
A Report on
THE OLYMPICS AND INTERNATIONAL
RELATIONS

(24/01/2022 to 20/02/2022)

By

Dhruv Nilkanth

THE RISE



Under
TheRise Internship Programme - TRIP
An online internship programme

LIST OF CONTENTS

| | Page No. |
|--|----------|
| Certificate | 3 |
| Acknowledgement | 4 |
| Abstract | 5 |
| Work Plan | 6 |
| 1.Introduction | 7 |
| 2.Motivation | 9 |
| 3.Political Events at the Olympics | 10 |
| 4.Applying Concepts of IR to the Olympics | 11 |
| 5.Beijing Controversies and the Future | 12 |
| 6.Methodology | 12 |
| 7.Conclusion | 13 |
| References | 14 |
| Appendix I | 16 |
| - The Political Nature of the Olympics: Protests, Boycotts and Violence at the Games | |
| Appendix II | 23 |
| - Olympics and International Relations : Uncovering an Intertwined Relationship | |
| Appendix III | 30 |
| - Political Controversies at the Beijing Olympics 2022 and the Way Forward | |

CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the online internship under TheRise Internship Programme (TRIP) has been completed by Mr. Dhruv Nilkanth on the topic "*The Olympics and International Relations*" during 24/01/2022 to 20/02/2022. This report has been prepared on the basis of the work carried out by me under the supervision of Consultant-TRIP.

Name of TRIP Intern: Dhruv Nilkanth
Email: dhruv10cricket@gmail.com



ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The internship opportunity I had with TheRise.co.in under TheRise Internship Programme (TRIP) was a great chance for learning and professional development. Therefore, I consider myself as a very lucky individual as I was provided with an opportunity to be a part of it. I am also grateful for having a chance to meet so many wonderful people and professionals who led me through this internship period.

Bearing in mind previous I am using this opportunity to express my deepest gratitude and special thanks to the Editor of TheRise.co.in who in spite of being extraordinarily busy with her/his duties, took time out to hear, guide and keep me on the correct path and allowing me to carry out my project at their esteemed organization and extending during the training.

I express my deepest thanks to the TRIP Consultant for taking part in useful decision & giving necessary advices and guidance and arranged all facilities to make life easier. I choose this moment to acknowledge his/her contribution gratefully. It is my radiant sentiment to place on record my best regards, deepest sense of gratitude to them for their careful and precious guidance which were extremely valuable for my study both theoretically and practically.

I perceive as this opportunity as a big milestone in my career development. I will strive to use gained skills and knowledge in the best possible way, and I will continue to work on their improvement, in order to attain desired career objectives. Hope to continue cooperation with all of you in the future.

Sincerely,

Dhruv Nilkanth

ABSTRACT

Many countries along with the US have decided to stage a diplomatic boycott of the 2022 Winter Olympics held in Beijing. The move comes in opposition to Chinese human rights violations and crimes against humanity especially in the Xinjiang autonomous region. Chinese leaders have condemned the move and asked the boycotting countries to not mix politics with sports. However, the Olympics have always been a stage for global politics. Countries have used the Olympics as a means for their strategic and foreign policy goals since decades. The present study aims to understand the current politics around Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics and analyze the broader canvass of international relations, power projection, and diplomacy with regards to the Olympic Games. The instances of Olympic spirit transcending the political tensions would also be delved into in this study.

Keywords : *2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, Olympics, Olympics and International Politics*

WORK PLAN

Objective: “To study and analyze the effect of international relations on the Olympics, and vice-versa.”

Work Plan: Weekly Work Plan for each week starting from Monday to Saturday will be as follows. The guidance can be sought on email any number of times. The intern has to communicate the progress of work done on **each** working day by email in minimum 25 words by 7.00 PM. After every week, a brief detail of the work done during that week in a maximum of 500 words **should** be sent latest by email by 7.00 PM on Saturday of respective week. There will be a weekly discussion with the intern as per the schedule notified on email.

Week 1: Preliminary study of issues pertaining to Olympics and international relations in the past and present (especially Beijing 2022)

Week 2: Writing and submitting an article* (upto 1500 words) giving insights into the present situation of Beijing 2022 Winter Games, the politics surrounding it, the issues and demands.

Week 3: Studying the international diplomacy pertaining to the Olympics of the past, instances of disruptions as well as overcoming them. Connect them with the concepts of the international relations.

Week 4: Writing and submitting an article* (upto 1500 words) giving insights into the complex relationship of the Olympic Games and the international politics in the past using the international relations concepts like soft power, power projection etc. supported with the instances of Olympic Spirit transcending politics and vice-versa.

1. Introduction

The Olympic Games are the biggest sporting event in the world. Originating in ancient Greece, the Olympics were revived towards the end of the 19th century by French educator Pierre, Baron de Coubertin. The first modern Olympics were held in Athens in 1896. Since then, the Olympics have been growing constantly to become a sporting spectacle that features hundreds of sports and thousands of athletes participating in both individual and team events. The Olympics have two editions: the Summer Games and the Winter Games. Both the competitions are held every four years, respectively. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) is the main governing body of the event. It has 206 member National Olympic Committees (NOCs), which is even more than the United Nations.

The Olympic games are watched by billions of people worldwide and feature the top athletes from most sports competing against each other. Every NOC sends a contingent to the Games. These athletes represent their respective NOCs. The competition has a medal system with gold, silver, and bronze medals being awarded for each event. A medal tally is maintained for every edition to track how many medals each country has won. While there is no prize for the countries that finish at the top of the medal table, it is a difficult feat which brings immense prestige to the country that manages to do so. The United States of America has been the most successful country at the Summer Olympics, while Germany has been the most successful country in the winter event. The US also holds the top position in the overall combined total.

Every edition of the Olympics is held at a different location. For this, the IOC invites applications from cities, and after a proper assessment, it awards the hosting rights to the respective candidates. Most of the Olympic Games are hosted by capital cities or other large metropolitan areas due to the immense infrastructural requirements of hosting such an event. This is another reason why a large majority of the Olympic games are held in the highly developed Western European and North American countries. London, Paris, and Tokyo are some of the cities that have held multiple editions of the Olympics. Until the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, no non-western country had held the games. However in recent times, many developing countries have shown their interest in hosting the Olympics. This is due to the

exposure the event provides. Millions of visitors and billions of viewers indulge in the Olympic games, and this provides a golden opportunity for developing countries to boost the economy through tourism and investment. Countries have to bear huge financial costs in exchange for this. The Olympics also attract a large number of sponsors from across the world.

The official motto of the Olympics is "Faster, Higher, Stronger - Together." The "Olympic rings" are the official symbol of the event. This symbol features interlocking rings of the colours blue, yellow, black, green, and red on a white background. The five rings represent the five continents from which countries and athletes participate in the Games. These are: Europe, Asia, Africa, Oceania, and the Americas (North and South). The Olympics have provided a global platform for countries and athletes, irrespective of where they come from, to compete with the top athletes in the world. Some athletes have gone on to become legends in the sporting world on the back of their Olympic achievements. Michael Phelps, who is a former swimmer from the US, participated in four editions of the Summer Olympics and went on to win 28 medals, including 23 gold medals. This stands as the Olympic record. Similarly, the equal stage means that small countries, such as Jamaica, have more medals at the Olympics than many larger countries. They have one of the best population to medal ratios. Norway, which has a relatively small population, has won the maximum number of medals in the previous two Winter Olympics, beating much bigger countries such as the US and Russia.

The IOC is an apolitical body and it works towards the goal of the Olympic Movement, which is to "contribute to building a peaceful and better world by educating youth through sport practiced without discrimination of any kind and in the Olympic spirit, which requires mutual understanding with a spirit of friendship, solidarity and fair play." While the Olympics are supposed to be a space free from politics, the realities of the world don't allow them to be separate from the same. In fact, the Olympics are deeply related to international politics instead.

The aim of this study is to understand the relationship between the Olympics and international relations (IR). IR is a sub-field of political science. The definition of the term is simply the study of relations between two or more sovereign states. However, the scope of the subject is not solely limited to the governments of the countries, as it also includes

intergovernmental organisations, international non-government organisations, private entities, and much more. The only criteria is that the topic of study should have an international aspect, meaning that any research in the field has to deal with at least two countries. IR theory includes the study of foreign policy, diplomacy, wars and conflicts, international cooperation, etc.

