



Role of World Cup Soccer in Healing the Gulf Region: Zeal of Qatar's Sport Diplomacy and Soft Power

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Abstract

The study discusses the importance of the Qatar World Cup in 2022 and its implications for Gulf area relations in terms of sports diplomacy and soft power influence. This research employs a descriptive-analytic technique. Descriptive literature reviews synthesize individual studies and discuss the research procedures and findings of referenced studies. Numerous worldwide worries about the issue with the gulf nations' embargo in regaining sovereignty and the Islamic and cultural values that are foreign to Western audiences will continue to put Qatar's reputation management and branding tactics under pressure. Nonetheless, maintaining a role on international soccer grounds via partnerships, ownerships, and tournaments, as well as aggressively attempting to improve and ameliorate the nation's international position, aided Doha in its sports policy objectives in the years leading up to and during the tournament. Its commitment to leaving a lasting legacy beyond December 2022 will also aid the state throughout the post-event era of empowerment. Finally, the article provides an overview of recent research on Qatar's worldwide strategic plan for sport, whether for investing and diversifying state income or political and policy diplomatic purposes.

Introduction

Hosting a big international athletic event, including the World Cup or the Olympics, significantly influences the host state's public image. This article examines the notion of sports diplomacy to comprehend how mega-sporting competitions contribute to a state's worldwide empowerment or disempowerment. It examines Qatar's bid for the 2022 FIFA World Cup from the perspective of using and modifying prior hosts' experiences and their own (soft) power capabilities, skills, and reach.

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Despite its small size, the emirate of Qatar has transformed rapidly since the 1970s into one of the world's wealthiest nations, owing to its vast fossil fuel reserves and the rise of globalization. While Qatar's rise to prominence has been realized mainly by financial considerations, the emirate has intentionally expanded into other sectors in order to capitalize on the momentum created by its riches. The emirate has seen sports as an attractive sphere for trade and diplomacy, as shown by its aspirations to host mega-events such as the FIFA World Cup in 2022 and the forthcoming Olympic Games in 2032 (Al-Emadi, Sellami, and Fadlalla 2022).

By examining the experiences of previous hosts of mega-sporting activities, this paper examines whether it was viable and appropriate for Qatar to learn from other countries' interactions or whether the 2022 mega-event had unique characteristics that made it extraordinary, unforeseen, and unique. In this spirit, the data gathering aims to analyze Qatar's readiness for the event and its post-event strategic considerations.

Qatar has invested billions in world sports in years past (Shakarji, Al-Husainy, and Al-Noaime 2019). This review examines and clarifies sports diplomacy ideas, which are equally necessary to justify using sport as a functional tool in foreign policy. Thus, this study will examine whether the World Cup may aid in the healing of gulf wounds via a combination of literature analysis and deployment of sports diplomacy theory. The review and collecting stages were purposefully connected to a key phase during which methodological excellence and factual dependability were established for the analysis' presentation. The resources, which mostly consisted of scholarly articles, legal records, other forms of discourses, and historical facts in each studied situation, were selected for their validity and application to the major theme, not as a simple recapitulation of comparable former occurrences. Indeed, involvement with each of them is crucial to the core study's goal of providing a broad analysis and a full synthesis. In summary, the literature review explicitly offers a series of interrelated arguments and rationales that justify the research's stated aims.

Methodology

The methodology used in this study is descriptive-analytic, with the necessary data gathered via library research. The material was collected from a variety of sources, including books, periodicals, and web pieces. To accomplish the objectives, we began by debating the philosophy and notions of geopolitics and sport. As a result, we presented the results and conclusion utilizing these ideas and theories.



Literature Review

Sport Diplomacy

Over the last several years, sports diplomacy has blossomed into a thriving topic of study useful to practitioners and researchers alike. As a crossroads of several areas, it poses basic issues of politics, diplomacy, and geopolitics. Diplomacy, for instance, is critical in resolving issues of legitimacy and governance that allow representatives of nations to engage. Moreover, international organizations such as FIFA precede the United Nations and are susceptible to political maneuverings on a par with larger international organizations (Pamment 2019).

