

Soft Power, Sport and Diplomacy Strategies: Potential and Opportunities for Canada's Foreign Policy

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Issue

Given the current escalation of hard power in international relations and the decline of unipolarity, it is crucial for Canada to restore international influence and regain its status as middle power through focusing on its soft power capabilities, such as using mega sports events to project a positive national image and send political and normative signals globally. As Canada prepares to co-host the 2026 FIFA Men's World Cup, leveraging sport as a soft power tool offers untapped potential for Canadian foreign policy and diplomatic influence.

Background

Canada as a Former Middle Power

Politics and governance operate on a power hierarchy. At the top are "major power" nations like China, Russia and the United States, which wield influence due to their significant "hard power" resources, such as large militaries and influential economies (Volgy et al. 2011). These nations can shape the ideologies, cultures and politics of the international community. Conversely, "small" or "low power" nations are still developing and lack substantial hard power resources, limiting their influence on the global stage (Chapnick 1999).

Canada lacks the coercive influence of major powers yet possesses the potential "hard" and "soft" power resources to create change at the international level (Haynal 2024, 2). In the past, Canada embraced its role as a global "middle

power," encouraging multilateralism and cooperation, while also taking up the role as peacekeepers across international conflicts (ibid., 4).

However, Canada has slipped as a middle power. The nation has faced a continuous loss of influence as shown in its failure to earn a United Nations Security Council seat (ibid., 3; Kemp 2023, 2). Canada has also taken a massive step back in its approach to foreign policy as the nation lacks a clear sense of direction on foreign policy and is instead producing reactive policy with ad-hoc approaches (Kemp 2023, 4). This slip in international status puts an even greater hinderance on the nation's ability to use its hard power resources. For example, Canada's hard sanctioning capacities are completely ineffective due to compounding factors of Canada's step back as a middle power and Canada's lack of economic or military resources to coerce countries into changing their behaviour (Nault 2017, 11). Moreover, as a nation that still pretending to operate as a middle power, Canada struggles with the moral implications of employing "blunt" sanctions that can lead to human rights violations in the targeted country (Elliott 2016, 177-78; Biersteker, Tourinho and Eckert 2016, 272). Violating human rights and negatively impacting other nations contradicts the middle power position of upholding peace and security, which has historically shaped the Canadian political identity (Hynek 2004, 36). Lastly, hard sanctions can disrupt Canada's social network and create friction between Canada and its biggest allies (Nault 2017, 9, 28). This creates extreme volatility since the world has continued to shift toward a greater multilateral approach, creating greater connections between nations and putting

Canada in a tricky situation when attempting to take the lead on multilateral initiatives such as hard sanctioning (Kemp 2023, 1).

Strengthening of Canada's Soft Power

Since Canada is limited in its resources for exercising “harder” military and economic strategies on the international stage (Kleinfeld et al. 2021, 9), the nation needs to rely on more nuanced forms of influence. Scholars and experts therefore see the strength of nations like Canada pursuing “softer” indirect approaches to the exercise of power (ibid., 13). For example, a discussion paper from 2023 on the future of Canadian diplomacy addressed to Global Affairs Canada (GAC) calls for more investment in Canada’s diplomatic capacities and suggests GAC “should continue to maximize the use of ‘soft power’ and public diplomacy abroad, including through support for science diplomacy, sport diplomacy, academic diplomacy and cultural diplomacy” (GAC 2023, 22; emphasis added).

“Soft power,” a term introduced in 1990 by Joseph Nye, means the exercise of power by political actors and states over other states, based on the ability to persuade others through its national image (Henne 2022; Ohnesorge 2020; Nye 2004; 1990). In contrast to hard power, soft power is therefore aimed at non-military conflict resolution (Grix, Brannagan and Lee 2019, 526) meaning global influence no longer depends exclusively on whose army wins, but also on whose story wins (Ohnesorge 2020, 7). Today, soft power is a “major ingredient within national power strategies” (Jarvie 2021, 4) that provides opportunities for a declining middle power like Canada to regain influence and play a more significant role internationally.

Since the introduction of the soft power concept, think tanks and research centres have made several attempts to create soft power indices that show that soft power “has real qualities that can be converted to numerical values.” (Wang 2023, 190). Although those indices do not provide a perfect measurement, they are valuable for nations such as Canada to identify weaknesses, strengths and opportunities for improvement. Analysis of soft power rankings could therefore help Canada build a targeted soft power strategy. Particularly considering the loss of middle power status, the nation would be well advised to use numerical indicators and concrete metrics that show why Canada has lost influence and how it might regain it.