If we examine the basic definition of international relations, it becomes evident that the Olympics fit into the criteria and scope of the subject and therefore can be studied under the same. The IOC consists of multiple member NOCs that represent different countries, and the Olympics have participants from all these countries. The interaction between them is a key issue that can be studied under IR. Not only do the Olympics have research scope in the field of international relations, but the concepts and theories that are present in IR theory can also be used to better understand the various aspects of the sporting event.

2. Motivation

There are multiple factors that motivated me to undertake a research project on the topic of "The Olympics and International Relations." The primary reason is my academic interest in the field of international relations. Being an undergraduate student of international relations, the choice of topic is directly related to my educational course. Secondly, I have been an avid sport enthusiast since my childhood. Growing up, playing and following multiple sports developed my interest in the Olympic games. Since 2008, I have been following the events, athletes, and results of the games. This explains the choice of the two sub-parts in the above study, "Olympics" and "International Relations."

The reason for combining both the topics and the timing of the research was inspired by the events related to the Olympics that took place at the time. In January 2022, it was less than a month before the Winter Olympics were going to be held in Beijing. The event was highly politicised even before it began, and few countries, including the US, announced a diplomatic boycott of the games to protest Chinese human rights violations. This inspired me to research the history of political events at Olympic Games while keeping the 2022 edition in mind. I also

followed the event in real-time and studied how the relationship between the Olympics and IR played out at the Beijing Winter Games.

I decided to pursue this research through an internship with TheRise.co.in under their TheRise Internship Programme (TRIP) for two reasons. First, being an undergraduate student and new to the specific research fields, I required someone to provide me with guidance and mentorship for the duration of the study. The decision to choose TheRise specifically was due to the fact that they are involved in social journalism. They provide a platform for both intellectuals to put forth their views and for readers to gain knowledge from various perspectives and viewpoints. I had previously read a few articles published by them and appreciated the variety of interesting and important issues that were covered. This motivated me to work with the organisation, undertaking a research project of my own and contributing to their vision while also learning, accumulating experience, and gaining exposure from the same.

3. Political Events at the Olympics

There have been several political events at the Olympic games ever since 1896. These include protests, boycotts, instances of violence, etc. The protests can be divided into two groups: athlete protests and civilian protests. This means that there have been instances where the athletes have shown dissatisfaction and opposition to sociopolitical issues in either their home country or the host country. Secondly, there have also been protests by civilians opposing either their own country for hosting the Olympics or allowing certain other countries to host or participate in the Games.

There are also two types of boycotts. The first is a total boycott, and the second is a diplomatic boycott. A total boycott occurs when one or more countries decide not to send an athlete contingent to the Olympic Games in order to protest any political act by either the hosting or participating country. A diplomatic boycott is when countries participate in the competition but don't send diplomats or government officials to the Games in an official capacity. There have also been instances of violence at the Olympic games. This includes

massacres and bomb blasts. Some of the most notable political events in Olympic history include the 1936 Nazi Olympics, 1972 Munich Massacre, the 1980 Olympics boycott, and the 1996 Atlanta Blasts.

4. Applying Concepts of IR to the Olympics

While taking a look at political events helps track the history and reasons for their taking place, a deeper critical understanding of the underlying relationship between the Olympics and international relations is necessary. This can be done by using certain concepts of IR theory. Firstly, the Olympics are a reflection of the realities of international politics. Any major international event, such as a war or pandemic, results in the rescheduling or cancellation of the games. Similarly, it is also a reflection of the power realities of the world. Most of the countries that have won many medals at the Olympics are either countries that have been global powers or have a high level of development. In some cases, both of the abovementioned conditions are true. Two key concepts of IR that can explain the Olympics are soft power and power projection.

Soft power is the opposite of hard power (military and economic power) and consists of all the socio-cultural aspects that make a country desirable to others. Hosting the Olympics as well as performing well at the event helps increase a country's soft power. Power projection is a military term referring to a country's extraterritorial capabilities. A country's performance at the Olympics should be judged considering the location since it might be positively affected when they are the hosts. Furthermore, the Olympics have also been used by countries directly and indirectly to achieve foreign policy goals such as gaining recognition or acceptance. Lastly, the best example to study the relationship was the Cold War between the US and the USSR. The on-field rivalry, boycotts, and medal tallies prove the practical implications of the above mentioned theoretical concepts. Unlike these instances of politics trumping sports, there have also been instances where the Olympic spirit transcended politics. These include the fielding of unified teams and the resilience of the Olympics through multiple global crises.

5. Beijing Controversies and the Future

The 2022 Winter Olympics held in Beijing were the most politicised Olympic Games ever. The games had so many political controversies that led to the sporting aspect taking the backseat. The first controversy was the diplomatic boycott against Chinese human rights violations, including the Uyghur genocide, the Hong Kong protests, the disappearance of Peng Shuai and much more. Secondly, there were many other concerns, such as the environmental damage caused by the event and the lack of security and privacy at the event. Lastly, a doping scandal made headlines due to its politicisation. The Games recorded the lowest Olympic viewership in recent times.

While the IOC claims to be apolitical, the level of politicisation of the games is at its peak. This is one of the many challenges that the Olympics face going into the future. The others include environmental problems, doping, lack of host candidates, etc. In such circumstances, the Olympic committee needs to bring about certain changes in both internal matters and the structure of the Games itself to adapt to the fast changing world. This includes that only countries maintaining certain human rights and anti-corruption standards would be allowed to host the games. Also, the introduction of e-sports to the event could make it more appealing to the younger generations. Change is inevitable for the Olympics, and while the resilient competition will continue to prosper, the type of changes that the IOC makes will determine the future course of the event.

6. Methodology

The methodology used for this study were secondary research. Both quantitative and qualitative analysis was used in the research. The first step was to do a literature review on the topics of the Olympics and international relations. For the following, I used a combination of online articles as well as academic publications. The main source used for data and facts was the official website of the Olympics. In order to better analyse the relationship between the Olympics and IR, there was substantial use of statistical data including medal tallies, instances of political events, etc. Graphs, charts, and tables were used to store as well as present this

data for a better understanding. Images were used to enhance the effectiveness of the final paper. For the theoretical concepts of IR, scholarly literature was used. The critical analysis of the research and the conclusions were derived after a thorough study of both the qualitative and quantitative data.

7. Conclusion

From this comprehensive study on the topic of "Olympics and International Relations", it has become evident that the two share a complex relationship. Many aspects of the Olympics, including the IOC, while they claim to be apolitical, are actually heavily politicised, both internally and from outside. Therefore, the Olympics and international politics can never be completely separated from each other. The Olympics are affected by international politics in many ways, while they also have an impact on international politics in some ways. For example, while protests, boycotts, and violence are examples of the former, soft power and sports diplomacy are examples of the latter. Another thing that can be said about the Olympics is that they are a reflection of global political realities. From the hosting country to the medal tally and the rivalries, the correlation and similarities are clearly visible. The Olympics are not only a stage for political expression but also a practical example of IR theory. The latest set of summer and winter games in Tokyo and Beijing, respectively, have shown a trend of challenges that are coming the way of this sporting event. Change is the need of the hour for the IOC, and proactive steps in the areas of sustainability, social responsibility, and adapting to changing sports and viewership patterns will help the Olympics prosper even in the future. With that said, the study of the Olympics and international relations is complete, and it can be said that not only are the two interrelated, but they are linked to an inseparable extent where both affect each other considerably.

