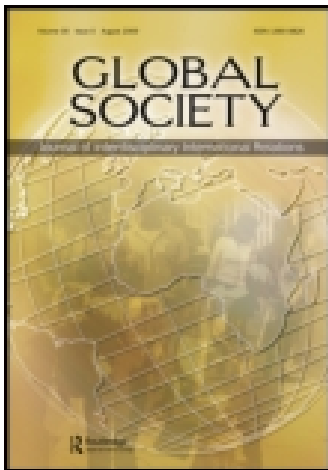


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Soft Power, Sports Mega-Events and Emerging States: The Lure of the Politics of Attraction

JONATHAN GRIX and DONNA LEE

This article highlights and analyses a hitherto largely neglected dimension to the growing agency of large developing countries in global affairs: their hosting of international sports mega-events. Why are large developing countries hosting sports mega-events and what does this contemporary phenomenon tell us about the significance of, for example, the Olympics and the World Cup in global affairs? We explore these questions through brief examination of the cases of the three most active sports mega-event hosting states in recent times: Brazil, China and South Africa. The 2008 Beijing Olympics, the 2010 World Cup in South Africa, and the upcoming 2014 World Cup and 2016 Olympic Games in Brazil provide interesting examples with which to explore developing country agency in the international system and in particular the discursive basis of that agency. We see the hosting of sports mega-events as the practice of public diplomacy by states to both demonstrate existing soft power capability as well as pursue its further enhancement.

Introduction

This article highlights the possibilities that hosting a sports mega-event offers China, South Africa and Brazil to practise public diplomacy in order to both project and boost their soft power in the international system. That each of these states has been successful in the bidding process to host the Olympics and the World Cup is a remarkable achievement in itself, signalling their individual arrival as credible powers but also collectively the new order of things not only in international sports but in the international system *per se*. We highlight the simple fact that hosting such events both signals and promises further opportunities to enhance the agency of large developing countries in global affairs, and certainly beyond their regional bases. While it is far too early to confidently assert that hosting sports mega-events has led to the socialisation of others and thus enhanced soft power, what hosting does do is augment their status as emerging powers and highlights the social and political dimensions to their agency, dimensions largely ignored by the emergent market conceptualisation of Brazil, China and South Africa that underpins much of the argument about their emergent power status.

There was a time when international sports governing bodies, such as the International Federation of Association Football (FIFA) and the International Olympic

Committee (IOC), had to persuade reluctant states to host their key events (the football World Cup and the Olympic and Paralympic Games respectively). The last three decades, however, have seen the increasing political salience of sport among governments of all political hues who see in it a relatively cheap means of improving a nation's image, credibility, stature, economic competitiveness and (they hope) ability to exercise agency on the international stage. This has led to the situation we have today, where even consistently popular states such as the United Kingdom¹ are willing to spend over £17 million on *attempting* to win the right to host a sports mega-event such as the 2018 World Cup.² Until very recently, the key sports mega-events (the World Cup and the Olympic Games) were predominantly staged by wealthy Western states. Not anymore; large developing states have successfully entered the fray. Inter-state competition to host an event—even so-called second order international sports events such as the Commonwealth Games or Pan American Games³—is now fierce as a greater variety of states vie for a chance to avail themselves of the “twin suns of prestige and profit”⁴ thought to accompany the staging of these sports spectacles. While this observation in itself may not be new, there is very little research to date on the key reasons why this is the case beyond work that focuses on the link between sport events and domestic social and economic change.⁵ The growing rivalry to host sports mega-events and, in particular, the emergence of new

1. S. Anholt, “Nation ‘Branding’: Propaganda or Statecraft?”, *Public Diplomacy Magazine*, available: <http://publicdiplomacymagazine.com/nation-branding-propaganda-or-statecraft/> (accessed 6 July 2011).

2. House of Commons Culture Media and Sport Committee, “2018 World Cup Bid”, Sixth Report of Session 2010–2012 (London: Stationery Office, 2011).

3. D. Black, “Dreaming Big: The Pursuit of ‘Second Order’ Games as a Strategic Response to Globalisation”, *Sport in Society*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (2008), pp. 467–480.

4. A. Guttmann, *The Olympics. A History of the Modern Games* (2nd edition) (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002).

5. A notable exception is Scarlett Cornelissen's extensive work on South Africa's hosting of the 2010 FIFA World Cup. See S. Cornelissen, “Sport Mega-Events in Africa: Processes, Impacts and Prospects”, *Tourism and Hospitality Planning & Development*, Vol. 1 (2004), pp. 39–55; S. Cornelissen, “‘It's Africa's Turn!’ The Narratives and Legitimations Surrounding the Moroccan and South African Bids for the 2006 and 2010 FIFA Finals”, *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 25 (2004), pp. 1293–1309; S. Cornelissen, “Crafting Legacies: The Changing Political Economy of Global Sport and the 2010 FIFA World Cup™”, *Politikon*, Vol. 34 (2007), pp. 241–259; S. Cornelissen, “Scripting the Nation: Sport, Mega-Events, Foreign Policy and State-Building in Post-Apartheid South Africa”, *Sport in Society*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (2008), pp. 481–493; S. Cornelissen, “A Delicate Balance: Sport Mega-Events and Development”, in R. Levermore and A. Beacom (eds.), *Sport and International Development* (New York: Palgrave, 2009), pp. 79–97; S. Cornelissen, “The Geopolitics of Global Aspiration: Sport Mega-Events and Emerging Powers”, *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, Vol. 27 (2010), pp. 3008–3025; S. Cornelissen, “More than a Sporting Chance? Appraising the Sport for Development Legacy of the 2010 FIFA World Cup”, *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 32, No. 3 (2011), pp. 503–529; S. Cornelissen and K. Swart, “The 2010 Football World Cup as a Political Construct: The Challenge of Making Good on an African Promise”, *The Sociological Review*, Vol. 54 (2006), pp. 108–123; S. Cornelissen, U. Bob and K. Swart, “Towards Redefining the Concept of Legacy in Relation to Sport Mega-Events: Insights from the 2010 FIFA World Cup”, *Development Southern Africa*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (2011), pp. 307–318. See also S.M. Ndlovu, “Sports as Cultural Diplomacy: The 2010 FIFA World Cup in South Africa's Foreign Policy”, *Soccer & Society*, Vol. 11 (2010), pp. 144–153; S.J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, “Pan-Africanism and the 2010 FIFA World Cup in South Africa”, *Development Southern Africa*, Vol. 28 (2011), pp. 401–413; S.J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, “The World Cup, Vuvuzelas, Flag-Waving Patriots and the Burden of Building South Africa”, *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (2011), pp. 279–293; also J. Van der Westhuizen and K. Swart, “Bread or Circuses? The 2010 World Cup and South Africa's Quest for Marketing Power”, *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, Vol. 28 (2011), pp. 168–180.

