

Soft power: political instrumentalisation of sport?

The concept of soft power is a matter of political science and international relations. However, the increasing use of sport by states for internal and external political reasons has important socio-economic consequences for professional sport, which fully justifies the inclusion of the issue in this book.

Definition and purpose

In a post-Cold War context (since the break-up of the Soviet bloc and the collapse of the communist regimes in 1989), the concept of power can be defined as the ability of a state to influence other states to behave in a way that conforms to its interests. To achieve this, countries can use three main methods: hard power, soft power and smart power. According to Joseph Nye, an American theorist of this new approach to power in international relations [1990], hard power refers to the ability to directly impose one's will on a third party through military, political or economic means.

Conversely, soft power is defined by the capacity of the State to indirectly orient international relations in its favour, with an action or a position in a given direction, by a range of means other than coercive (threat, use of force). The attractiveness of cinema, music, culture, language or sport is part of this diplomacy of influence. These powerful vectors of soft power are one of the many tools that allow the State to strengthen its legitimacy and expand its international audience. States that have the means to do so use both hard and soft power, the latter being more effective than the former, which is seen by public opinion as manipulation or violence. The effects of this subtle blend of soft and hard power is reflected in the notion of "smart power" [Nye, 2011].

Television turns every mega-sporting event into a 'global village' that brings together several hundred million highly receptive people. With its popularity and universality, sport bypasses borders and ideologies. Moreover, sport is one of the rare domains in geopolitics where power is not rejected, but most often admired [Boniface, 2021]. Also, sporting diplomacy has become a real tool in the foreign politics of numerous countries, allowing them to use persuasion or seduction in place of force.

Geopolitics through sport

Sport is a component and a marker of a state's power, of its ability to exist on the international scene. A state can thus obtain an aura that it could not normally have without recourse to certain forms of soft power: hosting sporting events, winning Olympic medals, taking

control of professional foreign clubs, acquiring TV broadcasting rights and naturalising athletes, etc.

Some countries in the Persian Gulf, unable to compete for medals with the big Olympic nations, have specialised in events: The United Arab Emirates, in Dubai, with a Formula 1 Grand Prix, a European Tour golf tournament, a professional tennis tournament and a stage of the World Rugby 7s circuit; in Bahrain with a professional cycling team (Bahrain-McLaren) and a Formula 1 Grand Prix; in Saudi Arabia with the Dakar Rally from 2020 to 2024.

Then again, for other countries (United States, China, Russia, Germany, Great Britain, France, etc.), it is a question of asserting a global and total power by activating all the levers of sports geopolitics. Many states see the Olympic Games as a continuation of the Cold War by other means, with a cult of nationalism and propaganda for external use.

For countries with huge economic and demographic resources, as well as a long-standing sporting culture, the games are based on the position obtained in the Olympic medals world ranking. This is the case for the United States (2827 medals at the summer and winter Olympics, from 1896 to 2018), the USSR-Russia (1885 medals), Germany (1235 medals), Great Britain (883 medals), France (840 medals) or China (608 medals won, for the most part, in a recent period, as a consequence of internal ideological changes).

In addition to the Olympic podiums, these major sporting powers equally concentrate the organisation of the two principal mega-events: 2008 Summer and 2022 Winter Olympics for China, 2012 Summer Olympics for Great Britain, 2014 Winter Olympics for Russia, 2024 Summer Olympics for France, 2028 Summer Olympics for the United States; 1998 Football World Cup for France, 2006 for Germany, 2018 for Russia and 2026 for the United States (with Canada and Mexico).

Soft power, nation branding and sporting power: Qatar as the example

An atypical multinational state strategy in the field of sporting policy is developed by a few oil countries with abundant capital. Amongst these states, it is Qatar which - lacking the tools and means of hard power - is leading and assuming a strategy of influence through sport that no other country had engaged in before [Guégan, 2017]. Qatar's instrumentalisation of sport is a method of accumulating rapid international visibility [Boniface, 2021]. Indeed, Qatari policy puts soft power and sports power at the service of nation branding, i.e., the promotion of the State's brand image by building and enhancing national identity, tangible and communicable, as

transnational firms do, to gain profits and rewards. Qatar is omnipresent through various investments in the sports economy, media overexposure and a desire to create a 'brand Qatar' as a land of excellence in high-level sport.

