

SPORTS DIPLOMACY AND SECURITY CHALLENGES DURING THE COLD WAR

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Abstract: This paper explores the complex interconnection between sports diplomacy and security challenges during the Cold War period (1947-1991). During this period of ideological divisions between East and West, sports competitions often served as a substitute for direct confrontation between super-powers. The paper analyzes how sporting events, such as the Olympic Games and other international competitions, were instrumentalized by states to achieve diplomatic goals and project soft power. Special attention is given to significant incidents such as the boycotts of the Olympic Games in Moscow 1980 and Los Angeles 1984, as well as the so-called «ping-pong diplomacy» which paved the way for the normalization of relations between the USA and China. Through analysis of historical documents, diplomatic archives, and secondary sources, the paper demonstrates how sport functioned as an arena for security competition, but paradoxically also as a bridge for dialogue in a period of intense geopolitical tensions. The conclusions indicate that sports diplomacy, despite its instrumentalization, often managed to open diplomatic channels that would otherwise have remained closed, contributing to a certain degree of stability in the Cold War security environment.

Keywords: sports diplomacy, Cold War, security, Olympic Games, ping-pong diplomacy, soft power, ideological competition, international relations, geopolitics

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Cold War period (1947-1991) represents one of the most complex epochs of contemporary history, characterized by ideological, political, and military confrontation between the United States of America and the Soviet Union, as well as their respective allies. Under conditions of nuclear deterrence and the impossibility of direct military conflict, superpowers sought alternative arenas to demonstrate their superiority and achieve foreign policy goals. Sport, as a global phenomenon with enormous popularity and symbolic significance, became one of the most important fields for projecting national prestige and ideological supremacy (Keys, 2003). Sports diplomacy, as a specific form of public diplomacy, involves the use of sport and sporting events to achieve foreign policy goals of states and improve international relations. During the Cold War, this phenomenon experienced its boom, and international sports competitions were transformed into arenas for symbolic measurement of strength between the capitalist and communist blocs (Redihan, 2017). Simultaneously, sport paradoxically served as one of the rare bridges of communication between ideologically opposed sides, enabling forms of cooperation and dialogue that were difficult to achieve in other spheres.

This paper aims to examine the complex dynamics of the relationship between sports diplomacy and security challenges during the Cold War. Through analysis of key sporting events, diplomatic initiatives related to sport, and their security implications, we will try to answer several key questions: How were sports competitions used as instruments of foreign policy strategies of superpowers? To what extent did sport contribute to the escalation or de-escalation of tensions in the Cold War security environment? What were the long-term consequences of the politicization of sport on international relations and the security architecture of the Cold War?

The paper is structured in several logically connected sections. After the introductory part, a conceptual framework follows that defines key concepts and theoretical approaches relevant to the analysis. The third part of the paper is dedicated to the analysis of the Olympic Games as an arena of Cold War competition, with special reference to the boycotts of

the Games in Moscow and Los Angeles. The fourth part explores the phenomenon of “ping-pong diplomacy” and its implications for Sino-American relations. The fifth part analyzes the role of football and other popular sports in the context of Cold War security challenges. The sixth part considers the consequences of Cold War sports diplomacy on contemporary international relations, while the final part summarizes the key findings and conclusions of the research.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: SPORT, DIPLOMACY, AND SECURITY

2.1. Sports diplomacy as an instrument of foreign policy

Sports diplomacy represents a relatively new concept in the theory of international relations, which involves the use of sport as an instrument for achieving foreign policy goals of states (Murray, 2012). It can manifest through various forms: from organizing international sporting events to raise the international prestige of a country, through using sports exchanges to improve bilateral relations, to instrumentalizing sports successes for projecting national power and influence. Unlike traditional diplomacy, which takes place behind closed doors between professional diplomats, sports diplomacy involves a wider spectrum of actors – athletes, coaches, fans, sports organizations – and takes place before the eyes of the global public. It is precisely this public dimension that makes it a particularly attractive instrument of “soft power,” a concept developed by Joseph Nye (2004) which refers to the ability of a state to achieve its goals through attraction and persuasion, rather than coercion or payment.

