



GNSI DECISION BRIEF

Olympic Diplomacy: The Endurance of Soft Power

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In 2022, China committed to a mission of hosting a “green, sharing, open, and clean” Olympics games and reinforced its commitment to reducing the negative environmental impacts of the games.¹³ For the first time in the history of the games, all Olympic venues were powered by green energy. This globally broadcasted commitment came after the signing of the 2015 Paris Agreement and the U. S.’s formal withdrawal in 2020.¹⁴ By committing to hosting a large sporting event powered by green energy, China gained a platform to demonstrate their leadership in this field.

Sportswashing by both Authoritarian and Democratic Governments

Authoritarian governments, with a history of human rights abuses and violating basic democratic values can utilize sportswashing to improve the perception of their nation. Sportswashing is “the use of an athletic event by an individual or a government, a corporation, or another group to promote or burnish the individual’s or group’s reputation.”¹⁵ In general, watching sporting events and participating in a sports fandom commands a large amount of attention, providing an opportunity for authoritarian governments, like Russia and China, to show audiences across the world that the political manifestation of “democracy is [not] the only viable path to prosperity and security, while encouraging more authoritarian approaches to governance.”¹⁶

Even governments promoting liberal democratic values can effectively use sportswashing to cover up aspects that run contrary to a fair and equal society. For example, the 1996 Olympic games set in Atlanta, Georgia was notorious for the methods employed to displace the houseless population. The city of Atlanta issued one-way tickets to the poorest residents and made them sign agreements not to return. Similarly, there are reports of the houseless and migrants being evicted ahead of the Paris games.¹⁷

Essentially the Olympics and other mega-sporting events confer legitimacy to the host nation, the participating athletes, and the nations they represent— even if the IOC president claims otherwise. The United States and its allies need to collaboratively

develop coherent proactive strategies to promote their own soft power and defensive strategies to counter the narrative set in place by authoritarian hosts.

Future Opportunities for Sports Diplomacy

Starting this summer, the U.S. and its allies will host the next four Olympics—Italy 2026, U.S. 2028, Canada 2030, Australia 2032—with the likelihood of the winter 2034 games being hosted in the U.S. by Salt Lake City again. The next decade will

