

## **The Impact of Sport on Diplomacy between America and China since the Nixon-era**

This essay will argue that, due to sport's ability to provide common ground to even the most disparate relationships and its capacity in an age of globalization to increase mutual understanding between two peoples, sport has had a profound impact on diplomacy between America and China since the Nixon-era. Moreover, this essay further argues that the nature of sport's impact has progressively become more adverse as it incubates an identity battle for superiority, shifting from being an enabler to an impediment of diplomacy. Following a word on methodology and definitions, the first part of this essay establishes the intrinsic relationship between sport and diplomacy. The second part explores the common ground established by ping-pong and how this instigated a whirlwind transformation in the Sino-American partnership between 1971-85. Part three surveys the growth of private modes of sports diplomacy between 1985 and 2005, before part four discusses a darker side to sports diplomacy emerging from an increasingly competitive relationship from 2005 onwards.

### **Introduction**

Theoretically, this essay utilises a constructivist lens. Constructivism "focuses upon ideational factors rather than... material conditions" (Ogden 2013, 248) and therefore primarily looks at identity, values, and interactions (Fierke 2016; Hopf 1998). Compared to other theories, constructivism provides the most robust framework for this essay because it is best placed to analyse the social dimensions central to sport and the person-to-person interactions focal to diplomacy. For instance, sport often constitutes an expression of collective identity (Jackson and Haigh 2008, 351; Orwell 1945) and both it and diplomacy are by default a series of interactions. Consequently, due to constructivism's aptness as an analytical framework, a case-study orientated methodology is applied.

Before preceding further, it will be fruitful to define key concepts employed by this essay. Firstly, diplomacy "is the management of international relations" (Hong and Xiaozheng 2002, 319). It is the way in which two separate groups communicate, negotiate and co-operate to maintain cordial relations while simultaneously pursuing their respective interests (Sharp 2003, 858 quoted by Murray 2019, 22; Murray and Pigman 2014). Traditionally, professional diplomats have held a "monopoly" (Murray 2012, 578) over diplomacy, however, in an age of globalisation, non-state actors are progressively entering the fore (Hocking 2004; Levermore and Budd 2004; Jackson and Haigh 2008; Ramsay 2006). As such, this essay works from the foundation that both state and non-state actors share the application of diplomacy and consequently aims to assess the impact of sport on both diplomatic practitioners.

Secondly, the United Nations defines sport as "all forms of physical activity that contribute to physical fitness, mental well-being and social interaction" (quoted by Murray 2019, 38). Therefore, the fusion of sport and diplomacy constitutes a third central definition –sports diplomacy. This is the utilisation of sport "to engage, inform, and create a favourable image amongst foreign public" (Murray 2012, 581). Notably, sports diplomacy does not target Presidents and Ambassadors; rather, it is a soft power tool which targets general publics (Murray 2019, 96; Abdi et al 2018; Shearer 2014). It exploits the universal appeal of sport to communicate a message and simultaneously further the interest of the practitioner.

## **Sports Diplomacy: An Intrinsic Relationship**

Despite the normative aspirations of some that the triad of sports, politics and diplomacy “should not mix” (Qingmin 2013, 213; Orwell 1945), evidence shows that they intrinsically intersect (Murray 2012; Zeiler 2014; Qingmin 2013; Gomez 2016; Murray 2019). The use of football to facilitate high-level meetings between Turkey and Armenia, the playing of cricket to ease tensions between India and Pakistan, and Nelson Mandela’s appearance at the 1995 Rugby World Cup are only three examples of sports diplomacy in action (Murray and Pigman 2014; Murray 2019). Indeed, such is the degree of interaction between the two fields that “sport could be considered to be the continuation of politics by other means” (Gomez 2016, 170 paraphrasing von Clausewitz, 2008).

The answer as to why these seemingly unrelated fields frequently overlap relates to sport’s commonality for peoples from every part of the world (Johns 2014; Murray 2019; Shearer 2014). From Seattle to Melbourne, from Seoul to Buenos Aires, people play and consume sport in a similar, if not identical, manner. Whether or not two peoples share a political or economic belief is irrelevant when it comes to sport because it has the rare capacity to form cross-cultural bonds inside its own bubble. As Murray (2019) notes, sport is a “universal language” (41) which everyone speaks and understands. On this basis, one can hold the *aspiration* that sports and diplomacy *should* not mix, but the facts are unmistakable; they are intrinsically inter-related.

