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The Olympic System: Toward a Geopolitical Approach

Une lecture géopolitique du système olympique

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Abstract
Sport has been a tool used in international relations since the dawn of the twentieth century and is still part of the international scene today. A geopolitical approach to sport is therefore useful and reflects Lacoste’s definition of geopolitics, which stresses the role of imagery in conflicts. Sport is actually a symbolic confrontation, and can be manipulated by various actors. First, we describe relations between the various actors in the Olympic movement because the Olympic Games are now the most popular show broadcast in the world and the Olympic movement controls the “family of sport” on an international scale. We then analyze how the International Olympic Committee (IOC) plays its own international relations game. Its power derives from its authority to recognize countries, as does that of the United Nations Organization. Taking part in the Olympic ceremony is proof of international recognition, and many new nations need it. This recognition has created a “sports geography” which is different from the traditional geography of states and sometimes is at odds with it. Moreover, the IOC strives to be an international player to strengthen its own position and to eliminate potential rivals who could run sports at world level. The other key players are states that use or manipulate sport in order to deliver messages to their own people or to the international community. Some create a sport-based diplomacy as an element of soft power. More recently, a new type of actor has begun to use sport: NGOs such as Greenpeace and Amnesty International use sporting events to deliver their own messages.

Résumé
Le sport est entré dans l’arène des relations internationales dès le début du XXe et n’en est jamais ressorti depuis. Une approche géopolitique du sport est donc possible dans le cadre de la définition de Lacoste qui insiste sur la place des représentations utilisées dans les conflits. Le sport, qui est un affrontement symbolique, se prête ainsi bien à la manipulation de la part de certains acteurs. À partir d’une déconstruction du système olympique, qui a développé les Jeux, manifestation planétaire la plus médiatisée, on peut analyser le rôle de chaque acteur et voir comment ils utilisent le sport à des fins de relations internationales. Le Comité international olympique (CIO) joue sa partition en tentant de devenir un acteur des relations internationales notamment au travers de la construction de sa propre géographie grâce à son droit de reconnaissance et en affirmant sa primauté face à des rivaux potentiels dont l’ONU. Les États utilisent le sport afin de distiller des messages vis-à-vis de leur population et de la communauté internationale au travers d’une « diplomatie sportive ». Enfin récemment, un nouvel acteur est apparu avec les ONG qui tentent aussi de se servir du sport pour communiquer.

Key words
olympism, geopolitics, State, international relations, sports diplomacy, international recognition, “sports geography”, soft power.
Mots clés  olympisme, géopolitique, États, relations internationales, diplomatie sportive, éconnaissance internationale, « géographie sportive », softpower.

Introduction

“The Olympic idea in the modern era is symbolic of a world war, one that does not openly reveal its military ambitions, but which provides—to those who know how to read sports statistics—a good appreciation of the hierarchy of nations.” This quote, an excerpt from a 1913 German sports newspaper, shows that Olympism was very rapidly integrated into the international relations game. Whether fascist regimes or democracies, states understood very quickly how they could use sport, symbolizing as it did a battle between athletes representing nations. An athlete’s or team’s victory becomes the country’s victory; we need only recall the spontaneous celebrations following the 1998 World Cup . . . An athletic battle is thus an easy and low-cost tool to bolster states. Indeed, “ping-pong diplomacy” is still used regularly as a substitute for or as a preliminary to diplomatic relations. This state use of sports was quickly identified by international sports authorities, who tried to avoid it through an apolitical, universal stance professed more or less strongly depending on the time period. However, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the International Sports Federations (ISF) are not above reproach either when it comes to using sports. Through certain initiatives, such as the Olympic Truce or the parade of the two Koreas, they have developed international relations deals to benefit them and strengthen their position. The IOC, which claims to be the world government of sports, thus conducts real diplomacy with states and the UN in order to preserve its position.

Starting in the 1980s, economic actors, the financiers of sport, have been the latest category of actor to interfere in sports. The money they have injected has led to a change of course in the sports system, signing the death warrant of amateurism and many of the values associated with sport. This money has allowed sports to develop significantly but has forced them to change format to make them more “telegenic” and to promote worldwide broadcasting and find new markets. Sport is therefore a social phenomenon, exploited by actors who develop strategies to take control or take advantage of them. This assessment thus leads us very naturally to Lacoste’s geopolitical analysis: “The study of power rivalries and power relations, which are the object of contradictory representations and are expressed over territories and the people living in them.” This paper applies Lacoste’s approach to the Olympic system, exploring in particular the dimension

2 This expression was used after the rapprochement between the United States and China after Nixon’s visit, which was preceded by a ping-pong match between Chinese and American players.
linked to international relations. The first section describes the primary actors in the Olympic system and the stakes involved. The next section covers the introduction of the IOC into international relations. The third section examines the role of states, not from a traditional historical perspective, but through the lenses of recognition, power, and the rewriting of history.

1 The Actors of the Olympic System

An analysis of the actors in the Olympic system must address two time periods: the long term, including the principal sports institutions—pillars of the sports movement (IOC, ISFs, National Olympic Committees [NOCs])—and the short term which comes around every four years—the celebration of the Games, where these actors are present but where other partners also play roles. It is during this brief period that we can take a geopolitical approach to sport, with media exposure giving it a unique stage.

