

## POWER POLITICS OF SPORTS IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND ITS EFFECTS ON CRICKET

Abdul Qadeer\*

### **Abstract**

*Sports can influence people like all other cultural activities. They act as a diplomatic tool to alleviate tensions and improve ties between states. Millions worldwide follow their favourite sports passionately; however, states and leaders sometimes exploit these feelings to further their political agenda. There are examples of cricket diplomacy when relations between states (Pakistan and India) were tense, and it helped normalize the situation but never securitised itself. Securitization of sports is a recent phenomenon that, unfortunately, has marred the beauty of cricket. Political theorists suggest that existing issues of even low politics can hold more sway and attention among the masses if proponents of these issues succeed in securitizing them. Hence, by securitizing an innocuous subject like cricket, matters of low politics have been dragged into the domain of high politics. The recent abandonment of cricket tour to Pakistan by the New Zealand cricket team is an example of getting high politics into sports. This article, therefore, explores the dynamic power of sports in international relations besides analysing the role of high politics in cricket. It accentuates that punishing a country politically by depriving it of hosting international teams can disservice cricket, though it is a diplomatic tool for peace.*

**Keywords:** Sports, Cricket Diplomacy, Sporting Nationalism, Securitization of Cricket.

### **Introduction**

**S**tates interact with each other to enhance cooperation and thrash out their differences. State leaders play an essential role in giving foreign policy directions to achieve desired objectives. Realist scholars argue in favour of power, which is mainly a force augmented by military strength, the economy, geography, population, and political stability.<sup>1</sup> According to the realist perspective, conflict is usually expected between states, but sports diplomacy is not a preferred foreign policy tool. Compared to realists, liberals take alternative approaches, including sports diplomacy. With the advent of the communication revolution, many communication tools in diplomacy are available to states today, such as public diplomacy.<sup>2</sup> However, power has often been used for influence; that's why Joseph Nye divided the power into hard and soft categories, given the immense importance of authority in international relations.<sup>3</sup>

---

\*Abdul Qadeer is MPhil in International Relations from the School of Politics and International Relations, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad.

In today's interconnected world, sports can bring the estranged nations together on a football field or cricket pitch, and leaders can discuss controversial issues in informal settings.<sup>4</sup> Foreign policy, politics, and culture are some soft power facets. Thus, according to Nye, soft power can shape foreign policy powerfully and is more cost-effective than sheer force.<sup>5</sup> Cricket, Ping Pong, and Wrestling diplomacy show that sports can be a foreign policy tool. The importance of sports in bringing nations and communities together has been acknowledged by politicians, journalists, scholars, and musicians and singers, such as U2 Band's lead vocalist Bono.<sup>6</sup> Former UN Secretary-General has also recognized the ability of sports in bringing states together through mega sporting events like Football World Cup and Olympics. Prejudices and stereotypes can be evaded through positivity from sports events.<sup>7</sup> Despite the positive impact of sports, political considerations, power politics, and rivalries have marred many sporting events.<sup>8</sup>

Boycotts have spoiled the Olympics and various other sporting events, including cricket. Even athletes have shown their resentment about political situations in their countries, such as raising fists by US athletes in a black power salute while standing on the podium in the 1968-Mexico City Olympics.<sup>9</sup> According to some scholars, sports reflect a nationalist spirit, which can turn violent when going gets tough inside a sporting arena. It harms international relations. In his extensively quoted article, George Orwell wrote that "serious sport has nothing to do with fair play. It is bound with hatred, jealousy..., and sadistic pleasure in witnessing violence; in other words, it is war minus shooting."<sup>10</sup> Though this argument stretches sports towards a realist perspective, it has an element of truth as states use sporting events to showcase their soft and hard power.

Securitization of sports is a new phenomenon in Subcontinent. It has brought issues of low politics under the spotlight. Cricket, traditionally a tool of diplomacy, has been brought into high politics through securitization. The concept of securitization was developed by Barry Buzan, Ole Waever, Jaap de Wilde, and others of the Copenhagen School of thought. Security in the context of states is freedom from threat and the ability to maintain their independence. These issues pertain to the realm of high politics. But bringing sports into high politics is the securitization of the problems that are not politics themselves. Recently, cricket has been used as a tool (sometimes brazenly) to extract political mileage and justify the jingoistic stance by ultra-nationalist in India.