The average cost of holding modern athletic mega-events exceeds \$15 billion, while Qatar's 2022 FIFA World Cup is anticipated to cost more than \$229 billion (Sporting News 2022). As a result, interest in sports diplomacy grows as a weapon of statecraft with enormous commercial potential. Governments see athletic mega-events as a means of establishing a country and city's presence in global awareness. Soft power, national diplomacy, and national image are inextricably linked to issues of location branding, ecotourism, and destination growth. Unsurprisingly, Talebpour et al. (2019) desired to better explain sports soft power control capability insofar as it can provide possibilities and advantages to nations that choose to participate (Abdi et al. 2019; Pamment 2019).

Sports have enormous potential to generate meaning, and governments aiming to maximize their soft power generation may capitalize on this potential. For instance, sports foster the development of superstars proficient in overcoming national, cultural, and racial barriers. Dubinsky (2019) delves into the history, present, and perspective of African-American benevolence ambassadors. Pamment evaluates the 2012 Olympics' cultural content in order to refocus the discussion away from merely economic benefits and toward issues of cultures, customs, and common ground (Pamment 2019).

Sanders (2016) remarked that sport is a massive and effective medium for disseminating information, personalities, and connections on a global scale, which are at the heart of public diplomacy. Diplomatic initiatives based on sport are consistent with established theoretical foundations. Effective diplomatic projects should include several spheres of influence, such as sport, in order to address different social issues. Sanders continued by advising that a well-envisioned public diplomacy approach may leverage the potential presented by athletics.

Using Theory E and Theory O, Beer and Nohria provide a foundation for intercultural diplomatic transformation (Beer & Nohria 2000). The goal of Theory E is to create organizational value. It entails centrally planned



systematic change that is implemented via formal structures and mechanisms that are top-down driven. Theory O is directed by the organization's human potential development. The objective, akin to the system's reasoning, is to execute strategy and improve through experience (Kippenberger 2000). Theory O is predicated on a high degree of member commitment and the idea that change would be constant and participatory. Theory E, or top-down transformation, produces more quick and cost-effective effects. Theory O, or bottom-up adjustments, are more expensive but may provide greater long-lasting outcomes.

Whereas Beer and Nohria's top-down Theory E attempts are widespread and often supported, Allport asserts that bottom-up Theory O methods are more likely to connect stakeholders and develop mutual comprehension. Beer and Nohria indicate that combining top-down and bottom-up transformation is usual. Effective intercultural transformation often requires both high-level diplomatic efforts and participant-driven programs (Kippenberger 2000).

Sport's value as a medium for increasing mutual communication makes it a vital component of diplomatic strategy. Grassroots sporting diplomacy programs based on the principles of Beaton facilitate individual local encounters that result in wider effects, such as cultural transformation, generated by people within the culture (Beaton et al. 2011). Sport's universality enables the achievement of both international and local diplomatic objectives. While sport provides a framework in and of itself, SFDT asserts that cultural and educational activities must accompany sports programming in order for intercultural SDP projects to be effective (Cunningham et al. 2015). Recognizing sport's worldwide importance, Sanders (2016) said that the crowd's interest in sport surpasses that in any other topic, including politics and the media.

The contact hypothesis of Beer and Norhia's Theory O demonstrate the value of direct participant involvement in enhancing the effect of Sports Diplomacy encounters (Beer & Nohria 2000). Whereas grassroots programming via authentic sport interplay enhances intercultural comprehension, the effect is significantly enhanced when the communication is authorized by institutional endorsements (i.e., by law, tradition, or local atmosphere), supplied that the interaction is of a nature that results in the perception of prevalent interests and humanity among participants of the two organizations (Cunningham et al. 2015).

Intercultural sports programming that is institutionally supported further fosters information exchanges and the development of competent employees capable of functioning successfully in a globalized sports environment (Kaplanidou et al. 2016).



