

Contesting the international order through the Olympics: from Sochi 2014 to Paris 2024

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Abstract

This chapter investigates the evolving nexus between Olympism and the liberal international order through a comparative analysis of the Sochi 2014 and Beijing 2022 Winter Olympic Games, situating their legacies within the context of the Paris 2024 Summer Olympics and the deepening fragmentation of the liberal international order (LIO). Building on the idea that contestation of the LIO can disrupt established institutional structures of international sport (Goretti, 2025), and that contestation within international sport may, in turn, unsettle the normative foundations of that order, this chapter examines how the two mega-events hosted respectively by Russia and China – widely seen as key challengers to the LIO – have functioned as platforms for the projection, negotiation, and contestation of competing visions of world order. By tracing both convergences and divergences in the Russian and Chinese approaches to Olympism, the chapter seeks to contribute to the growing body of International Relations literature on contestation by examining Olympic diplomacy both as a mirror of the often-overlooked multiplicity of contesting forces shaping global politics, as well as a catalyst in their unfolding.

Abstract (Italiano)

Questo capitolo indaga l'evoluzione del rapporto tra l'Olimpismo e l'ordine internazionale liberale attraverso un'analisi comparativa delle Olimpiadi invernali di Sochi 2014 e di Pechino 2022, situando le loro eredità nel contesto delle Olimpiadi estive di Parigi 2024 e della crescente frammentazione dell'ordine internazionale liberale (LIO). Partendo dall'idea che la contestazione del LIO possa destabilizzare le strutture istituzionali consolidate dello sport internazionale (Goretti, 2025) e che, a sua volta, la contestazione all'interno dello sport internazionale possa mettere in discussione le fondamenta normative di tale ordine, il capitolo esamina come i due mega-eventi ospitati rispettivamente da Russia e Cina – ampiamente considerati attori sfidanti del LIO – abbiano funzionato come piattaforme per la proiezione, la negoziazione e la contestazione di visioni

concorrenti dell'ordine mondiale. Analizzando convergenze e divergenze negli approcci russo e cinese all'Olimpismo, il capitolo intende contribuire alla crescente letteratura delle Relazioni Internazionali sulla contestazione, esaminando la diplomazia olimpica sia come specchio della molteplicità – spesso trascurata – di forze in competizione che modellano la politica globale, sia come catalizzatore del loro dispiegarsi.

Keywords: *Olympism, liberal international order (LIO), contestation, Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics, Sochi 2014 Winter Olympics, Paris 2024 Summer Olympics*

Introduction

Within an international order shaped by the structural condition of anarchy, contestation is “the rule rather than the exception in international relations” (Wiener, 2014: 5). This equally manifests in the realm of international sport, which serves as a microcosm of international forces (Espy, 1979). Yet, major sporting events such as the Olympic Games do more than mirror geopolitical dynamics; the political developments surrounding them offer compelling evidence that international sport can also serve as a transformative force in global politics. Among the most salient examples at the national level are the political reforms that followed the 1988 Seoul Games and the positive effects of the boycott on the end of apartheid in South Africa in 1994. Far from “mythologising” the transformative power of sport – and fully aware of its limited capacity to alter the course of domestic and international relations – this chapter argues that the need for a conceptual framework that positions international sport as a catalyst, or “driver,” of global politics should not be underestimated. Following Levermore and Budd (2004: 10), we maintain that the study of the dynamics occurring during international sporting events may foster a greater understanding of the international arena as well as of the domestic one, thus not only reflecting the normative contestation of the international order in place but also providing insights into how this is unfolding. In other words, whereas the Olympic Games should not be expected to produce peace or war, they possess the capacity to influence rapprochement or splits that are already underway (Keys, 2009). In the context of the crisis

of the Liberal International Order (LIO), which has come under mounting contestation in recent years, international sport, and the Olympic Games in particular, should therefore be regarded as an active arena and potential source driving such contestation.