Unfortunately, sporting nationalism has been associated with cricket in India by creating an atmosphere of insecurity and feelings of being threatened. Sports can provide a political motivation, bringing nationalism associated with sports.<sup>11</sup> Saga of New Zealand cricket team's abandonment of Pakistan's tour speaks of machinations emanating from sporting nationalism. Fake email and Facebook IDs were used to threaten the New Zealand team, which cancelled the tour to Pakistan after its arrival and minutes before the first one-day international cricket match at Rawalpindi.<sup>12</sup> India started the process of securitizing cricket to enforce sporting sanctions against Pakistan after the Kargil war when the Indian Cricket team was banned from visiting Pakistan.<sup>13</sup>

Since then, cricket has been the first victim whenever the temperature gets high as far as Pakistan-India relations are concerned. India unilaterally banned Pakistani cricketers from participating in the Indian Premier League (IPL) and cricket's governing body. International Cricket Council (ICC) has chiefly paid lip service to Indian nefarious attempts to securitize cricket. It may be due to ICC's corporate interests and the lure of the vast Indian market, which multinationals (MNCs) and states want to tap even at the cost of fair play in sports.

In India, cricket has inextricably linked with jingoism and warmongering. Before the 1996-Cricket World Cup quarter-final between Pakistan and India, Indian media went into a frenzy and presented it as some war with cricket pitch as a battlefield; a Gujrati newspaper even portrayed players as soldiers with uniforms and guns.<sup>14</sup> Norman Tebbit, a conservative British parliamentarian, argued in 1990 that South Asian immigrants should support the English cricket team instead of Pakistan or India as proof of their loyalty and commitment to the UK. Bal Thackeray, an Indian politician, came up with his version of the Tebbit test in the 1990s. He urged Muslims in India to support the Indian cricket team against Pakistan as proof of their loyalty by saying, "I want them with tears in their eyes every time India loses to Pakistan."<sup>15</sup> In the backdrop of these events, the cancellation of New Zealand's tour to Pakistan was not merely due to security reasons. Cricket that ought to be played on the field has been brought off to damage cricket itself.

### **Dynamic Power of Sports**

Sports have been a preferred pastime of millions of people around the world. Many people follow their favourite team with fanatic zeal. Sometimes ardent fans come to blow inside and outside the sporting arena for a result they do not like. Still, sports contribute to cultivating good relations between rival teams and nations these teams represent. Despite sports' role in creating sociability, sport can deteriorate relationships between two states. The Soccer War case between Honduras and El Salvador is in point. Harbinger to this war was an inflow of migrants from El Salvador to Honduras who came to Honduras for a better future. Relations between the two states were already simmering when they had to play three qualifying matches for Football World Cup in 1969. When these teams played their third and final qualifying match, Al Salvador cut off all diplomatic relations with Honduras and started bombing neighbour. Since then, this war has been referred to as La Guerra del Futbol – The Soccer War.<sup>16</sup>

Rivalry in football between the Netherlands and Germany in the late 1980s played a significant part in exacerbating the tense situation between the two nations. Firstly, Ronald Koeman in 1988 used a shirt (footballers swap their shirts after a match in a goodwill gesture) of German player, Olaf Thon, to mock German spectators. Then again, in the 1990-World Cup, a row between Frank Rijkaard and Rudy Voller resulted in the expulsion of both players from the football field. These two incidents show how a wild football field behaved and highlighted embedded cultural differences and historical disagreement that subsequently worsened relations between the two states.<sup>17</sup>

Sports have been a source of relieving tensions and promoting goodwill among nations. Famous Christmas Truce during World War I occurred to play a football match between soldiers who before truce were blowing any moving thing in front of their trenches into smithereens by machine gunfire.<sup>18</sup> Occasionally, a country needs a particular sporting event to talk on contentious issues; even the fixtures are designed for this purpose. A case in point is Ping Pong diplomacy between the US and China. This sporting event facilitated President Nixon's visit to China and thrashed out their differences while enjoying the game. This visit ended the estranged isolation of China from an American perspective, helped in pulling out US forces from Vietnam, and laid the foundation of future Sino-US cooperation.<sup>19</sup> Former President of Pakistan, General Zia ul Haq, also used a cricket match to alleviate tension between Pakistan and India. He visited India and witnessed a cricket match at Jaipur. The purpose was to use cricket diplomacy to thaw in a tense environment because of a military exercise Brasstacks by India near the Pakistan border.<sup>20</sup>

