

Sport As A State's Soft Power Strategy: The Case Of South Korea

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Many states have used sport to promote their national interests and image as a primary tool of diplomacy and international sporting success is increasingly acknowledged to be a highly visible and potentially positive signal to other countries (Houlihan, 1994). In more recent years, there have been signs of a growing interest in the role of sport among international relations scholars and with a particular interest in the concept of soft power which is seen as offering a lens through which to explore sport as a global phenomenon (see for example, Grix & Houlihan, 2014 and Merkel, 2008). The concept of soft power in the field of sports studies is considered to be an important element in enhancing influence over international outcomes in the international system such as a significant impact of soft power for winning an Olympic bid (Lee & Chappellet, 2012) as it has become more difficult to achieve diplomatic objectives through the use of hard power (Nye, 2004). As a consequence of the growing awareness of the limitations of an over-reliance on the deployment of hard power, governments have shown an increasing willingness to add soft power strategies to their portfolio of diplomatic resources with sport emerging as a major element. In recent years sport as a tool of soft power has been utilised by governments in the pursuit of both domestic and international policy objectives such as nation-building at the domestic level and enhancing a national image or overcoming diplomatic isolation at the international level.

However, there is the continuing relative lack of systematic empirical analysis of sport as a soft power resource within the study of international relations and still little consensus as to its effectiveness in achieving policy objectives. In this regard, the research uses the concept of soft power within the context of current international relations theory to analyse the utilisation of sport as a tool of soft power in relation to the policy objectives of South Korea, a country which exists within a complex and, at times, tense regional geopolitical context.

As the data collection strategy, this research conducts a thorough analysis of documents from the 1980s which was the period that sport has been widely adopted as a political resource in connection with the foreign policy and diplomatic objectives of South Korea. For the research, official government documents which are only published directly by state authorities and collected from National Archives of Korea — for example, national governing bodies and sporting committees, and so on — are analysed. Furthermore, this research includes semi-structured interviews with eight key officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, Korean Sport and Olympic Committee, and other private sectors organisations which are involved in sports diplomacy.

The research provides an empirical investigation of South Korea's strategic use of sport over the period 1980 to the present to understand how and why sport as a soft power strategy was attractive to both authoritarian and democratic governments of South Korea. Among the key findings are: a) the increasingly strong relationship between the use of sport soft power and South Korea's key diplomatic objectives; b) the series of five-year plans from 1993 provide evidence of a broadening of the strategic international relation's objectives for sport and increasing investment in sport diplomacy; and c) the increasing sophistication and subtlety in the deployment of sports soft power by the South Korean government.

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