players in this rivalry such as China (2008 Olympic Games), South Africa (2010 World Cup), India (2010 Commonwealth Games), Brazil (2014 World Cup; 2016 Olympics) and Qatar (2022 World Cup) are important and interesting developments in international politics that warrant detailed scholarly attention. While there has been significant reflection on the increasing power and influence of developing countries in international relations (IR) scholarship, and in particular the emerging powers (India, China, Brazil and South Africa), such analysis has focused almost exclusively on their growing material sources of power, notably their remarkable economic growth in the last decade or so.⁶ Several studies focus on the extent to which, as fast developing economies, these states play a far more active and influential role in global economic affairs and have become game changers in the governance of the global economy through routine involvement in international economic organisations such as the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and economic summits such as the G20 and the G8.⁷ There certainly appears to be a structural shift in the global economy, with large developing countries such as Brazil, China and South Africa enjoying more economic power and influence beyond their region (one indicator of economic power is, of course, the size of the economy, and *The Economist* estimates that Brazil will have the world's fourth largest economy by 2030, behind the US, China and India).⁸

There is a key strand of this growing developing country agency in the international system that has yet to be explored: their now predominant role in hosting sports mega-events. A look at the list of countries hosting the Olympic Games and the World Cup in the 21st century reveals a clear shift away from Western to Southern countries (see Table 1). There is a new order not only in the international political economy, but also in the international politics of sports mega-events, with the latter reinforcing the trends in the former. This development is analytically significant in two ways. First, it highlights the need to conceptualise emerging powers beyond the narrow materialist approach that

6. D. Guthrie, *China and Globalisation: The Social, Economic and Political Transformation of Chinese Society* (London: Routledge, 2012); A. Payne, "The G8 in a Changing Global Economic Order", *International Affairs*, Vol. 84 (2008), pp. 519–533; A.F. Cooper, A. Antkiewicz and T.M. Shaw, "Lessons from/for BRICSAM about South–North Relations at the Start of the 21st Century: Economic Size Trumps All Else?", *International Studies Review*, Vol. 9 (2007), pp. 673–689; T.M. Shaw, A.F. Cooper and A. Antkiewicz, "Global and/or Regional Development at the Start of the 21st Century? China, India and (South) Africa", *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 28 (2007), pp. 1255–1270.

7. See A.S. Alexandroff and A.F. Cooper, *Rising States, Rising Institutions: Challenges for Global Governance* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2010); S. Breslin, "China and the Global Order: Signalling Threat or Friendship?", *International Affairs*, Vol. 89, No. 3 (2013), pp. 615–634; G. Chin and R. Thakur, "Will China Change the Rules of Global Order?", *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 33, No. 4 (2010), pp. 119–138; M. Li, *Soft Power: China's Emerging Strategy in International Politics* (Lexington, VA: Lexington Books, 2009); A. Narlikar, "New Powers in the Club: The Challenges of Global Trade Governance", *International Affairs*, Vol. 86 (2010), pp. 717–728; S.A. Schirm, "Leaders in Need of Followers: Emerging Powers in Global Governance", *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 16 (2010), pp. 197–221; Shaw, Cooper and Antkiewicz, *op. cit.*; M.D. Stephen, "Rising Regional Powers and International Institutions: The Foreign Policy Orientations of India, Brazil and South Africa", *Global Society*, Vol. 26 (2012), pp. 289–309; W. Xiaodong, "China's Status and Influence in the Multilateral Trade System", Indiana University Research Center for Chinese Politics and Business Working Paper No. 7, 2011, available: <http://www.indiana.edu/~rccpb/Working_Paper/Wang%20Xiaodong%20RCCPB%207%20WTO%20PUB.pdf> (accessed 3 July 2013).

8. "The Brazilian Model", *The Economist*, 17 November 2011, available: <<http://www.economist.com/node/21537004>> (accessed 15 July 2013).

Table 1. Recent and Upcoming Sports Mega-Events in Emerging States.

Year	Event	Country
2008	Olympic Games	China (Beijing)
2010	Commonwealth Games	India (Delhi)
2014	Winter Olympics	Russia (Sochi)
2014	FIFA World Cup	Brazil
2016	Olympic Games	Brazil (Rio de Janeiro)
2018	FIFA World Cup	Russia
2022	FIFA World Cup	Qatar

currently dominates analysis of Brazil, China and South Africa's agency in global affairs. Second, it underscores the need to mainstream international sports into IR. The political willingness and economic ability of emerging states to bid for, and host, major sporting events adds another important dimension to their growing authority in global affairs and highlights the diversity of the sources of their power, which now goes beyond their emergent market status.⁹ Thus, we present hosting sports mega-events as both evidence and projections of emerging states' increasing discursive as well as materially based agency in the international system.

In this context, the purpose of this article is to highlight and analyse a hitherto largely neglected dimension to the growing agency of large developing countries: their hosting of international sports mega-events. Why are large developing countries hosting sports mega-events and what does this contemporary phenomenon tell us about the significance of, for example, the Olympics and the World Cup in global affairs? We explore these questions through examination of the cases of the three most active sports mega-event hosting states in recent times—Brazil, China and South Africa—focusing on diplomatic policy objectives rather than domestic social and economic policy objectives. These examples are also interesting because they provide an opportunity for an empirically based analysis of the concept of soft power and of diplomatic practice by states, drawing from a more expansive set of actors used by scholars to date.¹⁰ Our argument unfolds as follows. First we outline our conceptualisation of soft power and discuss how we

9. While recognising that China has enjoyed Great Power status in the post-World War Two period as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, Beijing has significantly broadened the scope of its global reach beyond this formal venue, as its contemporary relationship with Africa indicates. See C. Alden, D. Large and R.S. De Oliveira, *China Returns to Africa: A Rising Power and a Continent Embrace* (Columbia, NY: Columbia University Press, 2008); D. Brautigam, *The Dragon's Gift: The Real Story of China in Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); I. Taylor, *China's New Role in Africa* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2009).

