

Politicisation of Sports – Athletes, Anthems and Agenda

Ms. Harshaa S

5th Year, B.A.;LL.B.(Hons.), Sastra Deemed To Be University

Abstract

Sport is often considered apolitical but this paper argues that framing is political. The paper follows the evolution of sport from soft power projection, to identity-building at the domestic level, and it focuses on the asymmetrical use of the term “sportswashing” which is almost exclusively applied to non-Western hosts such as Qatar, but not to comparable conduct by Western states, exemplified through the 2026 FIFA World Cup, which is relabelled “sports diplomacy”. A parallel debate, invoking Anderson’s notion of ‘imagined communities’, differentiates postcolonial sporting pride from sportswashing and cases of individual athletes (e.g. Djokovic) inadvertently reshaping national image. The paper concludes that the political use of sport is not the problem per se, it is the selective willingness to name it as political that is.

Keywords: Sports, Sports Diplomacy, Sportswashing, national identity, Politicisation.

Introduction

The world is a tapestry woven from countless cultural, political and historical threads, where each nation is distinct and each society is shaped by its own story. Yet, when whistle blows and stadium lights come on, those threads seem to intertwine. Billions tune in to the same matches, cheer in unison, and celebrate moments of victory that transcend geographical borders. Sports has thus been a shared language which brought the humanity together through medals, trophies and records rather than diplomacy or debate.

But beneath this image of a paragon of unity lies a more intricate pattern. International sporting events are not merely athletic contests; they are used as stages where the nations impose identity, prestige and power into the global fabric. Flags, anthems and victories become symbols of national strength and legitimacy. From diplomatic boycotts to bidding wars for international events, from athletes’ activism to symbolic gestures on the podium, sport increasingly mirrors the geopolitical tensions it seeks to separate itself from. This article explores how sports have evolved into a subtle yet influential instrument of geopolitics where the soft power is threaded through competition, rivalries are carefully stitched into spectacle and pursuit of medals are no longer individual aspiration but a pursuit of national interest.

What does politicisation of Sports mean?

To understand what politicisation of sport means in a global sense, it is essential to understand what the term “Geopolitics” means. The term *geopolitik* was coined by the Swedish political scientist Rudolf Kjellen in the early 20th century to describe how geography shapes power, behaviour and strategic decisions of states. According to Kjellen, the state was not merely a legal or political entity rather he viewed it as a living organism whose survival and growth depended on territory, resources and population. This was influenced by Friedrich Ratzel’s Lebensraum theory and Kjeller argued that nations physical

environment profoundly influences in global policy and ambitions. To put it simply, he had believed that geography cannot be separated from politics.

Over time scholars recognised that geography alone cannot describe power dynamics. While early thinkers like Mackinder, Mahan and Spykman focused on territory and physical location, modern geopolitics expanded to include various other forces that shape how the state compete, cooperate and project their power. Such forces include trade routes, energy supply, technology, culture and the topic of discussion – GLOBAL SPORT.

While sport has always been looked at as a religion that unites people and transcends politics, it can never be denied that sports have always been political. Pierre de Coubertin, the founder of the modern Olympic games, strongly promoted neutrality, international friendship, peace and fair play as one of the major principles of Olympism¹. Yet, the term neutrality itself carries its political assumptions. The values promoted by Olympics such as meritocracy, fair competition, equality and peaceful rivalry between nations are reflective of the Western Liberalism movement that shaped late 19th and early 20th century Europe. Another instance where sports was considered separate from politics was Avery Brundage's argument that "Politics has no place in Sport" and how he opposed political protests and boycotts². The core paradox of that statement was that, while claiming neutrality, Brundage opposed the exclusion of South African team from the Olympics despite its Apartheid policies – revealing that his "neutrality" was itself a political choice. This dictum was further contradicted when he opposed the boycott of Berlin Olympics, despite it being a very obvious Nazi Propaganda.

It can be inferred from the above instances that attempting to keep politics out of the sports is itself an inherently political act.

War minus the shooting – An Orwellian Assertion

Another notable figure who had commented on politicisation of sports, especially international events was George Orwell. The author who is known for his extensive use of metaphors and analogies, wrote in his "The Sporting Spirit" essay that international sporting events are "war minus the shooting"³. He does not hide his contempt for using sport as a metaphor for creating goodwill between international sides saying that sport was never intended to create friendship and were considered as an outlet to release physical strength or sadistic impulses⁴. For someone synonymous with metaphors and analogies, this was a strikingly political stance.

