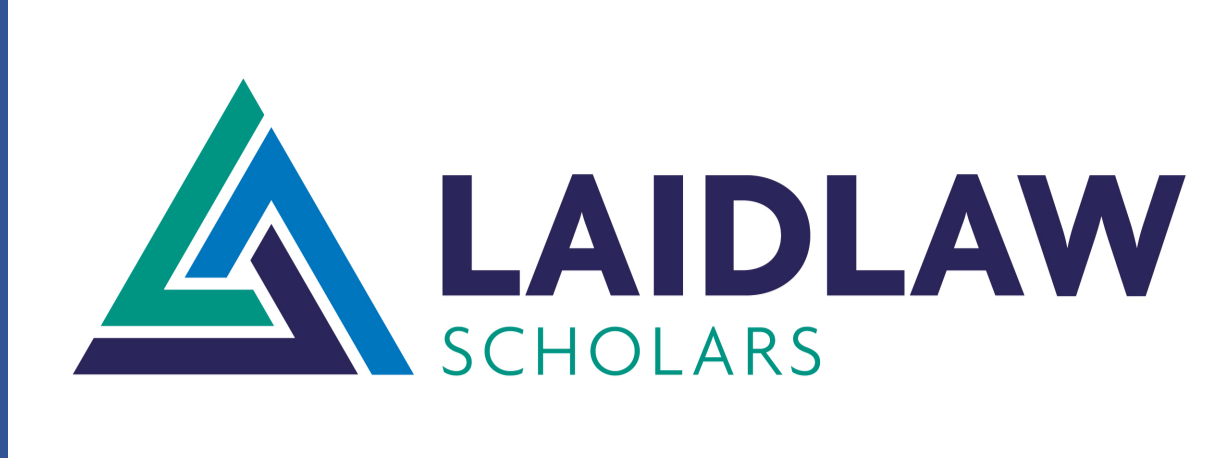
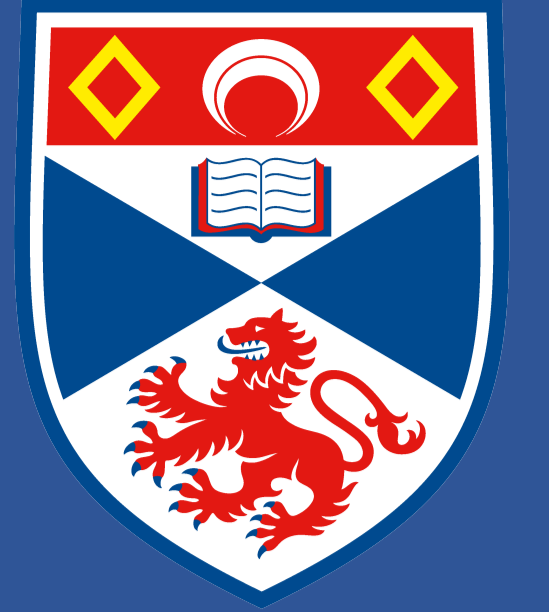


Ping Pong Diplomacy



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Sport, politics and diplomacy are not often regarded as related fields of study, however, the three intrinsically intersect. This research project analyses **the impact of sport on diplomacy between America and China since the Nixon-era**. It looks at a) the common ground established by ping-pong games and how this instigated a whirlwind diplomatic transformation, b) the growth of the NBA in China and its impact on mutual understanding between the Chinese and American publics, and c) the darker side to sports diplomacy in light of the 2008 Beijing Olympics.



Historical and Geopolitical Context

From 1949 to 1971 diplomatic relations between America and China were nonexistent. However, by the late 1960s, souring Sino-Soviet relations initiated a shift in the geopolitical balance of power between America, the Soviet Union and China promising to realign the Western superpower and the world's most populous state. But the first hurdle in reconciliation was proving considerably difficult to clear. This suddenly changed when the Chinese ping-pong team unexpectedly invited the American team to China to participate in a series of exhibition games.