Today's contestation is multifaceted, involving a diverse array of actors and targeting various principles and dimensions of the international order. Whilst there is no dearth of studies on how Russia and China position themselves vis-à-vis the US-led international order (cf. Morozov, 2023; Clunan, 2018; Buzan, 2010; Schweller and Pu, 2011; Johnston, 2019), significantly less attention has been paid to their strategic convergences and divergencies as well as potential alignments with the rise of the radical right as a global phenomenon. With regard to the Kremlin, three main perspectives emerge in International Relations (IR) literature: Russia as a "revanchist power" that seeks to overturn the very foundations of the liberal international order; Russia as a "defensive power" that works for incremental changes within the existing order; and finally, Russia as an "aggressive isolationist" power that deliberately plays a spoiler role in international affairs to boost its domestic legitimacy (Götz and Merlen, 2018). Scholarship, however, has also suggested that Russia's bid to reshape the liberal international order hinges on the type of liberalism it embodies, indicating that Moscow is ill-suited to a post-liberal order rooted in conservative nationalism and geopolitics (Trubina, 2019). As for Beijing, the debate tends to dichotomise between either status quo or revisionist predictions, although the reality appears to be more nuanced, existing in a space that lies somewhere between these two extremes (Breslin, 2018). In parallel, internal challenges to liberal internationalism have also intensified, with the rise of far-right and populist movements within liberal democracies increasingly recognized as a force undermining its very foundations. Scholars have begun to explore how these domestic counter-hegemonic forces may contribute to the erosion of the international liberal consensus by promoting exclusionary nationalism and undermining multilateral cooperation (Abrahamsen et al., 2024). These dynamics, however, have rarely been examined in conjunction, and even less so through the prism of the Olympic Games.

It is precisely in this gap that the present article seeks to intervene, shedding light on how the Olympics have emerged as a

prominent arena for what has been termed a “diplomacy of contestation” (Diodato and Strina, 2023). This phenomenon, on the one hand, has entailed the emergence of non-liberal hosting countries’ commitment to articulating a distinctive – if not outright alternative – normative system and vision of the international order within the Olympic arena, significantly displayed during the events’ opening and closing ceremonies. On the other hand, contestation has also arisen from “within,” with the 2024 Paris Olympics serving as an exemplary case: unfolding amid a surge of the global far-right and deepening societal divides, revealing that challenges to the LIO are not confined to authoritarian regimes but also emerge among liberal democracies themselves, endangering the internal cohesion and resilience of the very order they claim to uphold.

The entire reflection is situated within what may be termed a “BRICS phase” of the Games – marked by the Sochi Winter Olympics in 2014, the Rio Summer Games in 2016, and a broader “re-Orientation” of the Olympics toward the East, exemplified by the PyeongChang 2018, Tokyo 2020 Olympics, and the Beijing Winter Olympics in 2022 – to a renewed emphasis of the West, as witnessed by the hosting of Paris 2024 Olympics and the upcoming Olympic editions in Milan-Cortina 2026, Los Angeles 2028, and the French Alps 2030. Amid these developments, the analysis seeks to address two key questions: (i) To what extent does the “BRICS phase” of the Games and in particular the Olympics held in Russia in 2014 and China in 2022 contribute to understanding the current contestation of the US-led international order while illuminating the points of divergence and convergence between these two actors’ approach to the LIO? (ii) How were these long-lasting legacies reflected during the 2024 Paris Olympics, marking a new phase of Olympic diplomacy as the Games shifted back to the West? To unpack these issues, the chapter first explores the theoretical nexus between liberal internationalism and Olympism, situating the Olympic Games within the ideological fabric of the liberal international order. Subsequently, it comparatively examines the extent to which the Sochi 2014 and Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics have proved to be additional platforms through which to advance the contestation of the order in place and how this has echoed in the context of the far right’s rise in Europe, particularly at the 2024 Paris Olympics. This investigation begins by moving

beyond the treatment of “international order” and “contestation” as buzzwords, clarifying their meanings and theoretical contours – an analytical task to which the following section is dedicated.

1. Liberal Internationalism and Olympism

A well-established definition of “international order” frames it as

a pattern of activity that sustains the elementary or primary goals of the society of states” and exists “when a group of states, conscious of certain common interests and common values, form a society in the sense that they conceive themselves to be bound by a common set of rules in their relations with one another, and share in the working of common institutions (Bull, 2002: 8-13).

