

Opinion – The Olympic Games as a Reflection of Global Power

Written by Lev Topor

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2021/08/15/opinion-the-olympic-games-as-a-reflection-of-global-power/>

LEV TOPOR, AUG 15 2021

What is a great power, and specifically, what can define a great power? This is a difficult and complex question many great thinkers and practitioners in the field of international relations have attempted to answer. Ultimately, the nature of a possible answer depends greatly whether one is a realist or a liberal. The debate is non less than eternal with great 'academic powers' battling, or just vigorously debating at the very least, in conferences, articles and books on the very nature of international power – From Kenneth Waltz to Joseph Nye. My argument here, much of which is based on a more realistic approach, is that the tally of medals in the Olympic games can describe the global arena and specifically the balance or distribution of power.

During the recent Olympic Games in Tokyo, Japan, I have realized that an element which can define great powers and describe the global system is success in sport mega-events like the Olympic Games. Even though the official Olympic motto is “Faster, Higher, Stronger – Together”, I take a far more pragmatic approach to this event and argue that the Olympic Games are another platform on which global powers compete. The Olympic games may market “togetherness” on the outside, but the games are nothing more than an individualistic competition between nations to show one another who dominates the global arena – just without the use of force or economic pressure.

I argue that the tally of medal counts can suggest which nations are powerful enough to dominate the Olympics and consequently – the world. On 8 August 2021, the last day of the event, only one nation gained over one hundred medals – the United States. Indeed, all individual and team victories by competitors are impressive expressions of human spirit and perseverance. Those who won, and even those who merely competed, deserve the admiration and adoration of sport enthusiasts worldwide. However, one cannot but wonder how some nations manage to present record breakers and champions by the hundreds or by the dozens and other nations can hardly present one.

What can explain the success of great powers in the Olympic Games and in the international arena? Demographic significance might sound as a good explanation at first, but how can one explain the United Kingdom's sixty-five medals for its approximately sixty-seven million people compared to India's seven medals for over a billion people? How can one compare the American lead, with over three hundred million in population, over China which by now approaches one and a half billion people? Countries like India or even Israel with its four medals might be treated as regional powers as they have significant military and economic power, but can they actually stand head to head with the highest ranked nations?

Should power be measured by the number of nuclear weapons, aircraft and tanks? Should it be measured by economic strength or cultural appeal? Can the membership in international alliances be part of the equation? The answer is complex, power should be measured by all these factors. But what turns a nation into a great power? As Waltz has put it in his 1979 *Theory of International Relations* (p.131), a great power is one which has significance in population, territory, resource endowments, economic capabilities, military strength, political stability and competence. I base my argument on Waltz's insights and assume that resource endowments, generally but also in sports and education, are very significant for the analysis of the global system.

The correlation between medal counts and power may seem unrelated as individuals or teams are those who run,

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swim, jump, grapple, box and sweat for the medals. Yet, the most prestigious sport events can only be conquered by those who are nurtured properly. Thus, nations which cannot adequately educate and train their representatives have less resources to spare in general or on sports. If a strong and wealthy nation cannot allocate resources for the training and education of its representatives, it might mean that this nation is not at all strong or wealthy enough to dominate the global arena or its related regional arena. For instance, North Korea and Iran may have space programs or attempted to develop nuclear capabilities, but it was done at the expense of their citizens.

Furthermore, medal counts in events like the Olympic Games or world championships can suggest whether a global system is unipolar, bipolar or multipolar (or nonpolar). That is, a nation's endowment for sports and education, despite the many complexities of the global system like economic problems, conflicts and wars or even pandemics, can indicate its strength. If a nation seeks global hegemony, this nation will attempt to be victorious not only on the battlefield or in global markets, but also in other and softer events like the Olympic Games.

The official Olympic creed is "The important thing in life is not the triumph, but the fight; the essential thing is not to have won, but to have fought well." Yet, I cannot think of a single nation, large or small, powerful or weak, liberal and progressive or conservative and autocratic, that might find this sentence appealing. Nations seek power and dominance or, at the very least, to have the ability of making independent decisions and not be dictated by others.

What can describe the global arena and the balance or distribution of power? Scholars tend to describe the global system by mentioning key events in global history like wars, crises or peace treaties. I argue that sports mega-events should be considered more seriously as each Olympic Games or a short series of them can describe global shift in international presence and dominance. After World War II, the global arena could be described as bipolar with the United States (US) and the Soviet Union its key players. This bipolar system of course was divided between the West and the East. It was also divided between the five sovereign nations which grasped a permanent seat at the United Nations (UN) Security Council in 1945, making the bipolar system slightly less bipolar and more multipolar (United States, United Kingdom, Russian Federation, China, France).

Now, the list of global powers includes the United States, Russia, China, the United Kingdom and Germany. In 2021, a possible list of ten great powers, in a descending order, might include the United States, China, Russia, Germany, the United Kingdom (UK), France, South Korea, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Another possible list can include India, Japan, Iran and Israel. These lists are based on economic capabilities or military strength. However, as I argue, these lists of global powers and thus the description of the global arena can be adjusted more precisely. If one seeks to grasp a more complete understanding of the global system one needs to count medals, not aircraft or tanks.

Finally, let us count medals and place nations in a descending order – let us describe the global balance of power. This can help answer the questions of which nation dominates the global arena and which are just behind, breathing down the hegemon's neck? By the end of these Olympic Games in Tokyo, the most significant global powers are the United States, China, Russia, the United Kingdom and Japan, in this order. Australia, Italy, Germany, the Netherlands and France are just behind. As it seems, the United States, China and Russia still dominate the global arena. Furthermore, not only a medal count can describe regional arenas as well, but it can also describe the international arena more precisely by combining the number of medals in each alliance.

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Dr. Lev Topor is an ISGAP visiting scholar at the Woolf Institute at the University of Cambridge and a senior research fellow at the Center for Cyber Law and Policy at the University of Haifa in Israel. He is the co-author (w/ J. Fox) of *'Why Do People Discriminate Against Jews?'* Published by Oxford University Press in 2021 and the co-author of "Russian Cyber Information Warfare" (w/ A. Tabachnick) published in the *Journal of Advanced Military Studies* in 2021. Lev publishes scholarly works and practical reports on the topic of cyber warfare and IR,

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