

The Olympic Games and Politics in Northeast Asia

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Although Baron Pierre de Coubertin, the father of the modern Olympics, endeavored greatly to obscure the political nature of the games, it is said that in ancient Greek times, the Olympics were highly politicized events, where military power was put on full display. The same can be said for the Olympic Games of the 21st century, albeit with economic power replacing military power. The countries of Northeast Asia, in particular, have been active in using these mega-events to promote their respective agendas, with three Olympic events taking place over a span of five years in the region.

The most recent of the Olympic Games to have taken place in Northeast Asia was the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, which was used to demonstrate to the global audience that China had emerged as a world superpower.

Unfortunately, this also meant that the games became a stage of frigid geopolitical conflicts, as Jung Woo Lee of the University of Edinburgh argues in “Cold Geopolitics at the Winter Olympics in Beijing.” Amid the chaos of a global pandemic, the 2020

Tokyo Summer Olympics were held in 2021. Displaying Japan’s revival appears to have been the key agenda behind the hosting of the games, commonly held by all actors involved. Yasuhiro Sakaue of Hitotsubashi University, Japan, shows this in “Demonstrating to the World Japan’s Revived ‘Strong Economy’: The National Strategy for the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games.” In 2018, the Winter Olympics were held in Gangwon-do Province, the most underdeveloped region in South Korea, at a time when there were

high hopes for a defrosting of relations on the Korean Peninsula. The local and central governments’ agendas for hosting the games are relayed by Haenam Park of Seoul National University Asia Center in “Between Developmentalism and Nationalism: The 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Olympics.”

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Cold Geopolitics at the Winter Olympics in Beijing

Jung Woo Lee

In February 2022, Beijing became the first city in the world to have hosted both the Summer and Winter Olympics. China initially boasted about the delivery of an eco-friendly Winter Olympic Games because many of its venues were refurbished facilities originally built for its summer counterpart in 2008. Then, the communist nation praised their self-acclaimed achievement of making Beijing 2022 COVID-safe. As for sporting excellence, Team China reached third place on the medal table, demonstrating its best performance at the Winter Olympics ever in its history. It is also believed that more than 300 million Chinese people took up skating or skiing as a leisure activity after the winter sport extravaganza. Clearly, a sense of Olympic triumph overflowed in the People’s Republic of China when the Games concluded.

Despite this seemingly enviable status and visible success, the 2022 Winter Olympics involved a few controversies when it came to international politics surrounding the Games. This Winter Olympics took place amidst the escalating tensions between the West and China. With the rapid development of its economy and technology in the first two decades of the 21st century, the communist giant gained confidence in its relationship with other countries and transnational bodies. This enhancement of power allowed China to implement a more ambitious foreign policy. Particularly, by hosting this global winter sporting spectacle, China exercised its desire to revamp its image from a world factory to a world superpower.

Yet, the West, particularly the United States, was wary of China’s rise and intended to preserve its hegemony in the current world order. The recent trade war between America and China was a consequence of this shifting power balance in international relations. In an attempt to curb Chinese diplomatic aspirations, the West questioned the legitimacy of the Chinese capital as an Olympic host due to the poor human rights record in China. They especially condemned

the alleged operation of a re-education camp in Xinjiang Province. Some Western nations even implied that they would not dispatch their delegations to the Olympics unless the communist state was made more accountable. China categorically rejected such allegations, claiming that the West should not interfere with the domestic affairs of China.

Senior lawmakers in the US Congress sent a letter to the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in order to request the relocation of the Olympic venue to a different location governed by a democratic regime. The sport governing body refused to succumb to the argument against China and instead supported the Chinese effort to deliver the major event without friction. At the G7 Summit in June 2021, Western leaders again blamed China for undemocratic practices within and for unfair trade deals with its external partners. In the following month, the European Union also issued an anti-China resolution, asking the government representatives of its member states to decline Beijing’s invitation to the Winter Olympics. American politicians, most notably Nancy Pelosi, Speaker of the House of Representatives, also called for a diplomatic boycott of Beijing 2022. Before the commencement of the Winter Olympics, relations between China and the West turned the coldest ever since the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s.

China downplayed this political protest and asserted that the West should stop its anti-Olympic campaign. According to the Chinese authorities, such protests had no basis. The West, Beijing further argued, must not politicise an international sporting event as a way to realise their diplomatic aims. The communist regime even warned that it would retaliate resolutely against any attempt to damage the Winter Olympic Games on Chinese soil. Nevertheless, scepticism of China in the West showed no sign of abating. Eventually, no Western VIPs – except a few IOC members – travelled to Beijing to see the Olympic Games in person. Indeed, the “royal box” at the Olympic stadium was



Fig. 1: 2022 Winter Olympics cauldron at Yanqing Winter Olympic Cultural Square. (Photo courtesy of N509FZ via Wikimedia Commons, reprinted under Creative Commons license)

largely occupied by Chinese officials while the opening ceremony unfolded.

However, one prominent political figure at this Olympics attracted global media and public attention. This person was Vladimir Putin. His presence at the stadium was particularly noteworthy given that there were formally no Russian delegations to this Olympics due to the sanction against Russian athletes because of state-sponsored doping. Putin’s appearance may be seen as a reciprocal courtesy because Xi Jinping attended the opening ceremony of the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi eight years ago. Xi’s appearance in this Russian town was his first and only official visit to a major sporting competition held outside his home nation. Xi and Putin also had a summit meeting in a Black Sea resort at that time.

In fact, Russia and China maintained a supportive relationship in the field of winter sport. In 2018, the two emerging powers arranged an international friendly match between their junior ice hockey teams in the Chinese city of Tianjin. Putin and Xi watched this game together in the stadium, displaying their intimate partnership to world audiences. During this trip, the Russian leader also applauded the Chinese people for their relentless effort to prepare for the 2022 Winter Olympic Games. Additionally, a Beijing-based professional ice hockey team, Kunlun Red Star, has participated in Russia’s Kontinental Hockey League since 2016. Taking part in this Russian league was a Chinese strategy to foster competitive ice hockey players before the Winter Olympics.

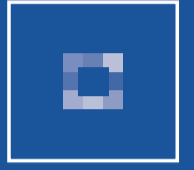
That said, Putin’s attendance at Beijing 2022 represented more than the Sino-Russia sporting connections. It was a time when China confronted the West not only diplomatically but also militarily in the South

China Sea and Taiwan Strait. Likewise, Russia gathered its forces in its Western frontier against Ukraine. Geopolitical conflicts could be detected in several different places on the globe when the Winter Olympics was about to start. A group of authoritarian regimes and an alliance of Western democracies yet again tore the world apart, and Putin’s rendezvous with Xi at the Olympics simply confirmed their union against the West. Soon after the end of the Winter Olympics, Russia invaded Ukraine. This post-Olympic aggression presents a disturbing déjà vu of the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula by the Russian army in a post-Sochi Olympic period in 2014. China remained neutral on both occasions.

It is cliché that politics and sport should not mix. Such a rhetoric paradoxically indicates that sport, especially during a major international championship, is often entangled with political incidents. The 2022 Winter Olympics aptly reflected this mood of a new Cold War on the rise. A series of diplomatic rows at this competition and the post-event military violence simply defied the United Nations resolution for Olympic Truce and the IOC’s campaign for international friendship through sport. At the closing ceremony of Beijing 2022, IOC President Thomas Bach proclaimed, “give peace a chance.” This statement ironically reaffirmed that this Winter Olympics was arguably the most politicised Games ever.

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