

The Olympic Games and Politics in Northeast Asia

Ilhong Ko

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.

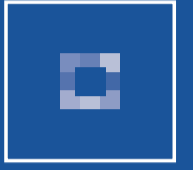
That said, Putin’s attendance at Beijing 2022 represented more than the Sino-Russia sporting connections. It was a time when China confronted the West not only diplomatically but also militarily in the South

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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Demonstrating to the World Japan's Revived "Strong Economy": The National Strategy for the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games

Yasuhiro Sakaue

What kind of identity and image did Japan seek to build within the international community through the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games? This question can be explored through the "Basic Policy on Preparation and Management of the 2020 Games" document adopted by the Japanese Government Cabinet in November 2015.¹ The hosting of the Games, a mega-event that attracts the attention of the world, involved a complex interplay between the sporting community and the host city, as well as the government, businesses, media, and the people. This Cabinet Decision collectively expressed the aspirations of all of these actors.

In the opening section of the document, the government states: "The 1964 Tokyo Games symbolised Japan's full-fledged return to the international community and showed the world that Japan had risen from defeat. It was an opportunity for the Japanese to gain confidence that if they worked hard, they could compete on a par with the rest of the world, and it gave momentum to Japan's rapid economic growth." In contrast, the stated significance of the Tokyo 2020 Games was to "revive Japan, which had almost lost its confidence, and to show the world its advanced initiatives in a mature society." The reason for Japan's loss of confidence is the long-term economic depression that has continued since the early 1990s, and the significance of the Games was to use the event as an opportunity to break out of this situation, revive Japan, and restore confidence. The model for this is the 1964 Games, which is believed to have been the springboard for Japan's rapid economic growth, and the country was eagerly awaiting a repeat of that event.

This was not just a desire of the government. The catchphrase for the Japanese that the Bid Committee came up with was also "Japan's revival," which appealed to the sense of crisis: "If we do not do something now, the world may forget about us. If we do not do something now, we may deprive the country's future and our children's confidence."² It was natural that people would seek an opportunity for change amid the stagnation caused by the long-term depression, but then why was the Olympics chosen for this purpose?

The main reason for this is the strong image and narrative that the 1964 Games had created a "glorious era" combined with economic growth, which gave rise to a fanatical attitude among the Japanese towards the benefits of hosting the Olympic Games. The most apparent evidence is that since Tokyo's bid in 1952, a total of five cities selected as national candidate cities have participated in a total of 11 Olympic bids and a total of four preparations for the Games, which together amounted to 60 years and three months, or 85% of the total period.³ In this Olympic addiction or dependency situation, the Olympics was chosen as an opportunity to break the long-term depression. The 2020 Games can be viewed as the historical conjuncture of this situation. The power and persuasive force it gave was powerful. That is why the bid for the 2020 Games was not derailed by the major political upheavals and catastrophes of the 2009 change of government, nor by the 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami. It is also why the event was held forcefully despite

widespread local opposition – 80 percent of the Japanese public, at one point – to holding the Games amid the COVID-19 pandemic and even though the vaccination rate against the virus was still only 38 percent.

Returning once again to the Cabinet Decision of 2015, it is of interest to note that the 2020 Games is considered to be an opportunity to "revive Japan" and simultaneously show the international community that Japan is making "advanced initiatives in a mature society." The "advanced initiatives" referred to by the government are "addressing ageing societies and environmental and energy issues common to advanced nations" and showing that Japan "is leading the world in solving these problems." This statement may have some relevance to Olympism. However, the specifics are environmental and energy technologies for building a hydrogen society, a practical application of automatic driving technology, robot technologies, new services using high-precision satellite positioning technology, and the like. This demonstrates that it is nothing more than a blatant measure to revive the Japanese economy. In other words, the Games are to be seen as a "driver of innovation towards the realisation of a strong economy," and these "showcase Japan's strengths in technology and communicate them to the world through the Games."

On the other hand, the Cabinet Decision also states that various Japanese cultural attractions – or "content that attracts the world's attention as Cool Japan" – will be disseminated to the world.⁴ This aim is nothing other than the realisation of a "strong economy." To this end, the government aimed to "spread the effects of the Games to every corner of the country" by promoting tourism by attracting more foreign visitors and increasing the participation of companies and others in projects and events related to the Games, and "promoting investment by communicating the improved Japanese business environment to the rest of the world." Thus, the 2020 Games became part of the government's economic policy, called "Abenomics". The Cabinet Decision also contains such rhetorical flourishes as assisting in the reconstruction of areas affected by the Great East Japan

Earthquake and realising an inclusive society, but these carry little weight beyond that of an add-on.