Five American wrestlers and the same number of officials visited Iran in 1998 to participate in International Takhti Cup. It was the most significant interaction between the US and Iran after 1979-Iranian Revolution. The spectacle of American flag hoisting in Iran was necessary because, before this wrestling tournament, the American flag was not hoisted in Iran but burnt.<sup>21</sup> North Korea (and its ruler Kim Jong Un) was one of the axes of evil in the eyes of former US president George Bush. There were no diplomatic relations between the two states. Kim Jong Un, a fan of the American NBA and Dennis Rodman, wanted to play basketball with Rodman. North Korean leader was willing to allow Rodman and his all-American TV crew into his country because of basketball's popularity. This visit by an American athlete was a significant diplomatic feat as it provided an opportunity to see through the opacity of North Korea and its leader.<sup>22</sup>

When Japan and South Korea jointly hosted the 2002-World Cup, they initiated dialogue to iron out their historical differences. At the same time, the organization of the event itself exposed the underlying tension, differences in an official mascot, and bickering on the location of matches. However, the Olympics were a great leap forward in increasing friendly ties with loose visa regulations and signing bilateral agreements. In 2004, Korean Overseas Information System acknowledged that jointly hosting the Olympics has helped initiate increased dialogue on political matters.<sup>23</sup> Athletes can bring the lesser-known ethnicities and nations on the world map more effectively; George Weah (Liberia), Kathy Freeman (Aboriginal Australian), and Novak Djokovic (Serbia) are examples of sports' power in displaying a rare talent of smaller communities and nations on the world stage.<sup>24</sup>

A sporting event can project a nation's image best possible. It allows spectators to see a particular country's cultural and natural beauty. *Tour de France* is one of the oldest cycling tournaments globally, enabling spectators to enjoy the race, beautiful landscapes, towns of historical importance, and castles in France. It has been a vital instrument in the image-building of a state.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, sporting events also help remove

negative stereotypes about a host nation. These events project the country's soft image, paying dividends in increased tourism and business; the Sochi Olympic Games of 2014 project Russia's soft power. Vladimir Putin showed to the world that even during crisis and doubts about his foreign policy goals, he could use the event for image-building of Russia.<sup>26</sup> The UN has also acknowledged sportsmen and women's star-power in building worldwide relations. It has structured a Sports Ambassador program in which famous athletes act as Sports Ambassadors to promote peace and friendship in the world. Muhammad Ali, Pele, Carl Lewis, and Maria Sharapova are some of the athletes who have been Sports Ambassadors of UN.<sup>27</sup>

### **Sports – A Tool of High Politics**

Sports have been a source of thawing tense relations among states, rarely used to coerce a nation; sometimes, it is used as a propaganda tool. Hitler used the Berlin Olympics of 1936 to showcase German racial superiority. Recently, the decision of the New Zealand Cricket Board to abandon a tour to Pakistan was a rare sporting and diplomatic occurrence. It abruptly cancelled the tour minutes before the first one-day match kicked off between Pakistan and New Zealand. In a press statement, security reasons were cited for the abandonment of the tour. It stated that “following an escalation in the New Zealand government threat level for Pakistan, and advice from New Zealand Cricket Security Advisors on the ground, it has been decided that BLACKCAPS will not continue with the tour.”<sup>28</sup>

The tour's abrupt cancellation was a bolt from the blue for Pakistan and against all the norms and curtsies of bilateral relations. After all, an agreed-upon tour abandoned at the last minute was not cricket. It smacked a conspiracy against Pakistan cricket as Pakistan's Information Minister stated that fake news (generated by India) led to shocking tour cancellation, describing it as a part of hybrid warfare against Pakistan. According to the minister, Proton Mail was used to generate a threatening email. On August 19, 2021, a Facebook post was circulated from a fabricated account (Ehsan Ullah Ehsan, a former TTP spokesperson) asking the New Zealand government and Cricket Board not to send their team to Pakistan. Abhinandan Mishra, the Bureau Chief of *Sunday Guardian*, wrote an article two days later based on the fake Facebook post and claimed that the New Zealand cricket team might face a terrorist attack in Pakistan.

