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Sports Mega-Events as Foreign Policy: Sport Diplomacy, “Soft Power,” and “Sportswashing”

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Jonathan Grix¹ and Paul Michael Brannagan¹

Abstract

Sports mega-events (SMEs), such as the Olympic Games and the FIFA World Cup, have become a key part of state strategies to achieve a multitude of foreign policy goals. The literature attempting to explain this—often under the broad umbrella term of “sport diplomacy”—has recently been bolstered by the arrival of two very popular concepts in this area of research, “soft power” and “sportswashing,” leading to confusion and a general lack of consensus around the use of sport for non-sporting aims. This article makes two key contributions to the literature: first, it serves to clarify the conceptual relationship between sport diplomacy, soft power, and sportswashing. It does so by arguing that the latter two concepts are strategies at different stages of a similar process, that is, using sport to achieve specific foreign policy goals by states, state actors, and non-state actors. Our second contribution lies in the application of this conceptualization to two relevant, empirical cases of an advanced capitalist country (the United Kingdom) and an autocratic country (Qatar), both of which have hosted an SME. The results show that while a variety of states, state actors, politicians, and non-state actors use the same means (SMEs) to achieve different foreign policy goals, their geopolitics, different histories, regime types, economic systems, and levels of development influence their rationale for doing so and the strategies they choose.

Keywords

Olympics, sport diplomacy, soft power, sportswashing

¹Sport Policy Unit, Faculty of Business and Law, Institute of Sport, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, UK

Corresponding Author:

Jonathan Grix, Sport Policy Unit, Faculty of Business and Law, Institute of Sport, Manchester Metropolitan University, Oxford Road, Manchester M15 6BH, UK.

Email: j.grix@mmu.ac.uk

Introduction

Sport has long been used by states to achieve non-sporting aims and has become a key part of state strategies to achieve a multitude of foreign policy goals. Well-documented sport diplomacy strategies have ranged from “ice-breaker” moments in history, for example, the so-called “ping-pong” diplomacy of 1971 that led to the thawing of relations between the U.S. and China, through to international sporting success by national teams and athletes competing abroad, to the hosting of sports mega-events (SMEs), or even second- and third-order regional events (Black, 2008). Less well known and understood are the two new strands of research that have sought to shed light on the motives behind why states wish to attract sporting events and what they seek to achieve by hosting them. The concepts of “soft power” and “sportswashing” have opened up new avenues of research and understanding as to why states and their leaders invest in sport, but they have not contributed to a consensus around the use of sport for non-sporting aims. In fact, both concepts rarely feature in articles on “sport diplomacy” for different reasons. “Soft power,” which is *the* key concept in public diplomacy studies (Snow, 2020), has not been analyzed deeply or used widely by sport diplomacy scholars. “Sportswashing,” which is clearly a misnomer (see section Sportswashing below), is not understood as part of a state’s attempt to influence others’ behavior, but is overwhelmingly misunderstood as simply an attempt to cover up human rights abuses by the state investing. This is something we wish to rectify by arguing that both concepts are subsumed under “sport diplomacy” and all seek to influence “the decisions and behavior of foreign governments and peoples through dialogue, negotiation, and other measures short of war or violence” (Britannica, 2024). “Sport diplomacy,” according to Murray, is a practice that:

uses sports people and sporting events to engage, inform, and create a favorable image amongst foreign publics and organisations to shape their perceptions in a way that is more conducive to achieving a government’s foreign policy goals (Murray, 2012, p. 581).

We argue that sporting competitions, especially international, lend themselves to fostering the communication of universal shared values that can be employed to court the publics of other states through a wide range of channels. “Sport,” as an entity, has been credited with not only overcoming or averting conflict, but also in aiding peace processes and fostering greater cultural understanding among countries and their people (Jarvie, 2023). This is, in part, what states, state actors, politicians, and leaders seek when they undertake “soft power” and “sportswashing” (as we define it) strategies. Further, we show, in particular in relation to the hosting of SMEs, that soft power acquisition and sportswashing refer to different stages in this process of influencing and communicating and are ultimately part of a state’s foreign policy strategy.

