

VOLUME 4 • ISSUE 04



BALSILLIE
PAPERS

State-Sponsored Boycotts of Sport Mega Events: Considerations for Sport Governors and State Policymakers

Tim Elcombe

July 20, 2021

Success in high profile international sporting competitions often generates unmatched sources of collective pride and national spirit that can unify a nation. With increased pride and national spirit, however, can also come controversy and division, such as when boycotts of these sporting competitions are used as political tools or weapons against host nations.

Success in high profile international sporting competitions often generates unmatched sources of collective pride and national spirit that can unify a nation. Canadians, for example, reveled together in the victory over the Soviets in the 1972 ice hockey Summit Series, celebrated Olympic successes across the decades, and has hosted multiple international sporting events, including the Olympics, Commonwealth Games, Pan-American Games, the FIFA Women's World Cup, and in 2026 will be co-hosting the FIFA Men's World Cup of football (soccer).

With increased pride and national spirit, however, can also come controversy and division, such as when boycotts of these sporting competitions are used as political tools or weapons against host nations. This raises the question, therefore: should nations like Canada support calls for boycotts of two international sporting mega events (SMEs) scheduled to take place in 2022, the Winter Olympics in Beijing, and/or the FIFA Men's World Cup in Qatar? Human rights groups, as well as some Canadian politicians, for instance, suggest that Canada, as a 'middle power' nation, should refuse to send its eligible Olympic athletes to China in protest of the imprisonment of two Canadian citizens, abusive treatment of the Uighur community, the dismantling of freedoms in Hong Kong, and in support of Tibetan and Taiwanese independence.¹ Similarly, national soccer teams seeking to qualify for the World Cup increasingly face pressure to skip the 2022 event because of the Qatari regime's checkered human rights record, particularly with respect to women, homosexuals, and migrant workers.² Sporting governors and state officials alike must, therefore, decide soon whether to politically leverage participating in the Winter Olympics in Beijing and the World Cup in Qatar.

This article aims to assist sport governors and state policymakers with these decisions by providing a nuanced overview of a specific type of sporting protest: state-supported³ actions, particularly symbolic non-participation, targeting SMEs such as the Olympics or World Cup for political reasons. The broader topic of sporting protest is complex and expansive: threats of political action through sport or sporting non-action can be undertaken by many different types of actors (e.g. states, national sport governing bodies, leagues/clubs, teams, athletes, sponsors, supporters, social movement groups) against a range of targets (e.g. malfeasant states, problematic sporting institutions, irresponsible stakeholders, rogue associations) for many reasons (sporting, non-sporting, or hybrid), and in a variety of forms (e.g. boycotts,

¹ L. Ewing (3 Feb 2021). "Canadian human rights groups among coalition calling for Beijing Olympics boycott." Canadian Broadcast Corporation. <https://www.cbc.ca/sports/olympics/canada-rights-groups-boycott-beijing-olympics-1.5900137>

² See P. Auclair (9 April 2021). "World Cup 2022 – Opinion: Qatar boycott campaign is chance for football to save its soul." Eurosport. https://www.eurosport.com/football/world-cup-qualification-uefa/2022/world-cup-2022-opinion-qatar-boycott-campaign-is-chance-for-football-to-save-its-soul_story8215091/story.shtml; Human Rights Watch report on Qatar at <https://www.hrw.org/middle-east/n-africa/qatar>; also, J.M. Dorsey (2015). "How Qatar is its own worst enemy." *International Journal of the History of Sport* 32 (3), 422-439. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09523367.2015.1008212>

³ While governing bodies ultimately responsible for boycotting SMEs often exist as independent or arms-length from central state governments, such as the Canadian Olympic Committee, decisions to boycott or engage in some form of coherent action for political reasons often becomes attributed to the larger state. For example, the Canadian Olympic and Paralympic Committees' decision to be the first national sporting bodies to publicly refuse participation in the Tokyo Olympics in March 2020 as the global pandemic worsened was attributed to the Canadian nation more broadly.

expulsions, protests, engagement). However, to provide tangible support for the looming 2022 decisions that sport and non-sport governors must contemplate, I will focus this paper on state-supported sporting boycotts utilized to punish or coerce into compliance SME state hosts, considered by the governments of participating players as “rogue” or “malfeasant” based on, for example, perceived human rights violations or actions considered beyond the accepted bounds of the established “world order”.