Chufrin and Saunders found that, although governments engage on the basis of shared interests and concerns, individuals are critical to diplomatic accomplishment. Sports Diplomacy often entails governments pursuing their international goals via local activity. Global and local passions and activities are incorporated into sport-based “Glocal” techniques. Glocalization combines the importance of the local in the context of global values and the international in the context of local interests. The sports sector has been a proponent of “Glocal” prospects and practices in sport (Chufrin and Saunders 1993). Sport Diplomacy initiatives are typically a component of a worldwide diplomatic objective that is carried out via grassroots programming at the local level.

The Geopolitics of Sporting Events

The phrase Geographies of Sport is inspired by two wide-ranging patterns in modern geographic academic: one of these is the organizational weakness of “sports geography” as a corrective subdiscipline, and the other one is a possibility to advance current structure by directly participating in critical theoretical strategies, both inside and over geography. Geopolitics draws together geologists and sports studies intellectuals to demonstrate the benefits of a profoundly geographic strategy to the investigation of sport and also the synergies and new lines of inquiry that emerge when geographers interact more substantively with the larger body of sporting events studies academic.

By placing power dynamics at the core of the evaluations, the geopolitics of sport seeks to use sport as a lens for examining how magnitude, space, and individuality come to existence in grounded ways in diverse settings throughout the world, a task that cannot – and must not – be constrained to the disciplinary silos (Koch 2018).

Sport has the potential to function as a catalyst for global geopolitical change. This transformation may occur both physically and politically. Countries that host big sporting events such as the Olympics undergo a tremendous makeover in which whole towns are completely rebuilt and equipped with new infrastructures to match the international traveler’s criteria of modernity and usability. Tokyo, in planning for the 1964 Olympics, and Seoul, in preparing for the 1988 tournaments, witnessed dramatic physical modifications, ranging from the construction of new state-of-the-art airport hubs to a nationwide push to renovate restroom facilities. Cities that host large sporting events such as the Olympics endure dramatic physical transformations. It is not simply about a handful of stadiums; it is about a comprehensive package of facilities, environment, infrastructure, airport, tourist, and sporting facility development and improvements on a scale never seen before in the country’s history (Cornelissen 2010).



Additionally, this transition is often condensed within a short period of time. Once a nation wins the proposal to host the event, the competition may be finished in five to seven years, compared to far over a decade in the past. Much of what we identify with places like Seoul, Tokyo, and today Beijing—from their cityscapes to their parks—is the consequence of the metropolis’s architectural ‘facelift’ in preparation for the Olympic Games (James 2021).

Sport-induced geopolitical transformation is a result of the media spotlight and the deceptively potent principles of Olympism. These impose tactical and conceptual demands on the regime, compelling it to adapt. Organizing and enforcing change via the Olympic microscope is a tool used by both internal and external groups. This results in additional audience expenses and calculations for leadership about their own procedures that they would not have had to do in the absence of the Games. What was formerly considered conventional business practice now has additional risks, including the threat of being boycotted, branded a pariah, and humiliated in front of the world. Political transformation is compelled by these factors. The most famous example of sport and political reform occurred during the 1988 Seoul Olympics, which had a significant influence on the country’s democratic transition. When the Olympic Committee awarded the Games to Seoul in 1981, the Republic of Korea was a military regime with anti-Olympic activities. The Chun dictatorship had to struggle with the chasm that existed between practices and goals. Geopolitical dissidents, democracy advocates, and international human rights organizations used the worldwide spotlight on Seoul to pressure the Chun regime to choose between democracy and martial rule, all in the glare of the Olympics. Chun and his associates, a gang of mediocre generals who had seized power in a coup, fought tooth and nail to achieve local and international credibility via the Games (Santos 2021). Their stakes in averting an Olympic catastrophe were significant and life-threatening. As a result of this convergence of forces, the Seoul Olympics was a critical agent of political transformation. Finally, in June 1987, one year prior to the events, the government announced the historic and unforeseen decision to cave into political unrest and agreed to conduct open presidential elections that autumn for Chun’s replacement (Raeissadat et al. 2021).