During the Cold War, sports diplomacy experienced its full affirmation as an instrument of foreign policy. Both superpowers recognized the potential of sport for projecting their ideological and systemic superiority. For the Soviet Union, international sports competitions represented an opportunity to demonstrate the successes of the socialist system and its ability to create a “new man” – physically and morally superior (Riordan, 1974). For the United States, sports successes served as proof of the su-

periority of the American way of life, individualism, and the free market.

2.2. Sport and the security complex of the Cold War

The security complex of the Cold War, characterized by a bipolar structure of the international system, nuclear deterrence, and ideological antagonism, created a specific context in which sport gained a pronounced political and security dimension. Buzan and Wæver (2003) define a security complex as “a group of states whose primary security interests are so closely linked that their national securities cannot realistically be considered separately from one another.” In the context of the Cold War, every aspect of relations between East and West, including sports competitions, was viewed through the prism of security implications. Sport had a dual role in the security complex of the Cold War. On one hand, it served as an arena for demonstrating power and prestige, contributing to the intensification of rivalry and distrust. On the other hand, it enabled forms of cooperation and communication that could act as mechanisms for reducing tensions and building trust. This ambivalent nature of sports diplomacy makes it a particularly interesting subject of analysis in the context of security studies.

2.3. Theoretical approaches to the analysis of sports diplomacy

Several theoretical approaches are relevant for the analysis of sports diplomacy in the context of the Cold War. The realist perspective, which emphasizes the struggle for power as a key determinant of international relations, allows understanding the instrumentalization of sport for projecting national power and realizing geopolitical interests. The liberalist approach, with a focus on the importance of international institutions and cooperation, provides a framework for analyzing sport as a potential mechanism for improving international understanding and cooperation. The constructivist perspective, which emphasizes the role of identity, norms, and perceptions in international relations, enables understanding of the symbolic dimension of sports competitions and their role in constructing national narratives and identities (Levermore & Budd, 2004). By combining these theoretical approaches, we can get a more compre-

hensive picture of the complex role of sports diplomacy in the security dynamics of the Cold War. In the following chapters, through analysis of specific cases and events, we will try to illustrate this complex dynamics and identify key patterns of interaction between sport, diplomacy, and security in the Cold War context.

3. THE OLYMPIC GAMES AS AN ARENA OF COLD WAR COMPETITION

3.1. Politicization of the Olympic movement

The Olympic Games, conceived as an apolitical competition dedicated to international understanding and peace, became during the Cold War one of the primary arenas for geopolitical and ideological competition between East and West. The entry of the Soviet Union into the Olympic movement in 1952 marked the beginning of a new era in which sports results became a measure of systemic superiority (Rider, 2016).

For the Soviet Union, successes at the Olympic Games represented confirmation of the superiority of the socialist system and its values. This led to the development of a sophisticated system of state-sponsored sport, with massive investments in talents, training, and sports science. The United States, although nominally committed to amateur sport, also had to intensify its efforts to match Soviet successes, which led to increased involvement of the federal government in sport (Rider, 2016).

Medals won at the Olympic Games were not just sporting achievements, but ideological victories, carefully quantified and analyzed in the media on both sides. The informal “medal table,” which is not part of the official Olympic tradition, became a key indicator of national prestige and systemic efficiency. Such politicization of Olympic sport led to a series of controversies and tensions that often undermined the Olympic ideals of peace and understanding.

3.2. Boycott of the Olympic Games in Moscow 1980

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 provoked a sharp reaction from the West and led to a significant escalation of Cold War tensions. In response to this military intervention, US President Jimmy Carter announced a boycott of the Summer Olympic Games in Moscow in 1980, calling on US allies to do the same. This decision represented the first case in Olympic history where a superpower boycotted the games for explicitly political reasons (Sarantakes, 2011).

The American administration presented the boycott as a necessary measure for punishing Soviet aggression and demonstrating Western unity in opposing the expansionist policy of the USSR. For President Carter, the boycott was part of a broader strategy of pressure on the Soviet Union, which included a grain embargo, suspension of technology transfers, and boycott of the Olympic Games (Sarantakes, 2011).