Moreover, the wife of Martin Guptil, a renowned New Zealand star batsman, received an email on August 24, 2021, which threatened to kill the batsman during the tour to Pakistan. The account was created at 01:05 am on August 24, 2021, and an email was sent on the same day at 11:59 am. Pakistan's Information Minister also pointed out that the email was generated intentionally as no other activity was reported from the same account. Interpol Wellington was informed on September 18, 2021, about the threatening email by New Zealand Police. Despite these negative tactics, the New Zealand team arrived in Pakistan on September 11, 2021. However, the New Zealand team and government abruptly abandoned the tour on September 17, 2021, citing credible security threats without sharing details. The threatening email was sent from an

associated device in India by using a VPN showing the IP address of Singapore minutes after the creation of ID.<sup>29</sup> It was a unique case in which foreign elements were involved against the cricket tour to tarnish the host country's image. Another view in Pakistan blames the US and West for bringing their political agenda into cricket, maligning Pakistan for supporting the Afghan Taliban.<sup>30</sup>

Many believe that the intelligence of a possible attack on the New Zealand cricket team came from Five Eyes, an intelligence alliance. New Zealand authorities deemed it credible, leading to phone calls between two cricket boards and both states' prime ministers.<sup>31</sup> A report of the congressional subcommittee on Intelligence and Special Operations mentioned Five Eyes, an alliance to counter China and Russia. It also proposed membership extension to like-minded states like Japan, Korea, India, and Germany. In 2020, India, Japan, and Five Eyes states appealed to technology-based companies for backdoor permission for encrypted smartphone applications.<sup>32</sup> This scenario depicts more than a security threat to the New Zealand cricket team; it may be a sinister plot to blemish Pakistan cricket to tarnish the overall image of Pakistan. Unfortunately, the victim is the game of cricket, which is being followed by millions passionately. States have been using sporting events to show their soft power but using a sport for power politics and depriving the people of entertainment is rare.

## **Conclusion**

Cricket has united people worldwide for their love of this game. From Papua New Guinea to Scotland, they enjoy playing and watching it. It has been a part of Track-II and III diplomacy between Pakistan and India. Unfortunately, Indian intransigency and belligerent attitude have remained an example of 'war minus the shooting' despite serving as a sign of social harmony.<sup>33</sup> Sports play a massive role in the daily life of the people like other social and cultural activities. They speak a universal language that everyone understands. Bringing politics into sports is against the sporting spirit they try to instil in players and spectators. The decision of the New Zealand Cricket Board to pull out of the tour at the last moment, citing a murky security reason, was a great disservice to the game of cricket. The tour was cancelled so barefaced that it demanded ICC investigation. There was a deliberate attempt to deprive Pakistan of cricket matches by portraying it as unsafe. It was not merely a cancellation of the tour; pulling off from the tour while citing a security reason tarnished the state's reputation and damaged Pakistan's efforts in reviving the hosting of international sporting events in the country. The way Indian media behaved immaturely after the tour cancellation implies an organized campaign to defame Pakistan.

All sports, including cricket, are innocuous activities to entertain the spectators and viewers. Games are supposed to teach the spirit of sportsmanship and goodwill, but to bring in politics at the state level reduces sporting bodies into pawns, ultimately damaging the sports. The need of the hour is to delink sports, especially cricket, from politics at the state level and play this beautiful game on the field rather than manipulating it through off-the-field activities.