The paper will be presented in three sections. First, an overview of Carole Gomez’s typology of politically-motivated state sponsored sporting boycotts will be provided to offer a framework to discuss the 2022 SME discussion. Next, three foundational positions on state sponsored SME boycotts will be sketched out, with the third perspective – boycotts as a soft-power strategy – championed as the most pragmatic view to adopt. Finally, four considerations for sport governors and policymakers will be offered, including a list of nine strategies for those in positions of authority to potentially adopt when punitive or coercive political action through SME (non) participation is considered “necessary”.

Typology of State-Sponsored Sporting Boycotts (for Political Purposes)

Threats of state-sponsored boycotts of the Olympics for political reasons trace back to the propaganda-laced 1936 Olympics in Berlin, Germany, hosted by Adolf Hitler’s Nazi Party. Significant politically motivated boycotts came to fruition at the 1956 Olympics in Melbourne, Australia, and again at the 1976 Montreal Games in Canada, with perhaps the USA-led Olympic abstention from the 1980 Games in Moscow, Soviet Union (and subsequent revenge USSR allies’ boycott of the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics) being the most renowned examples. While these state-sponsored Olympic boycotts were all politically motivated, subtle differences between them exist that Carole Gomez, from the French Institute for International and Strategic Affairs, uses to create a three-type taxonomy.⁴

First, ‘binary’ boycotts describe sporting withdrawal by a nation’s athletic representatives from an event hosted by the opposed state. For example, the threats against Berlin, as well as the actualized boycotts of Moscow and Los Angeles, fall within this category. However, in the case of Melbourne, the host nation did not draw the ire of Egyptian officials – instead the idea of sharing sporting space with Suez Canal combatants Israel, France, and Britain prompted the boycott. Gomez refers to these as the second form of boycott: ‘ricochet’ boycotts. Finally, New Zealand’s participation in the 1976 Olympics, despite castigated sporting affiliations with apartheid South Africa, ultimately served as the main point of contention spurring an African bloc boycott of the Montreal Olympic Games.⁵ Montreal merely stood as the unfortunate host of the Games when the IOC refused to expel New Zealand’s Olympic Team as

⁴ C. Gomez (2018). “Boycotts and Diplomacy: When the Talking Stops”. In J.S. Rofo (Ed.) *Sport and Diplomacy: Games within Games* (pp. 169-184). Manchester University.

⁵ The African-bloc’s boycott, and concerns about a repeat for the 1978 Commonwealth Games in Edmonton, Canada, helped spur the creation of a formal Commonwealth nations’ sport policy restricting competition against South Africa referred to as the Gleneagles Agreement in 1977. See A. Payne (1991). “The international politics of the Gleneagles Agreement.” *The Round Table* 80 (320), 417-430. DOI: 10.1080/00358539108454063

punishment for continuing athletic ties with South Africa. According to Gomez, this third type is a 'domino effect' boycott.⁶

The 2022 SMEs currently under boycott threat – the World Cup in Qatar and the Winter Olympics in Beijing – both qualify as binary boycotts, where the host nation is also the source of the political discord. Calls for state-sponsored binary boycotts are likely to increase in the future, as SMEs are more regularly awarded to non-Western, powerful “outsider” states, including the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) and Middle Eastern OPEC nations.⁷ With citizens of democratic nations regularly balking at the billions of dollars required to host SMEs⁸, the financial crisis likely to envelope the world following the COVID-19 pandemic,⁹ and emerging non-democratic world powers increasingly turning to high-profile sport investment to ‘normalize’ or enhance their global images (referred to as “sportwashing”)¹⁰, claims of state malfeasance, and demands for active non-participation decisions, are likely to reoccur.

Three Foundational Perspectives on Sporting Boycotts

Should states support SME boycotts moving forward? Are state-sponsored sporting boycotts vestiges of the Cold War, best put to the side of twenty-first century international relations? Should threats of sport abstention ever be used as a political tool for states to wield? To help sport governors and policymakers decide how to best answer these questions, three foundational perspectives informing sporting boycott positions require explanation.