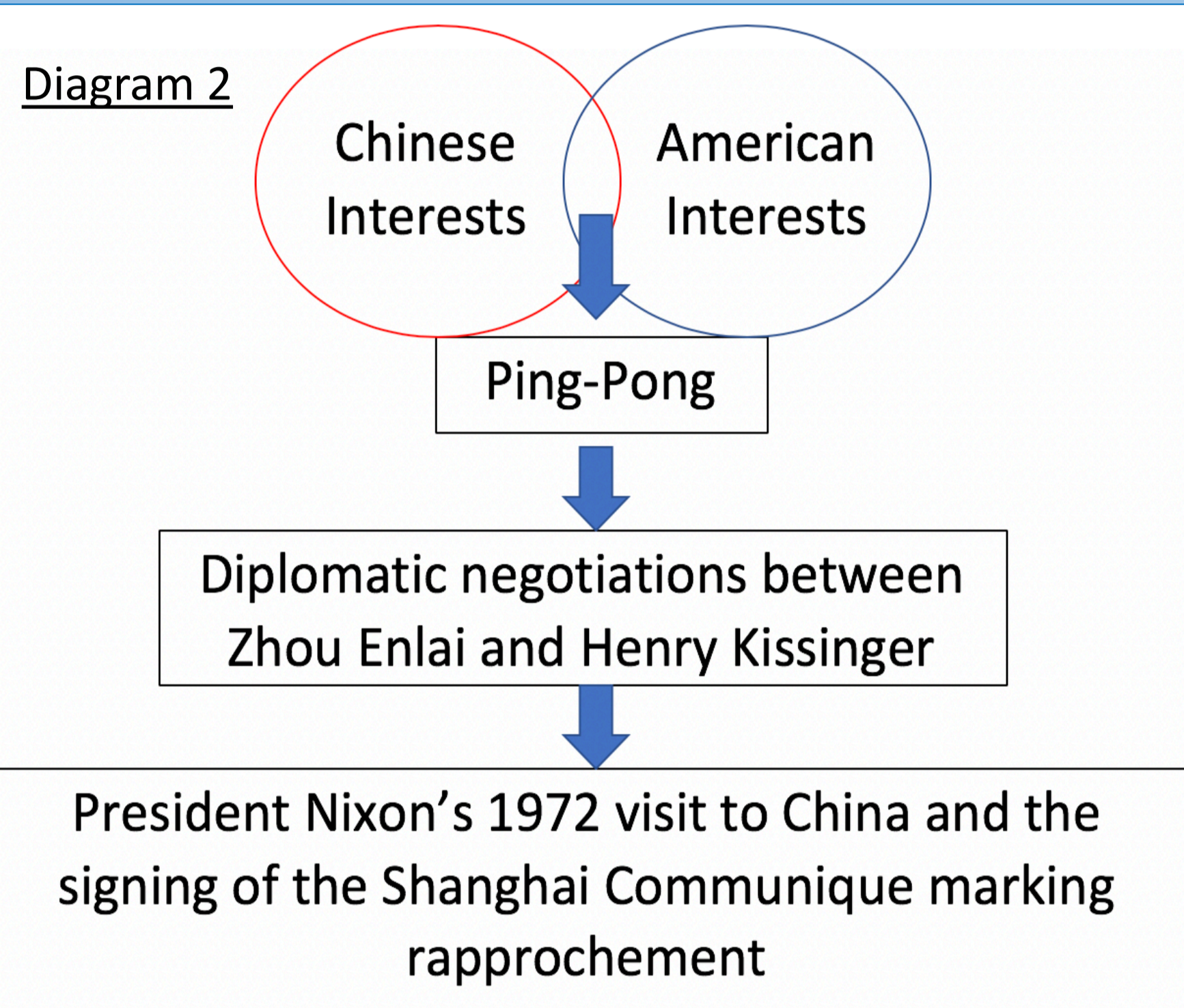