Here we will deal with relations between the actors, distinguishing those who make up the system from those who are only present for the actual Games.

1.1 The Three Constituent Pillars of the Olympic System

Founded in 1894, the IOC has controlled the international sports movement throughout its history, contributing significantly to its development. Indeed, sport owes much to the IOC in terms of ideas, with the prolific contribution of Coubertin, but also in terms of organization as the IOC succeeded in laying the foundation for a non-governmental sports organization. As founder of the Games, the IOC proclaimed itself “supreme authority of the Olympic Movement” and holds all powers. It possesses total control because it decides the eligibility (recognition) or exclusion (rules 3.1 to 6) of the two other pillars of the movement, the NOCs and the ISFs. Its power in the sport world is enormous because it decides who has access to the Olympic Games, an event that is its exclusive property and has generated considerable sums of money since the 1980s. Its financial power has grown on the back of television rights and sponsorship by multinationals, allowing it to finance the ISFs and NOCs through major distributions of its income. Last but not least, the IOC appoints the host city by election (rule 34) and sets the Games schedule (rule 46.3): attendance at the celebration is thus entirely in its hands.

This position is not really threatened within the sporting world today, and the only real problem for the IOC is managing an ethical contradiction: How can it

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4 Olympic Charter 2007 version – The Olympic Charter is a document written and amended by the IOC that sets out the operating rules of the Olympic Movement.
5 “Any person or organization belonging to the Olympic Movement in any capacity is subject to the terms of the Charter and must conform to the decisions of the IOC” (rule 1.2).
6 US$2.6 billion during the 2005–2008 period, covering only television rights and sponsorship.
Fig. 1  Principle relations between the actors of the Olympic system.
Les principales relations entre les acteurs du système olympique.
keep talking about the virtues of sports and a philosophy of life, while managing a worldwide brand like a multinational? The organization of the IOC is very similar to that of Nike, particularly its business model: they own a brand, promote it, and adapt its product(s), but outsource its production and distribution. Thus, the IOC outsources the organization of the Games to one city and to the ISFs every four years . . .

The second element of the Olympic Movement, ISFs are dependent on the IOC to a greater or lesser degree. Some have developed their financial autonomy by creating and commercializing their own sports spectacles (soccer with the World Cup, tennis with the ATP circuit, or golf with pro circuits). On the other hand, other sports, such as modern pentathlon or fencing, would suffer enormously if excluded from the Games, which are their primary source of funding. Incidentally, the radical changes to the format of the modern pentathlon competition for the London Games betrays the weak position of these federations: the recent possibility of removing a sport from the Games’ put pressure on them to “rejuvenate” their sport and make it more telegenic . . . In the 1980s, these ISFs joined forces (AIOWF and ASOIF8) in order to present a more united front to the IOC in negotiations, and they took advantage of the crisis following the Salt Lake City scandal9 to improve their representation in the IOC session (“parliament”). However, changes to the locations of ISF headquarters are indicative of the IOC’s influence. Sixteen ISFs set up headquarters in Lausanne in the International House of Sports (funded by the IOC, the city of Lausanne, and the canton of Vaud), an indisputable sign of the IOC’s polarization of international sports.

The final pillar of the Olympic system, the NOCs are the representatives of the IOC in each country (and not vice versa) ensuring its control worldwide. The NOCs are responsible for developing the Olympic Movement by spreading its ideals. Within the structure imposed by the IOC, they choose the candidate city to organize the Games in their country (if there is more than one application) and are solely authorized to form the delegation of athletes going to the Games.

The NOCs, while dependent on IOC recognition, are the least controllable partners because they depend to a large extent on their state. The IOC recommends that the NOCs “preserve their autonomy and resist pressures including, but not limited to, political, legal, religious, or economic pressures that could prevent them from complying with the Olympic Charter.”10 But the NOCs have difficulty obeying this wish because although the IOC tries to fund the poorest NOCs (through redistributions via Olympic Solidarity) it cannot

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7 The decision to be able to exclude a sport was made at the 117th session in Singapore in 2005, and softball and baseball were no longer on the Olympic schedule beginning with London 2012.
9 A crisis revealing that votes were bought in awarding the winter Games to Salt Lake City.
10 Olympic Charter (rule 28.6), 2007 version
Fig. 2  Relations between the three pillars of the Olympic movement.

*Relations entre les trois piliers du mouvement olympique.*
guarantee sufficient income for them. In addition, as sports are a political issue, some NOCs are headed by state representatives or completely integrated into the state, as is the case in Asian countries. The NOCs have thus been used as political instruments, as demonstrated by boycotts of the Games. Although the IOC strives to defend the independence of the NOCs (an example is the suspension of Kuwait’s NOC in 2010 due to state interference), the use of national symbols in the Olympic ceremonies (the opening parade of delegations lined up behind their flags, medal presentations with the national flag and anthem, victory laps with the athlete waving the national flag) turns them into a showcase for patriotism and nationalism, contradicting the Olympic Charter: “The Olympic Games are competitions between athletes in individual or team trials, not between countries.”