1. Sporting Exceptionalism:

'State-Sponsored Sporting Boycotts are Irresponsible and Inappropriate'

“So what is a boycott for? It's against all the Olympic spirit. It's against all the values we have in sport and what we are standing for in sport.” – IOC President Thomas Bach¹¹

The most stringent opponents of SME boycotts for political purposes argue that sports should remain apolitical. Echoing a separation thesis of sport and state, the United States Olympic and Paralympic Committee (USOPC) released a statement in light of American politicians calling for a USA boycott of

⁶ Ibid

⁷ M.M. Jerabek, A.M. Ferreira de Andrade, and A.M. Figueroa (2017). “FIFA’s Hegemony: Examples from World Cup Hosting Countries”. *Global Society* 31 (3), 417-440: DOI: 10.1080/13600826.2016.1261807

⁸ T. Streicher, S.L. Schmidt, and D. Schreyer (2018). “Referenda on hosting the Olympics: What drives voter turnout?” *Journal of Sports Economics* 20 (5), 627-653. DOI: 10.1177/02F1527002518794777

⁹ R. Laborda & J. Olmo (2021). “Volatility spillover between economic sectors in financial crisis prediction: Evidence spanning the great financial crisis and Covid-19 pandemic.” *Research in International Business and Finance* 57. DOI: [10.1016/j.ribaf.2021.101402](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ribaf.2021.101402)

¹⁰ S. Cornelissen (2010). “The geopolitics of global aspiration: Sport mega-events and emerging powers”. *International Journal of the History of Sport* 27 (16-18), 3008-3025. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09523367.2010.508306>

¹¹ Olympics.com (16 July 2020). “IOC President Thomas Bach reflects on the boycott of the Olympic Games Moscow 1980 40 years later.” <https://olympics.com/ioc/news/ioc-president-thomas-bach-reflects-on-the-boycott-of-the-olympic-games-moscow-1980-40-years-later/>

the 2022 Beijing Winter Games contending that human rights and broader political issues be left to the governments of the world.¹² Citing the USOPC's anti-sport boycott statement directly, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson claimed "the politicization of sports will damage the spirit of the Olympic Charter and the interest of athletes from all countries".¹³

Sports and politics "don't mix" inferences are regularly rolled out by the Swiss-based non-profit, non-governmental leaders of sport federations responsible for the world's biggest SMEs – particularly the IOC's Summer Olympic Games and FIFA's Men's World Cup finals.¹⁴ Both the IOC and FIFA go to great lengths to emphasize their political neutrality,¹⁵ with rules and regulations imposed to stem potential displays of political protest.¹⁶ Relative to the spectre of boycotts, the IOC affirms its blanket opposition: "Given the diverse participation in the Olympic Games", [we] must remain neutral on all global political issues".¹⁷

Despite their commitments to political abstention, both the IOC and FIFA view themselves as beacons for a better political world by bringing global citizens together for peaceful celebrations of humanity through their SMEs. The IOC in particular trumpets itself as a non-political force for good – referring to its philosophy as "Olympism" embodied by the Olympic Truce all UN Members are encouraged to sign prior to any Games.¹⁸ On the apolitical yet-influential role of the Olympics, IOC President Thomas Bach professes:

*"We have the athletes from all 206 National Olympic Committees and from the IOC Refugee Olympic Team united in this competition, living together in one Olympic village, without any kind of discrimination, exchanging opinions, discussing. And in this way, creating an atmosphere of friendship and of understanding, of respect and solidarity. And this is what we call the Olympic spirit."*¹⁹

¹² N. Bose, S. Keating, & M. Martina (3 February 2021). "U.S. signals no plans to boycott 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics after genocide designation". <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-olympics-2022-beijing-usa-idUSKBN2A332Z>

¹³ I. Tharoor (12 April 2021). "Should the U.S. boycott the 2022 Winter Olympics in China?" *Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/04/12/olympics-china-boycott/>

¹⁴ Each showcase event drew global television audiences over 3.5 billion for their latest quadrennial offering and garnered media and corporate attention from all corners of the globe. Although interest pales in comparison (numbers, global reach), the Olympic Winter Games are still considered as part of the larger Olympic programme and treated with similar reverence.

¹⁵ H.E. Naess (2018). "The neutrality myth: Why international sporting associations and politics cannot be separated." *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 45 (2), 144-160. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00948705.2018.1479190>

¹⁶ J. Boyckoff (2017). "Protest, Activism, and the Olympic Games: An overview of key issues and iconic moments." *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 34 (3-4), 162-183. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09523367.2017.1356822>

¹⁷ Quoted in I. Tharoor (12 April 2021). "Should the U.S. boycott the 2022 Winter Olympics in China?" *Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/04/12/olympics-china-boycott/>

¹⁸ R. Spaaij (2012). "Olympic rings of peace? The Olympics movement, peacemaking and intercultural understanding." *Sport in Society* 15(6), 761-774. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2012.708279>