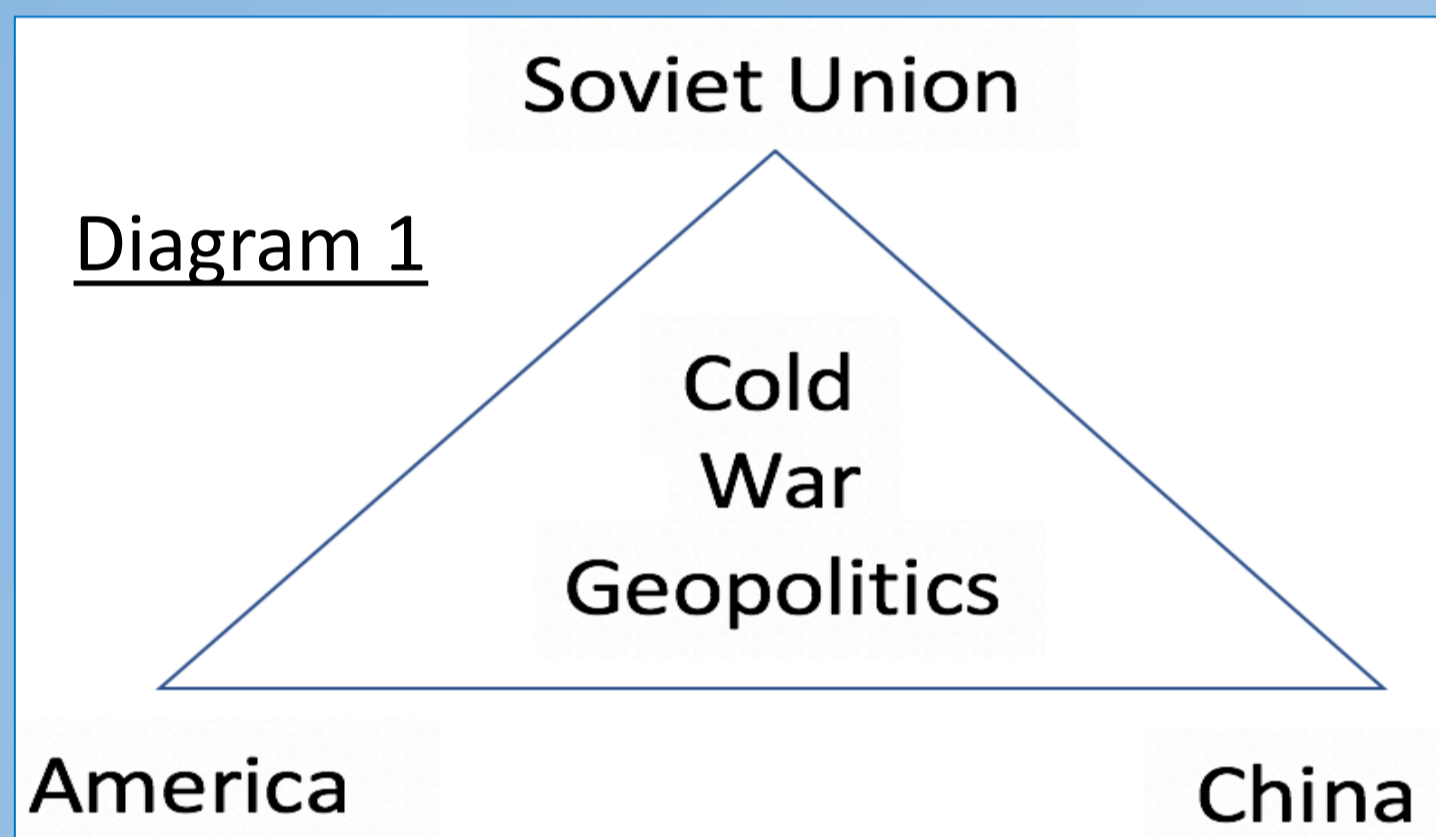