## **Sport and Rapprochement**

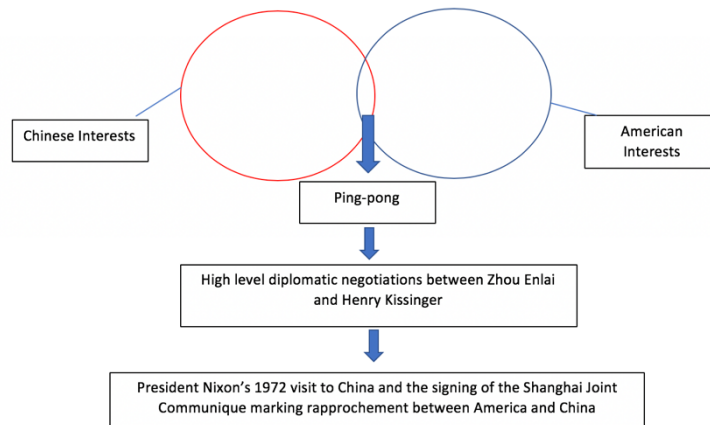
Before April 1971, when the US ping-pong team travelled to China for a series of exhibition matches, there had been no direct diplomatic contact between the governments of the United States and the People’s Republic of China since the latter’s formation in 1949 (Kissinger 1994, 719). Despite 136 meetings about a possible formal diplomatic meeting during the preceding 16 years (FRUSA 1971, Document 139), nothing came to fruition. However, by the late 1960s, geopolitical conditions were shifting to accommodate Sino-American cooperation (Carter and Sugden 2011).

Dramatically escalating tensions with the USSR compounded China’s geopolitical isolation and its fear of encirclement (Kissinger 2012; Allison 2017) while simultaneously the Cold War battle between the US and the USSR encouraged the Western superpower to explore opportunities to out-manoeuvre its rival (MacLaughlin and Gao 2015, 336). Such was the American appetite for reconciliation that President Nixon and National Security Advisor Kissinger strategized a three-group implementation plan that would progressively, yet cautiously, realign the two countries (FRUSA 1971, Document 111). But despite a clear mutual appetite to reconcile, neither side braved the first hurdle.

Enter ping-pong. Sport offered a “low-risk, low-cost [yet] high profile” (Keech and Houlihan 1999, 109 quoted by Murray 2019, 73) means of establishing pivotal common ground and enable the first hurdle to be cleared. Ping-pong was the grease which serviced the rusty diplomatic machinery back to action. That is not to argue that ping-pong magically solved the problems which had previously prevented diplomatic relations; in fact, they most certainly

remained. Rather, it is to argue that ping-pong, through its universal appeal, opened the door to the diplomatic institutions which were then able to overcome the challenges facing the Sino-American relationship (see diagram 1).

*Diagram 1 – The common bond formed by ping-pong and its subsequent facilitation of diplomacy (Author’s own).*



For example, the first major “butterfly effect” (Hong and Sun 2000, 430) occurred on April 21 1971, a day after the American ping-pong team left China, in the form of a Chinese invitation for a senior US official to travel to China to engage in diplomatic negotiations (FRUSA 1971, Document 118). By July 9<sup>th</sup>, Kissinger was in Beijing doing just that, laying the groundwork for Nixon’s visit and negotiating a joint communique (FRUSA 1971, Document 139). In this regard, there is a direct connection between ping-pong, Nixon’s visit and rapprochement. Evidently, ping-pong accelerated the reconciliation far and beyond what strategists from both sides thought possible because of the common ground it established. Therefore, the impact of sport on diplomacy between America and China in this particular example can only be described as monumental. Simply put, “sport succeeded where classic diplomacy failed” (Murray 2019, 75).

A great deal of ping-pong diplomacy’s success stemmed from the perceptions that both states had for the sport and its effect on their wider political self-identities. On the one hand, ping-pong was China’s national sport (Griffin 2014; MacLaughlin and Gao 2015, 336; Salisbury 1971, 3); they had been world champions numerous times and therefore ping-pong was a vehicle through which the Chinese could assert their superiority (Hong 2008; Hong and Zhouxiang 2012). On the other hand, to the American domestic audience ping-pong was more of a “basement hobby than a sport” (MacLaughlin and Gao 2015, 336; Carter and Sugden 2011). Subsequently, ping-pong uniquely allowed both countries to interact while simultaneously reflecting their competing national identities: China by depicting itself superior to America, and America by being a strong world leader whose integrity would not be degraded by a ping-pong defeat. In this regard, the very use of ping-pong, as opposed to other sports, was a pivotal factor in rapprochement.