¹⁹ Olympics.com <https://olympics.com/ioc/news/ioc-president-thomas-bach-reflects-on-the-boycott-of-the-olympic-games-moscow-1980-40-years-later/>

Critiquing the 1980 Moscow boycott that denied his own Olympic participation, President Bach lamented that athletes restricted from participating in the 1980 or 1984 LA Games were “sanctioned for something they had nothing to do with, and that they would never have supported”.²⁰ Athletes should not, USOPC Board of Directors Chair Susanne Lyons Chair argues, be used as “political pawns”.²¹ Looking forward, including contemplations of 2022 boycotts, Bach challenges National Olympic Committees (NOCs) to “stand up for the interests of sport” by refusing to relent to “political pressure”.²² Boycotts, from this perspective, destroy the spirit of international sport, infiltrating the peaceful and equitable haven created by these SMEs by introducing inappropriate and irresponsible political discord.

2. Crude (Zero-Sum) Instrumentalism:

‘Sporting Boycotts are Ineffective State Alignment Instruments’

“The Soviets were still in Afghanistan ten years later, so in terms of bringing about a conduct change it was completely ineffective.” – Canadian IOC Member Richard Pound on the 1980 boycott of the Moscow Olympics²³

A second foundational perspective on sporting boycotts dismisses them as ineffective instruments of political power. Often anti-boycott purveyors will combine both the apolitical sport argument and the ineffectual boycott argument to strengthen their claims. From an ideological perspective, however, important features distinguish the two positions. If one truly believes sporting boycotts are inappropriate and irresponsible (position #1), then their political effectiveness becomes a moot point. Alternatively, an instrumentalist argument could support sporting boycotts as, in theory, a reasonable tool for states to employ against malevolent actors; but ultimately, and as boycott critics argue, they lack efficacy.

The 1980 Olympics regularly serve as the case study confirming that sporting boycotts rarely, if ever, directly force misaligned states to alter their behaviour or change problematic policies. At the height of the Cold War in December 1979, Soviet forces invaded Afghanistan resulting in economic sanctions levied by the international community and threats by American President Jimmy Carter of an Olympic boycott. When the Soviets refused to leave Afghanistan, the United States Olympic Committee and allies including Canada’s NOC – encouraged by Federal government officials – announced their intentions to boycott. Eventually, 65 National Olympic Committees chose not to send Olympic Teams, with other states permitting athlete participation under IOC or NOC (rather than official national) banners. In the end, however, the Soviets

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Associated Press, (7 April 2021). “China warns Washington not to boycott Winter Olympics.” <https://apnews.com/article/race-and-ethnicity-winter-olympics-boycotts-beijing-2020-tokyo-olympics-a0defdcf7468519da87255c2a383d6fd>

²² Olympics.com <https://olympics.com/ioc/news/ioc-president-thomas-bach-reflects-on-the-boycott-of-the-olympic-games-moscow-1980-40-years-later/>

²³ CBC News. (4 February 2021). “Canadian member of IOC dismisses calls for Beijing 2022 boycott”. *Canadian Broadcasting Company*. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/canada-olympic-committee-boycott-beijing-1.5901941>

continued their military occupation of Afghanistan – only withdrawing in 1987 after Gorbachev’s reform-minded regime took charge.²⁴

Crucial to this second foundational perspective on boycotts is the demand to demonstrate a causal link between quantifiable successes (wins) for the state choosing non-participation, and obvious compromise or acquiescence (losses) by the target – a clear zero-sum political effectiveness, in other words. In theory, adherents of this crude instrumental approach remain open to the use of sporting boycotts if some desirable outcome can be attributed to politically spurred athlete non-participation. Rarely, however, do sporting boycotts achieve such obvious tangible outcomes. The 1980 boycott failed to pressure the Soviets to leave Afghanistan; decades of sporting embargoes existed prior to South African officials rescinding apartheid policies; the Republic of China’s boycott of the 1976 Montreal Games did not solve the “Two Chinas” problem.

Looking ahead to 2022, crude instrumentalist critics of sporting boycotts argue that the withdrawal of athlete participation will have little to no direct effect on the derided actions and policies exercised by Qatari and Chinese leaders. Therefore, boycotts of the FIFA World Cup and Winter Olympics, respectively, will only result in the hopes and dreams of elite footballers and Olympians (as well as vested stakeholders including supporters) being unnecessarily dashed. Regarding threats by Canadian politicians to boycott the Winter Olympics, Pound argues: “It’s as if we said, ‘we’re so mad about you treating your Chinese citizens in such a way that we’re going to effectively take away all the rights of our athletes’”.²⁵ Sporting boycotts, therefore, must be shown to hold strong and effective coercive powers to justify the restrictions imposed on non-political Olympic athletes.