Meanwhile, the 2020 Games Organising Committee also established a new sponsorship mechanism, separate from the IOC's The Olympic Partner, to meet the demands of Japanese companies. The system consists of three categories of sponsors, not limited to one company in one industry, and a total of 67 Japanese companies were approved as sponsors.⁵ The vision of realising a "strong economy" also coincided with the expectations of the public. According to a public opinion survey on the Games by the NHK Broadcasting Culture Research Institute,⁶ the top answer to the question "What do you expect from the Games?" was "contribution to the Japanese economy," with 63 percent in the October 2016 survey and 50 percent in the March 2021 survey. However, in the September 2021 survey, immediately after the closing of the Games, when asked what the Games had achieved, only 15 percent answered "contribution to the Japanese economy." The results of the event fell short of the public's expectations.

Needless to say, the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a complete lack of foreign visitors to Japan and to the cancellation of most of the events related to the Games. However, the pandemic was not the only factor behind the failure. A more fundamental factor was the failure to generate innovations that would attract the world's attention, including in the technology field, which had been touted as "Japan's strength."⁷ The most apparent evidence is that Japan was unable to halt the ongoing depreciation of the Yen. At the same time, prices have soared, and the average Japanese annual wage has already been overtaken by South Korea (OECD. Stat)⁸. Japan's economy is on the path of decline, the opposite of revival.

The day after the 2020 Games closed, the Japanese newspaper *Nihon Keizai Shimbun* noted that "this atypical Olympics may finally force the Japanese to break free from the illusions of 1964. It is a change that could be a turning point in post-war history."⁹ However, signs of such a change are hard to spot: the decision to host the World Expo in Osaka in 2025 and Sapporo's bid to host the 2030 Winter Olympic Games

both suggest that Japan has not yet broken free from the "1964 illusion."¹⁰ It has not yet developed a vision with vivid outlines of its alternative future.

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Notes

- Masaru Ogawa, 2016, *Tokyo Orimpikku: mondai no kakusin ha nanika (Tokyo Olympics: what is the core of the problem)*, Tokyo: Shueisha, pp.160-181.
- Hiroshi Ochiai, 2015, *Konnakoto o kaitekita: supōtsu media no genba kara (I've been writing about this: from the field of sports media)*, Tokyo: Sōbun Kikaku, p.49.
- Calculated based on Table 1 in Yasuhiro Sakaue and Kyoko Raita (eds.), 2021, *Tokyo Orimpikku 1963 no Isan : seikō shinwa to kioku no hazama (The Legacy of the Tokyo Olympics 1964: between Success myth and memory)*, Tokyo: Seikyūsha, p.15.
- Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's appearance at the closing ceremony of the 2016 Rio Games dressed as the popular video game character Mario may have been part of this.
- A total of six newspapers, including Japan's major national newspapers, were included there, preventing newspapers from maintaining the neutrality and impartiality media they were supposed to fulfil.
- https://www.nhk.or.jp/bunken/research/uron/20220601_7.html (last visited 4 December 2022).
- Growing public opposition to the Games in the country led significant sponsors of the Games to stop airing TV commercials, among other things, which might otherwise have given the Japanese public some idea of the revival of "the Japanese economy".
- <https://stats.oecd.org/index.aspx?DataSetCode=RMW> (last visited 26 December 2022).
- Mitsuo Ōshima, "Irei no Natsu Mirai heno kate (An Unusual Summer: Feeding the Future)", *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, 9 August 2021.
- In 1970, Osaka hosted the World Expo; in 1972, Sapporo hosted the Winter Olympic Games.

Fig. 1: Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games-Monument of Olympic Rings. (Photo via Wikimedia Commons, reprinted here under Creative Commons license)



Between Developmentalism and Nationalism: The 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Olympics

Haenam Park



Fig. 1: The Unified Team of Korea during the entrance ceremony at the 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Olympics. (Photo courtesy of the Korean Culture and Information Service via [Wikimedia Commons](#), reprinted here under [Creative Commons](#) license)

Since the 2010s, Asia has become the region hosting the most mega-events. Previously, since their inception in the middle of the 19th century, mega-events had primarily been used to showcase the prosperity of cities and countries of the Western world. However, the following events have been or soon will be hosted in Asia during the decade from 2015 to 2025: three Olympics (Pyeongchang 2018, Tokyo 2020, Beijing 2022), one FIFA World Cup (Qatar 2022), and two World Expos (Dubai 2020 and Osaka 2025). The 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Olympics was the event that ushered in the era of mega-events in Asia. Recording the largest number of countries and participants among any Winter Olympics held thus far, the event was held in three cities (Pyeongchang, Jeongseon, and Gangneung) of Gangwon-do Province, a northeastern province of South Korea.

Mega-events refer to events that have tens of thousands of visitors and billions of viewers, such as the Summer Olympics, Winter Olympics, FIFA World Cup, and World Expositions. Because this means that the venue of such a mega-event is broadcast to billions of people, at least ten billion US dollars are invested over several years for the massive renewal of a host city, the impact of which lasts for decades. As such, host cities and countries formulate grand plans upon which they decide what to display through that mega-event. What was the grand plan behind the 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Olympics? What was intended to be displayed through the event? A brief introduction of the history of mega-events is required before we figure out the answer to these questions.