References

1. Gabriel Crossley, Yew Lun Tian. 2018. China condemns U.S. diplomatic boycott of Beijing Olympics. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/lifestyle/sports/china-says-us-diplomatic-boycott-winter-olympics-could-harm-co-operation-2021-12-07/>.
2. Vincent Ni. 2021. IOC says it 'respects' US boycott of Beijing Winter Olympics. The Guardian. [https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2021/dec/07/ioc-says-it-respects-us-boycott-of-beijing-winter-olympics#:~:text=The%20International%20Olympic%20Committee%20\(IOC,Chinese%20tennis%20player%2C%20Peng%20Shuai.&text=American%20athletes%2C%20however%2C%20are%20](https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2021/dec/07/ioc-says-it-respects-us-boycott-of-beijing-winter-olympics#:~:text=The%20International%20Olympic%20Committee%20(IOC,Chinese%20tennis%20player%2C%20Peng%20Shuai.&text=American%20athletes%2C%20however%2C%20are%20).
3. Alfred Senn. 2008. Playing Politics: Olympic Controversies Past and Present. Origins OSU.edu. https://origins.osu.edu/article/playing-politics-olympic-controversies-past-and-present?language_content_entity=en
4. Politics and Protests at the Olympics. Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/olympics-boycott-protest-politics-history>. Accessed on February 2, 2022.
5. Lev Topor. 2021. Opinion – The Olympic Games as a Reflection of Global Power. E-International Relations. <https://www.e-ir.info/2021/08/15/opinion-the-olympic-games-as-a-reflection-of-global-power/#:~:text=The%20Olympic%20games%20may%20market,of%20force%20or%20economic%20pressure>.
6. Nye, J. Soft power: the origins and political progress of a concept. Palgrave Commun 3, 17008 (2017). <https://doi.org/10.1057/palcomms.2017.8>
7. Felix Ritcher. 2020. The Olympics Attract Millions of Spectators. Statista. <https://www.statista.com/chart/21046/number-of-tickets-sold-for-summer-olympic-games/>
8. US DoD Dictionary of Military Associated Terms (As of November 2021). <https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/dictionary.pdf>. Accessed February 4, 2022.
9. AbhisekGautam. 2020. Visual Analysis of Olympics Data. Towards Data Science. <https://towardsdatascience.com/visual-analysis-of-olympics-data-16273f7c6cf2>.
10. Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect. What is R2P?. <https://www.globalr2p.org/what-is-r2p/>. Accessed February 5, 2022.
11. Dario Brentin, L icTregoures. 2016. Entering Through the Sport's Door? Kosovo's Sport Diplomatic Endeavours Towards International Recognition. Diplomacy and Statecraft. Volume 27, 2016 Issue 2. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592296.2016.1169799>.
12. IOC. 2019 Ninety-nine years ago, the Olympic flag was flown for the first time. Olympics.com. <https://olympics.com/en/news/ninety-nine-years-ago-the-olympic-flag-was-flown-for-the-first-time>.
13. IOC. 2022. Beijing 2022 Facts and Figures. Olympics.com. <https://olympics.com/ioc/beijing-2022-facts-and-figures>.
14. ANI News. 2021. Lithuania confirms diplomatic boycott of Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics. <https://www.aninews.in/news/world/asia/lithuania-confirms-diplomatic-boycott-of-beijing-2022-winter-olympics20211203200952>.

15. Victor Mather. 2022. The Diplomatic Boycott of the Beijing Winter Olympics, Explained. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/article/diplomatic-boycott-olympics.html>.
16. Suhasini Haidar. 2022. Indian diplomats to boycott Beijing Winter Olympics. The Hindu. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-to-diplomatically-boycott-winter-olympics-over-chinas-decision-to-field-galwan-soldier-as-torchbearer/article38370876.ece>.
17. BBC. 2021. China warns nations will 'pay price' for Olympic boycott. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-59592347>.
18. Tom Cheshire. 2022. Beijing 2022: Lack of natural snow is 'disturbing' but Games are being 'delivered with sustainability', says IOC. Sky News. <https://news.sky.com/story/beijing-2022-lack-of-natural-snow-is-disturbing-but-games-are-being-delivered-with-sustainability-says-ioc-12539111#:~:text=Beijing%20is%20an%20arid%20region,water%20to%20create%20the%20snow>.
19. Jeffrey Knockel. 2022. Cross-Country Exposure Analysis of the MY2022 Olympics App. The Citizen Lab. <https://citizenlab.ca/2022/01/cross-country-exposure-analysis-my2022-olympics-app/#:~:text=According%20to%20this%20policy%2C%20apps,and%20travel%20and%20medical%20histories>.
20. Amy Qin. 2022. Bearing an Olympic Torch, and a Politically Loaded Message. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/08/sports/olympics/china-uyghur-olympics.html>.
21. Karolos Grohmann. 2022. Dutch reporter on-air incident was isolated case, says IOC. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/lifestyle/sports/dutch-reporter-on-air-incident-was-isolated-case-says-ioc-2022-02-05/>.
22. Express News Service. 2022. The Indian Express. Explained: How figure skater Valieva was banned, then reinstated at Olympics despite doping charge. <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-figure-skater-valieva-ban-winter-olympics-7777148/>.
23. Human Rights Watch. 2017. Olympics: Host City Contract Requires Human Rights New Provisions Could Prevent Abuses That Marred Rio, Sochi, Beijing Games. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/02/28/olympics-host-city-contract-requires-human-rights>.
24. Candice Choi and Kelvin Chan. 2022. EXPLAINER: Olympics show complexity of sustainability claims. Associated Press. <https://apnews.com/article/winter-olympics-sustainability-claims-b8ebc9d946ad080cac7508f95abb8978>.

Appendix I

The Political Nature of the Olympics : Protests, Boycotts and Violence at the Games

Introduction

The 2022 Winter Olympics got underway this week in Beijing. Commencing in less than six months after the close of the postponed Tokyo Summer Games, there is quite a buzz surrounding the event. However, most of the talk surrounding the event is not regarding the sports, athletes, or medal expectations, but rather discussions of a political nature. A few countries, along with the United States of America, have decided to stage a diplomatic boycott of the Beijing competition. This means that even though their athletes will compete in the Games, no ministers, diplomats, or officials representing the country will make an appearance in Beijing for the entire tournament. The Chinese Foreign Ministry, the Communist Party and their embassy in Washington all [responded critically to this](#), saying that politics should not be mixed with sports and that this decision taken by some countries was in violation of the Olympic spirit.

The International Olympic Committee ([IOC spokesperson stated](#)) that they respect the boycotting countries' decisions in line with maintaining the committee's political neutrality while also welcoming their decision to still send athletes to the games. Multiple stakeholders and many supporters of the Olympic movement argue that the boycotting countries are politicising the games and how this could set an example for the future. However, the Olympics have always been political, ever since the first modern games were played in 1896. This is bound to happen due to the participation of countries worldwide, and the political tensions often impact the Olympics in some way. A total of 206 National Olympic Committees are recognised by the IOC, meaning that it has an even greater membership than the United Nations itself. Thus, the combination of factors, including the participation of so many countries, a massive audience, and a global stage, has led to the formation of complex relations between the Olympics and international politics.

Politics inside-outside

Being such a global body, the Olympic governing body itself faces political and legal challenges on a regular basis. For political reasons, there have also been multiple instances of countries not being invited or allowed to participate in the games. However, the key principle of the Olympic Movement has been to avoid politics from impacting the athletes and any sporting component of the games directly. For example, after Russia was found guilty of systemically violating anti-doping regulations in 2017, the Russian flag was banned from the Olympics and other sporting competitions until December 2022. Even in doing so, athletes who have not been found guilty by the country would still be allowed to freely participate in the Olympics. Therefore, the IOC and other associated sports agencies did not let the uninvolved athletes be penalised or banned for a larger violation on their country's part. In fact, Russian contingents competed under the Olympic Athletes from Russia (OAR) and Russian Olympic Committee (ROC) acronyms and flags at the

2018 Winter Olympics and 2020 Summer Olympics respectively, going on to win a total of 88 medals combined.

However, politics at the Olympics goes well beyond the legal and administrative issues, extending to multiple social issues and the larger state of international relations. In the inaugural competition held in Athens itself, France and Germany were initially unwilling and reluctant to send their athletes to the games due to their bilateral relations, even though more than twenty years had passed since the end of the Franco-Prussian War. Finally, [after great efforts and attempts to convince them](#), both nations sent delegations to the competition. From then on, almost every Olympics has had one or multiple instances of politicisation. Therefore, there exists a strong link between politics and the Olympics, which provides an interesting and important research opportunity to be studied through the lens of international relations (IR) theory.

