

THE POLITICAL GAMBIT IN SPORTS: TAIWAN'S STRUGGLES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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In the Paris 2024 Olympics, the Taiwanese government is being given the opportunity to use 'Taiwan' as its name in the Cultural Olympiad. Taking part in international sports is viewed as a critical means to bolster Taiwan's diplomatic outreach, contributing to advancing cross-strait relations and relations with other countries while promoting Taiwan internationally. Taiwan's sports diplomacy relies on hosting international sporting events and academic events and conducting cross-strait exchange programs. Due to China's pressure on Taiwan's participation in the international space, the effectiveness of these strategies is limited. Taiwan consistently faces the risks of losing host rights and hostile bidding because of China's influence in global and regional sports organizations. In the meantime, the exchange program is limited to elite athletes and student-athletes. Therefore, to optimize the use of sports diplomacy, Taipei might need to diversify its relevant policies by involving civil society more and broadening the sphere of exchange programs.

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Introduction

Taiwan (Republic of China, ROC) has struggled to gain more international recognition due to China's (People's Republic of China, PRC) "One China" Principle, which claims Taiwan as an inalienable part of its territory. In the domain of international sports affairs, Taiwan has been required to compete under the name 'Chinese Taipei' in the Olympic Games since 1981, as mandated by the International Olympic Committee (IOC). This regulation also prohibits the use of the ROC's national flag and anthem in the venue.¹ Though

Taiwan has faced obstacles related to its sovereignty in participating in international sports affairs, it remains an efficient diplomatic tool for Taiwan to broaden its international presence and internationalize cross-strait issues.²

Sports have a long history of being used as a diplomatic tool to advance relations between countries and showcase a country's soft power and nation-branding.³ Taking part in international sports is viewed

as a critical means to bolster Taiwan's diplomatic outreach, contributing to advance cross-strait relations and relations with other countries while promoting Taiwan internationally.⁴ Taiwan's Sports Policy White Paper (體育運動政策白皮書), published in 2013 by the Ministry of Education (MoE), outlines a 10-year vision for sports development.⁵ According to the White Paper, Taiwan relies on hosting international sporting events and academic events and conducting cross-strait exchange programs in its sports diplomacy. These policies are common for countries with sports diplomacy. However, Taiwan's unique situation and China's pressure on Taiwan-related issues might limit these policies' effectiveness. Due to this situation, Taiwan might need to diversify its current strategy to better leverage sports diplomacy.

In the Paris 2024 Olympics, the Taiwanese government is being given the opportunity to use 'Taiwan' as its name in the Cultural Olympiad. As one of the most watched sporting events in the world, the Olympics offers a space for Taiwan to promote its international standing and presence.⁶ This opportunity not only shows the potential of sports to advance Taiwan globally but also raises the issue of Taiwan's sports diplomacy, which is not discussed often.

Taiwan's Diplomatic Situation and Cross-Strait Relations

Taiwan has faced international advocacy challenges since the United Nations (UN) General Assembly Resolution 2758 passed in 1971. The resolution made the PRC the only legitimate government of China in the UN.⁷ The ROC lost its membership in the UN and gradually started to lose its international recognition. Since many countries and international organizations (IOs) tend to follow the UN's protocol, Taiwan has therefore been struggling to build diplomatic relations and is excluded from critical IOs such as the UN, World Health Organization (WHO), International Criminal Police Organization (Interpol), and the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO).⁸

Additionally, Taiwan maintains formal diplomatic ties with only 12 countries as of 2024,⁹ with several former

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allies shifting their recognition to mainland China due to economic incentives and the "One China" Principle.

Apart from Taiwan's difficult diplomatic situation, cross-strait relations have deteriorated since the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) assumed office in 2016. Since then, China has markedly increased military coercion and grey zone tactics to warn Taiwan not to seek independence, while the DPP government believes that mutual communication necessitates that China first treats Taiwan as an equal partner rather than a subordinate.¹⁰ Cross-strait relations, thus, have reached a frozen point.

In his inaugural speech on May 20, 2024, Taiwan's newly elected President, Lai Ching-te from the DPP, mentioned China, PRC, and Taiwan a record number of times.¹¹ Notably, a prominent statement in the speech was: "The Republic of China and the People's Republic of China are not subordinate to each other. All the people of Taiwan must come together to safeguard our nation."¹² In this statement, Lai specifically distinguished the ROC from the PRC and emphasized the equal status of the ROC and the PRC's sovereignty. The move might reflect Lai's attempt to assert Taiwan's identity as distinct from China/PRC, sending a clear message to Beijing, which objects to this stance. In response, China conducted a military

drill called Joint Sword 2024A (聯合利劍-2024A) three days after the inauguration speech without any prior announcement.¹³ Based on the situation, Taipei is expected to experience challenges in expanding its international space.