Although soft power rankings are quite entrenched due to historical reputations, they can change swiftly when countries develop a soft power strategy and systematically work on their nation’s brand. This can be seen in the United

Arab Emirates, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, which have driven their soft power influence through the hosting of mega events (for example, Expo 2020, COP28 [the UN Climate Change Conference], FIFA World Cup) (Brand Finance 2024). Specifically, Qatar is a good example of a small middle power seeking to expand its influence through sport events such as the 2022 FIFA World Cup to balance its power differentials with neighbouring states such as Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia that possess substantial military power (Dubinsky 2023). This demonstrates that because soft power rankings can become “sticky,” success in soft power is rarely accidental but linked to targeted action, making it worth investing in strategies (Brand Finance 2024). Canada should use soft power indices as guidance to leverage soft power more effectively in the future and restore its influence globally.

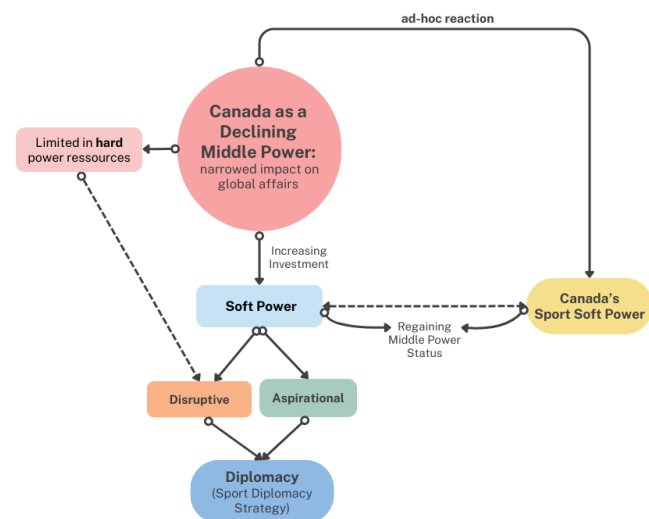


Figure 1: . Canada’s Decline as a Middle Power and the Diplomatic Shift Toward Soft Power, Including Sport as a Soft Power Tool – Image created by Lea Dörflinger.

Figure 1 illustrates how Canada’s limited power capabilities as a declining middle power nation suggests the country ought to focus more on soft power to reinforce its international influence. This includes the opportunity for Canada to regain middle power status through increased investment in soft power. Part of this is the utilization of sport as a soft power tool (Canada’s sport soft power), discussed in the following sections.

Sport as a Soft Power Tool

One area that has become a source of soft power is sport. In the twenty-first century, for instance, non-Western nations invest heavily in sport mega events such as the

Olympics and FIFA World Cup (Boykoff 2022; Grix 2013; 2012). Fostering a positive national image, displaying their economic power while furthering social and political goals domestically and internationally, countries such as China, Qatar and Russia have hosted the Olympics or World Cup. However, from a Western perspective, these sport mega event spectacles are employed to conceal human rights abuses and territorial encroachment (Boykoff 2022; Jirouchova 2022). Not merely a tool for authoritarian regimes, sports have also been used by democratic countries such as Canada in response to rogue actors.

Canada has a long history of using sport as a soft power tool in attempts to address global issues through ad hoc sporting sanctions. For example, in 1977, Canada signed the Gleneagles Agreement that outlined the Commonwealth's restriction of sporting contact with South Africa to challenge the nation's Apartheid policies (Payne 1991). Canada also participated in the boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics in response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (Kanin 1980). Canada's use of sports as a soft sanctioning tool is not limited to examples from the last century. More recently, Canada used a diplomatic boycott of the 2022 Beijing Olympics, which entailed withholding Canadian delegates from Olympic events in response to China's human rights record (Tasker 2021).

In addition to these "disruptive" measures, Canada has boosted its soft power using sports in an aspirational way. It has a long history of hosting sport mega events including three Olympics, FIFA's Women's World Cup as well as multiple Commonwealth and Pan American Games (Black 2016). In addition, it is set to co-host the 2026 FIFA Men's World Cup. The World Cup offers both opportunities and challenges for Canada to flex its economic and political muscle and to promote its ideals and strengths such as democracy and multiculturalism. However, concurrently, the FIFA World Cup could be a stage for demonstrations targeting Canada. For Canada to fully benefit from the World Cup, it must take every opportunity to wield its soft power.

Hosting is not the only way Canada uses sport to build its soft power. Canada invests heavily in achieving sporting success with initiatives such as Own the Podium to support medal-potential athletes in international competitions. Hosting sport mega events can build international prestige and recognition, while highly visible sports victories build pride in the populace and demonstrate the ability to defeat rivals (Freeman 2012). The ulterior functions of sporting victory are exemplified no better than in the example of the 1972 Summit Series,

a captivating series of hockey games between Canada and the Soviet Union (Wilson 2004). Canada's victory was not only a sporting one, but also a geopolitical one of West over East and an ideological one of capitalism over communism against its Cold War rival (ibid.).