Having sung ping-pong’s praises for its profound impact on reinstating Sino-American diplomacy, there are, however, possible objections to this argument. The most pertinent of which is the influence of geopolitics. Yes, ping-pong was an important facilitator, but as the above argument itself outlines, the triangular geopolitical conditions between China and the

two superpowers was a prerequisite; the ping-pong invitation would not have been extended were it not for geopolitical calculations. On this basis, it was arguably geopolitics as opposed to sports diplomacy which acted as the true instigator.

This essay fully acknowledges the importance of geopolitics; the core desire from both sides to reconcile in light of geopolitical calculations was indeed significant. However, Sino-Soviet tensions had been encouraging a Sino-American marriage since the early 1960s (Kissinger 2012, 172), a marriage which was “urgent” (Hong and Xiaozheng 2002, 333) by 1968. This begs the question as to why both sides waited until 1971 to approach one another if such swiftness was geopolitically necessitated? The answer is that, to evoke diagram 1, they could not find common ground through which to instigate a mutually politically acceptable first meeting. In this regard, geopolitics undoubtedly contributed to rapprochement but, in contrast to sport, it did not directly lead to tangible changes to diplomatic relations. Therefore, it must be concluded that sport had a profound impact on diplomacy between America and China in this first period of study.

### **The Role of the NBA**

The late 1970s and early 1980s saw sport consolidate the newly reinstated Sino-American relationship. The joint boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics— despite it being China’s first opportunity to compete since 1952 – symbolised unity (Hao and Hunt 2019, 859), the US inviting China to open the Olympic Village at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics signified friendship (Brownell 2015, 132), and the Washington Bullets basketball team’s visit to China in 1979 (Keeler and Nauright 2005, 204) proved a gateway to a new form of sports diplomacy.

The latter half of the 1980s was a period of seismic changes in international relations instigated by the acceleration of globalisation with sport being one of many industries transformed by this process (Huang 2013; Pu 2016; Redeker 2008). Consequently, sports leagues officials and players were fast becoming diplomats in their own right, their actions increasingly international in scope and intersecting with foreign policy (Jackson and Haigh 2008, 352). While events in Tiananmen Square and the Taiwan Straits placed significant pressures on the governmental-level Sino-American relationship (Hathaway 2003, 163), the new sports diplomacy practitioners, particularly the National Basketball Association (NBA), shifted the utilisation of sports diplomacy to target the general publics and through this, further mutual understanding.

While PLA tanks motored through Tiananmen Square in 1989, that same year, NBA commissioner David Stern travelled to China to discuss the league’s expansion to the most populous country in the world (Pu 2016, 13). A year later, China’s premier TV station, CCTV, started broadcasting NBA games, a remarkable step for a station which had previously resisted Western culture (Huang 2013, 273). Even more extraordinarily, in a 1992 national poll of Chinese school children, asked who the greatest person of the twentieth century was, the top two responses were Premier Zhou Enlai and US basketball superstar Michael Jordan (Pu 2016, 13). Unquestionably, as this poll indicates, the NBA connected Chinese and American spectators on an inter-personal level and strongly contributed to the way each country was perceived by the other.

This depth of facilitating understanding was compounded in 2002 when Chinese basketball player Yao Ming was selected as the first pick of the NBA draft by the Houston Rockets. The seven-foot-six-inches centre became a household name, but despite his prowess on the court, his impact was even greater off the court (Wang 2004, 263). Yao became “a symbol of China’s turning from an inward-looking nation to an outward-looking nation” (Shearer 2014, 56 quoting President Bill Clinton), a medium through which US companies – including Visa, Reebok and Pepsi – could exploit commercial interests in China (Keeler and Nauright 2005, 203; Pu 2016) but above all, he became “both a product and producer” (Pu 2016, 1) of the Sino-American relationship. For many Americans, Yao was their snapshot of China, and equally for the Chinese, Yao offered a gateway to America. As Pu (2016) aptly puts it, Yao was a “mainstream cultural bridge where none existed before” (6).