A total of 65 countries joined the American boycott, including key Western allies such as West Germany, Japan, Canada, and Israel. However, some significant Western allies, such as Great Britain, France, Italy, and Australia, decided to send their athletes, although some of these countries participated in protest gestures such as competing under the Olympic flag instead of the national flag.

The boycott had significant consequences on multiple levels. The number of participating countries was reduced from 121 to 80, which significantly diminished the sporting quality of competition in many disciplines. The economic impact on the Soviet Union was significant, given the enormous investments in infrastructure and organization. On the political level, the boycott further polarized the international community and deepened distrust between East and West (Sarantakes, 2011).

3.3. The Soviet response: Boycott of the Olympic Games in Los Angeles 1984

Four years later, the Soviet Union and its allies retaliated in kind, boycotting the Summer Olympic Games in Los Angeles in 1984. The official justification for the boycott was “alleged security threats to So-

viet athletes” and “anti-Soviet hysteria” in the US. However, it is widely accepted that the real motive was a reciprocal measure for the American boycott of the Moscow games (Hulme, 1990).

The Soviet boycott was joined by 14 Eastern bloc countries, including East Germany, which was a significant sports power and winner of numerous medals. The only exceptions among communist countries were Romania, which decided to send its delegation, and China, which returned to the Olympic movement after a long absence.

Despite the Soviet boycott, the Games in Los Angeles were very successful in organizational and commercial terms, setting new standards for the economic sustainability of the Olympic Games. For the US and the West, the successful organization represented a diplomatic victory and a demonstration of the vitality of the Western economic model (Hulme, 1990).

3.4. Security implications of Olympic boycotts

Olympic boycotts represented a dramatic manifestation of Cold War tensions, and their impact on international security was multifaceted. On one hand, boycotts contributed to further polarization of the international community and deepening of distrust between opposing blocs. The instrumentalization of sport for projecting political messages undermined the idea of sport as a neutral space for international understanding.

On the other hand, boycotts functioned as symbolic valves for releasing political tensions and allowed states to demonstrate their position without resorting to more serious confrontations. In this sense, sports boycotts can be viewed as an example of what Schelling (1966) calls “coercive diplomacy” – the use of limited, often symbolic measures to send political messages without escalation into open conflict.

During and after the boycotts, the international sports community, led by the International Olympic Committee, intensified efforts to depoliticize the Olympic Games and strengthen their autonomy from geopolitical tensions. These efforts, although only partially successful, contributed to the gradual reduction of direct instrumentalization of the Olympic

Games for political purposes in later phases of the Cold War (Cottrell & Nelson, 2010).

4. PING PONG DIPLOMACY AND OPENING TOWARDS CHINA

After the communist revolution in China in 1949 and the establishment of the People's Republic of China, relations between China and the US were extremely hostile. The US refused to recognize the new government in Beijing, instead supporting the nationalist government in Taiwan as the legitimate representative of China. The Sino-Soviet split during the 1960s created a more complex geopolitical situation, which opened the possibility for a change in American policy towards China (Xu, 2008). In the context of the ongoing war in Vietnam and increasingly pronounced tensions with the Soviet Union, the American administration under President Richard Nixon began to consider the possibility of normalizing relations with China as part of a broader strategy of "triangular diplomacy." At the same time, the Chinese leadership, faced with the threat from the Soviet Union on the northern border, was also interested in improving relations with the US (Xu, 2008).

In April 1971, American table tennis players participating in the World Table Tennis Championship in Japan received an unexpected invitation to visit the People's Republic of China. This visit, which became known as "ping-pong diplomacy," marked the first official contact between American and Chinese citizens after more than two decades of complete severance of relations (Itoh, 2011). The background of this invitation was a carefully planned diplomatic initiative. President Mao Zedong personally approved the invitation, recognizing the potential of sport as a neutral and low-risk channel for initial contact. On the American side, the Nixon administration quickly recognized the significance of this gesture and responded positively, allowing the visit despite a long-standing policy of isolating China (Itoh, 2011). The American delegation of table tennis players stayed in China for seven days, playing friendly matches and participating in cultural exchanges. Media coverage of this visit was intense, especially in the US, where it represented the first direct insight into life in communist China after many years.