Taiwan's Sports Policy and Its Limitations

The tension in the Taiwan Strait is hard to avoid nowadays, as shown by the increasing military actions around Taiwan since 2016 and Taiwan's hardship in maintaining or expanding its international presence through official channels and occasions.¹⁴ Under such circumstance, Taiwan has developed and relied on its soft power to broaden its relations with other countries and its international presence. Sports are part of Taiwan's soft power that actively serves as a diplomatic tool for gaining a greater global presence.¹⁵ Such a strategy could partially compensate for the diplomatic difficulties caused by Taiwan's unique situation regarding its sovereignty.¹⁶

Taiwan's Sports Policy White Paper published in 2013 indicates a 10-year vision for its sports development and strategy. After the 2016 party rotation, the DPP government reviewed the 2013 White Paper in 2017

and republished the modified version. In the modified version, the 2017 White Paper, former president Tsai Ing-wen's government decided to retain the framework of the 2013 White Paper while integrating Tsai's policy into it.¹⁷ The most distinct addition was the incorporation of the New Southbound Policy (NSP) and Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Sports Policy Network, which focuses on exchanges between Taiwan, South Asian, and Southeast Asian countries, as well as other members of the APEC. In 2022, the government started reviewing the White Paper again. In this reviewing session, experts from the Physical Education Research and Development Center at the National Taiwan Normal University aimed to structure the 2033 White Paper on Sport for the next ten years.¹⁸ Meanwhile, the National Taiwan Sport University hosted forums to gather diverse opinions and expertise around Taiwan between mid-June and mid-July 2024 to advance Taiwan's sports policy.¹⁹

In both the 2013 and 2017 White Papers, Taiwan's five major policies for enhancing its participation in the international community and increasing cross-strait exchange through sports include (1) proactively participating in international sporting events and activities, (2) bidding for hosting international sporting events and conferences, (3) building the system to train and assist personnel to participate in international sport affairs, (4) facilitating cross-strait sports exchanges, and (5) building a platform for international sports exchanges.²⁰

Through these initiatives, Taiwan aims to widen its presence in international sports and build up its global standing, thereby garnering increased diplomatic support and economic opportunities.²¹ For instance, hosting major international sporting events is a common strategy for countries to promote their positive image, enabling them to leverage international media coverage to showcase their soft power.²² Taipei 2017 Summer Universiade stands out as the most notable implementation of this policy. The event successfully garnered positive international attention for Taiwan.²³

Nevertheless, Taiwan's sovereignty issue and its tension

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with China have affected Taiwan's opportunities to host international sporting events. Taiwan consistently faces the risks of losing host rights and hostile bidding because of China's influence in global and regional sports organizations and the status of cross-strait relations.²⁴ For instance, Taipei's hosting right for the 2019 East Asian Youth Games was revoked in 2018 after a referendum calling for changing its name from Chinese Taipei to Taiwan in the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. Similarly, following its 2024 presidential and legislative elections, Taiwan lost the right to host the 2024 Asian Men's U20 Volleyball Championship.²⁵

The White Paper spells out the goals regarding participation in the international community and increasing cross-strait exchange through a sports focus on the number of international sporting events, sports conferences, and cross-strait exchange programs Taiwan can hold each year, as well as the number of Taiwanese personnel working in international sports organizations. Despite adding the policy of increasing exchange between Taiwan and countries in NSP and APEC, the goals listed in both the 2013 and 2017 White Papers remain the same.

These goals are crucial since they demonstrate Taiwan's participation and contributions to the international sports community, coupled with its aspirations and capacity to develop and invest in sports. Nonetheless, it does not discuss exchange programs with other countries except China in its goals. With limited exchange destination countries, Taipei misses the opportunity to build and deepen its relations with like-minded partners through sports. Additionally, it neglects how the sports groups in civil society could be involved since the exchange programs are mainly operated by the Chinese Taipei Olympic Committee, the Chinese Taipei University Sports Federation, and the Chinese Taipei University School Federation. Moreover, the current exchange programs only prioritize elite athletes and student-athletes.²⁶ Given Taiwan's restricted international space due to China's global influence, enhancing people-to-people exchanges becomes crucial for broadening its global exposure. Yet, centralized exchange targets solely focusing on elite athletes and

student-athletes might limit the overall impact of such initiatives.

In short, China retains the ability to revoke Taiwan's right to host sporting events when unsatisfied with Taiwan's actions. This situation has hindered Taiwan's ability to host major international sporting events. Additionally, Taiwan faces potential investment loss caused by the sudden loss of hosting rights.²⁷ Under this backdrop, Taiwan must reevaluate its sports policy to enhance its participation in the international community and increase the sphere of exchange programs.

Opportunities for Taiwan's Sports Diplomacy Under China's Influence

In the context of Taiwan's constrained international standing and tensions in the Taiwan Strait, hosting or participating in international events and facilitating exchange among athletes and sports professionals all play valuable roles in Taiwan's sports diplomacy.