10. Most case studies of both soft power and public diplomacy focus on the United States or Canada. A growing number of studies focus on China and the Middle East. See N.J. Cull, "The Public Diplomacy of the Modern Olympic Games and China's Soft Power Strategy", in M.E. Price and D. Dayan, *Owning the Olympics: Narratives of the New China* (Michigan: Michigan University Press, 2008), pp. 117–144; K. Dinnie and A. Lio, "Enhancing China's Image in Japan: Developing the Nation Brand through Public Diplomacy", *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, Vol. 6 (2010), pp. 198–206; M. Leonard and C. Smewing, *Public Diplomacy and the Middle East* (London: Foreign Policy Centre, 2003); J.S. Nye, Jr., "Public Diplomacy and Soft Power", *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 616 (2008), pp. 94–109; P.G. Peterson, "Public Diplomacy and the War on Terrorism", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 81 (2002), pp. 74–94; E. Potter, *Branding Canada: Projecting Canada's Soft Power through Public Diplomacy* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2009); Y. Wang, "Public

apply it to emerging states' use of sports mega-events as an integral part of their public diplomacy. We argue that the hosting of sports mega-events provides emerging states with the potential to practise public diplomacy to attract the citizens of other states using the global media. We suggest that hosting sports mega-events is performative political practice and, as such, is evidence of their increasing global reach, as well as their ability to leverage international credibility and status and project their carefully managed image abroad through the discursive praxis of public diplomacy. The subsequent section then applies these conceptual insights to a series of short empirical examples in order to highlight instances of the practice of the politics of attraction by emerging powers

The Practice of Public Diplomacy and the Exercise of Soft Power

Just as emerging countries have become much more relevant to contemporary international politics and have been mainstreamed in contemporary IR scholarship, hosting sports mega-events has become more relevant to the diplomatic strategies of Brazil, China and South Africa. Indeed, the strategic political benefits are just as significant as the (perceived) economic benefits to the host nation, and may well be the prime motive for bidding and hosting. For the most part, however, IR has ignored the strategic relevance to states of hosting sports mega-events. In comparison to economists who have sought to analyse the economic costs and benefits of hosting these events,¹¹ as well as the increasing number of sociologists who have highlighted their impact on the emergence of, for instance, a global sports culture,¹² IR scholars have been mostly silent. As Levermore has pointed out, and as we have discussed in more depth elsewhere, IR (and political science) has barely had an impact on the study of sport in general and on the political use of sport by states in particular.¹³ If IR is slowly waking up to the strategic significance of sports mega-events to states, scholars who have focused on states and their strategic use of sports mega-events and linked this with the concept of soft power are few and far between.¹⁴ We build on this emergent literature by mobilising Joseph Nye's soft power concept to better understand states' strategic

Diplomacy and the Rise of Chinese Soft Power", *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 616 (2008), pp. 257–273.

11. See, for example, C. Gratton, N. Dobson and S. Shibli, "The Role of Major Sports Events in the Economic Regeneration of Cities", in C. Gratton and H.P. Henry (eds.), *Sport in the City: The Role of Sport in Economic and Social Regeneration* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 45–46; C. Gratton, S. Shibli and R. Coleman, "The Economic Impact of Major Sports Events: A Review of Ten Events in the UK", *The Sociological Review*, Vol. 54 (2006), pp. 41–58.

12. See, for example, J. Maguire, *Global Sport: Identities, Societies, Civilizations* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1999); A.S. Markovits and L. Rensmann, *Gaming the World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

13. See, for example, J. Grix, "Sports Politics and the Olympics", *Political Studies Review*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (2013), pp. 15–25; R. Levermore and A. Budd, *Sport and International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2004).

14. J. Grix and B. Houlihan, "Sports Mega-Events as Part of a Nation's Soft Power Strategy: The Cases of Germany (2006) and the UK (2012)", *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* (2013), doi: 10.1111/1467-856X.12017; D. Black, "The Symbolic Politics of Sport Mega-Events: 2010 in Comparative Perspective", *Politikon: South African Journal of Political Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 3 (2007), pp. 261–276; Cornelissen, "The Geopolitics of Global Aspiration", *op. cit.*; C.J. Finlay and X. Xin, "Public Diplomacy Games: A Comparative Study of American and Japanese Responses to the Interplay of Nationalism, Ideology and Chinese Soft Power Strategies around the 2008 Beijing Olympics", *Sport in Society*, Vol. 13, No. 5

motivations behind bidding for and hosting sports mega-events and what they hope to achieve.

For Nye, the changing nature of international relations after the end of the Cold War, and the risk attached to deploying traditional military forms of power, has led to “intangible power resources such as culture, ideology, and institutions” becoming more important in inter-state relations.¹⁵ This should not be taken, however, to mean that Nye advocates replacing traditional hard power with soft power in international relations, but rather that states ought to make far more use of the latter. Nye distinguishes between power to “influence the behaviour of others to get the outcomes one wants” (coercive power) and the ability to “attract and co-opt them to want what you want” (soft power).¹⁶ In this conceptualisation, the ideational dimension to soft power is key and is found in the ability of states to communicate universally shared values (such as, we argue, those rooted in international sporting competition; see below for more on this) in order to court the publics of other states. Used in this way, soft power is a discursive mechanism for increased agency in global affairs through the performative politics of attraction rather than the use (or threat of use) of military or economic force.¹⁷ In this sense soft power resides in the ability to shape the preferences of others and align those preferences to your own. As such, it is similar to the Habermasian notion of legitimation and persuasion in relation to explanations of domination within democracies.¹⁸ Nye suggests that states should make more use of “soft power” and less use of “hard power”; they should also attempt to combine the two together. This combination Nye terms “smart power”.¹⁹ Neither Nye nor other “soft power” scholars tend to spend much time pondering who decides exactly what “attractive” is in international relations. One could put forward the (controversial) argument that, at least in part, “attractiveness” equates to “neo-liberal” economics, given the fact that the Olympics and the FIFA World Cup are the most commercial mega-events globally. States of all political hues are forced to accept specific conditions favourable to either the IOC or FIFA and their commercial sponsors, but not necessarily to the host countries. Arguing thus leads to the interesting situation of non-capitalist and non-democratic regimes hosting “neo-liberal” events, for example China and the Beijing Olympics (2008) and Russia and the Winter Olympics (Sochi, 2014) and the FIFA World Cup (2018).