Protests at the Olympics

The most common form of expressing dissent is through the means of protest. The Olympics have also had a fair share of protests coming from both the athletes as well as their supporters and the general public. The very first protest at an Olympic event took place at the 1906 Games in Athens. While the IOC later withdrew its recognition of the event due to their insistence on continuing the four-year sequence of the Olympiads, the event is still remembered for a different reason. Three Irish athletes competed at the games, but were forced to compete under British nationality because Ireland did not have its own NOC at the time and was still under British rule. Peter O'Connor, an Irish long jumper, went on to win the silver medal in his event. However, he was forced to stand on the podium under the British flag. It was then that he physically scaled the flagpole and held out the Erin go Brach flag, the name of which roughly translates to "Ireland Forever."

THE RISE



The flag waved by Peter O'Connor at the long jump podium in Athens, 1906. Source: [Wikiwand](#)

Following these Olympics, many athletes used the podium to express their dissatisfaction with both international and domestic social issues. A key issue, which [saw multiple protests](#) at the event, was racism. The 1936 Olympic rights were awarded to Berlin in 1931. However, in 1933, the Adolf Hitler-led regime came to power in Germany. Many countries, including the US, considered boycotting the event for moral reasons, but later decided to attend the games. Hitler saw the event as an opportunity to further his master race theory of the Aryan race being superior. At the games, however, the on-field performance of one athlete dislodged this entire narrative. Jesse Owens, an African American track and field athlete, won four gold medals at the event. A remarkable photo from the long jump podium ceremony shows Owens saluting with his hand against his forehead while the silver medallist from Germany, Luz Long, and all other German officials hold the Nazi salute.



Jesse Owens offers an American style salute while the silver medallist and other officials give the Nazi salute on the long jump podium at the 1936 Summer Olympics in Berlin.

Source: [Bettmann /Getty images](#)

While Owens' performance had ruined the Nazi racial supremacy plans, Germany still came out on top of the medal table. Further, the fan support for athletes of different races and the absence of any racial discrimination at the event helped Hitler project the Nazi party as renewed and welcoming. However, back home in the US, Owens and his fellow 17 African Americans, who won a total of 14 medals in Berlin, continued to face discrimination. At the 1968 Mexico Olympics, another such act of racial discrimination was seen. Two African American sprinters, Tommie Smith and John Carlos, won the gold and bronze medals, respectively, in the 200m race. During the medal ceremony, both athletes raised their fists, wearing black gloves and the Olympic Project for Human Rights badges. Known as the Black Power salute, this was a stand against racial segregation that was going on in the US and for which both athletes faced a ban from the American and international Olympic committees. The salute was inspired by the Black Power movement that emerged in the 1960s for the rights of African Americans and against the discrimination that they faced in the country.



Tommie Smith and John Carlos hold the Black Power salute pose on the podium of the 200m race podium at the 1968 Mexico Olympics. Source: [Derek Cattani / Shutterstock](#)

However, the Black Power salute is not the protest for which the 1968 edition of the event is most remembered. Ten days before the beginning of the Olympics in Mexico City, thousands of students conducted a peaceful march to protest the government's decision to hold the Olympics in the country. They felt that the resources used for hosting the games should rather be used for funding social programmes that the country needed more of. It was also a part of the larger 1968 Mexican Movement. The event turned into a massacre after Mexican armed forces surrounded the gathering under government orders and opened fire on the crowd, leading to hundreds of deaths and more than a thousand people injured in the process. This event came to be known as the Tlatelolco massacre, and it remains the most violent and brutal memory in Olympic history.



Protesters gathered in Tlatelolco on October 2, 1968. Source: [Mexico News Daily](#)

In recent times, civilian protests against holding the Olympics have been common, especially in developing nations with demands for the immense cost required to host the Olympics to be used for welfare and development instead. The most recent protest, however, was for a different reason. In 2021, the Tokyo Olympics were filled with multiple protests outside sports venues leading up to and during the event. The city was going through an outbreak of the COVID-19 corona virus. Even when strict restrictions were enforced in Tokyo, the government was keen on conducting the Olympics as they had already been postponed once in 2020. Finally, even after large-scale rallies and criticism against going ahead with the competition, the event went through with no major disturbances.

Boycotts

While protests by athletes and civilians have a more social and domestic nature, dissent on the basis of international conflicts and issues is more often expressed by countries through boycotts. In Olympic history, multiple countries have boycotted the games by not sending a representative contingent to the event. The first such boycott was staged in 1956, at the Melbourne Olympics. For varying reasons, a total of eight countries did not participate in the games. The Netherlands, Spain, and Switzerland did so to protest Russian interference in the Hungarian Revolution by invading the country. China, on the other hand, did not send athletes in opposition to Taiwan's participation. China considered Taiwan to be a part of its own territory even though it was controlled by the Kuomintang government, which had fled the mainland in 1949 after the communist movement took power in Beijing at the end of the civil war. Lastly, Iran, Egypt, Lebanon, and Cambodia all decided to boycott the games to protest the 1956 Sinai invasion by Israel, the United Kingdom, and France.

Another boycott took place at the 1964 Olympics in Tokyo when all athletes who had participated in the 1963 Games of the New Emerging Forces (GANEFO) were held in Indonesia. China, Indonesia, and North Korea ended up skipping these games since they were the key countries involved in the formation of GANEFO. The next boycott came in 1976 at the Montreal Olympics. A mass boycott held by 28 African nations greatly impacted the Olympics, both economically and on the field. The reason for the boycott was to protest the IOC's decision to allow New Zealand to compete at the event. To give a bit of context, these games were one of the many Olympics to be held during Apartheid in South Africa. The country was not allowed to participate in the Olympics right from the 1964 to the 1988 games. During this period, it was also common for many other sporting organisations as well as individual countries to not engage in any sporting events with the South African teams. However, the New Zealand rugby team toured South Africa in 1976. This enraged many African and other countries worldwide, which thus demanded that New Zealand not be allowed to participate in Montreal. However, when the IOC rejected this demand, the group of 28 African states decided to boycott the tournament completely.

The following three consecutive editions of the summer Olympics, in 1980, 1984, and 1988, respectively, saw boycotts by different countries. While the 1988 Olympics set a new record at the time in terms of the number of countries participating, a group of socialist nations, including North Korea, Ethiopia, Cuba, and Nicaragua, boycotted the games. The Olympics were held in Seoul, and North Korea wanted to be a co-host of the event. When they were not allowed to do so, they ended up boycotting the event.

Violence at the Games

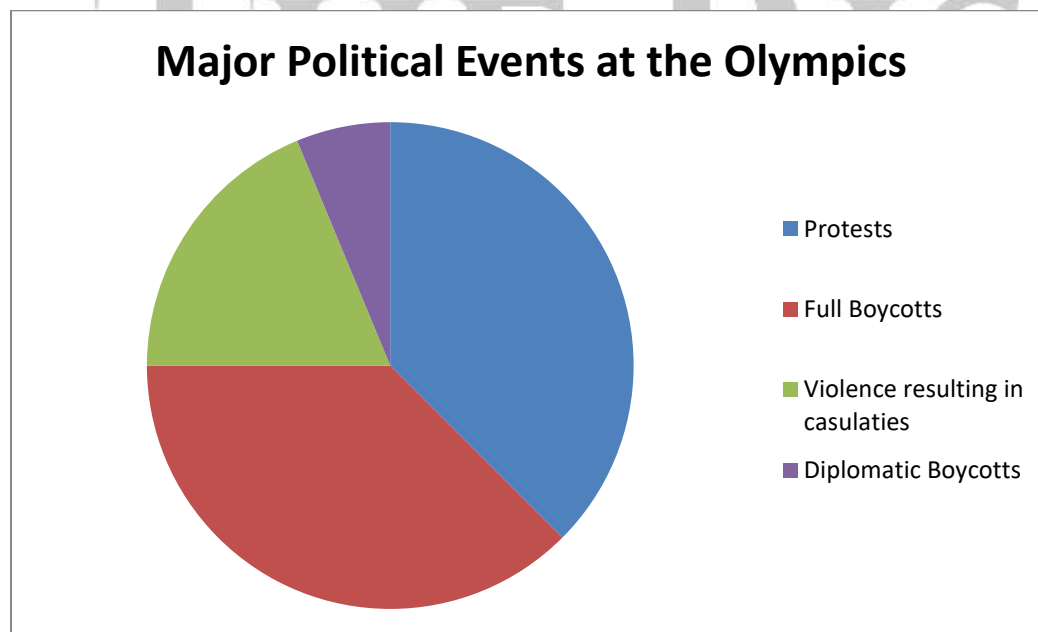
Physical fights between athletes have been limited at the Olympics. Usually, some amount of fighting is bound to happen in any sport due to high stakes and a competitive setting. However, while such acts are against the Olympic spirit and general sportsmanship, the human harm in such cases is negligible. However, there have also been incidents when violence takes place off the field and results in bloodshed. While the 1968 Mexico incident remains the most deadly incident, another instance of violence took place within the actual duration of the Olympic games in 1972. Being held in Munich, the event is remembered as one of the darkest moments the