## References

1. H. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, (NY: Alfred A Knopf, 1948).
2. N. J. Cull, "Public Diplomacy: Taxonomies and Histories. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 616, 2008: 31-54.
3. J. S. Nye, *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*, (NY: Basic Books, 2002).
4. L. Chalib, "Towards a Distinctive Sport Management Discipline." *Journal of Sport Management*, 20, 2006: 1-21.
5. J. S. Nye, *Soft power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, (NY: Public Affairs Books, 2004).
6. D.W. Drezner, "The Soccer Wars: 'Bono says the World Cup is a peacemaker, Not quite,'" *Washington Quarterly*, 23(4) 2006: 63-70.
7. K. Annan, "The World Cup is Africa's chance to show how it has changed," *The Guardian*, 26 Apr 2010.
8. J. Riordan, and A. Kruger, (eds), *The International Politics of Sports in 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, (London: E&FN Spon, 1999).
9. Jayanta Sengupta, "Globalizing patriotism? Some Lessons from the Cricket World Cup of 2003," *The International Journal of History of Sport* 21 (3-4) 2004: 585-612.
10. George Orwell, "The Sporting Spirit," The Orwell Foundation, available at <https://www.orwellfoundation.com/the-orwell-foundation/orwell/essays-and-other-works/the-sporting-spirit/>, (Accessed on November 3, 2021).
11. Ramachandra Guha, *A Corner of a Foreign Field: The Indian History of a British Sport*, (London: Picador, 2002).
12. "Pakistan uncovers 'Indian plot' behind NZ cricket tour withdrawal," *The Nation*, September 23, 2021.
13. Varun Sahni, "The Protean Polis and Strategic Surprises: Do Changes within India Affect South Asian Strategic Stability?" *Contemporary South Asia* 14 (2) June 2005: 219-31.
14. Jishnu Dasgupta, "Manufacturing Unison: Muslims, Hindus and Indians during the India-Pakistan Match," *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 21 (3-4) 2004: 575-84.
15. Ibid.
16. Case studies in sports diplomacy ed. Craig esherick, Robert E Baker, Steven Jaccson, Michael Sam. (2017), west Virginia university, Chap 1 Sports diplomacy: A review of How sports can be used to improve international relationships. Judith Trunkos and Bob Heere.
17. Altijt weer dat shirt van Olaf Thon: De Duitsers en het EK'88 (9 juni, 2008). HET Duitsland Instituut. Available at <http://duitslandinstituut.nl/artikel/3267/altijt-weer-dat-shirt-van-olaf-thon>.
18. M. Brown and S. Seaton, *The Christmas Truce: Western Front, December 1914*, (London: Papermac Books, 1994).
19. H. Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, (NY: Simon and Schuster 1994).
20. Shakeel Ahmed and Kausar Parveen, "Cricket for politics and peace; from 1989 to 2007 cricket world cup between India and Pakistan," *International Journal of Science Culture and Sport*, vol. 3, no.4, 2015: 59-66.
21. J. Goldberg, "Sporting diplomacy: boosting the size of diplomatic corps." *Washington Quarterly* 23 (4) 2000: 63-70.
22. Case studies in sports diplomacy ed. Craig esherick, Robert E Baker, Steven Jaccson, Michael Sam. (2017), west Virginia university, Chap 1 Sports diplomacy: A review of How sports can be used to improve international relationships. Judith Trunkos and Bob Heere.
23. Heere et al., "The impact of World Cup 2002 on the bilateral relationship between South Korea and Japan," *Journal of Sport Management*, 26 (2012): 127 - 142.
24. Case studies in sports diplomacy ed. Craig esherick, Robert E Baker, Steven Jaccson, Michael Sam. (2017), west Virginia university, Chap 1 Sports diplomacy: A review of How sports can be used to improve international relationships. Judith Trunkos and Bob Heere.
25. Heere B. (2015) Het effect van de tour de France organisatie op het imago van Utrecht in de Wereld. (Report for the city of Utrecht) Columbia, SC: Pictura Magna.
26. A., Simonyi and J. Trunkos, "How Putin stole our smart power," *Huffington Post*, 2014, available at [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/andras-simonyi/how-putin-stole-our-smart\\_b\\_5504985.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/andras-simonyi/how-putin-stole-our-smart_b_5504985.html).
27. Website: [www.un.org](http://www.un.org).
28. "New Zealand's tour of Pakistan abandoned due to government security alert," *Sky Sports*, September 17, 2021. Available at <http://www.skysports.com/cricket/news/12345/12410287/new-zealands-tour-of-pakistan-abandoned-due-to-government-security-alert>.
29. "Emails from India led to NZ tour cancellation," *The Express Tribune*, September 22, 2021.
30. "Pakistan Laments Cricket Matches Unplayed, and Blames Politics," *The New York Times*, September 21, 2021.
31. "Five-nation intelligence alliance caused NZ cancellation of Pak tour," *The News*, September 19, 2021.
32. Raghav Bhikhchandani, "What is Five Eyes, the intelligence alliance US wants South Korea, India, Japan to be part of," *The Print*, September 9, 2021, available at <http://theprint.in/world/what-is-five-eyes-the-intelligence-alliance-us-wants-south-korea-japan-to-be-part-of/730475/>.
33. Mike Marqusee, "War Minus the Shooting," *The Guardian*, March 10, 2004.