3. **Soft Power Resource:**

‘Sporting Boycotts are Complex Soft Power Tools’

“We should not hesitate to say that a nation [such as China] that [violates human dignity] does not get to appropriate the Canadian flag for a two-week sporting event that will be used to promote itself on the world stage. If we allow that to happen then our flag stands for nothing.” – Canadian Federal Opposition Leader Erin O’Toole²⁶

Advocates of a third foundational perspective utilize (consciously or unintentionally) the broad concept of soft power to consider the justification of sporting boycotts. Joseph Nye’s oft-appropriated theory differentiates harder, more coercive strong-armed forms of power (military, economic) from softer, propagative approaches geared to winning hearts and minds.²⁷ International sport has long been considered a soft power tool, with scholars regularly pointing to SMEs (and related boycotts) as soft power ground zeroes. Grix and Brannagan, for example, argue that sport – particularly via SMEs – contribute across all five resources mobilized through

²⁴ J. Eaton (2018). “Decentering US sports diplomacy: The 1980 Moscow boycott through contemporary Asian-African perspectives”. In J.S. Rofo (Ed.) *Sport and Diplomacy: Games within Games* (pp. 203-222). Manchester University.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ E. O’Toole (16 Feb 2021). “Erin O’Toole: China must not be allowed to host the 2022 Olympics”. *Toronto Star*. <https://www.thestar.com/opinion/contributors/2021/02/16/erin-otoole-china-must-not-be-allowed-to-host-the-2020-olympics.html>

²⁷ J.S. Nye (2004). *Soft Power. The Means to Success in World Politics*. New York: Public Affairs.

state's soft power strategies: culture, tourism, branding, diplomacy, and trade.²⁸ SMEs from this perspective are considered more than international sporting competitions – they are deeply symbolic reflections of the state's identity and aspirations. Hosts invite the world to these global events, while participating countries send (directly or indirectly) state-supported, flag-adorned athletic diplomats.

The 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics, for example, is often used as an exemplar of SME hosting as a resource for soft power utilization. The Chinese government invested heavily in the Games, hoping to both project a modern and culturally sophisticated national image to the world, as well as foster a nationalist sentimentality domestically.²⁹ Soft power use of Olympic hosting by states outside the Western-dominated conception of the “world order”, like China in 2008, to demonstrate their emergent national virtues (and influence) has a long history, including the Nazi Party's embrace of the 1936 Berlin Games, post-Imperial Japan's 1964 Games in Tokyo, and the Soviet's Cold War hosting of the 1980 Moscow Games. However, soft power projection through SME hosting extends to virtually all Olympics: a war-ravaged London hosted the 1948 Games to symbolize national resolve, and again in 2012 to promote Great Britain as a non-elitist global ‘hub’³⁰; middle power nations like Canada (Montreal 1976, Calgary 1988, Vancouver 2010) and Australia (Melbourne 1956, Sydney 2000) use the Olympics to enhance global influence; and the USA's global power is mirrored by its hosting record (St. Louis 1904, Lake Placid 1932, 1980, Los Angeles 1932, 1984, 2028, Atlanta, 1996, and Salt Lake City 2002).

Considering sporting boycotts from a soft power perspective challenges the first two positions. Soft power proponents reject the (selective) ideological and apolitically naïve view of international sport articulated earlier by IOC President Bach and the USOPC. International sport cannot disentangle itself from the complex political contexts they exist within. Consciously or inadvertently, high profile international sport functions as a tool seeking to rally citizens as a shared collective, while at the same time serving as a transregional soft power resource that serves to attract and positively influence perceptions of the wider state. Furthermore, though the Canadian Olympic and Paralympic Committees, for example, function as independent arms-length sporting agencies responsible for deciding if the nation's athletes will attend the Beijing Winter Games, direct government support through high-performance funding, elite sporting infrastructure development, and SME host backing, as well as less tangible political pressures, reinforce state-level influences. Governments do not invest (tangibly and intangibly) in international sport simply for utopian sporting purposes – they provide resources to wield soft power domestically and internationally.³¹

This third perspective also recalibrates the point and purpose of sport boycotts. As noted, criticisms of the 1980 American-led Moscow Games boycott cite the failure to coerce the Soviets to end the military invasion of Afghanistan as proof of their ineffectualness. This, however, is a hard power assessment of a soft power strategy. Complicating the use of soft power, of course, is how to adjudicate its “effectiveness”. The narrative and complex features of soft power plays render attempts to measure their effects illusive. Is it possible, yet

²⁸ J. Grix, & P.M. Brannagan. (2016). “Of mechanisms and myths” Conceptualising states' ‘soft power’ strategies through sports mega events.” *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 27 (2): 251-272. DOI: 10.1080/09592296.2016.1169791.