Olympics have seen. Known as the Munich massacre, the terrorist attack took place during the games when a Palestinian group known as Black September took hostage members of the Israeli contingent. The entire incident, including the hostage-taking, negotiations, and rescue attempts, led to the deaths of multiple Israeli athletes and coaches, a German police officer, and members of the terrorist group. Another unfortunate event took place during the 1996 Olympics held in Atlanta. A domestic bombing in the city led to more than a hundred people injured and a few deaths. Therefore, the Olympic games have had their fair share of violence, resulting in human and infrastructural casualties over the years.



The destruction caused by the blast at the Centennial Olympic Park in Atlanta, 1996.

Source: [Jim Davis / The Boston Globe / Getty images](#)



Sources: [Council on Foreign Relations](#), [Britannica](#), and [HISTORY](#).

Conclusion

It is clear that however much the IOC and other proponents try to say that the Olympics are not political and should be kept separate from each other, the fact remains that the Olympics and international politics are interconnected at various levels. Both are mutually affected by each other. In the next part of this series, we will further examine the relationship between Olympics and global politics. Using concepts from IR theory, different cases of the connection between the Olympics and other topics such as foreign policy and power competition will be uncovered.

References

25. Gabriel Crossley, Yew Lun Tian. 2018. China condemns U.S. diplomatic boycott of Beijing Olympics. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/lifestyle/sports/china-says-us-diplomatic-boycott-winter-olympics-could-harm-co-operation-2021-12-07/>.
26. Vincent Ni. 2021. IOC says it 'respects' US boycott of Beijing Winter Olympics. The Guardian. [https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2021/dec/07/ioc-says-it-respects-us-boycott-of-beijing-winter-olympics#:~:text=The%20International%20Olympic%20Committee%20\(IOC,Chinese%20tennis%20player%2C%20Peng%20Shuai.&text=American%20athletes%2C%20however%2C%20are%20](https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2021/dec/07/ioc-says-it-respects-us-boycott-of-beijing-winter-olympics#:~:text=The%20International%20Olympic%20Committee%20(IOC,Chinese%20tennis%20player%2C%20Peng%20Shuai.&text=American%20athletes%2C%20however%2C%20are%20).
27. Alfred Senn. 2008. Playing Politics: Olympic Controversies Past and Present. Origins OSU.edu. https://origins.osu.edu/article/playing-politics-olympic-controversies-past-and-present?language_content_entity=en
28. Politics and Protests at the Olympics. Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/olympics-boycott-protest-politics-history>. Accessed on February 2, 2022.

THE RISE

Appendix II

Uncovering the relationship between the Olympics and international relations

Introduction

In the first part of the series, we saw the various instances of the overlap between politics and the Olympics. While these incidents in isolation provide a general idea of the relationship, a deeper underlying understanding of the same can be examined through the direct use of concepts from IR theory. When you look at all the political events that have occurred at the Olympics, including protests, boycotts, violence, and much more, you see their background returning to an important social, economic, or political issue in global politics. Thus, the Olympics are more than just a stage for international politics, but rather a true reflection of the world order and what goes on in it. All these major non-sporting incidents at the Olympics stem from real world problems of discrimination, conflict, and power realities. For example, the cancellation of the 1916, 1940, and 1944 Olympics was all due to the World War. If we compare the two, the truly global sports competition was cancelled due to the war that affected the entire world.

Another aspect where the connection between the Olympics and international politics is visible is by looking at the performance of countries in the games themselves. If one were to try and compare the countries that have won the most medals at the Olympics games with the major world powers, the [same names would feature at the top of both lists](#) more often than not. All the top medal-winning countries are those that have been world powers for at least some period of time. The rise and fall of powers can also be seen in medal patterns across multiple Olympics. For example, the rise of Germany, Japan, and China and the fall of the Soviet Union are examples of how these countries gained and lost medals corresponding to their political, economic, and military rise. However, although this correlation generally holds true, there are multiple exceptions to this theory. While the top medal winners might be major powers, the same relationship between power and medals might not be seen in the middle and bottom of the table. Similarly, the number of medals a country has won might not be proportional to the power that country holds. Therefore, multiple factors such as population, infrastructure, geography, and sporting ecosystem play a huge role in a country's long-term Olympic performance. However, even such factors have a different impact on different countries' faring at the games.

Soft power and the importance of the Olympics

Going beyond the representation of the world's political actualities, specific concepts of IR theory can show how countries use the Olympics for political gains through positive means instead of dissent. Up till now, we have seen how means such as protests, boycotts and violence have been used. These are ways of opposing some aspects of the Olympics. However, there are also ways in which countries have used the opportunity to compete or host the games as a means to achieve their political goals. A great example of how to understand this is through the concept of [soft power](#). Coined by American political scientist Joseph Nye, the term is supposed to be the

non-coercive strength of a nation. Unlike hard power, which is based on economic and military might, soft power is derived through attraction through means such as culture, political values, and foreign policy. This can include a range of factors, including art forms, cuisines, tourism, sports, and much more. Hosting an edition of the Olympics is the most beneficial way of gaining soft power for any country. It is for this very reason that multiple cities and countries apply and bid for the opportunity to host the prestigious event.

The cost of organising an entire Olympic tournament in the twenty-first century is easily in the range of billions of US dollars. Planning such an event requires years of work, which starts even before the previous Olympics have ended in some cases. All these capital and labour-intensive tasks include building the infrastructure for hundreds of different sports disciplines, the Olympic Village to house the athletes, and other necessary preparations to make the city tourist-friendly. The most important times of any Olympics are the first and last days, respectively. While the smooth passing of the entire duration of the games is necessary for a country's reputation, the opening and closing ceremonies are the biggest opportunities for the host to truly benefit from the Olympics. As the years pass by, the ceremonies keep getting bigger, longer, and grander. Millions of dollars are spent solely on these events, and countries do their best to make them memorable by showcasing their own culture and values through dance and music performances. Every Olympics since 2000 has been watched by more than three billion people across the world. In the twenty-first century, each summer Olympics has sold over [six million tickets in aggregate](#). The Olympics serve as a marketing tool for countries to boost their soft power while also



generating secondary economic benefits such as tourism, viewership, and sponsorships.

Fireworks at the 2008 Beijing Olympics which had the most expensive opening ceremony ever. Source: [China Photos / Stringer / Getty images](#)

However, it is not solely the host of the Olympics that benefits from the event. Every participating contingent gets to parade at the opening ceremony. Athletes usually appear at this event, showcasing their national flag as well as the traditional clothes of their country. The 1964 Olympics are the best example of how the Olympics contribute to a country's soft power. Held in Tokyo, the event signified the return of a rejuvenated Japan to the world stage. After the Second World War, Japan's global image severely deteriorated, and they were even left out of the first post-war games held in 1948. The 1964 Olympics not only presented Japan as a peaceful and welcoming nation, but they also showcased the country's progress in development.

Furthermore, the host nation went on to finish third on the medal table. From then on, Japan has gone from strength to strength in accumulating both hard and soft power, as well as consistently performing at a high standard on the sporting front too.