What is evident from these examples is the cultural bonds which formed as a direct result of the NBA’s incursion into China. To revert to diagram 1, the continued interaction and exposure between the two publics through sport at a time when bilateral relations on a governmental level were strained by Tiananmen and Taiwan meant that the ‘new’ diplomacy offset the traditional mediums and, consequently, the two circles continued to further overlap. Although some might contend that the NBA’s motives centred on profits rather than improving bilateral relations (Thomas 2019; Sparvero et al 2008), the by-product of its inroads to China, whether it was intended or not, was to act as a fruitful access point to both peoples into the culture of the other and improve mutual understanding. As such, it is evident that sports diplomacy practiced by non-state actors like the NBA had a notable impact on Sino-American diplomatic relations between 1985-2005.

### **The Dark Side of Sports Diplomacy**

From 2005 onwards, sport has increasingly reflected government-level tensions and hampered Sino-American relations as opposed to cultivating them as it did previously. But regardless of the normative nature of the effect, the magnitude of the impact of sports on diplomacy remains noteworthy.

The 2008 Beijing Olympics was a culmination of China’s modernising process (Cornelissen 2010, 3016; Qingmin 2013), a reflection of its growing economic clout (Murray and Pigman 2014, 1103) and, more significantly, a moment where it re-emerged as a great power (Shen 2009, 95; Brownell 2009; Brownell 2013; Hong 2008; Hong and Zhouxiang 2012; Ogden 2013). Off the field, the “unprecedented display of spectacle, money and scale” (Cornelissen 2010, 3016) impressed the world and changed the international perception of China from the carnage of Tiananmen to the modernity of the Bird’s Nest Stadium (Shearer 2014, 55; Murray 2012). On the field, the fruits of the Ministry of Sport’s strategy to win gold medals (Hong 2008, 46) were reaped as China displaced the US from the top of the gold medal table for the first time since 1980.

The symbolism of China dethroning America is incredibly significant: it was, in many ways, the first time China directly challenged US hegemony, a pattern which would be repeated several times in multiple arenas over the following decade (Allison 2017). It also marked an emboldening of China’s national identity. China, through sporting success, became more confident in itself as a notable player in the international arena; as Brownell (2013) contends,

the 2008 Olympics allowed it to be incorporated “into the world system to a degree never seen before in human history” (1318). This outpour of confidence is best summarised by the International Olympic Committee President Jacques Rogge at the Opening Ceremony of the Beijing Olympics who asserted that China was the “host to the present and the gateway to the future” (*YouTube Olympic Channel*, 2019), a quote encompassing the bolstering Chinese identity of superiority through sport.

But, as previously noted in this essay, China has used sport as a reflection of its superiority before including its use of ping-pong during rapprochement. Why has this identity suddenly become problematic? The answer, simply, is that the broadness of that sporting identity now directly challenges the superiority complex to which the US has become accustomed. This is not just about a marginal game of ping-pong for the Americans anymore; it is about all forms of sport – from the Olympics to the NBA (Osno 2019) - and, by extension, the political perception of who is the world’s preeminent power. And although some might contest that sport has only a symbolic bearing on international politics, such symbolism holds significant substance to public perception, particularly given the global reach of sport. The majority of the general public do not have the capacity to compare both countries’ military capabilities and economic GDP figures, but when it comes to sport, everyone can deduce which country is stronger.

In this regard, the Beijing Olympics marked a point where sport stopped being a vehicle facilitating cooperation and became instead another arena in which the battle for superiority would ensue (Murray 2012, 584). It instigated a process which pitted two competing and incompatible identities (Morris 2012) against each other and, to evoke the diagram 1 once more, pushed each circle apart rather than together. Sport remains a commonality, but its purpose and use within diplomacy – both its traditional and new forms – is now to mirror the ever-competitive nature of government-level international politics. Therefore, because of its effect in intensifying the bilateral relationship, sport’s impact on diplomacy between America and China remains consequential although adverse in nature.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout the fifty years since the Nixon-era, sport has consistently proved to have had a consequential impact on diplomacy between America and China. Sport was pivotal in establishing common ground on which government-led rapprochement was built; incubated stronger mutual understanding and challenged misperceptions through the dissemination of American sporting culture to China thanks to non-state actors like the NBA; and contributed to a growing identity battle for international political superiority. However, despite the magnitude of sport’s impact enduring throughout, the nature of that impact steadily became more adverse reflecting a wider pattern in the Sino-American relationship. As sport’s centrality to society continues to grow through globalisation, its impact on the relationship between the world’s most powerful and most populous countries promises to remain a fruitful avenue of research. After all, to quote Nelson Mandela, “sport has the power to change the world” (Murray 2019, 2).