We used geopolitical examples to investigate the regional expressions of sport’s geopolitics in the Gulf region. Clearly, the Persian Gulf does not fund sports on an institutional level. Rather than that, a large variety of governmental and parastatal institutions, people, and businesses headquartered in the Gulf nations are active in guiding and sponsoring international athletic teams, events, and coordinating bodies. Over the previous decade, Bahrain, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (U.A.E.) have been by far the most active nations in international sports sponsorship



(Brannagan and Giulianotti 2014). Thus, the geopolitics of sport is defined as “a branch of geopolitics that investigates the relationships between sport and geopolitics, as well as their geographical aspects, which include competition, collaboration, peace, conflict, convergence, and dispersion” (Singer 2019). As may be seen from conceptual instances of the geopolitics of sport, the Gulf nations exhibit both convergence and dispersion.

Results and Discussion

While each nation has unique problems and possibilities while hosting mega-sporting tournaments, other countries’ previous cultural diplomacy experiences give insight into what to anticipate and how to plan for the games. Qatar was the first Arab nation to host the World Cup, which was also the first occasion that such a mega-sporting event was held in the Middle East or a Muslim nation. As such, Qatar was under considerable pressure as it prepared for the World Cup. Brazil’s encounter as the first Latin American nation to welcome the Olympics and South Africa’s inheritance as the first African nation to organize the World Cup demonstrate the enormous (additional) pressure that such a title imposes on the host, but also the numerous regional changes that accompany it, both politically and economically (Elias 2021).

As previously said, Qatar’s winning bid was consistent with FIFA’s mission to provide opportunities for ‘new territories,’ but the bid itself sparked controversy and precipitated Qatar’s struggles in December 2010. The key reason for the worldwide scrutiny surrounding Qatar’s victorious bid is that the country had never before competed for the World Cup. Additionally, Qatar is a tiny nation with essentially one main metropolis. As such, and despite the fact that the games would be held in three distinct locations, this was the first World Cup in which the venues were so close together. Qatar’s topography, in keeping with its magnitude, was also a consideration when the country was picked to organize the 2022 games. Due to the high heat experienced throughout the summer, when all previous World Cup games were held, FIFA and Qatar stated their intention to move the games to November-December. This was the first time in history that the games did not take place during the summer. In the lead up, this further increased worldwide dissatisfaction and hostility towards Doha. The fundamental reason for this is that several European, as well as other regional club championships, take place around that time period, and such a schedule adjustment generated significant dissatisfaction for football teams and their supporters worldwide.

The Qatar National Vision 2030 underlines the need to strike a balance between fast development and the safeguarding of an Arab and Islamic nation’s culture and traditions (Scharfenort 2012). This article contends that



by hosting the FIFA 2022 World Cup, Doha not only demonstrated its world-class capabilities as an evolved Middle Eastern nation but also established itself as an ‘Ambassador of the Muslim World’ and forthrightly demonstrating Islam’s harmony with modernity. According to Dale Eickelman’s analysis, a ‘tolerant’ Islam is critical for sustaining social and cultural devotion while allowing global influences to enter without compromising the state (Haghirian and Robles-Gil 2021).

The manifestation of the ‘Africa identity’ was critical in securing global support for South Africa’s 2010 World Cup bid. In a similar spirit, Qatar sought to represent the whole Arab world and garner particular favor from non-Arab Muslim nations. When the initial assaults against Qatar’s selection started, both the O.I.C. (Organization of Islamic Conference) and the Arab League issued a forceful statement urging their members to completely back Qatar and its entitlement to hold the World Cup. As a result, talks concerning the 2022 project tended to focus more on politics than sports. The broader transnational character associated with Qatar 2022 was profoundly impacted by the 42-month-long Gulf crisis—the Qatar embargo—which upended regional dynamics and had a significant influence on Doha’s goal to utilize the World Cup to consolidate its burgeoning regional prominence. Domestically, much as Putin earned support from the Russian people and solidified his authority during 2018 FIFA World Cup Russia, the Al Thani royal regime attempted and continued to aim to improve its popularity and solidify its base of support via the World Cup, especially throughout and after the blockade’s termination. Massive urban transformations and the evident rapid rate of modernity posed, to some degree, everyday challenges to traditional practices and public ideals. Certain segments of the Qatari population were gravely concerned about the foreign influence on Qatar’s cultural identity and believed that staging the World Cup would ultimately force Qatar to alter its social structure (Haghirian and Robles-Gil 2021).