The most recent high-level instance of Taiwan's participation in international sports-related events is its invitation to exhibit and present its culture by having the Taiwan Pavilion at Parc de la Villette in the Cultural Olympiad in the Paris 2024 Olympics. Taiwan actively sought the opportunity to participate in the Cultural Olympiad. Taipei invited the Artistic Director of Parc de la Villette - Frédéric Mazelly, to Taiwan in early 2023, then received his invitation to participate in the Cultural Olympiad.²⁸ Taiwan's Ministry of Culture thus (MoC) has invited Taiwanese artists and art groups from civil society to perform at the Taiwan Pavilion.²⁹ In this event, Taiwan can use the name 'Taiwan' to present Taiwanese culture and the beliefs it embraces. It is the first time Taiwan can be seen as 'Taiwan' among Olympic events since 1968.³⁰ It represents a significant opportunity for Taiwan to increase its international exposure and promote a positive image, given the global attention drawn by the Olympics. Additionally, this opportunity offers people worldwide access to Taiwan's civil society and culture while serving as a platform for politicians and diplomats

from Taiwan and Europe to deepen and diversify their relations through potential informal meetings.³¹

Interestingly, Beijing did not criticize this issue when Taiwan's participation in the Cultural Olympiad was revealed in late April, even though it is directly related to using the name 'Taiwan.' The reason might be that the Cultural Olympiad does not belong to the sphere of official competition in the Olympic Games. However, in June, Beijing announced judicial guidelines targeting people involved in 'Taiwan independence' activities.³² It is unclear if there is any correlation between the issue of the guidelines and Taiwan's participation in the Cultural Olympiad.

Moreover, increasing support for relevant non-profit organizations (NGOs) to participate in international sports could be more effective in gaining publicity, as China might refrain from actively interfering with independent bodies. Two notable examples are the Taiwanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs' (MOFA) support for Taiwan's Sport Forward Association co-hosting of the event: "Using Sports as Diplomacy: Taiwan and the United States Jointly Build an Asia-Pacific Sports Peaceful Exchange Platform International Forum," and the "Women in Sports International Photo Awards."³³ These international sports-related events attracted participants from 52 countries, providing Taiwan with an international platform to promote its advocacy for gender equality and strengthen relations with like-minded partners, such as the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT).³⁴

According to the White Paper, the exchange programs for athletes and sports professionals focus on cross-strait elite and student-athlete exchange, neglecting athletes and sports groups in civil society.³⁵ Addressing this neglect may allow Taiwan to increase its connections with other civil societies.

Taiwan's education scholarship programs are an example of building connections through civil society. Given the positive results, Taiwan might consider expanding this approach to include people from civil society in its sports diplomacy. Taiwan's MOFA, MoE,

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and International Cooperation and Development Fund provide scholarships for foreigners to study in Taiwan. These scholarships promote Mandarin learning, introduce Taiwan's academic environment, culture, and society, as well as foster relations with diplomatic allies and other countries.³⁶ They integrate people from diverse civil societies into Taiwan's public diplomacy, to some extent positioning them as cultural ambassadors for Taiwan. Furthermore, the MoE offers "Government Scholarship to Study Abroad" to Taiwanese citizens who intend to study abroad (China is not included as a destination country in the program), which serves as a tool to increase Taiwan's international competitiveness while facilitating exchange.³⁷ These scholarship programs provide Taiwan with valuable exchange platforms to strengthen connections with its diplomatic ties, like-minded partners, and trading partners. In other words, the importance of involving civil society in Taipei's sports diplomacy and exploring the potential of sports scholarship programs requires consideration.

It is hoped that under the current president, Lai Ching-te from the DPP, Taiwan may place greater emphasis on the potential of sports diplomacy. The

DPP invited Po-Chun Liu, the Founder and Secretary General of the Taiwan Sport Forward Association, to present the potential of Taiwan's sports diplomacy in its Central Standing Committee meeting just a few days before President Lai's inauguration.³⁸ The gesture indicates that the DPP government has an interest in what sports diplomacy could bring for Taiwan, and the government is willing to reevaluate and develop relevant policies.

Conclusion

Taiwan constantly faces China's pressure in the international arena, including the domain of international sports. Taiwan has actively used sports to broaden its international presence as a channel to connect to the world. The Sports Policy White Paper outlines its main strategies, which focus on participating in international sports organizations, bidding to host major international sporting events, and conducting cross-strait exchanges. The effectiveness of these primary strategies is being limited by Beijing's actions against Taipei in the international space.

Participating in the Cultural Olympiad in the Paris 2024 Olympics as an individual cultural entity under the name of Taiwan and supporting NGOs hosting its international forum and award can be seen as successful cases of Taiwan's public diplomacy and sports diplomacy. With this experience, Taiwan is expected to pursue a similar strategy further. In terms of athletes and sports professionals, Taiwan does not have wide-ranging collaboration targets within or outside of the island so far. This situation limits Taiwan's outreach scale. To avoid this situation and maximize the effectiveness of sports diplomacy, the government should diversify its current policies by involving civil society more and broadening the sphere of exchange programs.

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