“Ping-pong diplomacy” had far-reaching consequences for the geopolitical and security dynamics of the Cold War. In July 1971, just three months after the visit of the table tennis players, US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger secretly visited Beijing to prepare the ground for President Nixon’s historic visit to China in February 1972. This visit resulted in the signing of the Shanghai Communiqué, which laid the foundations for the normalization of relations between the two countries (Xu, 2008).

The strategic significance of this diplomatic breakthrough was enormous. For the US, rapprochement with China represented a key element of the “triangular diplomacy” strategy, which aimed to exploit Sino-Soviet tensions to strengthen the American geopolitical position. For China, improving relations with the US reduced the threat of a potential two-front conflict and opened the way to international reintegration after years of isolation. The Soviet Union followed this rapprochement with concern, perceiving it as a potential threat to its security. The formation of an implicit Sino-American axis against the USSR significantly changed the strategic balance of power and contributed to a new phase of détente between the US and the Soviet Union during the 1970s (Kissinger, 1994).

“Ping-pong diplomacy” which followed the evolution of international law (Knežević, S. & Martinović, T., 2024) became a classic example of using sport as an instrument for opening diplomatic channels in situations where traditional diplomatic paths are blocked. The success of this approach demonstrated how seemingly trivial sports contacts can have a transformative impact on international relations when there are coinciding strategic interests of key actors.

5. FOOTBALL AND OTHER POPULAR SPORTS IN THE COLD WAR CONTEXT

5.1. Football as an arena of ideological competition

Football, as the most popular global sport, could not escape politicization during the Cold War. Clubs and national teams were often perceived as representatives not only of their countries but also of their political systems. Matches between teams from countries with different

ideological orientations often gained a dimension that transcended sport (Tomlinson & Young, 2006). In Eastern Europe, football clubs were often directly linked to state institutions – CSKA Moscow with the army, Dynamo with the police. In such a context, the success of these clubs on the international scene was interpreted as proof of the strength of these institutions and, indirectly, of the socialist system. In the West, the model of sports clubs was different, but the successes of Western teams were also used for propaganda purposes as proof of the superiority of the capitalist model (Tomlinson & Young, 2006).

The symbolic charge of matches between teams from East and West Germany was particularly significant. After the division of Germany in 1949, sports encounters between the two German states became rare opportunities for direct comparison of the two systems in the conditions of the German cultural context. West Germany's victory over the favored Hungary in the final of the World Cup in 1954, known as the "Miracle of Bern," had enormous psychological significance for West Germany and was perceived as a symbol of the post-war recovery and regeneration of West German society (Hesselmann & Ide, 2009).

1.2. Basketball and Cold War rivalry

Basketball matches between the US and the USSR during the Cold War were among the most tense sporting events of that period, often reflecting broader geopolitical tensions. The controversial final of the Olympic Games in 1972 in Munich, when the Soviet Union defeated the US for the first time in Olympic history after a disputed repetition of the final seconds of the match, caused huge controversies and was perceived in the US as an injustice with a political background (Wolff, 2002). This victory had enormous symbolic significance for the Soviet Union, as it represented a victory over the US in a sport considered "American" and demonstrated the ability of the Soviet system to develop top athletes even in sports without a long tradition in the USSR. For the US, this defeat was shocking and was experienced as part of a broader narrative about the "loss" of American superiority in the context of the Vietnam War and other challenges to American power during the 1970s (Wolff, 2002).

1.3. Chess as a metaphor for Cold War competition

Chess, as an intellectual game with a long tradition in Russia, had a special place in the sports diplomacy of the Cold War. The dominance of Soviet chess players on the international scene was presented as proof of the intellectual superiority of the Soviet educational system and socialist values. In this context, the matches for the title of world champion between Boris Spassky (USSR) and Bobby Fischer (USA) in 1972 in Reykjavik gained enormous symbolic significance, becoming known as the “match of the century” (Johnson, 2007).

Fischer, the eccentric American chess genius, defeated Spassky and broke the long-standing Soviet dominance, which was celebrated in the US as a significant Cold War victory. This match attracted unprecedented media attention worldwide and transformed the perception of chess in the US, linking it with concepts of intellectual superiority in the context of technological competition with the Soviet Union (Johnson, 2007).