The recognition of NOCs allows the IOC to extend the reach of its ideal, to show that in 2011 no state was outside the bounds of Olympism: the planet is conquered.

1.2 Affirmation of the Economic Sphere, a Fork in the Road for the Olympic System

Actors in the economic world do not belong to the Olympic Movement. They are outside of the athletic world but have become indispensable to the realization of the event. As R. W. Pound explains, “Remove sponsorship and marketing from sports today, and what’s left? An imposing machine, complex and well oiled, 100 years old—but with no fuel.” During the Brundage era, the IOC held its ground as far as amateurism is concerned: “Sport must be amateur or it is not sport. Sports played professionally are entertainment.” But beginning in the 1970s, Lord Killanin and then A. Samaranch in particular would decide in favor of merchandising the Games and thus allowing professional athletes, providing the IOC with the financial affluence that strengthened its power and its ability to globalization. Two major types of partners coexist. On one hand, there is the media, with television as the primary representative. This is the most generous provider of Olympic funding. As the number of television networks grew over the course of the 1980s, competition to gain exclusive broadcast rights escalated and prices skyrocketed. On the other hand there are the multinationals that associate their image with the event through the TOP (The Olympic Partners) sponsorship program, launched in 1985 at Samaranch’s instigation.

For the Games, television brings both money and visibility. Television rights, funded primarily by American networks, still represent the majority of IOC income, though the IOC has rebalanced its revenue with the TOP program. It is clear that television has built up the event and given it its place of honor. The

11 Olympic Charter (rule 6.1), 2007 version
13 IOC President from 1952 to 1972.
14 IOC President from 1972 to 1980.
15 IOC President from 1980 to 2001
Beijing Games confirmed this success with 220 countries or territories covered. We should therefore not be surprised by the sway this partner holds over negotiations. Competition formats must be changed to be more telegenic. In table tennis, the diameter of the ball was increased in order to make it more visible onscreen, and the number of points in a set was changed to add suspense. For Beijing, the swimmers had to appear for finals at nine o’clock in the morning local time (a biological heresy), so that they could be broadcast at prime time in the United States. The media’s influence over the competition does not stop there. Selection of the host city provides an opportunity to “penetrate” a new market. The selection of Beijing opened up sponsors’ access to a fabulous market . . . Finally, the media even has an influence over the sports schedule for the Games because the telegenic factor becomes one of the most important criteria for introducing a sport, as revealed very clearly by the Olympic Programme Commission. In its August 2002 report,\textsuperscript{16} we note, among many key principles, the following consideration: “The interest for a sport as shown by the public and the media must be considered a key factor in analyzing the sports, because it is essential to the Games’ success.”

For the moment, and thanks to considerable financial support from the media, the Games remain the last sporting event where advertising is not present or where restrictions are imposed on the dimensions of ads worn by athletes. However, we have strayed far from the founders’ ideal. The image of the Games has become first and foremost a commercial enterprise, above and beyond the rhetoric about Olympic values: “Market studies reveal that an association with the Olympic Movement boosts partner companies’ image and prestige in the minds of consumers.”\textsuperscript{17}

\subsection*{1.3 The Rise of the Legal Sphere, Inevitable Consequence of Introducing Money}

Among the diverse institutions on the periphery of the IOC, the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) and the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) play a growing role. Their appearance was not coincidental, but betrays an evolution in the world of sport.

The goal of the CAS, created in 1983 by the IOC president, is to develop an international jurisdiction for sports and to resolve conflicts while avoiding intrusion by civil judges. With increasing financial stakes and the absence of a worldwide framework, the sports world is no longer shielded from complex debates. Some athletes have turned to their own countries’ judicial systems to counter the decisions of the sports movement, while others have attacked institutions representing the Olympic Movement to protest not being selected for

\textsuperscript{16} IOC, Olympic Programme Commission, Review of the Olympic schedule and recommendations for the schedule for the Games of the 29th Olympiad in 2008 in Beijing, report by the President of the Olympic Programme Commission to the Executive Commission, 2002.

\textsuperscript{17} IOC, \textit{The Olympic Movement}, Lausanne, 2001.
Fig. 3  The main money flows between the different actors of the Olympic system.

Les principaux flux d’argent entre les acteurs du système olympique.
the Games . . . To halt this downward spiral, the movement needed an institution to serve as a reference and initiate applicable procedures in a universal way. Since 1994, the CAS has been independent from the IOC, which had funded it completely until that point, and the Convention of Paris has recognized the International Council of Arbitration for Sport (ICAS). It publishes the Code of Sports-Related Arbitration. Composed of experts in sports law, its decisions are equivalent to the rulings of ordinary courts. The IOC prompted the ISFs and the NOCs to designate the CAS as the final authority for appeals from various juries and disciplinary commissions, meaning that athletes give up the right to appeal to ordinary courts. There is therefore a clear legal system for sports that coexists with traditional courts and which allows the sports movement to maintain a form of independence. At the time of the Bosman affair, the European Union judged that sports could not continue to exist “outside of” society, especially considering the amount of money at stake: “The laws of competition and the provisions related to the domestic market apply to sports insofar as they constitute an economic activity.” Let us recall that the sports movement is still lobbying to maintain special status.

