

# The Limits of Soft Power-Sports Diplomacy Templates in IR Research

Written by Nikos Lekakis

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2019/06/23/the-limits-of-soft-power-sports-diplomacy-templates-in-ir-research/>

NIKOS LEKAKIS, JUN 23 2019

The *soft power* concept has recently witnessed extensive application in international relations (IR) research focused on sport. The first work addressing 'sport & IR' was a late 1970s anthology by Lowe *et al* (1978), which attempted to synthesize knowledge of sport, culture and political institutions, but it lacked clear theoretical foundations. In the 1980s, Taylor (1986) cautioned that sports and IR research had mutually neglected each other. In the 1990s, Houlihan (1994) finally succeeded in laying down the theoretical premises of the field, in his pioneering study on *Sport and International Politics*. He did not cast a new theory but placed his study under three groups of theories: *The realist, the pluralist and the globalist*. In the last group, his focus was on the international system, fearing that non-state actors such as multinationals would eventually weaken the state's ability to use sport for diplomatic purposes. Several years later, Levermore and Budd (2004) and Allison and Monington (2005) pointed out once again the rare inclusion of sports in IR research. Later on, others have been trying to fill the gap with pertinent studies in various publication outlets. This article is a critical review of the relevant literature and positions itself strictly in relation to IR theories – not any other academic discipline and without attempting to recast any IR paradigm.

### The Influence of *Neoliberalism*

The main contribution of the *neoliberal* paradigm in IR generally is the role it reserves for international political institutions in an 'anarchic' international system, the cooperation among states for mutual benefits, and the aggregation of societal preferences in explaining the state's behaviour in international affairs. Since the 1990s the *neoliberals* had also fittingly argued that, beyond material (hard) power, states could employ social and cultural resources towards foreign policy goals. Therefore, a country's attempt to enhance its global image using such means is in effect employing them as an IR tool. Nye's (1990) concept of *soft power* has been at the core of 'sport & IR' research. It comprises two components. First, the ability of an actor (referring to the state) to obtain preferred outcomes through means such as agenda-setting, persuasion and co-optation or attraction – not the use of force. According to Nye (2011, p. 21):

...the types of resources associated with hard power include tangibles such as force and money. The types of resources associated with soft power often include intangible factors such as institutions, ideas, values, culture, and the perceived legitimacy of policies.

Second, this ability of the state makes it an example that other states would dash to emulate. Even if followed closely and instrumentally, however, this power can be used effectively, only if other states acknowledge it. Since soft power resources are not activated by themselves, Nye (2008, p. 95) delineated the concept using the term 'public diplomacy' (PD):

Public diplomacy is an instrument that **governments** use to mobilize these resources [culture, values, policies] to communicate with and attract the publics of other countries, rather than merely their governments. Public diplomacy tries to attract by drawing attention to these potential resources through broadcasting, subsidizing cultural exports, arranging exchanges, and so forth. But if the content of a country's culture, values, and policies are not attractive, public diplomacy that 'broadcasts' them cannot **produce** soft power. It may **produce** just the opposite [bolds by

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author].

This definition implies a logical sequence wherein PD is used to convert soft power resources into *soft power*. However, in later works, Nye reversed his position. He (Nye, 2010) argued that PD uses both hard and soft power resources to produce *smart power*. He (Nye, 2011) also christened the combination of hard and soft power *asliberal realism*. For him, the absolute distinction between “hard and soft power” is by no means perfect. Threats to use force are intangible resources, yet they are part of hard power. Co-optive (attraction) strategies are soft power resources aimed at getting others to do peacefully what you want, but they can lead to hard power blocks such as military or economic alliances. Thus, for Nye, PD must also be smart. This type of PD requires daily communication, strategic communication (in itself a term the US military prefers to PD) and a long-lasting relationship with key persons engaged in it – i.e. PD continuity over an extended period of time (Gregory, 2009; Wallin, 2015). As Lane (2013) explains, PD using cultural resources has emerged as *cultural diplomacy* and in the particular case of sport as *sports diplomacy* (SD). However, Nye never did a treatise on sport as soft power, other than having argued that the soft power of the US is rooted in cultural values which, among other resources, include professional sport – citing NBA player *Michael Jordan* as an example (Nye, 2004, 2011).