Orwell questioned the fair play of the game, because when the strong feelings of rivalry are aroused, he believed that notion playing the games according to rules always vanishes. He further states that people want to see one side on top and other side humiliated and they forget that victory gained through cheating or through the intervention of the crowd is meaningless. According to him, the crowd is where the nationalism is at its rawest. The essay was never just about any one sport in particular. It was Orwell using sport as a lens to examine a larger picture – how nationalism dehumanises crowds and how they turn into mobs and how something as leisure as cricket can be weaponised by the state. Despite being written in 1945, it reads almost as a prophecy for everything that followed.

¹ Müller, N. (n.d.). Olympism. Comité International Pierre de Coubertin. Retrieved July 5, 2026, from <https://www.coubertin.org/pierre-de-coubertin/olympism/>

² Guttmann, A. (1984). The games must go on: Avery Brundage and the Olympic movement. Columbia University Press.

³ Beck, Peter J. (2013). 'War Minus the Shooting': George Orwell on International Sport and the Olympics. Sport in History. 33. 10.1080/17460263.2012.761150.

⁴ Id

The dictum was excellent in describing the spectator behaviour but the stance on the players behaviour can be agreed to be taken with a pinch of salt. Crowds can be ugly but that does not mean the sport itself descends into lawlessness. The overstating of his case to make a point cannot dismiss the fact that, at a geopolitical level, this argument still holds up. Therefore, one could conclude that Orwell was describing a tendency which is worth taking seriously, at the same time not a verdict to accept in whole.

Sport as a Political Instrument

The preceding headings establishes that sports are inherently political, the question that follows is not *whether* sport is used as an instrument of statecraft, but *how* and by *whom*. The instrumentalization of sport operates across various overlapping dimensions – soft power, diplomatic signalling, domestic legitimisation, and ideological contestation – each of which reveals that stadium is as much a stage of politics as the parliament.

1. Soft Power in Sports

The term soft power was developed by Joseph Nye, which refers to the ability of a state to influence the preferences of others through attraction rather than coercion or without use of force⁵. Soft power according to Nye rests on the contextual intelligence of political leaders and policymakers to firstly identify what attract the target audiences and then match such forms of attraction to soft power resources such as ‘appealing’ cultures, innovative and forward thinking ideas, values and policies⁶. Sports is one of the potent tools for soft power. As per Daya Thussu, “Sports has always been a form of soft power in terms of promoting a national brand or identity, and which itself has been used by nations to promote their products and cultures. A nation that hosts the Olympics, wins the World Cup or dominates a particular discipline occupies global attention and generates association of competence, vitality and cultural confidence that directly translate as diplomatic capital.

The Soviet Union understood this with precision as its state sponsored athletic programme was designed not merely to produce champions but to demonstrate the superiority of Socialism over Western liberal capitalism. Every gold medal in either favour was regarded as point towards the ideological framework. Therefore, the Cold War Olympics became not just athletic events but political competitions conducted through athletic means.

The above example explains how Olympics serve as the most institutionalised vehicle for sport-as-brand. Each iteration of the Olympic Games strives to market the event as a unique cultural product capable of instigating narratives and discourses. The result is that host nation does not merely organise an athletic event- it displays a global impression of itself with an audience and platform and a moment of attention which no diplomatic summit can replicate⁷. Tokyo’s choice in 1964 of Yoshinori Sakai (born in Hiroshima on the day of the atomic bombing) as a torchbearer was a declaration of national rebirth⁸.

⁵ Nye, J. S. (2008). Public diplomacy and soft power. ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 616(1), 94–109. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716207311699>

⁶ Nye, J. S. (2011). Power and foreign policy. Journal of Political Power, 4(1), 9–24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2158379X.2011.555960>

⁷ Lopez-Mugica, J., Whyke, T. W., White, A., & Dean, L. (2024). The fluidity of soft power in YouTube's broadcast of the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympic Games. Global Media and Communication, 20(4), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17427665241289741>

⁸ New York Times. (1964, August 23). Boy born on day A-bomb fell chosen to light Olympic flame. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/1964/08/23/archives/boy-born-on-day-abomb-fell-chosen-to-light-olympic-flame.html>

The first Olympics to conduct an opening ceremony on a scale like today's was the 1936 Berlin Games – the infamous Hitler's Olympics. Nazi Germany invested heavily in the games, transforming them into a global spectacle designed to project an image of strong and disciplined nation and achievements were not merely individual achievements but evidence of nation's superiority.