The increase in doping led the IOC to create a medical commission in 1960 and to begin anti-doping tests in 1968, but its activities were limited to the weeks of the Olympics and clashed with state doping. Few international initiatives were taken until the Festina scandal in 1998, in which the French legal system intervened and brought to light the seriousness of the situation. This necessitated a reaction from sports authorities. Following this new scandal, the WADA came into being, still at the instigation of the IOC (its creation in 1999 and first effects in 2004), with the mission to “promote, coordinate, and supervise the fight against doping in all its forms at the international level.” In addition to this statement of intent, the WADA established an anti-doping code with a shared list of doping products adopted by the IOC, the ISFs, and the NOCs, which is revised each year and even during the year. In 2007, the UNESCO International Convention against Doping in Sport was ratified, allowing national laws to be aligned with the Code and athletic and public legislation to be harmonized. By January 2011, 154 countries had ratified the convention.

18 Following a civil complaint, the Swiss Federal Court recognized the CAS as a valid court of arbitration but drew attention to the many ties between the CAS and the IOC, which compromised the court’s independence; hence the 1994 statute reform.
20 At first, only the Council of Europe attempted to launch an attack on doping. In 1966, it adopted a resolution against doping; in 1978, it formulated an anti-doping recommendation; in 1984, it adopted an anti-doping charter based on the work of the IOC medical commission. In 1988, an international charter against doping was drafted and supported by UNESCO. In 1989, the Council of Europe converted its charter into a convention with the authority of a treaty which aimed to stimulate the fight against doping. In addition, various governments criticized sports authorities for their inertia (for example, in Canada following the Ben Johnson affair).
21 Article 4-1 of the WADA statute, 1999.
22 http://www.wada-ama.org/fr/dynamic.ch2?pageCategory.id=484
More recently, WADA has insisted on developing testing outside of competition in order to catch certain products that would be undetectable during competition and thus, since 2009, has required certain athletes to provide a weekly time slot when they can be found at a specific location to undergo testing.

For the first time ever, the sports movement has given an international institution full power to fight against doping. The Foundation Board is made up of equal numbers of members appointed by the sporting world and by intergovernmental organizations, governments, public authorities, or other public organizations dedicated to fighting doping in sports. The agency is funded by the IOC and by equally shared contributions from public authorities.

This agency therefore has a vital role to play in defending the health of athletes and the ethics so often claimed by the sports movement. While it can serve to guarantee efforts in the sporting world for clean Games, is it not also clearly in the interest of sports marketing? We have seen this with the Tour de France, where a doping scandal has so tarnished the image of the competition that German public television has refused to continue broadcasting it. Would the IOC be able to find so many sponsors ready to associate their image with the Games if they were too frequently tarnished by doping?

1.4 Sport, a Political Communications Tool

The first use of sport as a political communications tool dates back to the beginning of the twentieth century, with states quickly realizing what they could gain from it. At the 1908 Games, Finland, at that time an autonomous duchy of the Russian Empire, appeared under its own colors, paving the way for cries for independence. Over the course of the twentieth century, the use of sport as a channel of communication about national identity was a constant, from minor forms (the IOC’s recognition of a state) to more aggressive ones. Then, very quickly an association was made in the collective unconscious between sports victories and a country’s power. As such, the French and the English refused to allow German athletes into the 1920 Games for fear they would be bested and the Germans would appear victors, after four years of war had just ended. Next, the Italian and German regimes took things a step further, extending the association not with the country but with the political regime: a “good” political regime would produce exceptional athletes. This legitimation of the regime within the country was also used vis-à-vis other countries and became an important element in the creation of national image. Communist regimes kept coming back and improving during the Cold War, something they denounced before, as the democracies followed their lead. For the two decades following the end of this period, one may have thought that economics had triumphed in sport and that the states used sport much less, but the Beijing Games demonstrated that the temptation persisted just below the surface.

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Other actors have tried to use the Games for the purpose of communications—first of all, minorities, whether African Americans at the Mexico Games with Smith and Carlos, or Tibetans at the Beijing Games, and then, terrorist movements through the attack in Munich. And finally, more recently, some NGOs have used the Games to exert pressure, in particular Greenpeace for ecological issues and Reporters without Borders during the Beijing Games.

The Games have become so important for communication purposes that they are attracting numerous actors using them as a sounding board to deliver their own messages, often far removed from sport issues.

2 The IOC, the Temptation of International Relations

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the IOC established itself as the major international sports organization, mainly because states had no interest in it. In that context, it was necessary to form international relations to organize the Games. At that time, negotiations were conducted through individual IOC members, influential people with extensive social networks. For a very long time, the institution built its international relations on an ad hoc basis. The politicization of sport and the tensions surrounding the Games eventually led the IOC to develop a more circumspect approach to its relations with states. Starting in the 1950s, the IOC launched a discussion about its status and how it affected its ability to deal with international relations. Should the organization have a legal character; whose laws should it follow? Shaken by a whole series of events, it also had to rethink its sporting geography. Actually, for a long time, the sports movement thought it could develop its own rules for recognizing countries. But little by little, this became an issue that went beyond sports and plunged the IOC into the tumult of international relations. Its recognition rules became stricter over time. Finally, the 1980s were a turning point in developing external relations that were much more systematic in order to strengthen its position as an essential actor in international sports management, especially vis-à-vis the UN.