²⁹ Li, Y.W. (2013). “Public diplomacy strategies of the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the 2012 London Olympics: A comparative study. *The International Journal for the History of Sport* 30 (15), 1723-1734. DOI: 10.1080/09523367.2013.790374

³⁰ Li, 1729

³¹ J. Grix & F. Carmichael (2012). “Why do governments invest in elite sport? A polemic.” *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics* 4 (1), 73-90. DOI: [10.1080/19406940.2011.627358](https://doi.org/10.1080/19406940.2011.627358)

difficult to substantiate, that the 1980 boycott by NATO allies weakened the Soviet regime's domestic support and policy strategies? Could seeds of conciliation been sown in future leaders such as Gorbachev to avoid international order censure and exclusion?³²

Therein lies the problem with utilizing soft power mechanisms to challenge malfeasant states – how to determine their effectiveness and, relatedly, how to justify the denial of opportunity for athletes to compete and citizens to be engaged. As prominent historian Niall Ferguson argues, “the trouble with soft power is that it's, well soft”.³³ The higher, zero-sum stakes of hard power strategies are far more likely to evoke an immediate, tangible reaction from the targeted state. However, these higher stakes make them more dangerous – and in a zero-sum, hard power contest a nation like Canada might lose. The utilization of soft power, therefore, offers a less risky, but less direct and measurable option.

Another benefit (and complication) of sporting boycotts is they diffuse soft power in multiple directions and in multiple forms. For example, the pan-African boycott of the 1976 Montreal Olympics presented the image of a unified continent against South Africa's racist ideologies, pressured the Afrikaner National Party regime directly by reinforcing international sport exclusion, and sent a message to the citizens of each participating country that human rights mattered more than a sporting event. Therefore, the boycott had broad (international community) and focused (South Africa) diplomatic effects, as well as a deep domestic symbolism.

Where and how flags – flown from poles, driven into grounds, stretched across playing fields, or worn on the chests of athletes – are deployed carry weight in multifaceted ways. Of course, this soft power resource also exists for the targets of sporting boycotts. South African state leaders likely utilized the sporting embargo to rally Afrikaner support. Threats of boycotting Qatar's World Cup and Beijing's Winter Olympics will, undoubtedly, mobilize their own domestic narratives, perhaps emboldening claims of Western manipulation and repression.³⁴ Furthermore, political posturing through boycott threats can, again on soft grounds, backfire: “I think you want to raise the bar really high for Olympic boycotts...public signaling sometimes becomes very hard for countries to step back from” an anonymous Asian diplomat mused.³⁵

The decision to boycott on soft power grounds, although less risky than hard power plays, remains a complex and potentially fraught one. It will undoubtedly anger “sporting exceptionalists” committed to a sacrosanct vision of sport and to crude instrumentalists looking for clear zero-sum metrics to determine the boycott's effectiveness. Alternatively, boycott proponents, including various human rights organizations, suggest sport and government leaders have a moral obligation to employ their soft power to deny malfeasant states the

³² Hazan contends that the boycott of the Moscow Games limited “one of the most effective instruments of the Soviet propaganda machine” (pp. 125-126). B. Hazan (1982). *Olympic Sports and Propaganda Games: Moscow 1980*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books.

³³ N. Ferguson (3 November 2009). “Think Again: Power”. *Foreign Policy* <https://foreignpolicy.com/2009/11/03/think-again-power/>

³⁴ Bloomberg News. (6 April 2021). “Olympic boycott risks becoming the next big U.S.-China battle.” <https://www.bnnbloomberg.ca/olympics-boycott-risks-becoming-the-next-big-u-s-china-battle-1.1586970>

³⁵ N. Bose, S. Keating, & M. Martina (3 February 2021). “U.S. signals no plans to boycott 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics after genocide designation”. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-olympics-2022-beijing-usa-idUSKBN2A332Z>

opportunity to control the domestic and international relations narrative. A statement from the organization Canadian Friends of Hong Kong summarizes this call for soft power action through an Olympic boycott:

