

Sports in Healing International Relations

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The modern world is one of division and conflict. It often seems that no matter where a person is in the world, they can feel the effects of racial tensions, religious tensions, political tensions, and even international tensions. This brings up the discussion of how conflicting countries can reconcile and cooperate, especially without the use of military force at a point in time where military technologies are more powerful and destructive than ever before. What may be considered the “traditional” type of diplomacy is that which involves state representatives from (conflicting) nations meeting one another and discussing potential solutions. However, other types of diplomacy have emerged in recent history, one being sports diplomacy--the use of sports in fostering international relations. It has been discussed whether this may be a new means of bringing peace to the world and avoiding modern international conflict that could go as far as involving nuclear weaponry with devastating impacts on the world and its people. The modern internationality of sports dates back to the start of the Olympic Games in 1896, and throughout the 20th century, during which the world splintered in the largest international conflicts in human history, sports have been used for various purposes. Nations have often aimed to participate and win in international sporting events to assert their power politically, economically, ideologically, etc., over others (Kobierecki, 2013). On the other hand, sports have created opportunities for international unity by serving as unofficial reasons for leaders to talk in person and by bridging the cultural gap among peoples of different countries (Heere & Trunkos, 2017). Examples of both of these uses of sports raises the question: should sports be used to rebuild relations between two nations that have engaged in conflict?

Though sports appear to have merit in healing international relations, their potential may be largely based on speculation; there are few concrete examples of sports being successfully used for this purpose. Additionally, sports can even lead nations in the opposite direction of

progress, exacerbating tensions between them. Writer George Orwell (1968) labels international sports as “mimic warfare.” He expresses that sports’ natural competitiveness translates to strong patriotism in international sporting events, and this only harms international relations. His perspective from the bloodiest century of human history carries over to today, as modern sports are more internationalized than ever before. That being said, it is also likely that sports are not strong enough of a unifying force to bring countries together. US President Theodore Roosevelt (1919) once wrote that character is of much more value than excessive athleticism or intellect. This concept may be applied on a country-wide level; the character of a nation is a far more significant factor than their athletic ability (as displayed in particular sporting matches) in fostering international relations. Overall, sports are not an effective method for healing relations between two conflicting nations because they are not powerful enough a force to have a significant alleviating effect on conflicts that are deeply rooted in history or national identity.

Many modern instances of conflict between nations date back to the 1900s. As decades have passed between the start of those conflicts and now, those conflicts have only escalated through wars and other forms of political tension. It often appears as though the divisions in society have reached a point of no return, and that they are too deeply rooted in the past for a relatively new phenomenon such as international sports to help solve them. A case in point is North and South Korea, who were ideologically split after the Second World War and soon after engaged in an armed conflict that to this day has not been officially declared as over. As described by Kobierecki (2018) in the *Humanities and Social Sciences* journal, after the Korean War, the North and South competed to represent all of Korea, especially in sporting events such as the Olympics. Kobierecki details how tensions worsened in the following decades as North Korea boycotted the South’s hosting of the 1986 Asian Games and even planted a bomb at a

South Korean airport a week before the Games. Throughout the years following international conflicts' historical causes (like the Korean War), tensions and divisions are only deepened as peoples and leaders remember that they are at odds with each other, but forget the original reasons as to why. With the roots of conflicts buried in the past, sports fail to meet an invisible threshold that allows people to unify, and they instead become catalysts for further division. It is worth noting that at some points within the Korean conflict, sports diplomacy has actually been successful. Kobierecki (2018) explains how sports opened opportunities for the countries to get together and communicate on "non-political" issues, and in the 2000 Sydney Olympics, the two nations did walk together in the opening ceremony. However, even though sports might have helped alleviate this conflict at particular points, those effects were temporary; high tensions still exist today, with North Korea's testing of nuclear weapons (Masterson, 2020). This implies that sports may have some merit in international relations, but clearly not enough to make it a useful diplomatic method in fixing relations for the long term.

The Middle East is another site of tension with historical roots, and the conflict between Palestine and Israel has only been worsened by sports. This conflict dates back to an era of Western imperialism that set up violence between Zionists and Palestinian Arabs, and over decades, the conflict manifested in wars and tensions between Muslims and Jews in the region. Lekakis and Xenakis (2018), in the *Diplomacy & Statecraft* journal, detail how the Palestinian Football Association once claimed that Israeli forces bombed their stadia, and the latter argued that Palestinian militants used these locations as rocket-firing grounds against Israel. Just as in the Korean conflict described by Kobierecki, decades without resolution brewed further Israeli-Palestinian division and even created division along the lines of religion (Israelis are largely Jewish and Arabs are largely Muslim). In turn, rather than acting as a unifying force,

sports in this situation have only provided more opportunities for the conflicting parties to fight and accuse one another. Without a willingness to address the causes buried in time, clashing nations are more willing to use sports as a means of continuing conflict rather than ending it.