The most financially intensive contemporary example of Thussu's proposition is the Gulf states systematic investment in global football. Saudi Arabia's state-run oil and gas conglomerate Aramco became FIFA's major worldwide partner under a deal until 2027 which includes sponsorship rights for 2026 FIFA World Cup and the nation is in pole position to host football world cups in 2034 and 2035. The nation has also spent billions of dollars across tennis, boxing, Formula 1, golf and professional wrestling. Such multi-faceted investments across sports are aimed at improving the global image, shaping narratives of modernisation, build international partnerships and enhance their standing in international community.

2. Sportswashing and Sports diplomacy

Sportswashing refers to the use of an athletic event by an individual or a government, a corporation or another group to promote the individual's or group reputation, amid controversy or scandal. The term was first coined in 2015 in describing Azerbaijan's use of European Games to divert the attention from the human rights concerns in the country⁹. Since then, various accusations of sportswashing have been lodged against events hosted by authoritarian governments such as Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics which was held to "distract" the Chinese Communist Party's abuse of Uyghurs¹⁰ and Qatar's FIFA World Cup 2022 which was declared a blatant attempt to distract international attention from its exploitation and abuse of migrants¹¹. Historians even extended the term to describe the propaganda driven 1936 Berlin Games. However, the concept itself has come under scrutiny. Various authors questioned how the concept only targeted authoritarian governments whereas human rights violations happen daily in Western Democracies. When western democratic countries promote similar political uses of sport, these were understood as sports diplomacy. Therefore, the term sportswashing remains a selectively used categorisation¹².

The term "sportswashing" has almost been exclusively applied to non-Western, illiberal or Gulf-state actors, while functionally identical practices by Western powers get relabelled as "sports diplomacy". This is clearly explained in an article by David Rowe titled "Our Sports Diplomacy, Your Sportswashing: Western Liberal Rhetoric and Memory Loss."¹³ It argues that the term sportswashing emerged as a response to rising prominence of illiberal states like China, Russia, Saudi Arabia and Qatar in global sport and such confining reflects imperial-colonial mindset. It is taken one step further by Jules Boykoff in *Sociology of Sport Journal* which makes a point more expressively – sportswashing is not only the domain of autocrats but can occur in democracies where they serve as distraction from homelessness, hyper-policing and gentrification¹⁴.

⁹ Frommer, F. (2024, August 1). sportswashing. Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/money/sportswashing>

¹⁰ Christopher, John & Islam, Md. (2025). The Beijing Winter Olympics (2022) as a Case of State-Led Sportswashing.

¹¹ Ben Labidi, I., & Al Zo'by, M. A. (2025). "Not just a game": Power, politics, and media coverage of Qatar's World Cup 2022. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 28(4), 831-851.

¹² Costa, R., & Moriconi, M. (2024). Current political uses of sport revised: beyond public diplomacy and sportswashing. *Frontiers in sports and active living*, 6, 1316732. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fspor.2024.1316732>

¹³ Rowe, D. (2026). Our Sports Diplomacy, Your Sportswashing: Western Liberal Rhetoric and Memory Loss. In: English, P., Ramon, X. (eds) *Sportswashing*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-17292-1_2

¹⁴ Boykoff, J. (2022). Toward a Theory of Sportswashing: Mega-Events, Soft Power, and Political Conflict. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 39(4), 342-351. Retrieved Jul 2, 2026, from <https://doi.org/10.1123/ssj.2022-0095>

2026 FIFA World Cup- Manifestation of Democratic Sportswashing

The 2026 edition of the football World Cup, in the words of the FIFA President Gianni Infantino, has been credited to as the “greatest even that mankind has even seen”. With an expanded format of 48 teams playing across 3 host countries – USA, Canada and Mexico, the magnitude of the tournament is huge, but that does not automatically lead to its “greatness”. The best word for describing the word would be a Paradox. While it strives to use the universal love that exists for the sport to celebrate global harmony, it cannot be overlooked how it has been used as instrument to improve host countries reputations, distract from controversy and project a positive façade. The World Cup reached the North American coast amid a geopolitical crisis regarding the foreign affairs and immigration policies of President Donald Trump. The travel ban imposed on 39 countries served as barriers for players, supporters and officials from entering and celebrating such universal language. One of such glaring examples is the treatment of Iran’s National Football team who were ordered to leave US immediately after their opening game and base camp in Mexico. FIFA has claimed that immigration enforcement is outside the jurisdiction of the organisation whereas the host city agreements require the governments to guarantee a non-discriminatory environment for players and officials.¹⁵ Another deviation from this condition was how Somalian Referee Omar Artan was denied entry into the country and crushed his dreams of becoming the first of his nationality to officiate the World Cup. The double standards of FIFA are clearly visible as in the past, the organisation stripped Indonesia from its hosting of the U-20 World Cup in 2023 due to its refusal to allow participation of Israel¹⁶.