In the cases of Brazil, China and South Africa, we consider the extent to which soft power is being used to communicate their identity as similar to others on one level—on the assumption that similarity is key to attracting others—based on the reproduction of shared sporting norms and values at the core of international

(2010), pp. 876–900; W. Manzenreiter, “The Beijing Games in the Western Imagination of China: The Weak Power of Soft Power”, *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (2010), pp. 29–48.

15. J.S. Nye, Jr., *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1990), p. 167.

16. J.S. Nye, Jr., *Soft Power. The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), p. 2.

17. Note Mattern’s argument that the model of attraction in Nye’s concept of soft power is based on the use of representational force and should therefore be seen as a coercive form of power: J.B. Mattern, “Why ‘Soft Power’ Isn’t So Soft: Representational Force and the Sociolinguistic Construction of Attraction in World Politics”, *Millennium Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 33 (2005), pp. 583–612.

18. J. Habermas, “Legitimation Problems in the Modern State”, in *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, trans. T. McCarthy (Boston, MA: Beacon Books, 1979), pp. 178–205.

19. Nye, *Soft Power*, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

sporting events such as the Olympic Games and the World Cup. By hosting international sporting events, they can show the world that they are guardians of universal norms and, in so doing, can construct attraction by illuminating truths such as fair play that have universal appeal. This willingness to champion existing shared sporting norms is an important point in their ability to attract the publics of other states because, as Qobo has argued, the political nature of emerging powers (such as the authoritarianism of China, the high levels of income disparity in Brazil and the high levels of political corruption in South Africa) means that they hardly possess attractive domestic political values that are easy to export.²⁰ We realise, however, that a more in-depth discussion on the universal values of sport would raise a number of interesting questions that cannot be covered here. For example, sport is clearly a global phenomenon, one which, in general, shares cross-cultural ethical principles and moral values.²¹ There are, however, a number of problems with adopting an anodyne concept of sport universalism, when it can—and often is—used to further certain interests and mask other interests in society. For this article it is enough to note that sport is cross-cultural and that international sports events such as the Olympics command the attention of a significant portion of the world. This is not to say that there are not examples of the successful politics of attraction beyond hosting sports mega-events. China's interventions in Africa over the last decade, for instance, could be seen as having been based on gaining agency in that continent not only through material incentives, but also by offering an alternative model of African development to the failed models of Western development praxis. China's growing involvement in Africa could be read—and is by some commentators—as demonstrating not only structural power shifts but also normative shifts in global affairs, and it is thought to be illustrative of the growing agenda and norm-setting authority of large developing countries in the international system.²² South Africa, on the other hand, can enhance its agency in world politics with a successful soft power strategy of communicating their new-found democratic values in the post-apartheid era, not least through the politics of attraction embodied in Nelson Mandela, South Africa's first post-apartheid president.²³ In so doing it can also legitimately claim a place at the top table of multilateral summitry such as the G20 meetings and join the other emerging powers in extending their agency beyond their regional base.

The Soft Power of Sports Mega-Events

Staging sports mega-events potentially provides emerging powers with opportunities to generate attraction even where they possess unattractive domestic political characteristics, and we suggest that there is growing evidence to suggest that the international dimension of sporting success—be it national teams and national representatives abroad or staging a sports mega-event—is one arena in which the

20. M. Qobo, "The Newly Emerging Powers and South Africa's Global Strategy", *Global Summitry Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2013), pp. 1–20.

21. P.J. Arnold, *Sport, Ethics and Education* (London: Cassell, 1998), p. 1.

22. See Brautigam, *op. cit.*; G. Mohan and M. Tan-Mullins, *China's Resource Diplomacy in Africa: Powering Development?* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013).

23. For a detailed analysis of South Africa's influence in world politics, see D. Lee, I. Taylor and P.D. Williams, *The New Multilateralism in South African Diplomacy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2006).

politics of attraction is played out through soft power. Externally, states seek to attract others through activities that “create a favourable impression and increase understanding among foreign audiences”.²⁴ The key advantage, as we have stated, of a sports mega-event is that the hosting state is able to communicate their attractiveness through the shared cultural values of sport. This is not a new development in international relations, for the Nazis attempted to influence foreign public opinion of their regime through a bombastic Olympics as early as 1936 with the first true “sports mega-event”. Because of the centrality of universally admired values in international sporting events, hosting states can enhance their attractiveness to others by demonstrating that they not only share those values, but also that they wish to champion and collectively celebrate these within the context of their own distinctive cultural, social and political values. In a detailed study of Cuban sport policy and diplomacy, for instance, Huish highlights how Cuba projects its image as a virtuous developing country through the international dimension of sport by sending sportsmen and women to some 100 developing countries to work on sports capacity-building projects.²⁵ This brings no material benefits to the Cuban economy but rather serves to enhance cooperation between Cuba and other developing states and builds South–South solidarity. The Cuban case demonstrates that different states (and otherwise unattractive political states) can still exercise agency through the politics of attraction.