2.1 The Search for a Legal Status Compatible with Its International Mission

One of the fundamental principles of international relations is mutual recognition: in order to interact, actors must agree to have relations with other actors and thus recognize their existence and status. To this end, from the beginning, the IOC made its universal mission clear by setting the goal of spreading sport and its values throughout the world. The IOC therefore needed a status compatible with its objectives. Initially, the IOC was an association founded in France in 1894. In 1915, Coubertin transferred it to Switzerland, a country that remained neutral while war raged in Europe. When this transfer occurred, the association’s legal nature had to be addressed when the IOC applied for planning approval for office space in the municipality of Lausanne. The municipality informed Coubertin that the IOC would need to reformulate certain articles in its statutes and enroll...
on the Lausanne trade register... Coubertin’s response illustrates the dilemma that would occupy the IOC up until the 1980s: “It is out of the question for the IOC, an international organization, to be reduced to the same status as a simple Swiss association, and it is totally inappropriate to imagine it being obliged to enroll on the trade register like a common shopkeeper.” The IOC’s status posed a key difficulty, however: “The IOC must be able to maintain its independence from any government (which demonstrates the institution’s non-governmental nature) while also requesting a status generally reserved for international organizations of a governmental nature.” It was not until 1952 that the IOC attempted to gain official recognition from governments, of its authority. However, it failed to gather enough support for the results to be convincing. In 1973, it created a legal commission to advance its status application, and in 1974, the session adopted a new definition for its status: “an association of international law with a legal character, but not attached to any one national law...” It still lacked recognition as an international organization, which became important during this period of boycotts (1976, 1980, and 1984), the IOC thinking that “the legitimacy accorded by the international community and friendly relations as good neighbors of states” could defuse them. It thus explored two paths. It tried to gain recognition by the UN, proposing a draft declaration to protect the Olympic Games, but this came to nothing. On the Swiss side, after threatening several times to relocate, in 1981 the IOC received a decision from the Swiss Federal Council (government) acknowledging that “in Switzerland, the IOC has full legal character and consequently enjoys all rights and liberties guaranteed by the Swiss legal order” and deciding “to accord your committee a distinctive status taking into account its universal activities and its distinctive character as an international institution.” The IOC failed to receive a headquarters agreement, the status held by certain intergovernmental institutions headquartered in Switzerland, but this recognition allowed it to amend its statutes from then on: “The IOC is an international non-governmental nonprofit organization of indefinite duration, an association of legal character, recognized by the Federal Council...” This agreement was further improved in 2000, when the Federal Council signed a bilateral agreement with the IOC to set it on equal legal footing and allow it to achieve the status of subject of international law.

25 Excerpt from a letter written on March 18, 1980, to the director by Attorney Carrard, excerpt from Morath, Le CIO à Lausanne, 315.
26 Olympic Charter 1974 version
29 Olympic Charter (rule 15.1) 2007 version.
unique to Switzerland encouraged Samaranch to develop international relations with the heads of state he encountered beginning in 1982.

2.2 Recognition, the Cornerstone of International Relations Policy: From Geographic Specificity to an Alignment with the UN

At the outset of the Olympic venture, the IOC set up the NOCs so that they could organize the sporting movement on their own territories and advance the Olympic cause. For the sake of convenience, it also passed to them the responsibility to form the delegations of athletes to the Games. Thus, little by little, it wove its geographic web, beginning with recognition of the NOCs. However, since the early twentieth century, the geography created by the sports movement was inconsistent with the realities of international law and political recognition. As such, starting in 1899, Bohemia, part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, formed its NOC, while Austria waited until 1908 to create its own. And while the presence of Bohemian athletes at the 1908 Games in London did not raise any particular concerns, by the 1912 Games diplomats were suddenly very interested in sports. Vienna then assumed that the IOC was supporting the Czech independence movement by allowing Bohemia its own representation, and Russia objected to the participation of an autonomous Finnish delegation. When questioned in 1911, Coubertin replied to the editor of an Austrian sports newspaper, highlighting the absence of Austrian representation in the IOC: “The fundamental rule of the modern Olympiad is summed up in two words: All games, all nations . . . I would also add that a nation is not necessarily an independent state, and that the geography of sports may sometimes differ from political geography.” That says it all! At the time, when sports were not yet a prop for international relations, the IOC drew its own geography. However, this position became a sensitive issue at the end of the First World War which had brought a series of territorial upheavals. The era of a sports geography independent of politics was gone, as sport made its entrance into international relations. Nevertheless, the IOC was able to play it by ear until 1960, when it amended its charter, clarifying its wording: “Whereas the Olympic Movement is apolitical, the terms country or nation in the present rules apply equally to a geographic concept, zone, or territory, within whose boundaries an Olympic Committee recognized by the IOC deploys its activities or functions.” This amendment was precipitated by the two Chinas: since 1932, China had had an NOC which was transferred to Taiwan in 1951 following Mao’s victory. In 1954, the IOC recognized a second NOC for