Diagram 2 depicts the common ground established by the ping-pong games and its subsequent impact on Sino-American diplomacy. It became the grease which serviced the diplomatic machinery back to action. It provided a common ground upon which further diplomatic contact could be built.

Why Did Sport Diplomacy Succeed?

Firstly, sport is a "universal language" (Murray 2019, 41) which everyone understands regardless of their politics. Referencing diagram 2, ping-pong united Chinese and American interests and thus was a mutually politically acceptable medium for a first meeting.

Secondly, for China, this was their national sport and a vehicle through which they could assert their dominance. Conversely, for the Americans, ping-pong held little prominence in daily life. Therefore, ping-pong allowed China to express its self-identity of superiority while the US didn't lose face in defeat because its domestic audience saw ping-pong as irrelevant.



President Nixon and Chairman Mao meet in 1972

Chinese ping-pong team invites their American counterparts to China



Washington Bullets Basketball team visits China



Olympics host America invites China to open the Olympic Village



Chinese basketball star Yao Ming signed by the Houston Rockets NBA franchise



Diplomatic row sparked by the NBA

1971



1972

President Nixon's historic China visit

1979



1980

US and China boycott Moscow Olympics

1984



1990

Chinese Television begins broadcasting the NBA

2002



2008

Beijing hosts the 2008 Olympics and tops the gold medal table

2019



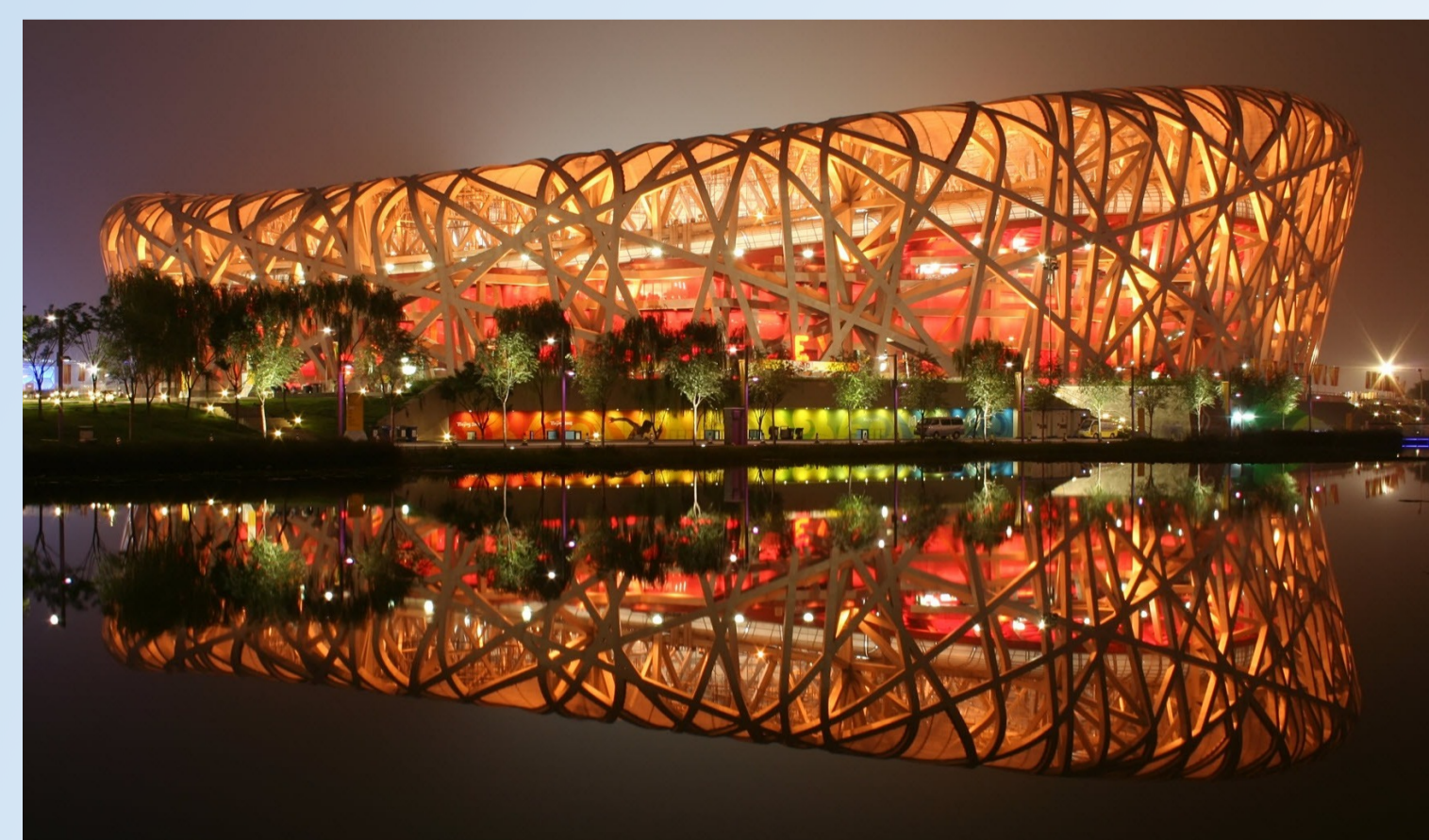
The NBA Storms into China



Chinese Basketball star Yao Ming in action

In 1990, games from the National Basketball Association (NBA) were first broadcasted on Chinese TV. By 2002, a Chinese player, Yao Ming, became a household name and was attracting as many as 200 million TV viewers in China alone. Subsequently, the NBA successfully formed cultural bonds between ordinary Americans and Chinese and acted as a cultural access point which increased mutual understanding and reduced misperceptions.

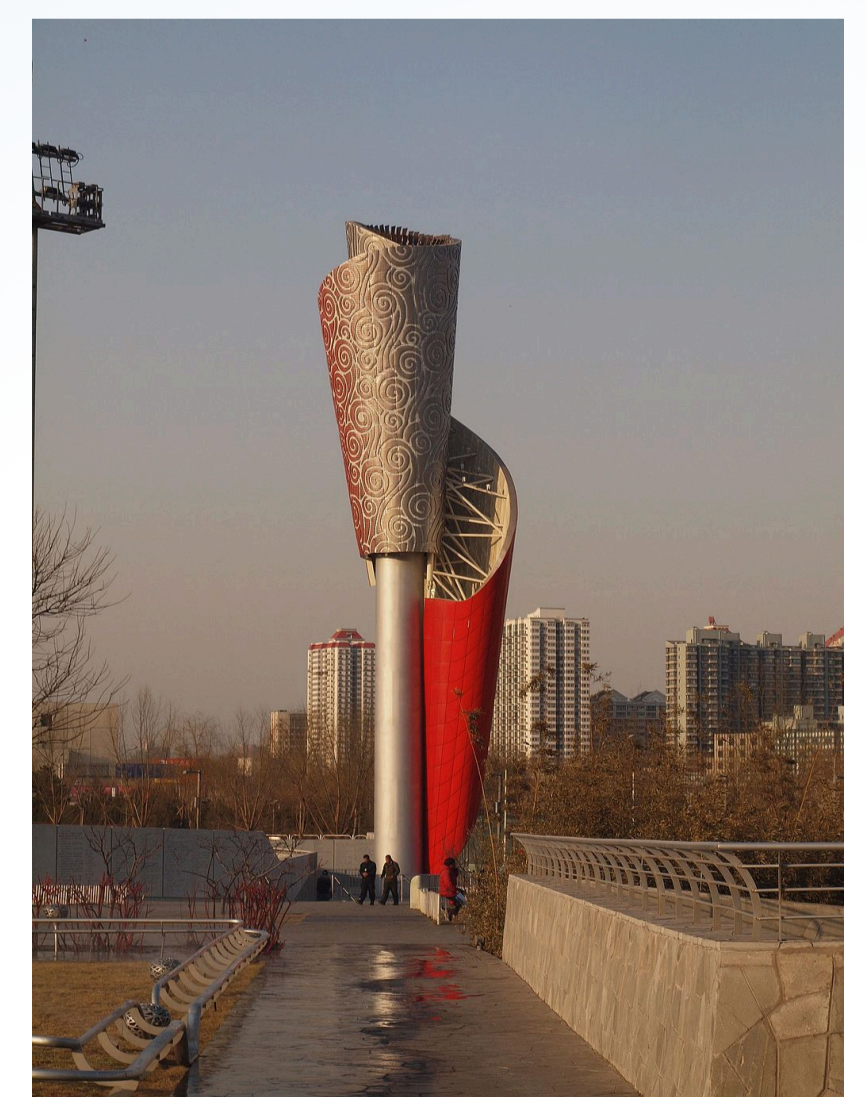
"Sport has the power to change the world" – Nelson Mandela (Murray 2019, 2)