The *soft power* and *SD* templates appeared in the sports literature of the late 2000s and early 2010s (Manzenreiter, 2008, 2010) and have been employed systematically ever since. A group of researchers believe that if cultural resources are part of the new ‘politics of attraction’ or ‘new diplomacy’, mega-sporting events can be understood as part of a *soft power* strategy. Analysing country examples Grix and Lee (2013) highlight the usefulness of soft power as a broad-brush device to understand emerging states’ motives for hosting mega-sporting events. Studying Brazil’s hosting of the 2014 FIFA World Cup and the 2016 Olympics, China’s 2008 Olympics and South Africa’s 2010 FIFA World Cup, they consider the extent to which soft power is being used at the communication and attraction levels. They examine the constitutive, performative and discursive nature and role of sports mega-events in IR using a state-centric approach to explore PD action. They argue that the socializing of others through PD is both an exercise and augmentation of the host state’s soft power. A state usually perceives the hosting of a sports mega-event as PD to showcase and enhance its soft power ability. In other words, hosting such an event shows the capability of large developing countries to enhance their agency in global affairs thus boosting their universal appeal. SD aims at foreign publics as opposed to transnational diplomacy that targets policy-makers and governments. The case of modern Germany (Grix and Houlihan, 2014) reveals that it invested in the hosting of the 2006 FIFA World Cup in an attempt to rectify its tarnished international image due to WWII. Unlike Germany, the UK’s hosting of the 2012 Olympics was more about attracting business and trade, revitalizing London’s East End, and pushing mass sport participation, than enhancing its international image.

Even within this group, however, scholars like Grix and Brannagan (2006) and Brannagan and Giulianotti (2018) argue that there is a need to understand how soft power helps states gain international prestige as well as how they can prevent such strategies from backfiring – something that Nye himself (2008) had pointed out. In the latter case they may lead to what they call ‘soft disempowerment,’ citing the example of Qatar that will host the 2022 FIFA Games. They question soft power at four levels: a) What soft power is b) how it is acquired c) why it remains a Western-centric idea; and, d) how academic research could increase its focus on the state. While acknowledging the contribution and concerns of these scholars, the fact is that diplomatic studies and international sport have longer antecedents than Nye’s concepts of *soft power* and *PD*. *Classical realists* spoke about the ‘power of opinion’ and *neorealists* argued that using force was not always the best way of advancing a nation’s foreign policy goals (Lee, 2011). Edmund Gullion, Dean of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University, had coined the term PD in the 1960s and SD dates back to the Cold War era, when there were systematic attempts on both sides of the bipolar system – especially the Soviet bloc – to convey a better image to the other bloc’s public through organized elite sports in international competitions (Dichter and Johns, 2014). It should also be evident that studies on hosting mega-sporting events use only one tenet of the *neoliberal* paradigm. Therefore, they are one-dimensional and overlook the possibility of employing frameworks based on syntheses of IR theories (Lekakis, 2019).

## Further Limitations to the Soft Power-Sports Diplomacy Templates

Studies grounded on the *soft power-sports diplomacy* templates are faced with additional essential challenges.

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According to the US Advisory Committee on Public Diplomacy Committee (APCD, 2016) governments around the world continue to express interest in such campaigns and programmes, including their performance monitoring and evaluation. Therefore, to become studies useful in policy analysis, works using the soft power template need to incorporate concrete policy assessments, i.e. provide evidence on the outcome of related campaign initiatives. This proposition raises the complex question 'how we measure soft power and SD'. Foremost, we need to know what exactly we should be measuring.