Power Projection and Foreign Policy

Another approach to viewing the Olympics is through the lens of [power projection](#). While the term is used in IR to describe a state's military capabilities outside its own territory, some of the same can be applicable to the Olympics to some extent. It is a well-known fact that countries [perform significantly better when they are the hosts](#) of an Olympic tournament compared to one abroad. The increase and decrease in the country's medals when they host or do not host the games is considerable. Therefore, when judging the leaders of the medal table, it is necessary to keep in mind the location of where the Olympics took place. For example, the US has been unchallenged in first place ever since the 1992 Olympics. However, in 2008, the Chinese contingent was able to outscore the United States in the number of gold medals they won and went on to top the table even though the US finished with more overall medals. Similarly, the UK's performance in the 2012 London Olympics was a major improvement on their performance in Beijing. This also makes us wonder whether the home court advantage also means an away court disadvantage. For example, if we consider the US and China, while both countries perform well at their home Olympics, they also perform well at other Olympics. However, what happens when the venue happens to be the home court of their real-world political and power rivals? While this argument might be hypothetical, there have been instances where countries have underperformed in nations with whom they share political animosity.

The Olympic games have also been used by some countries as a direct means of achieving their foreign policy goals. While not all states are successful in doing so, there are a few examples of countries that have made significant diplomatic gains from the grand international competition. A common criticism of the Olympic committee has been that it often gives undemocratic and dictatorial regimes the opportunity to host the Olympics. This in itself might not be a problem, but the implications it carries are of concern. For example, the 1936 Berlin Olympics helped the Nazis project a positive international image, and the 2008 Beijing Olympics were a huge success for China. In the first case, the Nazis imposed racial atrocities on the Jews, while China was severely criticised for its human rights violations. The same allegations are being made against China during these Olympics as well. The problem is that the treatment of the Jews and the Uyghurs by the following regimes against the Jews and the Uyghurs, respectively, is too severe to be considered under the four atrocities mentioned in the United Nations' [Responsibility to Protect endorsement](#). Hosting the Games assists such regimes in masking their concerns and projecting a peaceful image to a global audience. Thus, while the Olympic aim is only to keep politics and sports separate, in doing so they might be indirectly harming movements and causing such social groups to suffer. However, the opportunity worked out with great success for the host countries, and the mentioned governments.

Another example of exemplary Olympic use in foreign policy is by the newly formed state of Kosovo. The Republic of Kosovo was a former autonomous region of Serbia that declared its independence in 2008. After declaring independence, the key challenge for any country is to gain international recognition. [Kosovo used sports as a means](#) to make this process faster and easier. Kosovo made huge efforts and managed to get into multiple international spirit organizations,

including the IOC and the international organisations governing football, basketball, tennis, formula racing, etc. By 2020, Kosovo would have received international recognition from roughly half of all UN members, as well as membership in other intergovernmental organizations. This makes it an example of how the Olympic games and sports can be used as a powerful means of foreign policy when used to their full potential.



Kosovo celebrates one year since getting IOC recognition in 2015. Source : [BesimHasani / Inside the games](#)









The Cold War Olympics, 1948–1992 USA vs. USSR

All the discussed events and theoretical concepts have established a clear and complex link between international relations and the Olympic games. There is one such period in Olympic history, which is an amalgamation of every kind of political event and theoretical power concept known as the Cold War. After allying to defeat the Axis powers in World War II, the United States and the Soviet Union entered into a battle to gain political and ideological hegemony over the world. Although the countries did not engage in any major military conflict directly, the competition between the two was no less than a war. Apart from competition on traditional issues such as economic and military strength, forming strategic alliances and engaging in a nuclear race, the countries also fought hard in non-traditional areas of sports and space exploration. Both the Winter and Summer Olympics have become a battleground for the countries' athletes to outperform the other teams. When the tensions between the two countries rose to an extreme in the late 1970s and 1980s, the politics showed at the Olympics as well. In 1980, the Moscow games faced the biggest boycott in Olympic history. More than 60 countries boycotted the event under the leadership of the US to protest the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Around 15 countries, including the USSR and its allies, hit back by boycotting the 1984 event in Los Angeles.









The rivalry spilled on to the field as well, but in a good way. The US and USSR athletes and teams had some very competitive sporting battles, even pulling off great upsets in the process. The Miracle on Ice refers to the US victory in the ice hockey finals where they defeated defending champions and favourites, the USSR, coming back from a deficit going into the final quarter of the game. Similarly, at the 1988 Olympics, the Soviet basketball team upset the Americans in the semi-finals and went on to take the gold medal. This was the first time that the US had not reached the gold medal match in the sport and had to settle for bronze. Not only was

the Olympics a competition for power and a symbol of pride for the two countries, it was also a representation of their global dominance. Throughout the Cold War period, the US and USSR were the only two countries to top the medal table for 12 consecutive summer Olympics between 1948 and 1992. And as it is visible from the statistical data mentioned below, the Cold War was as fierce at the Olympics as it was anywhere else. While the USSR may have lost the political struggle, they were unquestionably triumphant on the world's most important sporting stage.

US vs USSR at the Summer Olympics between 1948 and 1992

| Country | USA  | USSR*  |
|--|---|---|
| Total Medals | 1066 | 1122 |
| Gold, Silver, Bronze |    448 338 280 |    440 357 325 |
| Overall Head to Head | 5 | 7 |
| Olympics Attended | 11 | 10 |
| Olympic Not Attended/ Boycotted | 1 | 2 |

US vs. USSR at the Winter Olympics between 1948 and 1992

| Country | USA  | USSR*  |
|--|--|--|
| Total Medals | 106 | 217 |
| Gold, Silver, Bronze |    37 42 27 |    87 63 67 |
| Overall Head to Head | 2 | 10 |
| Olympics Attended | 12 | 10 |
| Olympic Not Attended/ Boycotted | 0 | 2 |

*In the 1992 Winter and Summer Olympics, The medal counts are for the Unified Team of former Soviet Countries.

Source: [Official website of the Olympic Games](#)

The Olympic spirit overcomes politics

1992 was a special year in Olympic history. It was the first set of summer and winter games to take place following the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the consequent end of the Cold War. While the countries had separated, the NOCs were yet to be inducted into the IOC. Thus, they competed at the Winter Olympics as a unified team and went on to finish second overall. By the time of the Summer Olympics, the individual NOCs were formed and inducted, but twelve of the fifteen countries, excluding the Baltic states, decided to compete as the Unified Team. While the players belonging to the contingent represented a single team, they were allowed to hoist the flag and play the national anthem of their respective independent states during the medal ceremonies. The Barcelona Olympics are seen as a victory of the sporting spirit and the essence of the Olympic movement over the political reality of the world. Even after being divided into separate countries and losing the Cold War, the former Soviet athletes went on to compete at the Olympics in unity. This unity paid off in a big way, as they went on to top the medal table and emerge victorious over the rival United States.

Similar to this, there have been some instances that have left a mark on the event as the victory of sports and the Olympic spirit over any political conflict or problem. In 2016, the IOC formed a separate Olympic team consisting of a few athletes to represent the millions of refugees who have been displaced due to conflict globally. The contingent went on to participate in the 2016 Rio and 2020 Tokyo games. This event symbolised that even though refugees might face grave situations politically, the Olympics is still a place that provides them an equal opportunity to compete against the best athletes. Another instance of Olympic triumph is the 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Olympics, which came exactly thirty years after the 1988 Seoul Games. Unlike the previous instance, where North Korea boycotted the event, this edition of the games showed the exact opposite. Putting aside their conflict and bilateral relations, the North and South Korean nations fielded a unified Korean team in the women's ice hockey event. The team competed under a unified Korean flag and the "Arirang" anthem, which is considered a symbol of Korean unity.



Athletes parade at the 2018 Winter Olympics opening ceremony holding the flag of the Unified Korea team. Source: [Kirill Kudryavtsev / Getty images](#)

Conclusion

There have been times when politics has hurt the Olympics, but there have also been times when the Olympics came out victorious over global politics. To conclude, I would like to take the case of the 1920 Antwerp Olympics. It was the first event after the First World War and the Spanish flu pandemic where a lot of the athletes who participated in the previous 1912 Olympics were no

longer alive to be able to participate. While this was unfortunate and saddening, the event marked the remembrance of the war victims and the [first appearance of the Olympic flag, featuring the interlocked rings and the Olympic oath](#). It showed how resilient the Olympics have been and how they repeatedly emerge above the problems that the world faces from time to time. This is truly conveyed through the Olympic motto of "[Faster, Higher, Stronger—Together](#)." Therefore, while the Olympics have been the victim of international political impact multiple times throughout their history, they keep showing their ability to overcome those challenges and continue to bring the international community together to promote sports with the objective of peace.