The paper unfolds as follows: first, we present the conceptualization and clarification of the term “sport diplomacy” and the concepts “soft power” (and sport) and “sportswashing.” We then apply our conceptualization to two relevant, empirical cases of an advanced capitalist state (the United Kingdom) and an autocratic state (Qatar), both of which have hosted an SME. We note that while a variety of states use the same

means (SMEs) to achieve different foreign policy goals, their different histories, regime types, economic systems, geo-politics, and levels of development influence their rationale for doing so. The accusation that the concepts developed here are “western-centric” is valid (see Bakalov, 2019), in so far as they emanated from “western” academia through “western” academics. However, our argument is that through an understanding of what such concepts mean to non-western states, their leaders, and the coalition of beneficiaries who invest in sport, we can effectively “map” states’ motives for investing in sport and sporting events globally. That is, by factoring in local context, culture, and history, the process of soft power acquisition and/or sportswashing can be understood as a *strategic* choice by those involved.

Conceptual Clarity

One of the reasons that the literature under the umbrella of “sport diplomacy” has not made a greater impact is that it is a broad term that is difficult to operationalize in research. Sport diplomacy is an area of study subsumed under the wider field of public diplomacy, which is usually understood primarily as any government-led attempts at communicating directly with foreign publics with the aim of building mutual trust, fostering cooperation, and presenting one’s country as attractive. This traditional definition of public diplomacy draws on diplomatic channels and is generally understood as a tool for securing a state’s foreign policy interests (see Melissen, 2005). However, it also “involves building long-term relationships that create an enabling environment for government policies” (Nye, 2004, p. 107). Beyond the top-down, government-led policy, an ever-increasing number of non-state actors are involved in less conventional diplomacy, involving such diverse organizations as NGOs, language institutes, universities, multinational organizations, and key sporting organizations such as the International Olympic Committee. Melissen (2005) described this as a shift to a “new” diplomacy, in which citizens play a far greater role. This process has been exacerbated by the advances in communication technology and social media. Sport diplomacy should be understood as a broad term given to the use of sport, sports organizations, key actors, leagues, athletes, major events, and so on for diplomatic purposes. A wide, and recent, definition of this term suggests that its constituent parts “. . . include interactions between nation states and territories, non-state actors and individuals across the broad spectrum of global sporting, cultural, economic and political activities” (Postlethwaite et al., 2023, p. 2). Both “soft power” (and sport) and “sportswashing” are concepts subsumed under “sport diplomacy” at a conceptual level down from it and as such ought to be understood as key strategies that states, state actors, and non-state actors choose to achieve their foreign policy goals through the vehicle of sport.

Key authors in the small field of sport diplomacy (Murray, 2012, 2018; Pigman, 2014; Rofe, 2016) have sought to promote this area of study and cite a growth in such analysis since 2013. While the academic field of “sport diplomacy” is small relative to, for example, “cultural diplomacy,” it ought to be noted that thousands of instances of micro sport diplomacy take place every day; that is, a myriad of small scale inter-cultural meetings through sports and sport exchanges. The main academic focus is

usually on the bombastic, spectacular “mega-events,” given their global coverage; a lot of the real sport diplomacy takes place at the micro level, however (Jarvie, 2023).

There is also a great deal of sport diplomacy taking place at a regional level, for example, in East Asia, which can be understood as a SME powerhouse with the region winning the right to host three Olympic Games in a row: Pyeongchang (2018, winter), Tokyo (2020, summer) and Beijing (2022, winter), after already hosting the FIFA World Cup (2002) and the summer Olympics (2008) (see Creak & Trotier, 2024).