According to Nye's definition of PD, the logical progression holds that SD converts soft power resources into soft power. Specific SD programmes use soft power resources, aiming to create desired IR outcomes. In contemporary SD programmes, the ideas and values of sport are soft power resources, actualized to generate IR outcomes via their reproduction. These IR outcomes are called *soft power*. Soft power, therefore, is a product of SD and without it there is no production of soft power, for the IR impact appears to be implicitly embedded in soft power. Soft power and SD are two entirely different things to measure. At the very least, SD takes place on a campaign or programme basis, whereas soft power does not. One could measure whether SD creates soft power outcomes, or whether soft power creates effective SD. Nonetheless, the interest remains primarily in measuring the contribution of sport campaigns to soft power.

Nye was concerned with the effectiveness of his proposed policy and suggested that polls and focus group views could yield some actual measurement of soft power. There have been relevant attempts since 2010, but *The Soft Power 30* (McClory, 2015) produced a soft power ranking for thirty countries in 2015. The ranking took into account each country's characteristics including the quality of its political institutions, its cultural appeal, the strength of its diplomatic network, the global reputation of its system of higher education, the attractiveness of its economic model, and its digital engagement with the rest of the world. Nye, who wrote the foreword to that publication states (pp. 6-7):

This project does an admirable job... It builds upon my own work...by assessing each country against a carefully considered set of objective metrics as well as new international polling data. The result is the clearest picture to date of global soft power. It is a useful addition to the field of research on soft power, and I suspect it will provide food for thought in capitals around the world.

The specific exercise of assessing the soft power weight of a non-continuous sports diplomacy campaign, such as hosting a mega-sporting event, is admittedly demanding. However, one at least needs to have some measured outcome of a sports initiative in the foreign policy arena, compared to outcomes of other PD campaign packages. Aware of complications around the true content of the concept, Grix *et al.* (2015) attempted to shed light into the soft power of sports. They also initiated the discussion of how we can evaluate the impact – however, not in comparison with other forms of soft power but – in the specific context of hosting mega-sporting events. Searching for evidence of the impact of the 2012 Olympics, they relied on reports by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, which were contradictory and led them to conclude that the UK's SD had not produced any positive impact on the country's foreign policy. Grix *et al.* state (p. 478):

What is clear, however, is that while the use of sporting mega-events appears to have become part and parcel of most states' soft power packages, the benefits that are said to derive from hosting them remain overstated, over-inflated and under-researched.

This conclusion is logical but not actually in line with Nye's notion of soft power and PD. PD is a long-term process, and soft power is a cumulative outcome. The only way to measure the result of such initiatives is to examine their relative contribution to the production of a country's aggregate soft power. Grix *et al.*(2015) attempted also to determine the impact of the 2012 Olympics on UK's IR but could not arrive at a firm conclusion. Thus, they end with an argument that brings up another highly controversial issue that hinges on Nye's distinction between hard and soft power. They argue that for countries such as the UK that possess hard power, soft power only comes to reinforce their objectives. They also add that for countries not possessing significant hard power resources, sports are a potentially effective soft power resource.

The above distinctions do not appear to be successful for some reasons including Nye's re-conceptions of hard and

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soft power, the emergence of military PD, and the results of recent soft power rankings. According to *The Soft Power 30*, the top ten countries possessing soft power – the UK, Germany, the USA, France, Canada, Australia, Switzerland, Japan, Sweden, the Netherlands – also happen to be among the world's leaders regarding hard power. In fact, the UK is at the top of the soft power ranking list. In addition, evidence from research on India indicates the country's inability to capitalise on its soft power resources, including cricket diplomacy, due to a combination of three factors. First, there is an overestimation of the country's soft power. Then, it lacks adequate hard power, not sufficiently developed for soft power to have a noticeable impact on India's foreign policy. Finally, an incongruous element in the country's self-image is its multi-ethnicity, since soft power also lies in the coherence of a nation's international identity (Mukherjee, 2014). According to this argument, soft power must be adequate and also have the support of sufficient hard power – India may, in fact, be able to raise it through its military collaboration with Russia. Along a similar logic, a recent study on Japan (Cha, 2016) overestimates sport as a soft power resource. It contends that, by hosting the 2020 Games, Japan can re-emerge on the world stage as a global power and a global citizen. The study overlooks the fact that Japan is already among the top countries in *The Soft Power 30* ranking. Most importantly, in the past, Japan enjoyed impressive IR due to its hard power. It became the second largest economy in the world of the 1960s, it obtained accession to the OECD bloc and has secured membership in the G7 summit. Therefore, its re-emergence on the global stage will not really rest on sport as soft power.