Disruptive and Aspirational Forms of Sport Soft Power

The examples of how sport is used by Canada reflects the two sides of soft power: an aspirational form aimed at enhancing a state's image (Li 2013); and as a disruptive form used to exert political pressure on "bad actors" and signal dissatisfaction (Chhichhia 2008; MacLean 2018; Elcombe 2021). Figure 1 illustrates the two alternative forms of soft power and shows how disruptive soft power is an indirect consequence of, as well as an alternative to, the limited hard power resources that characterize historical middle powers such as Canada (see Figure 1).

One form of implementing disruptive soft power is cultural sanctions (Rosler and Press-Barnathan 2023). Unlike traditional hard sanctions, cultural sanctions are not based on coercion, but on the naming and shaming of a state's misbehaviour and therefore also understood as symbolic sanctions. They can take various forms, such as the boycott of cultural mega events (ibid.), for example, in the form of a diplomatic boycott of international sporting events. (Elcombe 2021). Because of their immense importance for organizing states in terms of image-making and identity building, mega events are ideal for challenging a state's national narrative. However, for a cultural sanction to be effective, the boycotted mega event must be perceived as significant by the target nation (Press-Barnathan and Lutz 2020; Rosler and Press-Barnathan 2023).

Sport, as a soft power tool, can send messages to a variety of different actors and can therefore be two-level or even multi-level strategies. According to Robert Putnam's (1988) two-level diplomatic games concept, political decisions are often both domestic and international negotiations and produce effects in both spheres. The 2014 Sochi Olympics is an example of this dynamic. In messaging around the Olympics, organizers crafted narratives of "normalcy" internationally and infused patriotic themes into the Games domestically (Boykoff 2022). Despite the exorbitant cost and Russians' economic pessimism regarding the Games, most Russians were still proud to host them (ibid.). Two-level diplomatic games using sport may even be multi-level diplomatic games, including strategies with non-state actors, institutions, sport governing bodies, corporations and civil society organizations.

Considerations

Effects on athletes: Leveraging sport for disruptive purposes have hurt athletes, impacting training, careers and personal finances (Crossman and Lappage 1992). Athletes have reacted poorly, viewing themselves as pawns in boycotts regarded as instrumentally futile (ibid. 1992).

Cost: Hosting sport mega events come with price tags in the billions and can end up being financially debilitating to host nations as cost projections are exceeded, revenue from the event fails to materialize and venues are abandoned post-event (Preuß, Andreff and Weitzmann 2019; Kasimati 2015). High-performance athlete funding also costs hundreds of millions that may be better spent elsewhere (Freeborn 2021).

Immeasurability: Unlike hard power strategies, soft power strategies do not produce measurable effects such as loss of GDP or foreign investment (Gutmann Neuenkirch and Neumeier 2023). As a result, it is often hard to assess the efficacy of sport sanctions, making them challenging to use as policy tools.

Recommendations

Canada should focus on becoming a global soft power to regain its role as a middle power. Given that Canada's hard power resources are limited, Canada should capitalize on its existing capabilities in soft power and use indices and numerical measurements of soft power to determine how and where Canada can improve its soft power to restore its role as a middle power. Therefore, Canada should focus on strategic actions and the development of a soft power strategy. Sport and mega sports events should be relevant tools for Canada's success and, therefore, Canada should place a special emphasis on sport as part of its soft power strategy.

Canada should lead in the creation of a comprehensive sport power index. To assess strengths and weaknesses in Canada's existing use of sport and how it compares to other nations, it should act as a leader in the creation of a comprehensive sport power index. Indexes already exist that provide crucial rankings in performance in sport. However, these usually only include singular aspects of sporting performance. This index should encompass numerous factors that play into sport power. The development of a comprehensive sport power index will allow officials to improve on weaknesses and emphasize strengths during decision making. In addition, it would allow for policy makers to assess the sport power of other nations, making

Canada better prepared when sports are weaponized against it at sport mega events such as the 2026 FIFA World Cup. Likewise, the creation of a sport power index should be understood as an essential part of the approach to using sport to restore Canada's international influence and middle power status. Only when Canada's strengths and weaknesses in the field of sports are revealed through metrics, can the power of sport be used effectively and purposefully to regain middle power status.

Canada should develop a sports diplomacy strategy rather than relying on ad hoc approaches. This strategy must account for Canada's soft power resources, as well as sport's capacity to enhance reputation and cultural sanctioning. Canada must use the aspirational and disruptive forms of sport diplomacy, relying on the concept of two-level games to realize Canada's domestic and international goals. Considering the reliance on collaboration with other countries, corporations and civil society actors in the success of using sport as a soft power tool, in addition to developing a sport diplomacy strategy, Canada should also build strong relationships and act in tandem with like-minded actors to ensure that its strategy is effective and impactful.

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