Those states burdened with unattractive political and social values that impact others’ perception of them deriving from, *inter alia*, particular historical events, human rights issues or poverty appear to have much more to gain from mobilising soft power to (positively) change their image. South Africa (2010 World Cup), China (2008 Olympic Games), India (2010 Commonwealth Games) and, in the future, Qatar (2022 World Cup), are—and will be—bound by the attempt to use sports mega-events to persuade others that (negative) stereotypes about their nations are wrong. While this is not in every instance the primary reason states host or wish to host sports mega-events, it is common to all states with negative images abroad. Primary and secondary reasons for hosting sports mega-events vary, of course, across states, regime types, regions and time. However, states with a negative image do tend to seek to utilise such events to change that image. Indeed, Kurlantzick went as far as to say that “China’s growing soft power ... has emerged as the most potent weapon in Beijing’s foreign policy arsenal”.²⁶ That said, sometimes the strategy of attempting to use sports events to harness soft power can backfire and fail. Witness the Formula 1 international motor race hosted by Bahrain in 2012 and 2013; on both occasions the event drew the kind of attention that host states fear as protestors used it to spotlight and criticise the undemocratic nature of the political regime (we refer to the negative side of sports mega-events in more detail below).

24. Potter, *op. cit.*, p. 51; P. Sharp, *Diplomatic Theory of International Relations* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

25. R. Huish, “Punching above its Weight: Cuba’s Use of Sport for South–South Co-operation”, *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 32 (2011), pp. 417–433.

26. J. Kurlantzick, *Charm Offensive: How China’s Soft Power is Transforming the World* (Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 5.

Sports Mega-Events as Public Diplomacy

Public diplomacy, in its classical sense, is diplomacy directed at the public of other countries as opposed to traditional diplomacy that targets policy makers and governments. It is most often, though not always, a state-driven activity which aims to create an open and responsive public milieu in other countries—an arena for the politics of attraction—in order to craft a more receptive environment for the foreign policies and economic interests of that given state using positive messages and images. Hosting major sporting events fits nicely with this concept of public diplomacy since such events are modern state-centric affairs that provide unique opportunities for hosting countries to fix the gaze of a global television audience. Opening ceremonies are the embodiment of this rendition of the purpose and content of public diplomacy, involving the construction, celebration and mass communication of a positive account of the history and culture of the host nation to the publics of other countries. These events are the quintessence of the performative politics of attraction, of winning hearts and minds and, of course, commercial opportunities.

The appeal to states of sports mega-events as a vehicle for the practice of internally as well as externally facing public diplomacy is that sport is a collective event which is culturally understood and socially played out through the lens of shared and celebrated universal values. Constructed in this way, sport can play a key political role in nation building by arousing domestic pride in a national team's achievements and, at the international level, by signalling a collectively recognised identity on the international stage that is appealing to others.²⁷ Sport also works on another level as part of the cultural sources of a state's soft power, along with broader cultural exchange (knowledge, language, art) between countries. Sports mega-events, foremost the World Cup and the Olympic Games, are communicative practices that can be successful in attracting the attention of billions of people across the globe and are hence a perfect platform to showcase the hosting nation, their culture and image.²⁸ As communicative practices, international sporting events are important opportunities for hosting states to showcase their sameness (which is not only a core component of attractiveness to others but also a source of legitimacy as global agents). By successfully hosting a major sporting event to showcase shared social norms and sameness, the state can enhance its international prestige and attractiveness in order to boost its agency in international politics.

How this benefits the state deploying soft power is not made entirely clear in Nye's writings, but in successful cases—and South Africa's hosting of the 2010 World Cup is one—the result can be an improvement in a nation's image and political and economic credibility. By profiling and showcasing themselves globally, they can attract others through inbound tourism, increased trade and inward investment, and a growing sense of national pride through the feel-good factor that accompanies major sports events.²⁹ In turn, these internal developments

27. J. Maguire, *Sport Worlds: A Sociological Perspective* (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 2002).

28. C.Y. Lin, P.-C. Lee and H.F. Nai, "Theorizing the Role of Sports in State-Politics", *International Journal of Sport and Exercise Science*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2008), pp. 23–32, at p. 28; Potter, *op. cit.*

29. J. Grix, "'Image' Leveraging and Sports Mega-Events: Germany and the 2006 World Cup", *Journal of Sport and Tourism*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (2012), pp. 289–312; L. Chalip, "Towards Social Leverage of Sport Events", *Journal of Sport and Tourism*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (2006), pp. 9–27.

provide the foundational elements that help the state to supervise the political extension of the mega-event into a foreign policy soft power instrument. This is dependent upon effective global communication practices to cultivate attraction and international political legitimacy since “legitimacy comes from common attraction”.³⁰ Political legitimacy is a necessary condition for states to bring soft power into play. Alternatively, where communication practices fail and the hosting state’s attempts to build complementary constructions of cultural distinctiveness and value/normative sameness are unsuccessful (the 2010 Commonwealth Games in India and the Union of European Football Associations [UEFA] Championships in Poland/Ukraine are examples of this), then legitimacy is questioned and agency may be diminished. As such, public diplomacy as a means to enhance agency has its risks; the world’s gaze can often be focused on the negative aspects of the socio-economic and political system. Rather than becoming opportunities to attract, they become events that repel. Equally, it is important to note that states do not by default have a monopoly on their internal development as regards the showcasing potential of such international sports mega-events. Recent events in Brazil indicate that there is often a disjuncture between elite and mass views of the value of hosting for society; there are clearly a broad number of sub-national actors involved in the internal dynamics within a hosting state, something that will differ from state to state. We acknowledge that our “state-centric”, broad-brush approach is unable to unpick these nuances between different actors, including civil society and sports organisations, within hosting states.

We discuss three examples to highlight the usefulness of soft power as a broad-brush heuristic device to understand emerging states’ motives for hosting sports mega-events. We highlight the constitutive, performative and discursive nature and role of sports mega-events in international relations using a state-centric approach (since states drive the decision making and funding around bidding and then lead the hosting process) to explore their public diplomacy praxis. The concept of soft power gains analytical traction once it is employed as a broad organising principle to understand a variety of states’ motives for hosting sports mega-events. Authoritarian regimes (e.g. China), advanced democratic states (UK, Australia, etc.), autocratic states (Qatar) and emerging states (South Africa, Brazil) have been, or are, interested in using sport to increase their international credibility, prestige and potential for agency. We put forward soft power as a concept to capture the diplomatic strategies these very different regime types undertake when hosting sports mega-events. We suggest that with the contemporary development of a global audience for international sports, recent and future Olympics and World Cups, the primary aim for host nations (see Table 1) is/will be the praxis of the politics of attraction through global image leverage and shared norm dissemination. They will have other, secondary aims, but the politics of attraction is primary.

