

CONFLICT PREVENTION AND RESOLUTION FORUM

Olympic Diplomacy

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Description

While the Olympic Games reflect an explicitly apolitical activity, they have historically been highly politicized—boycotted and exploited for a long list of political objectives and grievances. In the context of the controversial Beijing 2008 Olympics, this forum will examine the use and vision of the Olympic Games as a kind of international diplomacy, discussing how they can and cannot be leveraged as a means of preventing conflict and building more robust international cooperation.

Summary

In the 1987 World University Games in Zagreb, the theme was: "Youth of the world for a world of peace." 4 years after those games, Yugoslavia had a bitter civil war. This indicates that while sports events can be helpful in peacemaking, it's not all there is. At the end of the 1992 Barcelona Olympics, they covered all the athletes on the field with a giant Olympic flag and announced: "You entered this stadium representing your countries. You will leave representing Olympia: all one, all together." The organizers of these games really got the powerful symbolism behind this global competition.

One powerful symbol of the Olympics is the torch relay, which can be a magnet to which people attach their agendas. Such was the case with China. Symbols carry a tremendous amount of weight and power. After the death of Chairman Mao, hundreds of thousands died in an earthquake that many Chinese interpreted as the heavens shaking with the death of this great man. You can interpret the current earthquake in China as the earthshaking impact of the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

Sports have played a powerful role in politics. We think of the '36 Olympics in Berlin as a prime example of the politicization of sports. The images of American ping-pong players in China in 1971 cracked the ice in US-China relations, which were really tense at the time. Out of nowhere, the American team was invited to Beijing. It caused a global uproar. This was part of Mao's plan to build relations with the US, partly out of fear of the Soviet Union. And so ping-pong diplomacy has become part of our iconography of politics and sports. Ping-pong diplomacy really did produce a political earthquake.

Another example is on the Thai-Cambodian border in the early 90s, where a volleyball league was established among the different factions and refugee camps. Here, sports were a vehicle for reconciliation.

Why sports and politics? One of its advantages is its ambiguity. It's not overtly political, but it helps build friendships and mend relations. And if it doesn't work out, you can detach the political agenda, because the sport can stand alone. There have been some

wrestling exchanges between the US and Iran. You also have the New York Philharmonic's recent visit to North Korea. Sports or music where you have a large public can be used as an effective vehicle for changing public attitudes.

We're seeing with China that sports are being used as a point of pressure on human rights and Tibet.

What went wrong with China? Why have the Beijing Olympics become so controversial? This is the result of a poisonous interaction between China and parts of the rest of the world.

China wants to present the Olympics as a legitimation and appreciation of their progress. The Olympic Games are not the World Cup – they are given to cities and not countries. Yet everyone refers to this as China's Olympics. But of all the Olympics that have been coming out parties for emerging countries, probably only China and Berlin have been used so much as an attempt to mobilize domestic support for the government and to demonstrate international legitimation for the country.

Boycotting the games became "a sanction waiting for a cause." So many causes have tried to attach themselves to this sanction—Tibet, Darfur, Burma—each competing to make a boycott of the Olympics their cause, some concerned about situations in China, some wanting to use China as a way of highlighting a problem outside the country. China is used as a way to dramatize issues that are not China-specific, but where China can be invoked as an example of the problem—abortion and religious freedom. People know that the way to get attention for their issues is to link it to China.

When you award the Games to an emerging country like China, the award is a validation of the past, but also an expectation for the future. China was expected to progress on its promises of improving human rights. The sense is that they haven't since they were awarded the games in 2001.

But there has been some movement in response to protests—China met with the Dalai Lama. Yet there is tightening control of the press, and there's been an outburst of Chinese nationalism.

Sports are inherently competitive. They can be a trigger for nationalism, rather than for peace and harmony. We could have nasty events surrounding the Games. There is a huge outburst of nationalism that is not just pro-China, but pro-Chinese government.

There are logistical risks at the Beijing Games. Chinese fans could beat foreigners who unveil Tibetan flags. Nationalism is a double-edged sword. If the government is seen as supporting the people, it can be good. But if the police come in and beat Chinese to protect foreigners, it could be bad.

The media will be organizing and defining the event. One individual or special interest group can have as loud a voice as the American government.