Finally, mention ought to be made of the growing trend of country-level “sport diplomacy” strategies, that is, using the means of sport to achieve diplomatic ends. This is particularly apparent among “small” states (see Qatar section below), with New Zealand, Wales, and the Basque Country actively seeking to use sport, sports events, symposia, and cultural exchange to promote their nations to the wider world. Some larger countries also invest in sport diplomacy with the U.S. Department of State launching a “Sport Diplomacy Division” which sends top U.S. athletes abroad to “underserved” communities to give talks and act as role models, invites athletes, coaches, and administrators to the United States to learn how sport can impact positively on life (U.S. Department of State, 2024).

Soft Power

The growth in work on sport diplomacy is mirrored in the exponential growth of a body of work utilizing Nye’s concept of “soft power” and applying it to sport. Apart from a few very early adopters (Cull, 2008; Manzenreiter, 2010), the “soft power” strand of sport diplomacy literature only took off around 2012 (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2015; Grix, 2012b) and has since become the most used concept to analyze SME hosting and strategic sports investment on a grand scale.

In brief, the “power” side of Nye’s (2002) concept relates to an actor’s ability to “effect the outcomes you want, and, if necessary, to change the behavior of others to make this happen” (p. 60).¹ Nye suggests that for modern-day leaders, political outcomes can be achieved through an amalgamation of both “hard” and “soft” power strategies (Keohane & Nye, 1998). On the one hand, states may draw upon forms of “hard power,” through, for example, capitalizing on military force or offering economic rewards or sanctions; on the other hand, they may choose to indirectly adapt the political agenda in such a way which shapes the preferences of others through, for instance, emulating one’s “intangible assets”: an attractive culture, innovative ideologies, and/or credible and commendable institutions, values and policies (Nye, 2008). It is this latter approach which Nye calls “soft power”: “the ability to achieve goals through attraction rather than coercion” (Keohane & Nye, 1998, p. 98). Such attraction converts into power outcomes when those on the receiving end of the soft power strategy look to the state producing it for affirmation, guidance, and leadership, or seek to imitate their domestic and/or international achievements (Keohane & Nye, 1998).

It is clear that Nye’s (1990) conception of “soft power” is rooted in a specific western, liberal democratic perspective of its time (1990 marks the period shortly prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union and thus the end of the Cold War). The use

of the concept, however, has been widespread and has taken on a number of context-specific meanings as different states and key actors (both state and non-state) have adopted and changed its make-up to fit their engagement with it. Rather than jettisoning the concept, scholars need to understand the context-specific perspectives adopted, often in contrast to the western value-laden assumptions of the original coined almost 35 years ago. Although we develop this theme through the sports case studies below, it is worth noting the stark differences in the meaning of the term for a variety of states and their leaders. Germany's leveraging of the 2006 FIFA World Cup is one of the most striking "western" examples of an attempt to use a global sporting event to improve their international image, a key part of diplomatic relations. According to Spavan (Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 2010, Q.33, Uncorrected Evidence), Germany implemented an intentionally managed public diplomacy strategy:

. . . Germany's status . . . seems to be significantly better off in image terms now than it was in late 2005. The only factor that I can find to explain that is the 2006 FWC, around which it managed public diplomacy, in a very broad sense—international influence—as well as I've seen any country, and in a purposeful way. . . . Germany had a grand strategy, which I think they designed and pulled off very well.