In what follows we briefly discuss the recent examples of the hosting of/successful bidding for sports mega-events by China, South Africa and Brazil.

30. Mattern, *op. cit.*, p. 595.

Empirical Examples

2008 Beijing Olympic Games: China's Coming Out Party

China's selection as the host for the 2008 Olympic Games was the first of seven emerging states (from 2008 to 2022) and represents a bold move on behalf of the IOC, signalling the international acceptance of this one-time pariah state. While the IOC would maintain it is simply being fair by shifting the Olympics to what the head of FIFA, Sepp Blatter, referred to as "New Lands",³¹ it is very clear that the idea is to extend and spread the Olympic (and FIFA) corporate brand to new and large markets (the choice of India, China, Russia, Brazil and Qatar for the series of recent and future sports mega-events evidences this trend, as three—India, China and Brazil—will be among the four largest economies by 2030).³² China adopted sport and sporting glory to assist domestically in validating its own political ideology, with several commentators arguing that the Beijing Games was more about propping up domestic support than showcasing the nation to the wider world.³³ Scholars have argued, however, that there is little doubt that China used the Olympics to promote its rise as an emerging power and aid its integration and agency in the international system.³⁴ If we accept Cull's notion of the Olympic project itself as an exercise in public diplomacy, then it is clear that China used the Beijing Games in search of the politics of attraction and the soft power that comes with this.³⁵

Thinking about China and sport most instinctively points to the example of the so-called "ping-pong" diplomacy in 1971, an event which can be read as an "ice-breaker" role for sport. After the US table tennis team had visited China in 1971, President Nixon lifted a 20-year trade embargo; thus, initial sporting contacts between the US and China led to more formal discussions and negotiations, following a basketball competition between the two countries one year later. The idea was to facilitate communication after a long freeze in relations;³⁶ the fact that the Chinese were clearly superior in ping-pong, and the US clearly superior in basketball, was designed to rob sport temporarily of one of its core attractions: its unpredictability. In this case, sport is simply the means to an end: the opening of long-stalled diplomatic relations. With the hosting of an Olympics, however, sport moves from an ice-breaker to an event that attracts the world's attention towards the host's handling of the event and its political and social systems. In so doing, the host's performance in the Olympic medal table becomes a sign of those systems' strengths vis-à-vis other nations.³⁷

31. S. Blatter, "Russia, Qatar Take World Cup to New Lands", 3 December 2010, available: <<http://in.reuters.com/article/2010/12/02/idINIndia-53307220101202>> (accessed 20 June 2012).

32. "The Brazilian Model", *op. cit.*, pp. 108–209

33. S. Brownwell, *Beijing's Games. What the Olympics Mean to China* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008); S. Collins, "The Fragility of Asian National Identity in the Olympic Games", in Price and Dayan, *op. cit.*, pp. 108–209.

34. P.-C. Lee, A. Bairner and T.C. Tan, "Taiwanese Identities and the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games", in A. Bairner and G. Molnar (eds.), *The Politics of the Olympics* (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 129–144.

35. Cull, *op. cit.*; see also R. Tomlinson, "Whose Accolades? An Alternative Perspective on Motivation for Hosting the Olympics", *Urban Forum*, Vol. 2 (2010), pp. 139–152.

36. R. Espy, *The Politics of the Olympic Games* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1979).

37. See I.V. Hilvoorde, A. Elling and R. Stokvis, "How to Influence National Pride? The Olympic Medal Index as a Unifying Narrative", *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (2010), pp. 87–102.

The example of the Beijing Games is instructive in indicating the risks involved in hosting sports mega-events for, on the one hand, if your state suffers from a poor image based on the past, poor human rights or undemocratic governance, then a major sports event *could* be the best way to re-socialise others towards a more positive image. On the other hand, however, showcasing your nation to a global audience (Beijing's cumulative TV audience reportedly topped 4 billion)³⁸ and the intense media scrutiny that comes with it may not be quite the Olympic effect you seek and may not be the best way to improve your image and increase your influence on the world stage.³⁹ China, although a more closed society than most,⁴⁰ still operates in a "world of the internet and global satellite news", which means that the nation will be "known as it is, not as it wishes to be",⁴¹ leading to a constant stream of bad press around human rights issues. The civilian protests in France around the Olympic torch relay were broadcast across the world and illustrate the risks involved in attempting to attract civilians of other nations through the public diplomacy of the Olympic project. That said, the reaction of the Chinese public to the French protests also illustrates the success of the Olympics in building Chinese nationalism.⁴² Xinchun identifies this nation building as a key part of the Beijing Olympics and the raised nationalism within China led to raised expectations by Chinese people that their country would "have a higher profile within the international community".⁴³

China's hosting of the Olympics could be read not as an attempt to present a *changed* nation to the international community, but rather one that has shifted from being a regional superpower to a global power. As Breslin argues, China has become a more active and involved actor in global affairs, one based around a more confident country able to assert "Chinese interests and ideas" and pursue "responsible" reform of key international organisations such as the WTO.⁴⁴ As we discuss below in relation to Brazil, China is not attempting to be part of a core, occupied as it is by advanced capitalist states, but rather an emerging, alternative power to those in the West, as is clearly evident in its ongoing interventions in Africa⁴⁵ and recent involvement in the North Korean nuclear issue and the Somalian piracy problem.⁴⁶ Despite the difficulty in measuring the impact that the Beijing Olympics has had on China's international influence, Hall is correct in arguing that "the ability to attract events is often regarded as a performance indicator in its own right of the capacity of the city or region to compete" at the international level.⁴⁷

38. International Olympic Committee, "Marketing Report: Beijing 2008", available: <<http://view.digipage.net/?userpath=00000001/00000004/00040592/>> (accessed 9 May 2013).

39. J. DeLisle, "One World, Different Dreams: The Contest to Define the Beijing Olympics", in Price and Dayan, *op. cit.*, pp. 17–66.

40. For a detailed analysis of Chinese politics and society, see Guthrie, *op. cit.*

41. Cull, *op. cit.*, p. 137; see also S. Shen and S. Breslin (eds.), *Online Chinese Nationalism and China's Bilateral Relations* (Lenham: Lexington, 2010).