31 The atmosphere of European relations was becoming strained at this time, and the Balkans became an issue in the alliances that were forming (Italy, France, and Russia on one side and Austria-Hungary-Germany on the other). The annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1908 was intended to intimidate Serbia, and in 1912, several months after the Games, the first Balkan War began . . .
32 Citation taken from O. Mayer, À travers les anneaux olympiques (Geneva: Cailler, 1960), 63.
33 The Treaties of Versailles, Saint-Germain, and Trianon restructured Central and Eastern Europe.
34 O. Mayer, À travers les anneaux olympiques, 321.
continental China. This NOC shortly thereafter asked that Taiwan’s NOC be
derecognized, arguing that it could not represent China by itself. This fight insti-
gated by China paralleled at the UN. When the IOC refused, continental China
boycotted the Melbourne Games and left the movement in 1958. In 1959, the
IOC changed the name of the Taiwan NOC to correspond to the portion of the
territory that it actually covered and to pacify continental China’s demands.

During the period of decolonization and up until the fall of Communism,
recognition by the IOC became an international relations objective of new coun-
tries, and the IOC had to make decisions with increasingly important diplomatic
implications. Following even more political demands, in 1996 the IOC decided
to amend its charter again, in order to better define the term country, from then
on as “a state, territory, or portion of a territory that the IOC regards, ac-
cording to its absolute discretion, as the jurisdiction of the country it has recog-
nized,” giving the IOC considerable liberty but leading it down a slippery slope. The
change attempted to clarify the definition of a country: “In the Olympic Charter,
the expression ‘country’ refers to an independent state recognized by the inter-
national community.” However, this definition is not as clear as it may seem,
as international relations specialists had already pointed out the ambiguity of

35 S. Peacock, Géographie Sportive: Over 100 Years of Charting the Globe’s Territorial Disputes with the
this definition. How many countries are required to constitute an international community? Is the UN the representative organization of the international community, and is its recognition necessary? The recent case of Kosovo illustrates this difficulty. Declared independent by its Parliament on February 17, 2008, while it was a part of Serbia and governed by international forces, Kosovo was recognized in 2011 by 76 countries but not by Russia, China, or India. Kosovo has not been recognized by the UN because its independence contradicts Resolution 1244, which stipulates territorial autonomy but without violating the territorial integrity of Serbia . . . But this became an issue for the IOC because Kosovo applied for recognition as soon as it declared its independence.

Since the second half of the twentieth century, political changes and their territorial manifestations have required the IOC to clarify its recognition policy little by little. However, the sports movement maintains a geography all its own as evidenced by the “anomalies” of Taiwan, Hong Kong, and a number of more or less independent territories (particularly in the Caribbean and Pacific). The majority of these are due to history and the strong differences in states’ notions of sovereignty and how it is exercised.

2.3 The Diplomacy of the IOC, or How to Advance Ideals While Anticipating Competitors

IOC diplomacy aims to strengthen its position in order to remain the world government of sports. It succeeds by creating numerous ties with organizations that use the image of sport for their own activities in return.

In the 1950s, UNESCO was assessing the boundaries of its sphere of activities. In 1952, during its 7th session, it surveyed its members in order to define its work in the world of sport. In 1958, this discussion resulted in the creation of the International Council of Sport and Physical Education (ICSPE, now ICSSPE), recognized by UNESCO as the only worldwide organization for the protection of sport and physical education. The IOC saw it as a seed of competition. However, it was not until 1976 that UNESCO held the first conference for physical education and sports ministers in Paris to call for a “new world sporting order” inspired by the new world economic order advocated by the UN. African and Communist Bloc representatives supported this initiative because they had been unable to force the IOC to have all NOCs represented within the session. In 1978, UNESCO published the International Charter of Physical Education and Sport, and Lord Killanin suggested that it concentrate its efforts on sport in schools and leave significant autonomy to sports organizations.

This quiet battle to appoint the organization in charge of managing world sports changed with the arrival of Samaranch. He dedicated himself to

strengthening diplomatic ties with member countries, visiting almost all of them and systematically meeting with their heads of state (146 in 6 years!), but also with the UN. In this way, the IOC went on the offensive by getting closer to specialized UN agencies and organizations. In 1985, it signed a partnership agreement with the WHO. In 1986, a collaboration agreement with UNESCO launched a rapprochement between the two institutions. In 1993, the IOC developed a partnership with UNICEF, who wanted to use sports as a vector for education. In 1994, its collaboration was extended to include the HCR and the UNEP. As if this were not enough, in 1996 it began cooperating with the UNDP as well as the WFP. In 1997, the IOC signed an agreement with the FAO, and finally, in 2004, it collaborated with UNAIDS. In 2009 its efforts were finally recognized, with the IOC gaining observer status at the UN, allowing it to attend and speak at meetings of the United Nations General Assembly.