By emphasizing institutions, rules, and values that underpin states’ conduct, any international order emerges as an ideational project rather than merely an equilibrium or balance of forces. From this perspective, the international order currently under contestation – established by the U.S. leadership after World War II – can be understood as an ideational project grounded in “liberal internationalism”. As Ikenberry (2018: 7) observes, “What has united the ideas and agendas of liberal internationalism is a vision of an open, loosely rules-based and progressively oriented international order.” At the same time, the general “concept of LIO” (liberal international order) – used in political science to define the international order based on liberal internationalism – “suffers from theoretical weaknesses that render it unable to explain much about the interaction of the United States with its adversaries or its allies” (Glaser, 2019: 52). One fruitful way to engage with this concept is by considering how liberal internationalism has historically underpinned and shaped the international society, also materializing in the norms, symbols, and institutional practices of the Olympic movement, making it clearer why the LIO and Olympism are subject to contestation today.

Liberal internationalism has shaped the international order for over two centuries, from France’s civilizing mission and the 19th-century British free trade imperialism to American manifest destiny, providing the ideological foundation of the postwar order

(Barnett, 2021: 13). The globalization of the international order after the Cold War is indeed entangled with a set of underlying principles, rules, and values – what Gong (1984) calls the “standard of civilization,” which enabled inclusion and exclusion between those deemed inside and outside the liberal community. While cloaked in the rhetoric of progress and universal values, these iterations were often inseparable from coercive practices and asymmetrical power relations, which justified imperial and colonial projects on the premise that they were uplifting so-called “uncivilized” societies by introducing them to liberal norms and institutions. Just as the notion of civilization has long functioned as a legal and moral criterion for membership in international society, the contemporary turn to civilizations – what has been termed “civilizationism” – can be read as a counter-hegemonic reaction to the globalization of liberal internationalism and its “monistic universalism” (Bettiza et. al., 2023; Acharya, 2014: 649). In a similar vein, reactionary Western civilizationism articulates a conception of world order that, in contrast to liberal internationalism’s open and globalizing orientation, envisions a regionally bounded and integrative civilizational order grounded in the defense of a collective Western identity (Bettiza et. al, 2023). Against this background of ideological contestation, sport imaginaries condense rivalry’s intensity with its civilizing potential (Hoberman, 2004).

To examine the nexus between the contestation of Olympism and the contestation of the LIO, therefore, it is essential to unpack their shared foundational pillar: “liberal internationalism”, “the idea that we both are part of a broader community than that of the nation” (Halliday, 1988: 187). Since its inception, this “was in many ways the twin of nationalism, the ideology of the modern nation-state, which also emerged as a political movement in the nineteenth century” (Ikenberry, 2020: 66). The Italian patriot Giuseppe Mazzini was one of the first thinkers who tried to reconcile “love of the country” with “love of humanity.” By viewing other nations not as antagonists but as allies in the pan-European alliance against multinational and monarchical empires,

Mazzini became a forerunner of Woodrow Wilson’s later ‘liberal internationalism’ that called for national self-determination,

international cooperation, and the formation of a League of Nations short of a world state (Rolf, 2023: 104).

True or sincere nationalism (the love for one's own country) and true or sincere internationalism (the love for humanity) constitute not only the core of liberal internationalism but also of Olympism. As underlined by Rolf (2023: 105), "sincere nationalism and sincere internationalism – together with amateurism, athleticism and Hellenism – constitute the core of de Coubertin's ideological morphology." The nucleus of the Olympic idea was indeed a persisting individual effort integrated into a civilized nationalism and displayed in an international multi-sport event controlled by an independent organization, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) (Horne and Whannel, 2020: 118).

Whilst liberal internationalism inspires the fundamentals of contemporary Olympism – a "philosophy of life" based on "respect for internationally recognised human rights and universal fundamental ethical principles within the remit of the Olympic Movement" (IOC, 2025b: 8) – there are two caveats to consider.