This is "western" in the sense that Germany pursued a deliberate policy aligned with Nye's definition of soft power to improve its image (which prior to 2006 was still relatively negative), win over foreign publics, and improve its standing in international affairs (Grix, 2012a). Russia, a double SME host in 2014 and 2018 (the Sochi Winter Olympics and the FIFA World Cup), has a very different understanding of "soft power." For Russia, its state actors and other key agents, there was no intention of "winning over the hearts and minds" of foreign publics, which is the standard "use" of major sporting events in international relations. Rather, Russia's focus was on *domestic* soft power—that is, they crafted an internally aimed narrative of a Russian state returning to prominence in world affairs (Golubchikov, 2017; Grix & Kramareva, 2017). Whereas Germany set about investing heavily in a fan-based approach to the event, in part to overturn the stereotype of "boring Germans" and get away from references to the Second World War, Russia's (and China's, incidentally) response to "soft power" is influenced by their communist pasts (Wilson, 2015). Further, Russia set out to construct ". . . a national identity that maintains the current regime and contest(ed) Western dominance in the prevailing international order" (Wilson, 2015, p. 287).

Sportswashing

"Sportswashing" is a new, media-created concept that has gained a great deal of traction within a very short space of time; it has also brought with it a considerable amount of misunderstanding. First and foremost, it is a misnomer, as sport does not "wash" anything and audiences and those investing in sport know this. That is, the process of investing in sport, be it a premier league football team or an SME, usually has the

immediate effect of attracting the gaze of the world media, focusing on any negatives of the investor. The concept has become a short-hand way of criticizing (usually) non-democratic regimes or large corporations for using investment in world-renowned athletes, sports clubs, and sports events to detract from illiberal, nondemocratic, and/or exploitative practices in their home countries or businesses (Ettinger, 2023; Grix et al., 2023). By definition, a misnomer is something that has been named inaccurately and often before the *process* behind it is fully understood and that is exactly what happened in this case. The media were very quick to react to the large-scale investment in sport by nondemocratic states, coming to the conclusion that they are doing this to “cover up” illiberal practices. This is a logical, surface-level conclusion to draw. However, it is oversimplified and explains little about the complexity of the relationships involved in a sportswashing arrangement or the motives behind the massive investments in the first place. Before expounding on the “process” that “sportswashing” actually refers to, it is instructive to understand the recent origins of the term.

Western journalists make up one of the largest groups employing the term to mean the investment in sport as a way for illiberal regimes to “wash” their images (Delaney, 2022; Lawson, 2022; Week UK Staff, 2022), with the first recorded incident—according to Skey (2022)—back in 2015. This is interesting, as this is an era in which there was a “turn” in the granting of hosting rights for major sports events, characterized by a shift from hosts in the global north to those in the global south. This trend began with the Beijing Olympics in 2008 and continued with all BRICS² countries showcasing themselves through sport (Brazil: 2014 and 2016; Russia: 2014 and 2018; India: 2010; China: 2008 and 2022; South Africa: 2010).

It is clear that states associated with political and social values deemed unattractive by others deriving from, *inter alia*, particular historical events, do not have the option of a “soft power” strategy, but must adopt other strategies to pursue their national interests and foreign policy goals. This is where sportswashing comes in. As we have expounded elsewhere in much more detail (Grix et al., 2023), “sportswashing” is not a process that states and state actors undertake alone, rather, its very existence is the result of a dynamic coming together of a push and pull of interests between cultural prestige and economics. “Sportswashing” ought to be understood as a reciprocal, bidirectional relationship that entails economic, cultural, and social capital gains for all parties involved (i.e., those who invest and those who are invested in). We conceptualize the arrangement of “sportswashing” as consisting of those who possess cultural power and prestige (at the “center”—to use Connell’s [1997] center-periphery logic) and those who wish to have it (from the “periphery”); equally, those in possession of cultural power and prestige want economic capital and power in exchange. Thus, “sportswashing” is an arrangement in which capital rich countries seek to invest in cultural power and prestige (in this case, “sport”); those who possess the cultural power and prestige (usually the “west”) are only too happy to take the money offered by capital rich states. Historically, “western” states have used sport to distract from unpleasant aspects of their regimes, for example, the 1936 Berlin Olympics (see Boykoff, 2022); however, this is not the type of interwoven sportswashing arrangement that is prevalent today. Two further things are important to note here: first, the above explains the process of sportswashing, but

says nothing about the investors' motives; second, such processes are having—and will have—a profound impact on shaping the future of many professional sports (cf. the LIV Golf league, cycling, boxing, Formula 1 and so on). In this paper, we are concerned with the first, as the motives of investors in professional sport are closely linked to the pursuit of their foreign policy goals.