In 1992, a non-sport event offered the IOC the opportunity to develop another diplomatic approach, still with the UN. Following the breakup of Yugoslavia, the UN issued Resolution 757 which, as a unique occurrence in the history of sport, resolved to include sports competitions among the embargo measures against Serbia. But the Barcelona Games were due to be held soon, and an invitation had already been issued to Serbia. The IOC negotiated with the UN to admit Serbian and Montenegrin athletes on an individual basis under the Olympic flag. While the IOC was at it, it revived the idea of the Olympic Truce and made a diplomatic “deal” when it succeeded in getting the UN to adopt a resolution on the Olympic Truce. In terms of official recognition, there could be nothing better . . . In 1994, the IOC even succeeded in having the year declared the “International Year of Sport and the Olympic Ideal” by the UN. In a quid pro quo, the IOC has flown the United Nations flag at every Games since 1998. In 2000, the UN Millennium Summit, held in New York with more than 150 heads of state and government attending, adopted the Millennium Declaration which includes a paragraph on respect for the Olympic Truce, and since 2001 the UN has discussed a question entitled “To build a better and more peaceful world through sports and the Olympic ideal” every two years before the Games. The progress of the Olympic Truce has thus allowed the IOC to strengthen its relations with the international community and to become an undeniable partner, even though the Truce is a just pious hope that costs the IOC nothing, as it is governments that have to agree to respect it. At the time of the Beijing Games, Georgia and Russia were in the midst of armed conflict, demonstrating the vacuity of the Olympic Truce.

40 “The states will take the necessary measures to prevent participation in sports events on their territory by persons or groups representing the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro),” Resolution 757, May 30, 1992.
The choice of host city represents the final axis of Olympic diplomacy. Since 1984 and the success of the Los Angeles Games, many cities have entered the competition. The most recent nominations have demonstrated the enthusiasm of heads of state to defend their cities’ applications. In Copenhagen in October 2009, during the election of the 2016 Games host city, the Japanese prime minister, the presidents of Brazil and the United States, the president of the Spanish government as well as the king of Spain all traveled to be there, thus strengthening the stature of the IOC. The IOC’s power was reflected by the United States signing the UNESCO anti-doping agreement so that the city of Chicago could apply. Until that time, the United States had refused to sign, in accordance with its general policy.

### 3 Sport as a Tool of International Relations used by States

International relations are formed by many concepts, including that of mutual recognition, without which they would not exist, but also the concept of power. Indeed, sport is an arena where these two concepts are perfectly expressed. A sports match between two national teams automatically implies recognition of the other. Being present at the Games also allows for recognition of self and self-development. But for certain countries out to demonstrate their power, mere
presence is not enough; power must be expressed through the medal count or through hosting the Games. For the host city, the latter is an opportunity to send a message, particularly during the opening ceremony.

3.1 Sports Matches as a Concrete Expression of International Relations

To return to P. Collomb, “sport means staying in touch.” In terms of international relations, a sports match expresses a regime’s degree of acceptance and recognition of another regime and therefore becomes a barometer. We can distinguish three basic positions: refusal to meet, the “first step,” and the absence of significance once relations are strong and well established.

One may refuse to meet because the Other is the embodiment of Evil. This usually happens during times of hot ideological conflict. Thus, the USSR initially refused to compete in the Olympics because it rejected bourgeois sport. It even launched a parallel competition, the Spartakiad, with Red Sport International. This refusal to meet with the other, however, evolved as Soviet foreign policy evolved, when in the 1930s it began using sport to renew relations with the European powers. Olympic history is thus rich with boycotts by states such as the African countries in 1976, the United States and its allies in 1980, and the USSR and its satellites in 1984. Each time, sport was used as a symbolic, “low-cost” state weapon given the visibility of the action.

The “first step” policy takes advantage of the fact that sport is still considered “trivial.” The decision to play against each other sends a signal without too much commitment. However, this depends on the media exposure of the sport in question: when the United States sends a team of ping-pong players (a relatively small-scale sport) to China or wrestlers to Iran, its visibility is low, and people are not necessarily aware of attempts at rapprochement, whereas when Turkey and Armenia meet to play soccer, people are inevitably aware that things are changing. In any case, the authorities can always minimize the importance of the match if they lose.

In the third scenario, a sports match does not serve as a specific tool when states no longer consider sport important, because relations have normalized.

3.2 Attendance at the Games, from Recognition to Expression of Soft Power

Since the end of the Second World War, the Games have continued to welcome new countries, demonstrating their global appeal. The visibility they offer is far
Fig. 6  Political relations between actors in the sports system.
*Les relations politiques entre les acteurs du système sportif.*
superior to any other communication media. Thus, during the period of decolonization, new states applied to the UN for recognition by the international community, but they also simultaneously applied to the IOC to participate in the Games. Being able to line up behind their respective national flags at the opening ceremony, allows participants to demonstrate their country’s existence in the eyes of the world. For some states, the only objective is to participate in the Games. For others, the objectives are more complex but are always tied to the image they project to their people or to others. This speaks to the heart of Lacoste’s definition, as states are very focused on symbolism and perception.

During the parade of nations at the Beijing Games, viewers were able to see a delegation from Montenegro (an independent state since 2006), from Kiribati (a Pacific island unknown to 99.9% of the world’s population), and from Palestine (not yet a state in its own right). For those states, merely being at the Games was a success in terms of international communication. Other states tried to change their international image during this ceremony: to this end, Iran, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and the Maldives each chose a woman as flag bearer for the parade. The goal here was to address frequent criticisms from parts of the Western world about the status of women in those countries.