42. For details, see W. King, "Online Chinese Nationalism towards the European Union: Economic and Diplomatic Implications of the Olympic Torch Relay Protests", in Shen and Breslin, *op. cit.*, pp. 177–198.

43. Cited in Breslin, *op. cit.*, p. 623.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 616.

45. Brautigam, *op. cit.*; Taylor, *op. cit.*

46. Breslin, *op. cit.*, p. 624.

47. C.M. Hall, "Urban Entrepreneurship, Corporate Interests and Sports Mega-Events: The Thin Policies of Competitiveness within the Hard Outcomes of Neoliberalism", *Sociological Review*, Vol. 54 (2006), pp. 59–70, here p. 64.

2010 World Cup: South Africa (and Africa's) Renaissance

Although many commentators expressed surprise at the awarding of the 2010 World Cup to South Africa, Pretoria had been applying for, and hosting, what Black has termed second and third order events for many years.⁴⁸ Not long after the dismantling of apartheid in 1990 and becoming a democracy in the post-apartheid era (1994), South Africa began hosting international sports events. For example, South Africa played host to the very successful 1995 Rugby World Cup (along with symbolic and iconic photographs of Nelson Mandela sporting the victorious Springbok's colours), the 1996 African Cup of Nations, the 1999 All-Africa Games and the 2003 Cricket World Cup. Like China, success in bidding for these events signalled the international credibility of this once-pariah state, providing a platform for the exercise of the politics of attraction.

The difference between all the events above and the World Cup is its global reach. Media coverage of the event, according to FIFA, reached an estimated 46 per cent of the world's population,⁴⁹ providing an unparalleled platform to use the event as a form of public diplomacy to improve the image of their nation among foreign publics abroad. Lepp and Gibson point to a host of negative images that encompass the whole of Africa, of which South Africa is part. These include social, political and economic instability, war, terrorism, corruption, (violent) crime, disease, poor healthcare facilities and so on, embodying the unattractive nature of African politics to others.⁵⁰ Cornelissen, Bob and Swart rightly see South Africa's hosting of the World Cup in part as an exercise in post-apartheid state building in which the state used the event for both internal state building and external showcasing.⁵¹ South Africa also framed its bid—and the event itself—as “pan-African”, that is, it represented the African continent. This was the politics of African attraction by the continent's leading power.

There is no doubt that South Africa took a risk in inviting the world's media to scrutinise its country for four weeks. With 49 per cent of the population living under the poverty line, 25 per cent of its population unemployed, an 18 per cent HIV/AIDS infection rate and an extremely high crime rate, it is easy to understand the misgivings of the world media that South Africa was even considered for the World Cup.⁵² Despite these concerns, consensus among commentators is that this event has definitely put the new, democratic South Africa on the map, fulfilling one of its central foreign policy goals of presenting itself as a global middle power. A number of studies evidence this successful socialising of others, reporting changing perceptions among visitors to South Africa from negative to more

48. Black, “Dreaming Big”, *op. cit.*

49. “Almost Half the World Tuned in at Home to Watch 2010 FIFA World Cup South Africa”, 11 July 2011, available: <<http://www.fifa.com/worldcup/archive/southafrica2010/organisation/media/newsid=1473143/index.html>> (accessed 14 May 2013).

50. A. Lepp and H. Gibson, “Reimagining a Nation: South Africa and the 2010 FIFA World Cup”, *Journal of Sport & Tourism*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (2011), pp. 211–230; see also R. Donaldson and S. Ferreira, “(Re-)creating Urban Destination Image: Opinions of Foreign Visitors to South Africa on Safety and Security?”, *Urban Forum*, Vol. 20 (2009), pp. 1–18.

51. Cornelissen, Bob and Swart, *op. cit.*

52. L. Harris, “Mega-Events and the Developing World: A Look at the Legacy of the 2010 Soccer World Cup”, *South African Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 18, No. 3, pp. 407–427; here p. 408.

positive.⁵³ Some 309,000 visitors came to South Africa for the World Cup, with some 51 per cent suggesting that they would never have thought of visiting had it not been for this event.⁵⁴ There is, therefore, some evidence to show that South Africa has been able to attract foreign publics as the first African state to hold a global sports mega-event and that it was successful in practising the politics of attraction in hosting the 2010 World Cup.

2014 World Cup and 2018 Olympic Games: Brazil's Shift from Regional to Global Power

The final example differs from the above in so far as the sports mega-events have yet to take place (2014 World Cup and 2016 Olympic Games) and so our examination of the politics of attraction focuses on the bidding process (socialising the IOC and FIFA decision makers). Brazil is at the forefront of the new emerging powers discourse; towards the end of 2011 it overtook the UK to become the world's sixth largest economy. While wider debates rage about the ways in which Brazil will exercise its newly found power in the international system,⁵⁵ the unprecedented hosting of the two largest sports mega-events in the world has received far less scrutiny. Brazil is no novice at showcasing itself through large-scale events: the successful staging of the 2007 Pan American Games was clearly a precursor to winning the right to host both the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Olympic Games. This was followed by the successful hosting of the global Rio + 20 Sustainable Development Conference in 2012. It is clear that the rationale behind wanting to stage the two biggest sporting events in the world is simply an extension of this global exposure.

The vast majority of emerging states use sports mega-events to announce their arrival on the world stage as major players, as a so-called "coming out" party⁵⁶ or "to signal their 'graduation' to the status ... of advanced state".⁵⁷ However, in Brazil's case, it is not simply to announce that it is ready to join the advanced Western capitalist states (that is, move from the periphery to the core), but to indicate its shift from a regional actor to a global actor in international affairs. As we have suggested, sports mega-events are part of a package of measures used by elites in emerging states to express and enhance their soft power. However, sport is an ideal mode because of its universal appeal and an ability to cross—

53. See Cornelissen, Bob and Swart, *op. cit.*; Donaldson and Ferreira, *op. cit.*; D. Holtzhausen and J. Fullerton, "The 2010 FIFA World Cup and South Africa: A Study of Longer-Term Effects and Moderators of Country Reputation", *Journal of Marketing Communications* (2013), doi: 10.1080/13527266.2012.740065.