These double standards raise the question – Does Sportswashing become “internal affairs” when the West is concerned? The main contention of the author is how Qatar was put into trial for its human rights concerns, corruption, migrant labour and fairly so, but same reckoning was not faced by the United States. The Western superpower had abducted the President of another country, is waging war against another country, contributes to the war in Gaza. The article does not argue that Qatar’s labour regime was beyond reproach. The Kafala system which had documented deaths of migrant workers, restriction on LGBTQ+ were legitimate concerns and such scrutiny was indeed necessary. Western response to it was not just journalistic but institutional. French cities including Paris, Marseille, Lille, Strasbourg, and Bordeaux refused to host public fan zones or big-screen broadcasts, citing human rights concerns. Denmark wore toned-down kits, including a black jersey described as mourning for migrant workers who died in Qatar. German fans hung #BoycottQatar2022 banners in stadiums. European lawmakers wore OneLove armbands in Parliament as they adopted resolutions criticising Qatar’s human rights record. But the same media has remained silent on Trump administration’s immigration and anti-human rights activities. Human Rights Watch documented the arrest and transfer to Immigration and Customs Enforcement agent’s on July 13, 2025 a non-US citizen who was attending the tournament with his children. HRW also criticized FIFA for awarding President Trump the first-ever FIFA Peace Prize in December 2025, calling it a sportswashing exercise. The organization said all but one of the World Cup host city committees have failed to present the human rights action plans FIFA promised, or have produced plans that ignore key

¹⁵ Associated Press. (2026, June 24). US eases restrictions on Iranian national football team allowing travel two days before next match. *Euronews*. <https://www.euronews.com/2026/06/24/us-eases-restrictions-on-iranian-national-football-team-allowing-travel-two-days-before-ne>

¹⁶ FIFA stripped Indonesia from hosting the U-20 World Cup. What happens next? (2023, April 7). *TIME*. <https://time.com/6269303/indonesia-fifa-u20-world-cup-impacts/>

threats, including harsh immigration enforcement and threats to press freedom¹⁷. The 2026 World Cup, in this light, does not merely illustrate the double standard that this article has traced through the Orientalist framing of Sportswashing.

3. Sports as an instrument of National Identity

While literatures on soft power treats sports as an instrument deployed outwards towards foreign policies, investors, and diplomatic audiences. But there is also an inward facing dimension to it, one which constructs the opinion and image on how a nation's feeling of a community. Before a state can export a national image, it must first have manufactured one domestically¹⁸.

Benedict Anderson's concept of the nation as an "imagined community" is provided a literal expression in sports. According to him, nations are not ancient communities united by history, blood, language, culture or territory but rather a modern imagination of state's population as a result of nationalism. A community was imagined as a deep and horizontal fraternity that united all of its members across age, class, colour, gender and race and these people would never actually meet¹⁹. Sports reproduces it perfectly because a match is watched simultaneously by millions of strangers the same emotions and belonging without being in proximity. The discussion of print capitalism explains how when a reader consumes a bundle of news items with no intrinsic connection to another reader but the act itself creates an "extraordinary mass ceremony" uniting them all. The newspaper analogy replaced by broadcasting in sports and the analogy still works.

Eric Hobsbawm observes that imagined community of millions seems more real when embodied in eleven named individuals wearing a nation's colours²⁰. Some post-imperial and post-colonial research sports is regarded as the most permitted arena for nationalist sentiment which would be political elsewhere and most relevant example would be a cricket match between India and Pakistan where a sporting competition often carries the emotional weight of historical conflict, national identity, and political rivalry, making the match far more than a contest over runs and wickets. Another citable reference is the football relationship between Argentina and England which carries the unresolved political charge of the Falklands conflict.²¹

For a newly independent state, a sporting victory over the former colonial power carried beyond the scoreline, properly illustrated in C.L.R. James's *Beyond a Boundary*²² on West Indian cricket's dismantling English batting lineups or African nations World Cup appearances as assertions of sovereignty on a stage the colonizer once monopolized. It is important to distinguish post-colonial sporting pride and sportswashing both of which involve using sports to manage a nation's image. When a formerly colonized country celebrates success, it is referred as an answer to historical insult whereas when a wealthy state hosts a mega event to improve its reputation, it is trying to replace a bad reputation with new, shinier one.