Intense sports rivalries during the Cold War had complex security implications. On one hand, sports competitions served as a valve for releasing geopolitical tensions, enabling symbolic competition instead of direct confrontation. On the other hand, sports encounters often further inflamed nationalistic feelings and antagonisms, especially when they were accompanied by controversies and perceptions of unfair judging. Sports rivalries also created risks of incidents and security crises, especially at major international competitions. The terrorist attack on Israeli athletes during the Olympic Games in Munich in 1972, although not directly related to Cold War tensions, demonstrated the vulnerability of major sporting events and led to a significant intensification of security measures at all future competitions (Wolff, 2002). Also, major sporting competitions are subject to terrorist attacks (Munich massacre) but also to a whole range of other acts aimed, among other things, at attacking the constitutional order of the respective state (Knežević, 2024). However, there is a huge number of successful examples that science and faith can coexist (Knežević, 2024a).

6. LEGACY OF COLD WAR DIPLOMACY IN THE CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

6.1. Transformation of sports diplomacy after the Cold War

The end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked a new era in sports diplomacy. The disappearance of the bipolar structure of the international system eliminated the ideological framework that had dominated sports diplomacy in previous decades. However, the politicization of sport did not disappear – it only changed its forms and manifestations (Levermore & Budd, 2004). In the post-Cold War era, sports diplomacy became an instrument used by various actors for different purposes: from traditional states seeking to improve their international image, through international organizations using sport to promote development goals, to multinational corporations using sporting events for global marketing (Levermore & Budd, 2004).

The organization of major sporting events, such as the Olympic Games and the World Cup in football, became an even more important element of national branding strategies and projecting “soft power.” Developing countries and emerging economies such as China, Brazil, South Africa, and Qatar actively sought to organize prestigious sporting events as a way of demonstrating their growing international status and attracting global attention (Grix & Lee, 2013).

6.2. Continuity of sport politicization in the contemporary context

Despite transformations, many patterns of sport politicization established during the Cold War continue to exist in modified forms. The most important sporting events are still arenas for projecting national prestige and demonstrating systemic efficiency. The Olympic Games in Beijing in 2008 were often compared to the Olympic Games in Moscow in 1980 as an example of using sport to legitimize a political system and demonstrate national power (Brownell, 2008).

Boycotts and political pressures remain part of sports diplomacy, although less frequently in the form of complete boycotts as seen during the Cold War. Instead, diplomatic boycotts (where politicians refuse to attend events, but athletes participate), demands for relocating competitions from countries with problematic human rights, and pressures on sponsors to withdraw from controversial events are common (Cottrell & Nelson, 2010).

Sports successes continue to be instrumentalized for purposes of building national pride and cohesion. However, the globalization of sport and increased mobility of athletes complicate this process, creating situations where the successes of emigrants or naturalized athletes become the subject of complex identity negotiations (Bairner, 2001).

7. CONCLUSION

Sports diplomacy during the Cold War represented a complex phenomenon with significant implications for international security. As an arena of symbolic competition between opposing ideological blocs, sport was often instrumentalized for purposes of projecting national power and prestige. The boycotts of the Olympic Games in Moscow and Los Angeles represented dramatic manifestations of the politicization of sport and its connection with broader geopolitical tensions. At the same time, sports diplomacy paradoxically served as a channel for dialogue and de-escalation of tensions in a period when other diplomatic channels were blocked. “Ping-pong diplomacy” between the US and China demonstrated the transformative potential of sports contacts in opening diplomatic possibilities that had far-reaching security implications. The experience of Cold War sports diplomacy left a lasting influence on the dynamics of relations between sport, politics, and security. Many patterns of sport instrumentalization established during this period continue to shape contemporary international relations, adapting to the new global context. Sporting events still represent arenas for demonstrating national prestige and projecting “soft power,” while simultaneously serving as platforms for international cooperation and dialogue. The best legacy of Cold War sports diplomacy perhaps lies precisely in its demonstration of

the ambivalent potential of sport – as an instrument that can both deepen antagonisms and build bridges of understanding. In today's complex security environment, this lesson remains relevant for understanding and managing the relationship between sport, diplomacy, and international security.

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