

War and games

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Sports have long been a bridge to unite people and nations, with diplomatic efforts often leveraging internal games to foster harmony. The first-ever Olympics, held in 776 BCE in a grand arena in Greece—home to the earliest known world games—promoted inclusivity and unity. However, over time, geostrategic and political interests have overshadowed this ideal, eroding the significance of sports in diplomacy.

The ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict has affected the Eurasian geopolitics, impacting trade, education, food security, energy supply, and even the global sports sector. The conflict has disrupted world politics and led to widespread human rights abuses, prompting the international community to impose sanctions on Russia. In response to Russia's aggression against Ukraine, major sporting bodies like the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) have suspended Russia from participating in key events.

Initially, Russia was allowed to compete as the "Football Union of Russia," playing matches outside its borders. But, when Poland, Sweden, and Czechia declined to play Russia in World Cup play-offs, FIFA and the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) were forced to ban Russia. Additionally, St Petersburg-Spartak Moscow was disqualified by UEFA from the Europa Champions League final. Another notable move was the athletes' exclusion from the Beijing 2022 Winter Paralympics by the Russian and Belarusian Paralympic Committees one day before the games started.

Russian athletes are currently banned from competitions by the International Ice Hockey Federation, the International Biathlon Union, and the International Skating Union. Russia also lost its right to host the 2022 Volleyball Men's World Championship, with similar suspensions announced by the European Volleyball Confederation, the International Gymnastics Federation, the International Ski Federation, and the International Basketball Federation.

Amid international pressure, the International Olympic Committee's (IOC) executive board allowed athletes holding Russian or Belarusian passports to compete as individual neutral athletes in the most recent Paris Olympics in 2024. The national anthem, colours, flag, and other symbols of Belarus and Russia won't be displayed during the Olympics. Only those Russian athletes who

opposed the war were deemed eligible to compete.

For the Paris games, over 60 Ukrainians qualified, compared to just 11 individual neutral competitors (six Russians and five Belarusians) out of the 4,600 competitors. To support Ukrainian athletes, the IOC tripled its Solidarity Fund to \$7.5 million, covering expenses such as travel, accommodation, equipment, clothes, and training.

Despite restrictions, some Russian athletes made their mark at the Paris Olympics. Diana Shnaider and Mirra Andreeva won silver in women's tennis doubles, while Bardzilouskaya secured silver in the women's trampoline. Russian athletes are not permitted to engage in political, religious, or racial propaganda or demonstrations in Olympic venues or other sports locations, per rule 50 of the IOC Charter.

Russia expressed its disapproval through the media and other channels after the Olympic Committee announced that their participants would be allowed to compete as individual neutral participants. For the first time since 1984, Russia had chosen not to broadcast the games, and the anti-West propaganda of the Kremlin and Russian media had made the Russian people less interested in the games. Even Russian President Vladimir Putin and Foreign Minister Maria Zakharova denounced the International Olympic Committee for utilising sports as a political tool. They also said that sports could bring them together rather than dividing people.

Restrictions and prohibitions from sporting events are not new in the annals of world politics. Due to their involvement in World War II, Germany and Japan were formerly prohibited from competing in the Olympic Games, and South Africa was subject to comparable penalties during the apartheid era. However, banning and restricting athletes will escalate the problems instead of resolving the conflict. On the other hand, international sporting events were planned to encourage harmony, peace, and multiculturalism. These events should strengthen human harmony and unity. Athletic events and committees should avoid getting involved in politics to continue being able to unite people. The international community, particularly the United Nations (UN), should mediate between Russia and Ukraine to resolve the war and preserve world peace.

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