Some scholars prefer to follow a strictly 'diplomatic studies' approach, elaborating on SD with no reference to IR theories. Murray (2018) emphasizes the distinction between traditional diplomacy carried out by state institutions and modern diplomacy, which employs sportspeople that are not necessarily professional diplomats. To establish the 'essence' of contemporary diplomacy, Murray employs an interdisciplinary approach based on anthropology, culture and sociology. Anthropology and rock-art, for example, can shed new light on the diplomatic embryology of human beings, the groups they formed and the relations between those groups. Diplomacy helps improve relations between rival groups, avoiding war, conflict, division, disunity, extremism, and the like that could finally lead peoples to extinction. Some others use the *soft power-sports diplomacy* templates but they stretch them beyond Nye's ideas. Simon Rofe's (2018) anthology offers a global coverage of sport as a diplomatic tool, presenting experiences from Asia, Europe, and North America, Afghanistan before WW II, China during the Cold War, the US during the Reagan administration, and French club sports. The sole contribution of this anthology is that it advances sports history, embedding it theoretically into the field of 'diplomatic history'. Another anthology by Esherick *et al* (2018) explores the influence and effectiveness or ineffectiveness of sport diplomacy in improving long-term relations between nations, offering case studies from the US, Canada, New Zealand, China, Russia, Brazil, the Koreas, Iran, South Sudan and Belize. Particular emphasis is placed on programmes operated by global political players and NGOs. These works offer practical ways of pursuing SD but they actually fail to make a convincing case for the efficacy of *soft power*.

Lastly, the *soft power-sports diplomacy* templates have also been oversimplified to the extent of being 'popularised' and incompatible with their ontologies. Studying Kosovo's quest for international recognition, Brentin and Tregoures (2016) emphasize 'the soft power of sport' towards that goal. That is not theoretically consistent. The mere act of seeking membership in international sports governance organisations is not an own soft power attractive to other states. All unrecognised states try to gain international recognition via membership in such organisations first. The proper question would be 'what are Kosovo's sport attributes that make it an example others would dash to emulate.' The Esherick *et al* (2018) anthology includes various NGO initiatives including UN programmes such Sport for Development and Peace, which are supported by FIFA, as examples of SD. Often, FIFA and IOC assume their own initiatives aiming to also pacify communities in conflict through sport. There is no problem when an NGO of a state (e.g. a famous football club) uses SD to advance that state's soft power. The question is how comparable are the SD actions of a state or one of its NGOs with those of an NGO such as FIFA, i.e. 'whose image and IR is an international sports governance organization trying to enhance'.

## Conclusion

This article has been critical of the abundant use of the *soft power-sports diplomacy* templates in studying sports and IR. The concept has been influential among researchers, because it appears relatively easy to apply. However, there are three major shortcomings. The two templates comprise only one dimension of the *neoliberal* paradigm and thus relevant research remains devoid of theoretical IR significance. They also fail to provide a meaningful platform for

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understanding the real international impact of mega-sporting event campaigns on a country's total soft power and assist in policy analysis. And, lastly, they have been either stretched too much or popularized to the extent that they appear to be inconsistent with their own ontology.

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**Nikos Lekakis** is postdoctoral fellow in the Department of Politics, University of Crete, Greece. He has ongoing research in both urban and international politics. His recent work highlights the application of US urban politics theories outside North America and the application of international relations (IR) theories to the study of conflicts and rapprochements. Among his IR publications are: Lekakis, N. (2015). Can football loosen the 'Gordian Knot' in Cyprus?. *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, 7(2), 255-282 and Xenakis, D., & Lekakis, N. (2018). From *Hasbara* to the Palestine-Israel Sport Conflict. *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 29(2), 328-351.

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