References

1. Lev Topor. 2021. Opinion – The Olympic Games as a Reflection of Global Power. E-International Relations. <https://www.e-ir.info/2021/08/15/opinion-the-olympic-games-as-a-reflection-of-global-power/#:~:text=The%20Olympic%20games%20may%20market,of%20force%20or%20economic%20pressure>.
2. Nye, J. Soft power: the origins and political progress of a concept. Palgrave Commun 3, 17008 (2017). <https://doi.org/10.1057/palcomms.2017.8>
3. Felix Ritcher. 2020. The Olympics Attract Millions of Spectators. Statista. <https://www.statista.com/chart/21046/number-of-tickets-sold-for-summer-olympic-games/>
4. US DoD Dictionary of Military Associated Terms (As of November 2021). <https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/dictionary.pdf>. Accessed February 4, 2022.
5. AbhisekGautam. 2020. Visual Analysis of Olympics Data. Towards Data Science. <https://towardsdatascience.com/visual-analysis-of-olympics-data-16273f7c6cf2>.
6. Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect. What is R2P?. <https://www.globalr2p.org/what-is-r2p/>. Accessed February 5, 2022.
7. Dario Brentin, L oicTregoures. 2016. Entering Through the Sport’s Door? Kosovo’s Sport Diplomatic Endeavours Towards International Recognition. Diplomacy and Statecraft. Volume 27, 2016 Issue 2. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592296.2016.1169799>.
8. IOC. 2019 Ninety-nine years ago, the Olympic flag was flown for the first time. Olympics.com. <https://olympics.com/en/news/ninety-nine-years-ago-the-olympic-flag-was-flown-for-the-first-time>.

Appendix III

Political Controversies at the Beijing 2022 and the Way Forward for the Olympics

Introduction

The 2022 Winter Olympics concluded recently in Beijing. Almost [3000 athletes from 91 different countries took part in over 109 events, spanning seven sports and 15 disciplines](#). Norway continued its dominance at the winter games, topping the medal tally with 16 gold medals and 37 medals overall. The host nation, China, finished third on the table with nine gold medals. While the event featured exciting action with stories of success and upsets, it wasn't the sporting aspect most people talked about at the 24th edition of the Winter Olympics. Even before the games began, Beijing 2022 had become a victim of international politics. The event was characterised by boycotts, security concerns, doping scandals, and numerous controversies throughout. In fact, politics dominated the sporting competition to such an extent that the average viewership of the games was the lowest of any Winter Olympics.

Opposition to Beijing 2022

Ever since Beijing won the hosting rights of the 2022 Winter Olympics, the questioning of this decision had begun. The International Olympic Committee maintains that it is an apolitical body and does not consider such factors in the selection of a host city or country. However, this stance faces severe criticism from human rights organisations, media outlets, and even a few governments from time to time. There were several issues that were flagged regarding China being the Olympic hosts. Even when Beijing hosted the summer edition in 2008, there were many concerns ranging from human rights violations, surveillance, environmental problems, etc. The same set of issues found prominence at the 2022 games in the Chinese capital as well. Calls for shifting the event out of China and boycotting the games emerged after reports of China's treatment of Uyghur Muslims surfaced and the Hong Kong protests in 2019. The alleged disappearance of Chinese tennis player Peng Shuai for comments against a senior Chinese politician added further to this movement against the 2022 Beijing Olympics.



Protests demanding a complete boycott of the 2022 Winter Olympics. Source: [The Bridge](#).

Many countries, including the United States, were considering a diplomatic boycott of the 2022 Beijing Olympics by November 2021. [Lithuania became the first country to confirm the same by releasing a statement in early December](#). This was soon followed by a decisive move when the [United States declared a diplomatic boycott of the event in December 2021](#). This meant that while these countries would still participate and their athletes would compete at the games, no diplomats, politicians, or government officials would attend the event in an official capacity. The US was soon joined by Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom, who announced their boycotts in the following days. Other boycotting nations included Kosovo, Estonia, Belgium, Denmark, and Taiwan. While Japan did not officially refer to it as a diplomatic boycott, senior officials from the Japanese government did not attend the Olympics.

[India's decision to diplomatically boycott the event](#) came just a few days before the games got underway. This action was provoked by the inclusion of a regimental leader of the Chinese People's Liberation Army as a torchbearer at the opening ceremony. Identified as Qi Fabao, the soldier was involved in the 2020 Galwan Valley clash between China and India. Apart from the boycotting nations, there were many other countries that, although they were not staging a diplomatic boycott, decided not to send any diplomats to the Beijing 2022 Winter Games.

Response to the Boycott

The IOC released a statement in response to the US declaration of a diplomatic boycott by taking a neutral stand. It said that the decision to send diplomats or officials is the political decision of every government and that the IOC would respect any such decision in the spirit of political neutrality. The body also showed appreciation towards the boycotting countries' decision to still let athletes compete in the games uninterrupted. However, at the same time, the IOC reaffirmed its commitment towards an apolitical approach to global cooperation in sports to promote peace.

In contrast to the IOC's reaction, the [Chinese response](#) was strong and condemned the boycott. Many spokespersons belonging to the Chinese government, foreign ministry, embassy in Washington, media outlets, etc., reacted critically to the US decision to boycott the Beijing event. Firstly, the diplomatic boycott was portrayed as insignificant and incapable of making any impact on the proceedings of the event. Secondly, the Chinese respondents termed the allegations of the protesting countries as baseless. Furthermore, China accused the boycotting nations of misusing the Olympic platform by politicising the event. China also affirmed that the diplomatic boycott would have absolutely no effect on the proceedings of the event. Lastly, the Chinese also warned the boycotting nations that they would have to face severe consequences for their actions. While there has been no official statement or action in relation to the consequences, some of the possible outcomes could be Chinese economic and strategic moves such as cutting off market access, etc.

Other Concerns

Apart from human rights violations, there were also other national and international concerns regarding the 2022 Winter Olympics which turned into controversies. These problems ranged from environmental issues to security breaches. One of the most pressing concerns was based on the privacy of the athletes. Due to an insufficient stock of snow in the capital city, large volumes of [snow had to be artificially created](#) for the event. Additionally, since most of the venues were close to natural reserve areas, this would have a detrimental ecological impact.

The health of the athletes was another crucial matter. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the risk associated with athletes' health was already high. For this reason, it was mandatory for all athletes to install a mobile application known as "My 2022." However, this further created another problem. This app, made to monitor and regulate data related to the corona virus, had several security gaps. A Canadian interdisciplinary laboratory, [Citizen Lab, warned against this](#). Not only did the app collect large amounts of personal health data from the athletes, it was also vulnerable to security breaches. Furthermore, there was also speculation about China aiming to conduct espionage on the athletes. The combination of these two factors led to a few countries advising their athletes to either not carry any electronic devices to China, or to use only burner phones.

Controversies during the Games

The political frenzy around Beijing 2022 continued throughout the actual duration of the event as well. Apart from the existing drama, there were many incidents that took place during the games that led to brewing controversy. During the opening ceremony, [Dinigeer Yilamujiang, a 20-year old Chinese cross-country skier, brought the Olympic torch](#) into the stadium along with another athlete. The choice of Yilamujiang, who belongs to the Uyghur community, as a torchbearer was criticised as being politically motivated by Uyghur support groups, including the World Uyghur Congress. According to them, China was trying to hide its treatment of the Uyghur Muslims from the Xinjiang region of the country and portray a different narrative through this symbolic

act. Another instance was when a [Dutch journalist was manhandled off camera](#) while reporting from the Olympics. Sjoerd den Daas was covering the opening ceremony in real-time from outside the stadium when this incident took place. While the incident might not be too serious when seen in a vacuum, it raises concerns about the treatment of journalists in China.