¹⁷ Worden, M. (2026, June 9). The world is worried about the World Cup. *Forbes*. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/minkyworden/2026/06/09/the-world-is-worried-about-the-world-cup/>

¹⁸ Porter, Dilwyn, 'Sport and National Identity', in Robert Edelman, and Wayne Wilson (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Sports History*, Oxford Handbooks (2017; online edn, Oxford Academic, 10 May 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199858910.013.33>, accessed 5 July 2026.

¹⁹ Anderson, B. (2006). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (Rev. ed.). Verso. (Original work published 1983)

²⁰ Hobsbawm, E. J. (1990). *Nations and nationalism since 1780: Programme, myth, reality*. Cambridge University Press.

²¹ Alabarces, P., Tomlinson, A., & Young, C. (2001). Argentina versus England at the France '98 World Cup: Narratives of nation and the mythologizing of the popular. *Media, Culture & Society*, 23(5), 547–566.

²² James, C. L. R. (1963). *Beyond a boundary*. Hutchinson.

The above examples discuss on topics of identity assertion and purchased image. There is another niche example where an individual's sports success has led to an unintentional, individually generated identity assertion that the nation subsequently claims as its own. The Serbian tennis player Novak Djokovic's success is often read as alternative image of Serbia to the one shaped by the wars of the late twentieth century, given that Serbia lacks the infrastructure typically associated with elite tennis talent. Therefore, even though the initial shift in the reputation was unplanned, the afterlife of that success often gets folded into ordinary state driven identity work²³.

Therefore, it can be concluded that state's power to build national identity cuts both ways. At its best, it unites divided societies, turns individual achievement into collective pride, and even reshapes how the world sees a country. At its worst, the same emotional pull curdles into hooliganism, racial hostility, or state manipulation. What matters is which tendency a society and institution choose to nurture – because the identity will keep shaping national identity regardless.

Conclusion

This paper set out to answer not whether sport is political which is a premise it dispensed with early, given that even the loudest claims to neutrality, from Coubertin's Olympism to Brundage's dictum, reveal themselves as political positions on inspection - but how, and by whom, that political power gets deployed, and just as importantly, whose deployment of it gets named as such. Sport's soft power function, from the Soviet Union's Cold War medal count to the Gulf states' contemporary investment across football, tennis, boxing, and motorsport, shows a consistent pattern: nations use athletic success and hosting rights to manufacture attraction and translate it into diplomatic capital, precisely as Nye's prediction. What this paper has tried to isolate, however, is not the existence of that instrumentalization but its uneven naming. "Sportswashing" was coined to describe Azerbaijan's 2015 European Games and has since attached itself almost exclusively to non-Western and illiberal hosts whereas functionally comparable practices by Western democratic states are absorbed into the more forgiving vocabulary of "sports diplomacy." The 2026 World Cup makes this asymmetry difficult to ignore: a tournament unfolding against a backdrop of travel bans, an expelled national team, a denied match official, and a Peace Prize awarded to a sitting president under active human rights criticism has drawn a fraction of the institutional and journalistic scrutiny that Qatar 2022 faced for comparable concerns.

This asymmetry of scrutiny operates alongside, but should not be confused with, a second and analytically distinct claim developed in this paper's discussion of national identity: that sport's power to construct belonging domestically through Anderson's imagined communities, reproduced almost literally in the synchronized, broadcast experience of a match. What holds both halves of the argument together is a single observation: sport's political charge is constant, but the willingness to name it as diplomacy or as washing, as pride or as propaganda tracks the geopolitical position of the actor doing the naming rather than the conduct itself. An honest account of sport as a political instrument must hold this asymmetry in view, rather than treating either sport's neutrality or the fairness of its critics as a given.

²³ Tomić, I. (2023). Sport and national identity. *South Eastern European Journal of Communication*, 5(2), 97–103. <https://doi.org/10.47960/2712-0457.2.5.97>