In addition to the visibility gained during the opening ceremony, some states are out to win medals for international kudos. Unless you turned off the news during the Olympics, you could not avoid hearing about Jamaica’s or Kenya’s athletic performances. These countries’ image changed, and for the better, because of their performance. But these were the product of a niche strategy by countries that cannot claim to be fighting for the top spot in the medal count, because the ultimate goal is, of course, to win gold. In Beijing, China pulled off an enormous public relations feat by winning the most gold medals. For some, this success symbolized the passing of world domination from the United States to China. Incidentally, the controversy in the United States over how the top place in the medal rankings was calculated was not merely on principle.  

### 3.3 Hosting a Large International Competition

Being selected to host a large international competition is also a (sometimes very expensive) victory and allows the country to take the international limelight during the event. Some countries, for example Qatar, have implemented a policy to transform their image: “Sports are the fastest way to send a message and promote a country. When someone says ‘Middle East,’ you immediately think ‘terrorists,’ right? Well, our leaders want Qatar to have a good reputation.”

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46 The IOC ranks countries by the number of gold medals and not by the total number of medals. China, having won 51 gold medals out of 100 medals total, was therefore ranked ahead of the United States, which won 36 gold medals out of 110 medals total. Some American media outlets still put the United States in first place . . .

47 Taken from the *Journal du dimanche*, Paris, February 15, 2004, M. Al-Mulla, Qatar Director of Communications.
At the Beijing Games, Chinese PR was negatively impacted by the campaign for human rights, but China was able to offset it mainly by its excellent planning for the Games. The Chinese state dedicated a staggering budget (US$40 billion) to the Games, as they were an integral part of its international communications strategy, with the opening ceremony as its crowning achievement. The ceremony allowed China to exhibit key features of its history, its values, and its civilization. Similarly, the Games in Salt Lake City and Sydney placed special emphasis on the treatment of minorities. All the same, let us recall that Native Americans and Australians had been deprived of their lands, moved, massacred, and confined to reservations. The opening ceremonies presented romanticized episodes and showcased minorities, particularly Cathy Freeman in Sydney. Not until 2008, however, eight years after the Games, did Australia’s prime minister issue an apology to the Aboriginal nation for all the ills it had suffered. In Beijing, one of the first scenes of the ceremony highlighted Chinese minorities (56) represented by children united around a Chinese flag, Tibet lost among the others. China then spotlighted the many discoveries, later adopted by Europeans, that China had bequeathed to humanity (the compass, silk, the printing press . . .) but did not say a word about recent history, ignoring the Communist period altogether. Other scenes in the opening ceremony presented a China uniting tradition (Confucianism, Tai Chi) with modernity, featuring the symbol of space already used by the US in Los Angeles and Russia in Moscow.48 These ceremonies are therefore a massive PR opportunity for states to reach millions of viewers.

**Conclusion**

After describing the primary relations between actors in the Olympic system, we focused on the role of the IOC and states.

The IOC has demonstrated its robustness and its ability to control world sports. Samaranch transformed the IOC from an amateur system into an international nongovernmental organization that succeeded in gaining access to the UN and recognition by governments to preserve its leadership in sport. He also introduced professionalism that now generates large amounts of money (too much?) and dysfunctions that threaten sport (especially doping). If “nonprofit” were not written into the charter, one might wonder about the very nature of the IOC, which from many angles looks like a multinational corporation managing a brand. Incidentally, the IOC’s most impressive feat has been maintaining a major inconsistency between the values it professes, the ethics of sports, and the reality of a real business.

48 The Chinese showed their taikonaut going into space (which took place three weeks after the Games), the Russians established communication between their cosmonauts in orbit and the stadium, and the Americans showed a man with the jetpack used by astronauts for their EVAs.
Governments have used sport and the Olympics whenever they could because the media sounding board allows them to convey and manipulate key images essential to their public relations and thus to their international relations in general. Their use of sports thus perfectly illustrates the principles of recognition and soft power.

However, this paper would be incomplete without reporting a recent evolution in the use of sport. Since the early 2000s, new actors have been out to hijack sport for their own ends. First Greenpeace at the Sydney Games and then Amnesty International and Reporters without Borders (RWB) at the Beijing Games took advantage of the event to convey their own messages. These NGOs, representing a new form of governance (?) also know how to play the PR game, and in Beijing we saw the boycott argument reappear. For the IOC, this evolution is a new challenge because it has had to face attacks coming not from states but from adversaries over whom it does not necessarily have a hold. Interestingly, these adversaries simply took advantage of the IOC’s own internal contradiction: professing universal, humanist values while holding its event in a country that does not offer all the “guarantees” was a risky bet, but also an important one in terms of “market share” . . . Another catastrophic factor in terms of image for China, more than for the IOC, was the fact that the Olympic torch was run through Europe. Here, we can only highlight the professionalism of the communication strategy of the NGOs that created the event. Incidentally, the IOC drew its own conclusions, deciding that future Games should return to “tradition,” that is to say, a Torch Run in the host country.49

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49 Decision of the executive commission meeting in Denver in March 2009.