The first caveat precisely concerns the complex interplay between internationalism and nationalism within the Olympic arena – a tension well reflected in the way specific Olympic symbols, rituals, and myths are appropriated by nationalist narratives, to which the IOC responds by promoting cosmopolitan ideals (Rolf, 2023). Originally, Coubertin envisioned the Olympic movement to be explicitly framed by "internationalism," alongside other principles such as equality of opportunity, fair play, and peace (Preuss and Liese, 2011). The motto "All Games, All Nations" and the Olympic rings, symbolising the five continents, came to represent cross-cultural interaction and a form of "peaceful internationalism" (Guttman, 2002). At the same time, Coubertin's vision was driven by patriotic concerns and the desire to strengthen French society through national cohesion and reform (Chatziefstathiou and Henry, 2012). Despite becoming increasingly international in its institutional structure and meaning, the Olympic movement has historically relied on the differentiation of national identities for its success (Rowe, 2006: 431). Rooted in a shared cultural tradition and closely tied to national symbols and rituals that bind an "imagined community" together (Anderson,

1983), the Games and sport in general function as an “invented tradition” inseparable from nationalism (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983). The most visible example of the quest for an ideological compromise between these two orientations might be found during the 1930s, when the Olympic movement was

understood as a rightwing internationalism that was effectively coopted by the Nazis (...). This cooptation was made possible in part by an ideological compatibility between the IOC elite and the Nazis based on a shared ideal of aristocratic manhood and the value system that derived from their glorification of the physically perfect male as the ideal human being (Hoberman, 1995: 17).

While it is tempting, as Hargreaves (1992) suggests, to dismiss Olympism as either a relic of nineteenth-century moral code or an ideological device, it nonetheless operates as an active agent capable of shaping political agendas and being strategically mobilized by social actors in pursuit of their interests. It is within this historical interplay of nationalist expressions and cosmopolitan aspirations that the so-called “Olympic paradox” arises: a tension between Olympism’s universalism and particularism, between symbolizing a moral order without demanding moral action, serving at once as a “social stimulant” and a “tranquilizer” (Hoberman, 1986: 36).

The second caveat is the development of Olympic internationalism towards a form of show business in the late 20th century, when the Games were predominantly a Western affair. The Los Angeles Games of 1984 constituted the tipping point of a phase of the politics of the Olympics marked by “neo-liberalization,” with the Atlanta Games in 1996 held without any governmental support and thus leading to what is known as the “commercialization of the Games” (Horne and Whannel, 2020: 147-8). The triumph of Olympism, in other words, was possible due to its economic success related to the show business of the Western capitalist world.

While contestation of the economic interests that distort the Olympic spirit remains rather marginal and does not seem to call the Games into question, contestation of Olympism, including the LIO, is intended as “a social practice that entails the objection to specific issues that matter to people” (Wiener, 2014: 3). Given that

norms represent the “legitimizing core of global governance” (2014: 4), contestation is not confined to “notions of opposition, questioning or protest” but signals legitimacy gaps that might even lead to a more legitimate global governance (2014, viii). In this sense, beyond a destabilizing force, contestation constitutes the condition for a more shared understanding of the meanings of norms that may ultimately foster norm legitimacy (Deitelhoff, 2020). Following this reasoning, it might be claimed that just as the LIO must embrace contestation to evolve into a genuinely ‘global order,’ so too must Olympism, a global vision in scope.

Along with the contestation of liberal internationalism, we should consider two additional related forms of contestation that concern other social structures of the LIO, such as “regionalism” and “interdependence,” which facilitate cooperation and create capacities for states to make good on their domestic obligations (Alcaro, 2018). These structures, however, can be coherently situated within the broader framework of what John Ruggie (1992: 571) described as “multilateralism”: an institutional form that coordinates relations among groups of states “on the basis of generalized principles of conduct.” Accordingly, regionalism is nothing other than multilateralism on a smaller scale, carrying additional advantages such as geographic proximity and cultural affinity; interdependence would represent the economic framework of liberal internationalism, understood as an obligation to pursue economic welfare in a multilateral and non-discriminatory fashion. Rooted in the assumption that all states, regardless of size or power, are entitled to representation and participation in international decision-making processes, the LIO advances multilateralism as a pathway toward a more just and democratic global order. To contest the LIO is, therefore, to contest this very pathway: its normative commitment to multilateralism, which also underpins the Olympic Games, convening states within a shared institutional framework grounded in rules, representation, and mutual recognition.

