


Chapter 13

Soft Power and the Olympics: Opportunities and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

The explanation of the post-cold war era in international relations has been characterised by using the notion of soft power. Originally put forth by Joseph Nye, it provides a highly useful conceptual approach to understanding and explaining the foreign policy behaviour of states. The attractiveness of soft power also enables it to be utilised to shed light on international non-governmental organisations such as the International Olympic Committee. Relying on historical case studies and clarification concerning sports diplomacy, this chapter evaluates the challenges and opportunities the Olympic movement faces regarding soft power.

INTRODUCTION

Power is a key concept that underlines international relations. It has been and continues to be widely studied by researchers, theorists and practitioners. Traditionally associated with the state, power is defined as a capacity: the capacity to do; the ability to get things done; the ability to prevent doing; ability to refuse to do. Historically, power was primarily viewed through a military prism. The number of soldiers and armies deployed, the improvement of the defence industry or the conquests made, and ultimately the territory conquered made it possible to translate the importance of a state on the international scene.

Until the end of the 19th century, and according to the Westphalian conception of international relations, states remained the only actors in the international system. Developments in the 20th and 21st centuries saw the emergence of other actors:

- International organisations (United Nations, European Union);
- Transnational corporations (Google, Apple, Rio Tinto);

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- Non-governmental organisations (International Olympic Committee, Amnesty International, Doctors Without Borders);
- Individuals (Musk, Dalai Lama)

The latter are now considered actors in their own right. Consequently, to manage to exist on the international scene, to claim its independence or importance, it will be necessary to weigh and therefore, seek to express its power. Each actor will seek to highlight his/her strengths. It can be understood that international relations are not carried out solely through the channels of diplomacy, but by the notion of power, of maintaining a foreign policy based on political and military force to dissuade any state that can be considered an adversary.

In the 1970s, the theory of complex interdependence came into prominence; that is to say, the notion of power - released from the monopoly of military power - began to be used by Nye to specify the current type of management of foreign relations but related to the issue of power from a different perspective than that established by the model of political realism, which, as has been stated previously, is guided by the notion of hard power (Keohane & Nye, 1973). Afterwards, Nye, on the eve of the fall of the USSR, sought to theorise the concept of power, defining it as the capacity to obtain a given result and, if possible, to alter the behaviour of others in this direction (Nye, 1990). It identified the classic elements of power: population, territory, economic power and military force, which must be intelligently used. Accepting military and economic power (hard power) had been widely studied; Nye conceptualised soft power as a power of influence, the capacity of attraction from which a country could benefit.

Soft Power

Soft power is the ability to make sense of the particularities of others. More separately, people are used to the power of charm and attraction. In any social relationship, authority is not based solely on the person with the most control but on the deep synergy of affinity. Soft power is based on three-dimensional chess, that is, on three imaginary boards in which power is distributed; at the top is military power, which is on the whole unipolar; next, there is economic power that is multipolar; and, finally, there is the power of transnational relations, which transcends borders and is beyond government control (Nye, 2005 January). International sport would come under this board. Under this scheme, it is the third board in which soft power is supported as a way for one state to influence another to adopt a point of view of its own offered one.

It is a power based on attractiveness that can be exercised based on culture and its image, on the shared political values and foreign policy defined by how one acts in an international context. It is understood that the broader the values that an actor defends and those that her/his banner makes, the greater the influence that s/he will have over others. This is true not only in terms of the depth of cultural influence that it is exercised but also in terms of the number of countries that would be able to influence through different interests.

Nye affirms there are actions that are determined by an observable but intangible attraction and that these are the direct result of the motivations of soft power, but that this does not reside in force or money but in the attraction of shared values such as justice and a sense of obligation to seek greater value for achievement (Nye, 2004a). He also asserts that power in today's globalised and highly connected world is even less coercive and tangible in advanced democracies than previously thought.

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