Muslim intellectuals’ debates also intensified. Some accused the World Cup of unduly disrupting the nation’s religious atmosphere and public morality, while others examined the history of Islam and how it accommodated all human and religious diversity. People and residents who see Qatar as a tranquil Islamic environment centered on the family expressed their discontent, not only with the event itself but also with its effects. Newer generations subjected to such a month-long event may begin to question certain characteristics of their local established order, and a desire for reform or reform may emerge – or expand. Furthermore, as has been the case in all examined situations – and Qatar is no exception – foreign criticism and pressure have drawn attention to the host country’s democratic deficiency, lack of sufficient accountability, and fundamental social and political liberties.



Qatar encountered several political roadblocks. The most significant of them was the embargo imposed in 2017 by three of its neighbors; K.S.A., the U.A.E, and Bahrain, as well as Egypt. The embargo, which spanned more than three years and was finally lifted in January 2021 (partially, but formally), shed light on a variety of regional concerns that may have harmed the games had it persisted. Even though the embargo was lifted, the political implications, particularly extensive media and social media attacks against Qatar and its staging of the 2022 World Cup, have already had substantial and long-lasting consequences. It was reasonable to anticipate that there will be some depiction of the blockage during the ceremonies since the three-year-long scenario is ingrained in the country's history, particularly because it occurred during the peak of the games' planning.

Possibly, the strengthening of Qatar's autonomy and separate foreign policy approach after the termination of the embargo has boosted Doha's standing as a stable nation state on the world stage. Additionally, its efforts to mediate and facilitate local and international crises, as well as its convening of high-level representatives from other nations with the goal of providing a forum for debate and cooperation, have surely boosted Doha's image. Furthermore, its sound foreign policy strategy enabled it to continue executing World Cup-related activities throughout the blockade and also throughout the Covid-19 pandemic (Singer 2020). In any particular instance, hosting a global competition may be self-defeating. As it has been noted, there is a risk that the host country will expose its flaws, casting doubt on even the crucial political and economic capabilities that convinced FIFA or the IOC to award the mega-event to that nation, thus casting doubt on the host countries and international sport's ruling bodies' legitimacy.

Conclusion

The geopolitics of football is a novel and critical perspective to political geography and the academic subject of geopolitics. A state may use a football game to communicate with other states and demonstrate goodwill. Additionally, the sport may serve as a focal point for geopolitical unification between governments. The experiences of previous hosts demonstrate that there are different ways in which hosting large athletic events may strengthen or undermine nations. More significantly, the experiences demonstrate how established and emerging countries, tiny states and large powers, and wealthy and impoverished nations all employ sports diplomacy uniquely. What they have in common is that they all had the chance to employ soft power, but their activities leading up to, during, and after the event is what differentiates their degree of success.

According to previous hosts' perspectives and Qatar's experience ten years after winning the bid to organize the 2022 World Cup, the kingdom has encountered various roadblocks throughout the pre-event period.



Numerous worldwide worries about the situation in the Gulf states and unfamiliar Islamic and cultural values to Western viewers will continue to complicate Qatar's image-building and branding efforts. Nonetheless, the commitment to hosting the most environmentally friendly event possible, sustaining a presence on global soccer fields via sponsorships, ownerships, and championships, as well as actively seeking to elevate and ameliorate the nation's status on the worldwide scene, assisted Doha in its sport diplomacy efforts prior to and throughout the event. Furthermore, its commitment to preserving a lasting legacy beyond December 2022 will also aid it throughout the post-event period.

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