Dinigeer Yilamujiang as the torchbearer at the opening ceremony. Source: [New York Post](#).

The biggest controversy of the Olympics, however, was due to a common factor known to taint several sporting events from time to time – doping. Russia was again at the forefront of this drug controversy. After already having been found guilty of a systemic doping program, the country's name and flag was banned from the 2022 Winter Olympics. All athletes from Russia were competing under the ROC (Russian Olympic Committee) banner. On February 7th, the ROC athletes won gold in the figure skating team event. However, the medal ceremony for the event did not take place on schedule for some reason. It was revealed that one of the ROC skaters, 15-year-old [Kamila Valieva, had tested positive for trimetazidine](#), a banned substance. This news came as a shock and led to a huge controversy surrounding the revelation. Valieva was consequently banned by the Russian Anti-Doping Agency (RUSADA). However, she was later reinstated and allowed to participate in the women's individual event almost two weeks later. However, after having posted the best score in the short programme on February 6, Valieva failed to recreate her performance and faltered multiple times in this instance. The IOC and the associated drug testing agencies, including the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA), received severe flak for this. Many blamed the pressure and stress that had emerged from the controversy as a reason for the young Russian's failure.



Kamila Valieva was caught in the middle of the doping controversy. Source: [Reuters](#).

However, the doping controversy soon took a political turn when certain facts came out about the investigation. It was revealed that Valieva had taken the test in December 2021, but the report wasn't released until February 7, after she had led the ROC team to an Olympic gold. While the athlete's defenders claimed that she had consumed the substance unintentionally, there were strong arguments against this. Apart from trimetazidine, Valieva had also taken two other legal substances, which are for heart function improvement but could also have a positive effect on her performance. Travis Tygart, the head of the US Anti-Doping Agency (USADA), used this fact to emphasise that this was part of a more serious doping plan. Similarly, there was also an argument that the entire controversy was an outcome of a failed cover-up attempt, which was only exposed because of a whistleblower.

A Disturbing Trend of Politics at the Olympics

Politics has always been present at the Olympics, and the complete separation of the two is hardly possible. However, the 2022 Beijing Olympics might have been the most tainted games in the history of the Winter edition. There was already a trend of increasing controversies and the political nature of the competition, but the latest set of events in China might have set the tone for years to come. What made the 2022 Winter Games stand out was that the political aspect of the games was talked about exponentially more than the sporting aspects. The main focus of a sporting event was a non-sporting topic, which goes against the very spirit of the Olympics.

From here onwards, there is a high possibility that every Olympics will be surrounded by more such political controversies. Last year, the IOC president, Thomas Bach, announced that the Olympic motto would be changed to "Faster, Higher, Stronger – Together" before the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. However, the following events before and during the 2022 Beijing Olympics have made it clear that the 'together' element is clearly missing from the Olympic games. Unfortunately, while the Olympics remain the gold standard for athletic excellence in the world, the on-field battles are being overshadowed by geopolitical rivalries.

Future Challenges for the IOC

Politicisation, environmental problems, doping, decreasing viewership, fewer hosting candidates, increasing criticism, and many more problems cloud the future of the world's oldest and grandest sporting phenomenon. Given the circumstances, the IOC has a lot of work to do if it wants to keep the glory of the event alive and continue with its aim of bringing peace through sports and cooperation. The Games have become increasingly political in nature. The IOC has to be apolitical as well as not harm the athletes in any way. Therefore, it has to walk a tightrope in order to prevent countries' politicisation of the games while trying to avoid penalising the athletes from those countries. The most logical way to accomplish this is to prohibit the name and flag of the protesting or boycotting country from appearing at the event while allowing the athletes to participate freely. However, being an apolitical body, the IOC also has to show restraint in taking such actions.

Whether the IOC does or does not do something against this, they will be criticised either way. Therefore, in the future, the Olympic body has to tread carefully by balancing between preventing such incidences while also not cracking down on freedom of expression. In the case of Beijing 2022, while the boycotting countries were violating the Olympic spirit, the human rights record of the hosts, China, was also at odds with the objective of peace. Thus, while it is true that politicisation of the Olympics goes against the very spirit of the competition, it is also true that the IOC's ignorance of a country's political actions under the excuse of being apolitical is proving counterproductive to achieving that goal.

The Olympics and the Way Forward

In 2017, the IOC took a progressive step in the direction of accountability by referring to the [United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights \(UNGP\) in the revised Host City Contract](#). This will require future hosts to maintain certain human rights and anti-corruption standards. Another challenge for the Olympics is to become sustainable, both environmentally and financially. While the 2022 Winter Games claim to be carbon net-zero, the [ecological effects of hosting an Olympics are too complex](#) to assess solely on the basis of one indicator. This holds true, especially in the case of the Winter Olympics, which require large quantities of land and snow. This negatively impacts forest reserves and water supplies and is becoming even more challenging due to global warming. Similarly, the low viewership numbers and a decrease in countries wanting to host the event have led to people questioning the economic viability of the tournament.

Resilience and a New Direction

This is not the first time that the Olympic Games have faced such challenges. During the last 126 years, the competition has seen many ups and downs going through wars, economic crises, pandemics, and much more. Internal policy changes and the potential introduction of e-sports are just a few of the steps that will help the Olympics adapt to a changing world. The Olympics have

been resilient through all this and will definitely emerge past the current hurdles. One thing is for sure though, that there is a massive change impending. However, the decisions that the IOC and all concerned parties take in the near future will determine the direction in which the Olympics will head in the years to come.

References

1. IOC. 2022. Beijing 2022 Facts and Figures. Olympics.com. <https://olympics.com/ioc/beijing-2022-facts-and-figures>.
2. ANI News. 2021. Lithuania confirms diplomatic boycott of Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics. <https://www.aninews.in/news/world/asia/lithuania-confirms-diplomatic-boycott-of-beijing-2022-winter-olympics20211203200952>.
3. Victor Mather. 2022. The Diplomatic Boycott of the Beijing Winter Olympics, Explained. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/article/diplomatic-boycott-olympics.html>.
4. Suhasini Haidar. 2022. Indian diplomats to boycott Beijing Winter Olympics. The Hindu. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-to-diplomatically-boycott-winter-olympics-over-chinas-decision-to-field-galwan-soldier-as-torchbearer/article38370876.ece>.
5. BBC. 2021. China warns nations will 'pay price' for Olympic boycott. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-59592347>.
6. Tom Cheshire. 2022. Beijing 2022: Lack of natural snow is 'disturbing' but Games are being 'delivered with sustainability', says IOC. Sky News. <https://news.sky.com/story/beijing-2022-lack-of-natural-snow-is-disturbing-but-games-are-being-delivered-with-sustainability-says-ioc-12539111#:~:text=Beijing%20is%20an%20arid%20region,water%20to%20create%20the%20snow>.
7. Jeffrey Knockel. 2022. Cross-Country Exposure Analysis of the MY2022 Olympics App. The Citizen Lab. <https://citizenlab.ca/2022/01/cross-country-exposure-analysis-my2022-olympics-app/#:~:text=According%20to%20this%20policy%2C%20apps,and%20travel%20and%20medical%20histories>.
8. Amy Qin. 2022. Bearing an Olympic Torch, and a Politically Loaded Message. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/08/sports/olympics/china-uyghur-olympics.html>.
9. Karolos Grohmann. 2022. Dutch reporter on-air incident was isolated case, says IOC. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/lifestyle/sports/dutch-reporter-on-air-incident-was-isolated-case-says-ioc-2022-02-05/>.
10. Express News Service. 2022. The Indian Express. Explained: How figure skater Valieva was banned, then reinstated at Olympics despite doping charge. <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-figure-skater-valieva-ban-winter-olympics-7777148/>.

11. Human Rights Watch. 2017. Olympics: Host City Contract Requires Human Rights New Provisions Could Prevent Abuses That Marred Rio, Sochi, Beijing Games. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/02/28/olympics-host-city-contract-requires-human-rights>.
12. Candice Choi and Kelvin Chan. 2022. EXPLAINER: Olympics show complexity of sustainability claims. Associated Press. <https://apnews.com/article/winter-olympics-sustainability-claims-b8ebc9d946ad080cac7508f95abb8978>.