Despite manifesting in different ways and to different degrees, the contestation of Olympic internationalism is fundamentally anchored on its relationship with “idealistic internationalism,” which places normative expectations to conform to the ideational principles of the IOC’s Olympism (Cha, 2009). Since the end of World

War II, the state that hosts the Olympics has been expected to embrace the presumed universal ideals and values of the Olympic movement carried out under the authority of the IOC, that is, to place sport at the service of the harmonious and progressive development of humanity in order to promote peaceful and fair societies. Among these expectations, the imperative to organize the Games in an “environmentally sustainable manner” has gained increasing prominence. In 1994, environmental protection became officially included as a third component of Olympism, and a year later, the IOC Sport and Environment Commission was created (Krieger and Langenbach, 2018). Since 2014, environmental commitments have built on the principles of the Olympic Agenda, which place sustainability and sustainable development at the heart of the Olympic Movement under the motto “change or be changed.” (IOC, 2025a). Today, as a core pillar of Olympic Agenda 2020+5, the growing urgency of achieving sustainable development has established the pursuit of “green Olympic Games” as a central mandate for hosting nations. It follows that “environmentalism” – defined as a framework that “predicates environmental protection on the promotion and maintenance of a liberal economic order” (Bernstein, 2001) – emerges as a key site where contestation of the LIO extends to and emanates from the Olympic arena.

Building on these theoretical underpinnings, this chapter claims that just as the contestation of liberal internationalism entails a challenge to the very foundations of the international order, so too does the contestation of Olympism, which, grounded in liberal internationalist ideals, may contribute to questioning the fundamentals on which that order rests. “Internationalism”, “environmentalism”, and “multilateralism” are understood as the three core pillars underpinning the LIO and the Olympic ethos, emerging as key focal points through which their contestation is articulated. These dimensions constitute the primary focus of the analysis, which is guided by two critical questions: Has anything changed in the link between Olympism and liberal internationalism during the ‘BRICS phase’ of the Olympic Games, and in particular those editions hosted by Russia and China? What lessons can be drawn from the Paris 2024 Games as the Olympics made their way back to the West? The next section outlines the methodological approach adopted by this study,

presenting the rationale through which the intersection between the contestation of the liberal international order and the Olympic Games is investigated.

2. Methodology

Drawing on these theoretical foundations, this study explores the modes of contestation of “liberal internationalism” within the Olympic arena by developing a critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1989) of the official narratives of the Sochi 2014 and Beijing 2022 Olympic Games developed in the context of the opening ceremonies. The decision to center the study on the Games’ opening ceremonies stems from their role as “staged, embodied performances of statehood and nationhood” that operate as sites of negotiation between global norms and national intent (MacAloon, 2008: 206). To explore how this interplay unfolds, this study focuses on the analysis of the declarations, speeches, and interviews given by the Games’ artistic directors, Zhang Yimou for Beijing (both 2008 and 2022 editions) and Konstantin Ernst for Sochi 2014, acting as key agents in the symbolic articulation of the countries’ national role conceptions and their international positioning.

Given that the Olympic stage functions as a proxy for the contestation of the “multilateral” rules-based order and as a key platform for advancing alternative visions of globalism, the chapter moves to investigate the significance of high-level meetings with foreign heads of state held during the mega-events under examination. In particular, it develops a critical discourse analysis of the joint statement “The International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development”, signed by President Putin and Xi Jinping in the context of the Beijing 2022 Olympics. Notably, this landmark document articulates a vision of “true multilateralism” against Washington’s alleged “fake” or “pseudo” version, advocating for the “democratization of international relations” and framing “Russia and China as world powers with rich cultural and historical heritage (that) have long-standing traditions of democracy.” (President of Russia, 2022). In claiming so, the analysis seeks to illuminate, through the Olympic prism, in which ways Russia and

China may articulate their international positioning within a political order that they perceive as not of their own making.