“An Olympics in Beijing will force our athletes to be the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) propaganda tools for garnering moral glory of being the first city to host both the Summer and Winter Olympics, lending their hard-earned professional credibility to help whitewashing the bloody record of human rights violations and further empowering the dictatorial might of CCP domestically and internationally.”³⁶

Four Considerations for Sport Governors and State Policymakers

What are state policymakers and sport governors to do? First, pragmatically, it makes the most sense to adopt a soft power perspective of sporting boycotts. Recognizing, at once, that sport cannot remain on the international relations sidelines and that sporting boycotts are best understood as soft power tools provides decision makers and advisors with the most nuanced perspective to utilize when contemplating SME abstention for political purposes.

Second, the athletes’ role in a sporting boycott must be considered more complexly. Athletes capable of qualifying for quadrennial SMEs, such as the Olympics, dedicate much of their lives to participating in these pinnacle sport competitions. Decisions that strip sportspersons of their limited opportunity Olympic dreams should not be taken lightly. However, athletes at the highest levels also recognize the inherent precariousness of their sporting careers. A poorly timed injury, inopportune subpar performance, or the existence of more talented Olympic hopefuls vying for the same limited spots can derail their athletic dreams yet remain accepted aspects of sport. And the Olympics are not the only opportunity for these elite athletes to compete in high level international competitions – World Championships, intermittent tournaments, sport tours, and impromptu parallel events remain options.

Third, sport governors ought to also recognize the potentially insensitive talk of ‘athlete rights’ and calls for the ‘need to protect sport’ when the political issues prompting boycott conversations often involve accusations of human rights violations and the exploitation of vulnerable people. The reality is high performance athletes competing in international competitions are, voluntarily or involuntarily, non-state actors to some degree. Select Canadian athletes, for example, receive special federal funding from a program called ‘Own The Podium’.³⁷ Only those considered legitimate Olympic medal hopefuls gain access to these extra advantages. Does the Federal Government provide these resources simply for sporting excellence purposes – or is it an investment in athletes as tools for domestic and international soft power?³⁸ Since winning medals, not developing a broader sporting infrastructure, is the focus of the multi-million-dollar program, it seems reasonable to argue athletes implicitly become instruments of the state. Some might bristle at the non-athletic responsibility, while others may embrace this arms-length state actor role. However national representative

³⁶ Canadian Friends of Hong Kong (n.d.). Canadian Joint Statement calling for IOC to move the 2022 Winter Olympics to a free country. <https://www.askpoliticiansccp.org/>

³⁷ See Own the Podium at <https://www.ownthepodium.org/en-CA/>; also M. Dowling & J. Smith (2016). “The institutional work of Own the Podium in developing high-performance sport in Canada.” *Journal of Sport Management* 30, 294-410. DOI: 10.1123/jsm.2014-0290

³⁸ Grix & Carmichael

athletes, particularly from states that invest heavily in international sporting success, should recognize their role (and be publicly acknowledged) as sporting diplomats.

Finally, considering both the limits of soft power as well as an appreciation for the gravity of a boycott on the limited sporting career of a select few athletes, sport governors and policymakers ought to consider the full range of ways to leverage SME (non) participation. Each of the following approaches challenge the soft power plays employed by the malfeasant state within a SME hosting context in a variety of ways.

The first three options involve state sporting representatives pressuring the international sport governing body (e.g. IOC, FIFA) to implement measures of censure against the malfeasant host state:

- i. **Relocate the SME** to an alternative location. Such a move would *displace* the malfeasant state's soft power potential – at least internationally.
- ii. **Exclude** the targeted state athletic representatives. Theoretically the IOC, for example, could permit Beijing to continue as hosts of the 2022 Winter Games but restrict the Chinese athletes from participating – however this seems an unlikely option. If enacted such an approach would *deprive* the malfeasant important soft power opportunities.
- iii. **Decertify the relevant NOC** to effectively strip the malfeasant state of formal athletic representation. In this case, athletes from the offending nation may continue to participate as neutrals but symbols connecting the athlete to the state are removed. Again, this is an unlikely proposal when the host is the censure target, but an option that would *devalue* the malfeasant state's soft power.

