



Feb 25

## More Than Medals

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When you organize a gathering where individuals wear their national colors and compete against one another, there is something intrinsically beautiful about the many cultures, languages, and beliefs that come together. Yet, these interactions quickly become inherently political. Locate that gathering in one of the world's most volatile geopolitical flashpoints, and you'll get this year's Winter Olympics.

However, the diplomatic posturing and flexing is nothing new. The Olympic Games have long been an event that is wrapped up in the agendas of one state or another. While much has been said on gestures such as the unified Korean women's hockey team and Vice President Mike Pence's snubbing by North Korean diplomats, there is often little distinction between what's noise and what's news. Looking back on the peculiar history of sports diplomacy, the Olympics has often been a venue for shallow gesturing but also an opportunity to project national capability on a global stage.

For diplomats, the Olympics often presents the prospect of building legitimacy or targeting the legitimacy of others. Legitimacy, an often nebulous concept, tends to be the currency of soft power. While hard power — economic might or military strength — can be used to coerce other states, soft power — understood as the power to persuade rather than coerce — is far cheaper and more popular. Legitimacy can be framed as how likely foreign actors are to engage with a given state and acknowledge its rights, decisions, and contributions.



an open democracy and hub of innovation, would have plenty of legitimacy in the eyes of most other states.

South Korea's strong global reputation made it an ideal candidate to host the current winter games.

Theoretically, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) awards hosting privileges to the nations who appear capable of producing the best experience for athletes and spectators. Such capability is contingent on having the financial means to build facilities, a security situation unlikely to allow harm to visitors, and a cultural factor to bolster the enjoyment and sacredness of the world's best athletes coming together to showcase their skill and dedication.

Hosting a major event such as the Olympics was historically reserved for cities of global renown, such as Paris, Sydney, and Tokyo. In recent years, hosting duties have broken the mold of the "global city" and have instead showcased up-and-coming cities. India is the only country of the "BRICS" (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) diplomatic bloc to have not yet hosted a major international sporting event. China, Russia, Brazil, and South Africa have all hosted either the Olympics or a World Cup in the last decade. Statesmen in these countries hailed such opportunities as recognition of their heightened status. Others openly questioned whether the hosts were ready or deserving and later ridiculed shortcomings in the preparation and execution of the events. The Olympics becomes a battleground for diplomatic bickering years before the torch is lit.

Perhaps more impactful than who hosts is who comes. Sending a delegation to a sporting event reflects one state engaging with another. Engagement is by nature a recognition of another state's legitimacy. It was not surprising that when Moscow hosted the 1980 Summer Olympics, the United States and its allies boycotted these games, citing the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Four years later, Los Angeles hosted, and the Soviet Union and other Eastern bloc nations returned the favor. However, these boycotts have little influence on policy. A boycott does little more than aggravate the hosting nations, but it does not necessarily lead to capitulation.

However, withholding an entire nation from participating in the Olympics is not a common occurrence. Boycotts are effective strategies for grabbing attention. The reportedly abandoned secret meeting between Mike Pence and North Korean officials displays how not showing up has a unique psychological effect. Boycotts are symbolic and please domestic citizens more than they anger foreign actors. Regardless, they are one of the most glaring ways the Olympics becomes politicized before the games even begin.

And yet, sports are not always a divisive endeavor. In the same way that refusal to participate appears as an affront, reaching out and agreeing to engage over sports can be a sign of respect. Willingness to compete with another signals admiration; it functions in the same way "breaking bread" demonstrates a willingness to look

past differences. Ping Pong Diplomacy was a valuable tactic used by the Nixon Administration to improve U.S. relations with China. By offering China legitimacy through a desire to send athletes into a previously hostile land, the United States set itself up to normalize and build ties with China.

International sporting events can be about more than medals. However, sport diplomacy is not a fix-all for foreign relations. The two Korean states unified their delegations in 2000, 2004, and 2006; none of these instances precipitated in a tangible breakthrough in the Korean crisis. Moreover, as George Orwell once lamented, international competition can bring “hatred, jealousy, boastfulness, disregard of all rules and sadistic pleasure in witnessing violence.” In 1972, the “Summit Series” was played between the Soviet Union’s national hockey team and Canada’s top professional players. The series was anything but amiable; both sides raised issues with the officiating and conduct of the other. The risk of stoking nationalist fervor is always high when athletes compete with entire nations on their backs.

At the end of the day, sports are a useful but not universal method of building goodwill. They also can be kindling for rivalry. As this latest installment of politicized sports winds down, we should remember one key component of the Olympics: the athletes. Athletes will train all their lives just to qualify for the Olympics. Before celebrating a national victory or exalting newfound peace, we should celebrate the journeys of the competitors. For some, it’s just a game. For others, it’s national pride or a chance for peace. But for the athletes, it’s a lifetime of blood, sweat, and tears, and that’s what’s truly beautiful about the Olympic Games.

## *Global*

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