It is true that this Middle Eastern micro-state is rich in the short and medium-term, but weakened by the duration of its gas and oil resources, which will not last 50 years. Moreover, this emirate suffers from a strong economic vulnerability (too little diversification outside of hydrocarbons), demographic (2 million inhabitants), territorial (1,400 square kilometres, less than Corsica), military (lowest share of GDP devoted to military spending in the region) and geopolitical (complicated relations with Saudi Arabia and Iran). The more Qatar is talked about, the less likely it is to be annexed or endangered by its powerful neighbours. All in all, it is not certain that the implementation of this non-coercive power of influence through sport is more costly for Qatar than buying weapons [Boniface, 2021].

For all these reasons, Qatar is investing massively abroad within the framework of the 'Qatar National Vision 2030' plan, drawn up in 2008, whose objective is to have half of its income dependent on activities other than gas and oil (as opposed to 20% at present). To this end, the Qatari monarchy is taking stakes in the sports sector via the country's main sovereign wealth fund, the Qatari Investment Authority. Qatar thus intends to become a world sports capital to promote its fame and reputation, stimulate its tourist economy and build an alternative economy for the post-energy rent era based on leisure and entertainment, amongst other things.

To do this, Qatar is taking increasing shares of the global sports spectacle market in order to increase its diplomatic influence, the only means it has to ensure the security and integrity of its territory, protect its sovereignty, its population and its interests in a tense and unstable geographical area. Classically, but increasingly effectively, Qatar attracts many major events to shape its image as a modern, globally recognised power: World small pool swimming championships and men's squash championships (2014), men's world handball championships (2015), World road cycling championships (2016), World athletics championships (2019), Football World Cup (2022 with a record budget of 74 billion euros, the cumulative equivalent of the previous five editions), World swimming championships (2023). The ultimate goal of this strategy of taking over the sports field by the Qatari authorities is Doha's bid to host the Summer Olympics in 2032!

The objective of the Qatari state's acquisitions of football clubs is to gain in symbolism [Franck, 2010] with the purchase of Paris Saint Germain in 2011, via Qatar Sports Authority, as well as the Miami football club (Major League Soccer) in 2016. It should be noted that the United Arab Emirates was a pioneer in this field with the takeover of Manchester City by a sovereign fund in 2008.

Qatar also buys TV broadcasting rights in France (football, rugby, tennis, basketball, etc.) through the beIN Media Group and controls sports broadcasting in the Arab world with Al Jazeera. The method of strengthening its national teams through the almost instantaneous naturalisation of top foreign athletes is singular. For example, 23 of the 28 players who wore Qatari shirts at the 2015 World Handball Championship were not from the emirate and represented seven nations.

The ambivalent effects of sport's soft power

It is true that these investments in the global sporting economy contribute to the strong growth of the professional sports turnover and allow the international sporting movement to reap substantial revenues and increasing profits. However, this influx of money is causing inflation of salaries and transfers, as well as an extension of the value chain of the sporting activity (multiplication of sports agents, marketing consultancy companies, financial investments), which is at the origin of progressive outsourcing of important financial flows. In addition, this capital threatens the competitive balance of championships. For example, between 2013 and 2021, thanks to the injection of more than 2 billion euros into PSG's budget by Qatar, the Parisian club has outrageously dominated the league with seven of the nine titles awarded.

It is also questionable, in terms of cost-benefit analysis and the well-being of the populations concerned, whether it is appropriate for states like China and Russia to spend whatever it costs to increase their influence abroad and perpetuate their power at home. The rate of cost overruns for the Olympic Games and the level of expenditure incurred by these two host countries are proof of this, with unprecedented records: 1130% for the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing (32 billion euros instead of 2.6 billion) and 495% for the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi (50 billion dollars instead of 8.4 billion).

Finally, this generous providential windfall does not encourage the international sporting movement to question the authoritarian nature of certain political regimes with which it has developed, since the beginning of this century, a close partnership for the organisation of major sporting mega-events. These 'democraships' totally instrumentalise sport, with soft power or nation branding objectives to hide the flagrant human rights violations. The moral, ethical and educational credo that is supposed to have inspired the foundation of contemporary sport has difficulty remaining credible.

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