Conceptualizing Sport Diplomacy, Soft Power, and Sportswashing

Before turning to the empirical cases below to show how and why these different strategies to achieve foreign policy goals are undertaken, we discuss the conceptual relationship of the sport diplomacy term with the two specific sport diplomacy strategies of (a) using sport to acquire soft power and (b) entering in a sportswashing arrangement. We have already considered that “sport diplomacy” is the umbrella term under which the two strategies fall. We understand “sportswashing” as a process that represents the early stages of “soft power” acquisition for specific states. It is a long-term strategy that involves three “waves” of a “sportswashing” relationship and we have summed it up previously as starting with:

initial investments in cultural power and prestige by capital rich countries usually takes place against a barrage of *negative media coverage* reporting voices against the arrangement (“Wave 1”). This is followed by a prolonged period of *negative narratives and counter-narratives* about the incompatibility of “values,” “norms” and differences in culture between those investing and the investee (“Wave 2”; this period is shorter if it is a sports mega-event, for example, the Qatar World Cup). “Wave 3” represents the final phase in which the arrangement becomes “*normalised*”; that is, the critique dies down, media interest declines and the benefit of the injected economical capital begins to come to fruition (cf. the investment in multiple Premier League Football champions, Manchester City) (Grix et al., 2023, p. 8. Authors’ emphasis).

This is part of the investors’ longer-term strategy of moving away from “sportswashing” toward, eventually, the acquisition of “soft power” through the “mainstreaming” properties of sport. Therefore, we understand “sportswashing” to sit at the beginning of a continuum that will, eventually, lead to “soft power” gains over time. The massive investment in Manchester City Soccer Club and its subsequent success on the field is a good example of “Wave 3.” That is, the media coverage associated with the team rarely discusses who owns and bankrolls it (Davis et al., 2023; Ganji, 2022).

It is worth noting that while we use the terms “state” or “country”—incidentally, still the key unit of analysis in political science and international relations, of which SD is part—we are fully aware of the wide range of actors and agents that are involved in sport diplomacy broadly defined.

Examples

The examples that follow are of two very different states and have been chosen for that reason. The United Kingdom is a sovereign, advanced capitalist state and a mature

democracy while Qatar is a small, authoritarian, constitutional monarchy run by the al-Thani family. These stark differences lead to different choices when undertaking diplomacy through sport. As we shall see, the United Kingdom sees itself as a “soft power” superpower. Qatar, on the other hand, without the more universal “soft power” assets of an “attractive culture, innovative ideologies, and/or credible and commendable institutions, values and policies” (Nye, 2008), has chosen an alternative strategy of sport diplomacy, mislabeled “sportswashing.”

United Kingdom

Context

The United Kingdom is a sovereign, advanced capitalist state that has invested heavily in soft power acquisition through a number of specific strategies. A recent report by the British Council suggests that the United Kingdom is a “soft power superpower,” due to its arts, sport, values, and civil, and political freedoms (British Council, 2021, p. 2; see also Jarvie, 2023). The United Kingdom has long enjoyed high approval ratings from foreign publics for many years, it possesses sought-after and admired cultural goods (including the BBC, the English language and the teaching of it abroad, the Premier League, and so on), a mature democracy and remains a key destination for those fleeing persecution. This popularity is evidenced by consistently high placings in various soft power indexes such as the IfG-Monocle Soft Power Index (McClory, 2011), the USC-Portland Soft Power 30 (McClory, 2019), the Brand Finance Global Soft Power Index (Brand Finance, 2024), or the Elcano Global Presence Index (Elcano Global Presence Report, 2018).³ Interestingly, while the United Kingdom’s “soft power” is holding up, its role in global affairs and its influence could be said to be in decline, especially since leaving the European Union in 2016 (Chatham House, 2020; Ipsos, 2019).