Especially in the most recent century of history, nationalism--fervent identification with and support of one's own country--has grown to a great extent in the wake of state-building. International conflicts of deep historical roots frequently involve national identity, and national identity is too strong a force in the modern world for sports to override. Sports failed to ease tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union during their Cold War rivalry, in which the United States' identity of democracy and capitalism was at odds with the Soviet Union's identity of authoritarianism and communism. Ellingworth (2020), an Associated Press writer, explains in *The Washington Post* how the US boycotted the 1980 Moscow Olympics and pressed the rest of the world to do so (with mild success); four years later, the USSR boycotted the Los Angeles Olympics in retaliation. Opposing national identities can create deep social divisions that essentially become ingrained in peoples' cultures. In this instance, the social polarity was so strong that sports were used to actually heighten international tensions rather than ease them; the US and the USSR went as far as using the Olympics, a global event that also concerned the world outside of these superpowers, as a means of snubbing each other. It does not help, as emphasized by Orwell (1968), that sports are naturally competitive especially on the international level, and thus, they can serve as a springboard for nationalism as nations are pit against each other. It is worth noting that despite Cold War tensions, relations between the US and China were actually improved by sports and sports diplomacy, even though China was a communist power like the USSR. Kobierecki (2016), in the *Polish Political Science Yearbook*, explains how Chinese and American teams met at the 1971 World Table Tennis Championships,

and later, China formally invited the American team to play matches in and tour China. As a result, President Nixon visited China; additionally, the US would lift its trade embargo against the country, terminate American currency control there, and begin visa facilitation for Chinese visitors to the US (Kobierecki, 2016). This was an extremely successful--if not the most successful--instance of sports easing international tensions. However, though this contrasts with the USSR example described by Ellingworth, China was arguably not as deeply rooted in communism as the USSR was, and therefore not as ideologically opposed to the US at the time.

Sports also failed to ease the colonial-era tensions between France and Algeria. Algeria had a violent colonial history and gained independence from France in only 1962, and in Algeria's struggle for independence, soccer became a symbol of Algerian resistance and nationalism. In the *International Review of Modern Sociology* journal, Amara (2006) details a 2001 soccer match between Algeria and France, during which ardent supporters of the Algerian team spilled onto the field when the game was 4-1 in France's favor. Spectators, fueled by nationalism, interrupted the match; this is an exact instance in which national identity and passion overrode sport's potential in de-stressing international tensions. It may be argued that the Algerian supporters who spilled onto the soccer field are a small group of people who do not represent all of Algerian public opinion and tension in France-Algeria relations. Even so, this was a significant sports match, given the rocky colonial history between the two nations, and despite the match's importance, it was still interrupted by spectators. This reveals that, in any case, significant anti-French and/or Algerian nationalistic sentiments remain, enough so that this opportunity for unity was interrupted. Heere and Trunkos (2017), in their book on sports diplomacy, note the ability for sports teams to diplomatically represent states in a globalized world and the ability for small groups of people (like the Algerian spectators in Amara's

example) to represent a whole conflict (French-Algeria tensions). Because of their competitiveness and their potential to spur national pride, international sports can be conflict-creating forces more than pacifying forces.

There is potentially some merit in the use of sports in international relations, but it is simply not the most effective route to take at this point in time when it comes to easing tensions. More traditional means of international communication—like diplomatic interactions between state representatives, the formation of international organizations/deals, and so on—should continue to be focused on rather than sports and sports diplomacy. President Theodore Roosevelt (1919) expressed that character is more significant than an abundance of athleticism or intellect, and the standard methods of diplomacy with cooperation among representatives is the best way for nations to exhibit their character and find common ground. Such diplomatic methods have already been employed for decades, and it may be argued that they have not shown results or done a great job of alleviating international tensions. Their consistency in effectiveness may be dependent on the leaders of involved nations at a given time, as the leaders may be more willing to cooperate with each other than previous sets of leaders. Despite this, these standard methods of healing international relations are not as subject to chance, it seems, as sports diplomacy. There are few large examples of successful use of sports in easing international conflict, and they do not seem to have much in common.

However, supporters of sports diplomacy continue to believe that sports have potential, as they could open talks between conflicting nations from a seemingly nonpolitical event. This raises the question: what if they were used only as a supporting diplomatic method for helping to fix relations? There are occasionally openings for sports to be used, and there is always the chance that the use of sports in international relations could be as successful as ping-pong

diplomacy was between the US and China. However, the ability for sports to be used as a sort of diplomacy method varies from situation to situation, as every international conflict is different.

The actual level of tension between two or more given nations must not be too high, otherwise the use of sports may be impossible. And in numerous cases across the world, the actual levels of tension are too high. Sports diplomacy is a relatively new phenomenon, and as sports continue to internationalize in a globalized world, it may become more common and even mainstream; but currently, in a world full of chaos and division and nationalism, sports are not an effective method of easing tensions between conflicting nations.

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