Word Count: 2990

### Appendix 1: A timeline of interactions

Date	Event
1958	People's Republic of China withdraws from IOC and all affiliated sporting federations except Table Tennis over the issue of Taiwan. Ping-pong becomes China's national sport after this.
April 1971	During the World Table Tennis Championships in Nagoya, Japan, the US team is invited by the Chinese to visit Beijing
April 10-20, 1971	The US Team spend 10 days in Beijing, the first group to do so in 20 years.
July 9-11, 1971	US National Security Advisor, Dr Henry Kissinger, visits Beijing and holds secret meetings with Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai. This lays the groundwork for President Nixon to visit China in 1972.
February 1972	President Nixon travels to China and meets Chairman Mao Zedong. On the 27 <sup>th</sup> of the month, the Shanghai Communique is signed by both countries signalling the rapprochement between the US and China.
April 1972	Chinese Table Tennis Team visits the US.
November 1972	President Nixon is re-elected as President of the United States.
January 1, 1979	Diplomatic ties between America and China reinstated and normalised.
1979	Deng Xiaoping, on a state visit to the US, is entertained by the Americans by jointly attending a basketball game.
1979	Olympic Formula established whereby PRC and ROC both agree to each other's position, thus allowing both to be readmitted to the IOC. This formula is then replicated within several other international organisations.
1979	The People's Republic of China takes its seat in the United Nations and its Security Council instead of the Republic of China's representatives.
Summer 1979	Washington Bullets (now Wizards) professional basketball team visit China and play two exhibition games against the Chinese national team.
January 1980	China participates in the Winter Olympic Games held at Lake Placid, New York, its first Olympic games since 1952.
Summer 1980	China joins the US in boycotting the Moscow Summer Olympics despite it being their first opportunity to compete in nearly 30 years.
September 1980	In their absence from the Olympics, both China and the US host alternative tournaments including a joint China-US Diving Invitational.
1982	Chinese tennis player Hu Na defects to the United States leading to the Chinese to cancel all sporting exchanges in 1982-83.
Summer 1984	China fully participates in the Los Angeles Olympic Games and several preparatory championships on US soil. Chinese athletes given preferential treatment by the Americans including raising the Olympic village flag.
1985	Chinese Sports Ministry publishes its first Olympic Strategy with the aim of winning more Olympic Medals.
1986	LA Dodgers baseball franchise host a team of Chinese baseball players in Los Angeles for coaching clinics.

June 1989	Tiananmen Square massacre and clampdown occurs in China provoking a strong response from the US which includes the imposition of economic sanctions.
1990	Beijing hosts the Asian Games which inspires them to use sport as an illustration of their growing economy
1990	Chinese Communist TV Channel broadcasts National Basketball Association (NBA) games for the first time. This was one of the first times where non-Chinese, Western culture was broadcasted on its channels.
1992	In a national poll of Chinese school children, Premier Zhou Enlai and US basketball icon Michael Jordan are voted as the greatest people of the twentieth century.
1993	US House of Representatives discuss HR188 which urged the USIOC to oppose China's bid to host the 2000 Olympic Games, a first sign of sport emerging as a competitive aspect of the bilateral relationship
1997	NBA stars David Robinson and Joe Smith host basketball clinics in China.
2001	NBA icon Kobe Bryant visits China and holds basketball clinics.
2001	China admitted to the World Trade Organisation.
2001	Having won the bid for the 2008 Olympic Games, China's government publishes a strategy for winning Olympic medals at those Olympics.
2002	Yao Ming is selected as the first pick in the NBA draft and signs with the Houston Rockets. During his 8-year-career with the Rockets, Yao would become one of the league's star including being chosen for the All-star game eight times.
2005	LeBron James and his sponsor, Nike, tour China promoting the company, the NBA and the sport of basketball.
2005	NBA China establishes the Junior NBA for teams based China.
November 2007	Yao Ming and Yi Jianlian, the two prominent Chinese stars in the NBA, come head-to-head for the first time drawing a staggering 200 million viewers in China alone.
Summer 2008	Beijing hosts the 2008 Olympic Games, watched by an estimated 70% of the world's population. In a highly successful games, China tops the Olympic Gold Medal table for the first time with 51 gold medals, dislodging the US from a position it had held in every Olympic game since 1980.

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