Jingmin, China's Olympic representative, that "[b]y allowing Beijing to host the Games, you will help the development of human rights". (Economy and Segal, 2008: 50) Thus, hosting the Games would affect both China's domestic and international affairs.

Despite the high price, hosting the Olympics was relatively worthwhile, since it provided Beijing with opportunities to fulfil two crucial elements of its

strategy: promoting a amicable image and values but maintaining its characteristics and publicly reiterating the One-China principle. As the Olympic Games were *de jure* apolitical under the spotlight of the world, China took this chance to proclaim globally that it was a peaceful great power and no longer the 'sick man of Asia'. As China's rise was perceived as a threat, Beijing was extremely careful to use this non-political platform to nurture its peaceful image. The Games' mascot, for example, was changed from a menacing dragon to an adorable Fuwa, since the dragon could signify antagonism. In addition, Chinese cultural resources were used to soften the war of medals as well as to disseminate its cultural influences to audiences around the world via the Opening and Closing Ceremonies. Nevertheless, perceived conflicts with Olympic values led to international criticism including calls for boycotts of the Beijing Games. Much of this arose from Beijing's relations with repressive regimes as well as its domestic response to Tibetan unrest; these became crises for Beijing. In terms of foreign relations with repressive governments, Beijing carefully and selectively moderated its policies, conforming under international pressure, particularly on human rights issues (Cha, 2008: 111).

In the case of Sudan, for example, Beijing publicly pressured Khartoum to accept a joint African Union-United Nations peacekeeping force (Economy and Segal, 2008: 54). Nonetheless, as Cha pointed out, China's moderations were only tactical adjustments, and were not meant for fundamental change (Cha, 2008: 111-112). Beijing's stance on its domestic affairs confirmed Cha's thesis. In the case of the 2008 Tibetan riots, Beijing rejected an international petition and closed the affected region, insisting firmly on its sovereignty rights.

The issue of national sovereignty arose again through questions about the status of Taiwan in the Olympic Games, as Taiwan has been a paramount concern of China in terms of its territorial integrity and national security. These events, as Junwei Yu demonstrated, were used by Beijing to legally exclude Taiwan from appearing in international arenas as a sovereign state; this was demonstrated through the prohibition of the Taiwanese national flag and the usage of terms that were contrary to the One-China principle, such as “two Chinas” and “one China, one Taiwan” (Yu, 2008: 300).

The One-China principle is critical to Beijing because status as a *normal* great power could not be attained if China’s territorial integrity was not intact. Considering this, it is not an exaggeration to state that the Beijing Olympics became a platform for China to contest and reframe international values. This could be perceived as an attempt by China to integrate itself into a peaceful world whose essence is the sovereignty of states while simultaneously concealing its *realpolitik*, which is opposed to the West’s liberal norms and emphases on human rights and humanitarian interventions—an attempt to create a world order in which China is the greatest power (Caffrey, 2008: 819).

This section demonstrates why Beijing strived to host the Olympic Games in spite of the crises that arose from liberal conditions and the China threat theory. Despite compromising under pressure, China’s fundamental characteristics and values remained intact and were successfully promoted through the Beijing Olympics.

Did China win the Olympics?

Despite condemnations of the 2008 Beijing Olympics as the “Genocide Olympics” and the “Saffron Olympics” because of China’s hard

stance on the principle of sovereignty rights towards the violation of human rights in domestic affairs of Sudan and Burma, this article contends that China won the Games, and not only because of its diplomatic accomplishments hosting the events. Rather, these Olympics was the beginning of a new world order in which China has become the *de jure* great power whose nature is not considered to be something *other*, but rather to be an alternative model for non-Western states. Nevertheless, Beijing's success in diminishing its image as a threat especially among the Western world is difficult to measure, because there is no empirical evidence to support analysis since such image depends upon a process of intersubjectivity, which to some extent is beyond Beijing's abilities. Besides, the 2008 Olympics was just the starting point, and China's road to success is long and uncertain. Meanwhile, international sporting events such as the Olympic Games will also be used by other great powers to maintain the status quo and to counter China's growing power. The 2016 Olympics, which will be held by Brazil, another rising power, will be another war without shooting. Last but not least, the 2008 Olympics Games, held by Beijing, demonstrates how the great powers utilize the international sports events as an instrument of their strategy and foreign policy. It demonstrates that the Olympics Games can be used as a platform for power politics. Thus, the relationship between international sports events and the power rivalry among the great powers cannot be neglected by the study of international relations.

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