The United Kingdom invests heavily in intercultural institutions in order to bring its culture and language to the world through the BBC World Service and the British Council. “Sport” is central to the attractiveness of the United Kingdom and has therefore, since 1997, enjoyed continued investment from successive U.K. governments.

Strategy

The United Kingdom practices a twin-track sport diplomacy strategy that not only invests heavily in elite athletes, but also in an elite sport system *and* the pursuit of multiple events to showcase these athletes globally. There is a clear belief on behalf of the U.K. government that the latter greatly enhance a state’s image and increase a state’s international prestige and “soft power” (cf. British Council, 2021; UK Government, 2022). The United Kingdom is no doubt what David Black has termed a “serial host” (2014) of sporting events. Since 2010 (the Women’s Rugby World Cup), the United Kingdom has staged no fewer than 100 international sporting events, including the 2012 Summer Olympics, the 2013 Rugby League World Cup, the 2014

Commonwealth Games, the 2015 Rugby World Cup, the 2017 IAAF World Athletics Championships, the 2019 Cricket World Cup, the 2020(1) Rugby League World Cup and the 2022 Commonwealth Games amongst others (UK Sport, 2024). In addition, the United Kingdom has, in the last three Olympic cycles, massively improved their sporting soft power through finishing fourth, third, second, and fourth, respectively on the hallowed Olympic medal tables in 2008, 2012, 2016, and 2020(1), actually improving on their 2012 home advantage in the following Olympics.

For the United Kingdom, hosting the Olympics was not an announcement of its “entry onto the world stage” in a way that Beijing 2008 or Rio 2016 arguably were, but instead an opportunity to “rebrand,” and portray an image of a new, modern Britain. The United Kingdom’s strategy is what we term “Defensive Marketing,” that is, “market leaders” undertake advertising campaigns not for awareness, but to maintain their preeminent position (Hauser & Shugan, 1983). Thus, the London Olympics were not necessarily equated with *growing* soft power or *enhancing* an image, as the United Kingdom was, and still is, already near the top of most soft power rankings and one of the favorites of foreign publics (Brand Finance, 2024). In an ever-changing world with the rise of China and other emerging states, defensive strategies aim to consolidate existing leading positions (Roberts, 2005).

Professional sports that are less dependent on Government funding also play a considerable role in enhancing the United Kingdom’s soft power and filling the Government’s coffers. The English Premier League is admired and the action on the pitch is followed closely around the world. According to a report by Ernst and Young (2019), the Premier League contributed £7.6 billion to the U.K. economy during the 2016/2017 season and this rose to £8 billion in the 2021/2022 season (Premier League, 2024).

Outcome

For the United Kingdom, there is no doubt that sport is central to its success as a “soft power” superpower. While U.K. Sport—the government arm’s length body responsible for distributing elite sport funding—seeks to cut its workforce by 25% (Wilson, 2024), there is no sign of a decrease in its aggressive hosting strategy of key sporting events (UK Sport, 2024). London 2012 was seen as an unqualified success by many, including the number of tourists visiting Britain increasing by 28% from 2011 to 2019 (Statista, 2023). Of course, these effects are not solely due to London 2012—Britain possessed significant soft power prior to the Games, and the sources of that did not disappear. However, it does indicate that London 2012 certainly was not a negative influence on British soft power, and the associated geopolitical objectives of the government. The United Kingdom’s premise of such a sport diplomacy strategy that is focused on elite sport and major sporting events is that athletes can act as role models for “ordinary” citizens to look up to and stars in international competitions can be understood as “diplomats in tracksuits” (Strenk, 1980). As we have seen, the United Kingdom does very well in “soft power” rankings lists; however, there is little evidence to suggest that this expansive elite sport/events focus has much impact on the

United Kingdom's citizens in terms of their physical activity and sports participation, which was *the* key aim of 2012. There is some irony in the fact that the United Kingdom has enjoyed unprecedented success in elite sport, yet at the same time it has record levels of physical inactivity estimated to cost the United Kingdom around £7.5 billion annually (UK Government, 2022).