Assuming the international sport governing bodies refuse to act against the malfeasant host nation, state sporting representatives may wield soft power in the following ways:

- iv. **Decertify the relevant NOC** to Commit to a **full boycott** by refusing to send any athletes to participate in the SME. Alternative parallel events can be organized for affected athletes to ensure opportunities for participation remain. The intended effect of non-participation is to *disempower* the malfeasant state's soft power usage.
- v. Engage in a **peripheral boycott**. This limited approach to non-participation would focus on political and corporate abstention. Athletes would still be permitted to participate, however non-sport participants would disengage from the SME, *disrupting* the malfeasant state's opportunity to fully realize their soft power objectives.
- vi. Employ a **symbolic boycott**. Sportspeople, in this instance, can participate in the SME but as neutrals. Like the decertification option, this strategy permits the athletes to compete, while *denying* the malfeasant state appropriation opportunities.
- vii. Support **protests** of the malfeasant state through the SME. Rather than remain neutral or discrete with dissent, states can implicitly or tacitly embolden non-state actors such as athletes, corporations, NGOs, or others wishing to openly challenge the actions or policies of the malfeasant

state in the lead up or during the SME. Such state-supported protests are likely to *destabilize* the soft power foundations of the targeted state.

- viii. **Engage** in public dialogue with the malfeasant state while continuing full SME participation. This approach *directs* soft power by challenging the targeted state to demonstrate ‘normal’ behaviours while hosting the event. With the attention of the world directed at these ‘rogue’ states, real change may be stimulated – at least optically but perhaps structurally as well.
- ix. **Do nothing** and **organically** rely on the power of sport to cut across political divides and create communities of understanding. In effect, this would be an approach that *disregards* soft power and uses SMEs as opportunities, as sporting exceptionalists argue, to set aside political differences.

Regardless of the strategy selected, once calls for boycotts gain momentum, states will have little choice but to defend their response in some way. Therefore, assessing the range of options available, considering the role of athletes and other SME stakeholders, anticipating the reaction of the targeted state, the decision in relation to allies, and how the politicians and national sport governing bodies communicate with each other and the citizenry will be crucial. This requires sport governors and policymakers to appreciate and consider the nuances of sporting boycotts. Currently, all National Olympic Committees and eligible Football (Soccer) Federations (including Canada) continue to prepare for participation in the 2022 Beijing Olympics and FIFA World Cup in Qatar, respectively. And at the time of writing, Olympians are traveling to Japan to meet quarantine requirements prior to the start of the delayed Tokyo Olympics – a spectator-less³⁹ SME largely unwanted by the Japanese public and health officials⁴⁰ living in a pandemic-related state of emergency.

Considering the deep and often problematic relationship that exists between sport and politics, one might ask if enjoying international sporting competitions remains appropriate. Certainly many abhor the political dimension of sport, but it is largely due to the depth and complexity of its entanglements with international affairs that makes it such a meaningfully powerful force. Sport governors and political actors, therefore, must acknowledge the intricate links between what can be at once play and serious business, sources of collective pride and destructive jingoism, triumphs of the human spirit and spaces for irresolvable dilemmas. Athletes representing nations can lift citizens off their collective feet, can entice strangers to celebrate as one and sing mostly forgotten national anthems; they can also embarrass, spark xenophobia, and empower authoritarianism. Sport, particularly in inter-national SME contexts, is complex, ubiquitous, and (soft) powerful – as such, needs to be treated with care, nuance, and intelligence.

³⁹ S. Ingle & J. McCurry (8 July 2021). “Spectators banned from most Olympic events as Covid emergency declared.” *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2021/jul/08/tokyo-to-be-put-under-state-of-emergency-for-duration-of-2020-olympic-games>

⁴⁰ J. McCurry (24 May 2021). “Tokyo Olympics: Anger in Japan at IOC call to make ‘sacrifices’.” *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2021/may/24/tokyo-olympics-anger-japan-ioc-coronavirus-sacrifices>



Tim Elcombe is an Associate Professor and past Department Chair of Kinesiology & Physical Education at Wilfrid Laurier University. Broadly speaking, Dr. Elcombe's scholarship uses a pragmatic normative lens to examine concepts and issues related to sport ethics, cultural and political aspects of sport, sport development and governance, and social impact through sport (and inquiry). His current scholarly work involves developing normative concepts and tools to better understand problems (and resolution processes) in and through sport; considers the uses of sport as a sociocultural "tool"; applies philosophical pragmatism to address ethical issues in sport; and explores how sport (kinesiology) inquiry can be turned "inside out" to enhance its sociocultural impact.



balsilliepapers.ca

ISSN 2563-674X

doi:10.51644/BAP44