54. B. Knott, A. Fyall and I. Jones, "The Nation-Branding Legacy of the 2010 FIFA World Cup for South Africa", *Journal of Hospitality Marketing & Management*, Vol. 22, No. 6 (2013), pp. 569–595, available: <<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/19368623.2012.663155#.UZflhkp80IQ>> (accessed 20 August 2013).

55. M. Vieira, "Rising States and Distributive Justice: Reforming International Order in the 21st Century", *Global Society*, Vol. 26, No. 3 (2012), pp. 311–329.

56. S. Kuper, "Sport: Developing Nations Go on Offensive for Games", available: <<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/aa7cef8c-273f-11e0-80d7-00144feab49a.html#axzz1mMDENFR9>> (accessed 14 February 2012).

57. D. Black and J. Van der Westhuizen, "The Allure of Global Games for 'Semi-peripheral' Polities and Spaces: A Research Agenda", *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 25, No. 7 (2004), pp. 1195–1224, here p. 1206.

not necessarily bridge—deep cleavages in society, which makes it attractive to event hosts, but also to a global audience and an essential factor in the politics of attraction exercised by hosting states. On hearing that Rio would host the 2016 Olympics, the then president of Brazil, Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, stated: “The world has recognised that the time has come for Brazil”.⁵⁸ He went on to suggest in an emotional address that “[t]oday I’ve felt prouder of being Brazilian than on any other day. Today is the day that Brazil gained its international citizenship ... Today we earned respect”.⁵⁹ Rohter goes on to put this in perspective and suggest that Brazilians “crave the respect of others”; Brazilians want Brazil to be taken seriously, “especially by the countries it views as great powers”.⁶⁰

Winning the bidding process for the Olympics or World Cup usually sends out a number of positive signals of inclusion and acceptance in the international system. Being chosen for two in short succession suggests that the IOC and FIFA have enough trust in Brazil to put on successful events and a belief that it can put its historical in-fighting to one side, streamline its culture of opaque bureaucracy and clamp down on the rampant corruption linked to its political elite,⁶¹ that is, refashion the unattractive political and social elements. The latter are reflected in Brazil’s 69th spot in the 2012 “corruption index” put together by the non-governmental organisation Transparency International, joint with South Africa and 11 places above China.⁶²

Providing both events are successful, staging them will constitute another step on the way to becoming an embedded regional, and global, power. Brazil’s rise is clearly not just economic; this is likely to be matched by political influence, as we have seen with the examples of China and South Africa, both of whom are, post event, established participants in multilateral summits such as the G20.

During the writing of this article, demonstrators took to the streets in Brazil in part against the costs associated with staging two consecutive sports mega-events. This opens an interesting debate that we are unable to discuss fully here: there is a clear discrepancy between what politicians, elites and the public think about the vast investments necessary to host sports mega-events and how that money could have otherwise been invested. The Brazilian case has made public what academics have been pointing out for a while: powerful, unaccountable organisations such as FIFA and the IOC exact commitments of investment from states in which a number of serious problems—poor public health for example—are worsening due to a lack of investment.⁶³

58. “Rio to Stage 2016 Games”, BBC, 2 October 2009, available: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport1/hi/olympic_games/8282518.stm> (accessed 17 July 2013).

59. L. Rohter, *Brazil on the Rise. The Story of a Country Transformed* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 224.

60. *Ibid.*, p. 224.

61. *Ibid.*

62. The index records the manner in which countries around the world are perceived and is based on a wide range of surveys and followed closely by investors and civil rights groups alike. See <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/datablog/2011/dec/01/corruption-index-2011-transparency-international#data>> (accessed 30 July 2012).

63. See “Leader: Brazil Says No to FIFA Jamboree”, *New Statesman*, 4 July 2013, available: <<http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2013/07/leader-brazil-says-no-fifa%E2%80%99-s-jamboree>> (accessed on 5 July 2013); “FIFA Wins, Brazilians Lose”, *The Guardian*, 24 June 2013, available: <<http://www.todayonline.com/commentary/fifa-wins-brazilians-lose>> (accessed 20 August 2013).

Conclusion

Brazil, China and South Africa have less in common than the analytical compartmentalising of them as emergent powers would suggest. They are not, for instance, equally emerging. China's economy is growing faster than Brazil's or South Africa's, and China has long been a nuclear power and permanent member of the United Nations Security Council. What they do have in common, however, is that they have all become predominant players in the hosting of sports mega-events. In this article we have explored this contemporary phenomenon, arguing that it indicates and reinforces what IR scholars have already signalled: the structural shift in contemporary international affairs in which a plurality of states are now active participants in the global system and where, in particular, large developing countries such as Brazil, China and South Africa enjoy influence in multilateral and bilateral settings far beyond their region. Sports mega-events are notable socialising events in which the majority of states compete with each other, watched by a majority of the world's population and sponsored by the world's leading transnational businesses. In this global context they provide unprecedented diplomatic opportunities for host states in particular to practise the politics of attraction by championing universally shared and admired sporting norms in ways that project a positive image of themselves in order to increase credibility and status on the world's stage. This is crucial for states like Brazil, China and South Africa whose political and social systems are otherwise difficult to export to others. The socialising of others through public diplomacy is both an exercise and augmentation of the host state's soft power. We have focused on how large developing states have increasingly, and successfully, hosted and/or bid for sports mega-events as part of a diplomatic strategy to increasing their potential for agency in international affairs. In the case of China and South Africa, the successful hosting of the 2008 Olympics and the 2010 World Cup respectively signalled a shift from pariah state to included state. For Brazil, China and South Africa, the successful bidding for (and in the case of the latter two, successful hosting of) a sports mega-event signals and boosts a shift from regionally based emerging power to embedded global power.

The significance of soft power is well established in IR following the seminal work by Nye. Here we have ontologically extended this concept beyond its usual developed state focus to highlight how large developing states make use of soft power to transform their state image and enhance their international positioning through hosting sports mega-events. In so doing, we have drawn attention to the contribution that Nye's concept of "soft power" can make to an understanding of emerging states and their attempts through sports events to increase their agency on the international stage.