Qatar

Context

The State of Qatar (henceforth “Qatar”) is an authoritarian country located in the Arabian Gulf. With a population of just under 3 million inhabitants, Qatar is what we may refer to as a “small state” (Brannagan & Grix, 2023). Despite its size, Qatar is, nonetheless, one of the richest per capita countries in the world, thanks to its abundance of natural gas and crude oil—latest figures suggest the country is the eighth richest in the world in terms of nominal GDP per capita, and the fourth richest in the world in terms of GDP per capita at purchasing power parity (see International Monetary Fund, 2024). Despite this, the state's foreign policy strategy centers on the desire to shape international perceptions of Qatar in order to meaningfully address two crucial concerns. First, the state seeks to engage with global markets and audiences to increasingly expand its non-hydrocarbon sectors at home, specifically those linked to tourism, finance, and commerce. This is due to the acute need for Qatar to diversify its national economy away from a heavy reliance on the sale of natural resources—at present, the state's oil and natural gas sectors contribute to 81% of Qatar's total government annual revenues (U.S. Energy Information Agency, 2023). Second, as a small state in a relatively volatile region, Qatar seeks to shore up its national security and stability by purposefully positioning itself as a vital regional and global influence in key areas such as politics, mediation, economics, and culture.

Strategy

In seeking to achieve these twin-foreign policy goals, one area Qatar has sought to strategically invest in is global sport. For the state's leadership, global sport acts as a key “niche market”—that is, a market in which, as a small state, the country can carve out for itself a distinctive “space” within the international community, and in doing so, separate itself from its neighbors (see also Peterson, 2006). In seeking to do so, Qatar's engagement with global sport is underpinned by two types of key investment. First is the state's desire to *stage SMEs*. Like the United Kingdom, so too can Qatar be described as a “serial host” of sports events. Qatar hosted its first “major” event in 2006 when it staged, for the first time, the Asian Games. Since then, the country has gone on to organize and host a plethora of regional and global sports events, including the 2010 IHF World Indoor Championships, the 2011 Asian Cup, the 2015 IHF Handball World Championships, the 2019 World Athletics Championships, and the 2022 FIFA World Cup (see Brannagan & Grix, 2023; Brannagan & Reiche, 2022).

Future events include the 2027 FIBA Basketball World Championships, and the state's staging, for the second time, of the Asian Games, in 2030 (Salari, 2023).

Second has been Qatar's *overseas investment in sport*. The state has, for instance, emerged as a vital sponsor of key global sports events, leagues, and clubs. Qatar Airways, for example, the state-owned flag carrier of Qatar, has established itself as one of the most prominent sponsors of global sporting brands, having previously acted as the first ever commercial sponsor of the FC Barcelona shirt from 2013 to 2017, along with securing its position as one of the main sponsors of the 2018 and 2022 World Cups, and the UEFA Euro 2020 Championships; in 2023, it was announced that Qatar Airways had signed a multiyear partnership to become the "Global Partner" and "Official Airline" of Formula 1 (see Qatar Airways, 2023). Furthermore, Qatar has emerged as a key investor in notable sports teams. The state has made high-profile investments in key European football leagues, specifically via Qatar Sports Investments—a subsidiary of the Qatar Investment Authority, the state's sovereign wealth fund—and its purchase in 2011 of French Ligue 1 club Paris Saint Germain for €100 million, and then in 2022 when it acquired a 22% stake in Portuguese club SC Braga (see BBC, 2023).