Mega-events have been associated with various ideologies. The most popular expositions held in the late 19th and early 20th centuries were closely related to nationalism and imperialism. Western cities, such as London, Paris, and Chicago, wanted to display the industrial developments achieved by their respective countries, in addition to how well they had civilized their colonies. After World War II, mega-events came to be combined with

the Cold War. The Olympics (the mega-event that received more attention than expositions from this period onwards) was used as a stage where the prosperity of the Western world, led by the United States, was displayed. The stage was also used to convey the message that Italy, Japan, and West Germany had transformed from former Axis powers into responsible members of the international community.

Since the 1990s, mega-events have come to be combined with the ideologies of neoliberalism and urban entrepreneurialism. From the mid-1970s, the cities of the West were faced with the need to find new engines of urban growth to replace manufacturing, and they turned towards finance, logistics, tourism, and cultural industries. In addition, perspectives on the role of the city have changed from "urban managerialism," which focuses on distributing public resources and facilities for residents, to "urban entrepreneurialism," which actively aims to attract businesses, business elites, and tourists to promote urban growth. The Olympics provided an opportunity for such cities to publicize their new images to the world through hotels, skyscrapers, and middle-class apartments. Prime examples include the Olympics held in Barcelona in 1992, Atlanta in 1996, Beijing in 2008, and London in 2012, as well as the Dubai Expo 2020 and the FIFA World Cup in Qatar 2022.

The ideology behind the Pyeongchang Olympics was developmentalism. In developmental states, central government bureaucrats make plans for rapid economic growth and implement such plans by mobilizing conglomerates. Industrial cities that will become the engines of rapid economic growth are determined by the state. Korea, Japan, Taiwan, and China are countries that share such practices of top-down developmentalism. In addition, these countries can also be seen to share bottom-up developmentalism. This is because the local governments in these countries, witnessing the rapid growth of certain cities due to the central government's plans, actively request that the central government distribute resources to them as well. This is

why the central governments in East Asia allocated the right to host the Olympics, Expos, and Asian Games to several cities, whereas in the west, it was mostly local governments, such as London and Paris, that singlehandedly made bids for the mega-events.

Gangwon-do Province, one of the least developed regions in South Korea, had previously witnessed how the central government provided a large amount of budgetary support to Daejeon when the Expo was held there in 1993. Subsequently, Gangwon-do made efforts to become a host city of the FIFA World Cup Korea/Japan. Unfortunately, Gangwon-do became the only province not to host a FIFA World Cup game in 2002. Attempts began in the early 2000s to host the 2010 Winter Olympics, but Gangwon-do had to wait until the 2018 Winter Olympics to finally host the event, after three bids. For over a dozen years, Gangwon-do insisted that, because the province was alienated from the central government's distribution of resources and had no developed industries, the hosting of the Pyeongchang Olympics required much support from the central government. The cost of building the necessary facilities and holding the event itself was 1.9 billion USD, but the amount of social infrastructure investments required in the wake of the Olympics reached 11 billion USD.

For South Korea's central government, on the other hand, the message that was intended to be displayed by hosting the Pyeongchang Olympics was closely related to nationalism. In 1988, when South Korea first hosted the Summer Olympics in Seoul, the majority of Korea's progressive civic activists campaigned against it. The reason was not to do with hosting the Olympics itself; rather, it had to do with the fact that the hosting of the Olympics in Seoul would promote the image of a divided Korea to the world. The argument made was that the Olympics should be held in both Seoul and Pyeongyang in order to demonstrate the peninsula's commitment towards unification. Their idea was realized as athletes from the two Koreas jointly entered the Olympics

from 2000 to 2006, holding one flag (bearing the image of the Korean Peninsula). The political party with close links with the progressive civic activists re-gained power in 2017, and attempts were made once again during the Pyeongchang Olympics to display to the world a will to improve relations between the two Koreas and achieve unification. This was done through the joint entrance of athletes during the opening ceremony [Fig. 1], as well as through the creation of a "unified" women's ice hockey team.

In this sense, the Pyeongchang Olympics can be interpreted as a nationalist performance on a stage created by developmentalism. A clear and coherent strategy and vision was not present in hosting the event. For the local government, obtaining resources from the central government was the most important goal, but they were not able to establish specific plans for the utilization of these resources. The central government's plan was also unsuccessful. The creation of a "unified" women's ice hockey team meant that several of the South Korean athletes who had been preparing for the Olympics for a long time had to be left out. The decision was subject to much criticism, and the "unified" team did not receive much support from inside or outside South Korea.

In South Korea today, the multiple imbalances that exist between the Seoul metropolitan area and other provinces, as well as the decline facing the provinces outside the central area, have become important social problems. Despite previous, unsuccessful experiences, local governments are still trying to revitalize their local communities by hosting mega-events. This is because mega-events continue to provide justification for receiving resources from the central government. In this way, developmentalism and the politics of distribution around mega-events in Korean society cannot be separated, like two sides of a coin.