Above: The Bird's Nest Stadium, Beijing, centerpiece of the 2008 Olympics; Right: The Olympic Flame, 2008

A Darker Side to Sports Diplomacy

The 2008 Beijing Olympic was a monumental success for China. On the field, China dethroned America from the top of the gold medal table for the first time since 1980. The symbolism was unmistakable – sport became an arena where China directly challenged US preeminence. The increasing battle for superiority on a political level was being mirrored on the sports field. In this regard, sport was fast becoming an impediment to diplomacy, galvanizing tensions rather than reducing them.



Research Findings

- Throughout the fifty years since the Nixon-era, sport has consistently proven to have had a consequential impact on diplomacy between America and China.
- 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. Sport remains a commonality, but its purpose and use within Sino-American diplomacy is now to mirror the intensifying political relationship and not to cultivate relations.

References: Murray, Stuart. 2019. *Sports Diplomacy: Origins, Theory and Practice*. Abingdon: Routledge; China Themed Bat: <https://www.pinterest.co.uk/pin/741123682410322958/>; credit Zazzle.com; American-themed bat: <https://www.zazzle.co.uk/the-usa-ping-pong-paddles>; credit Zazzle.com; Nixon and Mao: https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?sort=relevance&search=nixon+and+mao&title=Special:Search&profile=advanced&fulltext=1&advancedSearch-current=%7B%7D&ns0=1&ns6=1&ns12=1&ns14=1&ns100=1&ns106=1#/media/File:Nixon_and_Mao.jpg; credit Vito Esposito; Ping-pong bat: https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?sort=relevance&search=table+tennis+bat&title=Special:Search&profile=advanced&fulltext=1&advancedSearch-current=%7B%7D&ns0=1&ns6=1&ns12=1&ns14=1&ns100=1&ns106=1#/media/File:Table_tennis.svg; Nixon Visit: <https://www.nixonlibrary.gov/media/31714>; credit Richard Nixon Presidential Library; Basketball: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Deus_Basketball_Ball.png; credit Bruce the Deus; Olympic Rings: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Olympic_rings_without_rims.svg; NBA All-star logo: https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?sort=relevance&search=NBA+logo&title=Special:Search&profile=advanced&fulltext=1&advancedSearch-current=%7B%7D&ns0=1&ns6=1&ns12=1&ns14=1&ns100=1&ns106=1#/media/File:Nba_all_star_logo55.png; Yao Ming: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?sort=relevance&search=yao+ming+basketball&title=Special:Search&profile=advanced&fulltext=1&advancedSearch-current=%7B%7D&ns0=1&ns6=1&ns12=1&ns14=1&ns100=1&ns106=1#/media/File:Yao_Ming_\(3048977075\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?sort=relevance&search=yao+ming+basketball&title=Special:Search&profile=advanced&fulltext=1&advancedSearch-current=%7B%7D&ns0=1&ns6=1&ns12=1&ns14=1&ns100=1&ns106=1#/media/File:Yao_Ming_(3048977075).jpg); credit Keith Allen; Bird's Nest: https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?sort=relevance&search=beijing+olympics&title=Special:Search&profile=advanced&fulltext=1&advancedSearch-current=%7B%7D&ns0=1&ns6=1&ns12=1&ns14=1&ns100=1&ns106=1#/media/File:Beijing_national_stadium.jpg; Olympic Flame: https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?sort=relevance&search=beijing+olympics+flame&title=Special:Search&profile=advanced&fulltext=1&advancedSearch-current=%7B%7D&ns0=1&ns6=1&ns12=1&ns14=1&ns100=1&ns106=1#/media/File:Olympic_Flame,_Beijing.JPG