Outcome

For Qatar, investment in sport helps the state achieve its two key foreign policy goals. On the one hand, the state's investment in major sports events helps the state to overcome its heavy reliance on the sale of oil and natural gas by opening new, non-hydrocarbon sectors. A crucial small state strategy in this regard is the diffusion of one's culture, which, in most cases, is linked to attempts to foster material gains in tourism. Note, for instance, the success Qatar's neighbor, Dubai, has enjoyed in this regard. For Qatar, a critical objective is therefore to rival others in the region by engaging in ventures that support the state "to become a tourism destination of choice" for global onlookers, in part, via the desire to stage sports events and, in doing so, take advantage of "the thriving sports tourism market" (Qatar National Development Strategy, 2024–2030, n.d., p. 17). Consequently, like all cities and states who stage sports events, for Qatar, global occasions such as a World Cup seek to be strategically used to help (re-) educate audiences on what the state has to offer, be that in terms of its leisure and sporting attractions, its various culture and heritage sites, and/or its quality in hospitality services.

On the other hand, investment in sport also helps situate Qatar as a vital, influential actor in world affairs. A common small state anxiety is the future of one's national security, and while Qatar lacks the size of military required to meaningfully repel any serious territorial invasion, the state can shore up its survival through growing its importance on the world stage. One way Qatar does this is through its sale of oil and natural gas—indeed, as one of the world's largest exporters of natural gas, Qatar provides a vital energy resource to countless countries worldwide, countries who, in turn, then hold a vested interest in Qatar's continued survival (see also Ulrichsen, 2020). In similar ways, Qatar's investment in, and sponsorship of, global sport, along with its

staging of major events such as the 2022 World Cup, significantly helps to raise the state's importance on the world stage and allows Qatar to punch above its weight. Global sport does, for instance, further shore up the state's national security, as sport governing bodies, such as FIFA, and various international and European competitions, also come to hold a vested interest in Qatar's future stability and survival. Furthermore, the state's investment in sport arguably also helps Qatar leverage a seat at the table of strategic (sport) decision-making—take, for example, the Qatari Nasser Al-Khelaifi, Chairman of Qatar Sports Investments and President of Paris Saint-Germain, who in recent years has secured the positions of Chairman of the European Club Association, and Executive Committee Member of UEFA (2019).

Conclusion

In this article, we have sought to clarify the often-confused conceptual relationship between sport diplomacy, soft power, and sportswashing. We did this by arguing that the latter two concepts are subsumed under the broad umbrella term “sport diplomacy” and that they represent strategies at different stages of a similar process, that is, using sport to achieve specific foreign policy goals by states, state actors, and non-state actors. Further, noting that while a variety of agents involved in sport diplomacy use the same means (SMEs) to achieve different foreign policy goals, their geopolitics, different histories, regime types, economic systems and levels of development influence their rationale for doing so and the strategies they choose. We highlighted two examples at both ends of the “soft power through sport” continuum: the United Kingdom and its quest for soft power via elite sport and Qatar and its pursuit of the same via a sportswashing arrangement. Thus, both “soft power” (and sport) and “sportswashing” ought to be understood as diplomatic “tools” used by key agents pursuing foreign policy goals and key concepts with which academics can analyze these strategies.

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Notes

1. This short section rests heavily on Grix and Brannagan (2016).
2. BRICS is an acronym for Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa.
3. Soft power rankings are, in general, controversial and contentious for what they do or do not “measure.” However, as a general trend, they serve to show how a country is perceived by the international community.

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Author Biographies

Jonathan Grix is Professor of Sport Politics and Policy, Head of the Sport Policy Unit at Manchester Metropolitan University and Editor-in-Chief of the *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*.

Paul Michael Brannagan is a Senior Lecturer in Sport Management and Policy at Manchester Metropolitan University, UK, and author of *Qatar and the 2022 FIFA World Cup: politics, controversy, change* (Palgrave, 2022).