Finally, the chapter comparatively examines how “environmentalism” has emerged as a fault line of contention in the context of the Sochi and the Beijing Winter Olympics. This pillar, as mentioned, has become inseparable from the Olympic brand and the philosophy of Olympism – and, therefore, to its contestation (Mincyte et al., 2009). As the IOC formally recognized sustainability as “the third pillar of Olympism” (IOC, 2005: 43) and as “an integral dimension of Olympism” (IOC, 2014a), its centrality to the evolving mission and legitimacy of the Olympic movement has become self-evident. This is particularly critical in light of greenwashing practices that expose the disjuncture between the IOC’s rhetoric and the on-the-ground realities in Olympic host cities, risking undermining the Movement’s credibility (Boykoff, 2025). The observations emerging from this three-dimensional discourse analysis – focusing on “internationalism”, “multilateralism”, and “environmentalism” – will be finally discussed with reference to the 2024 Paris Olympics to examine the extent to which the legacies of these earlier Games have reverberated in the liberal democratic context of Olympic hosting.

3. Legacies of the 2014 Sochi and 2022 Beijing Olympics for Olympism

According to the IOC’s definition, the “Olympic legacy is the result of a vision. It encompasses all the tangible and intangible long-term benefits initiated or accelerated by the hosting of the Olympic Games/sport events for people, cities/territories and the Olympic Movement” (IOC, 2017). Prior to examining the impact of China and Russia’s visions on Olympism, it is necessary to make a brief yet fundamental premise about the socio-political context in which the Winter Games under examination have taken place. By hosting the 2008 Summer Olympics and the 2022 Winter Olympics, Beijing became the first city in the world to organise both the Summer and Winter Games, which served as a unique opportunity to present China to the world and elevate its international appeal to a level commensurate

with its growing economic stature, while also advancing the goal of becoming a “sport superpower” (*tiyu qiangguo* 体育强国). The two events reflect the profound transformations that unfolded over those fourteen years, both domestically and in the international environment. Domestically, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has been facing mounting challenges stemming from widespread corruption among the ruling elite, the ideological vacuum deepened by decades of market reforms, and growing public discontent with the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, especially at the local level. Internationally, the environment has become markedly more adversarial than in 2008, with the so-called ‘China threat’ theory gaining increasing traction in academic and political discourse and ushering in a phase of “de-risking” across most Western democracies. As the People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) diplomatic identity has gradually transitioned from a “low profile” stance characterizing Deng Xiaoping leadership towards a more proactive posture in international affairs resulting in an emphasis on “striving for achievements” (*fenfa youwei* 奋发有为), so did the 2008 and the 2022 Beijing Olympics’ opening performances, moving from a “coming out party” of China in the modern world (Miles, 2006) to the contestation of that international order (the LIO) designed without Beijing’s inclusion (Cabula and Pochettino, 2023).

In a similar vein, the Sochi Olympics served as Russia’s first major global coming-out party after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, signalling its re-emergence on the international stage. The event was comparable in significance to the Tokyo 1964 Olympics for Japan and the 1972 Munich Games for Germany, both of which marked the return of the erstwhile Axis countries to the community of “civilized nations” (Grix and Kramareva, 2015). Notwithstanding, the 2007 decision to award Russia the hosting rights for the Winter Olympics was met with wide scepticism by the international community, given the country’s increasingly strained relations with the United States (US) and the European Union (EU) – tensions that had been amplified by President Putin’s confrontational speech at the Munich Security Conference earlier that year, understood as a revisionist turning point in Russia’s foreign policy conduct. These concerns proved well-founded in the context of the 2014 Sochi Games, when the Kremlin’s annexation of Crimea delivered a serious blow

to the values enshrined in the Olympic Charter and the international order itself. This marked the second instance in which Russia violated the spirit of the Olympic Truce, the first being its invasion of Georgia during the opening day of the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics' ceremony. The pattern notably resurfaced during the 2022 Beijing Winter Games, held against the backdrop of the looming war in Ukraine. In response to the Kremlin's aggression, the IOC and international sports federations implemented a series of unprecedented measures, including the exclusion of Russian and Belarusian athletes from most international competitions and a ban on hosting events in Russia, raising fundamental questions about the alleged neutrality of international sports (IOC, 2022; Goretti, 2022).

As the geopolitics of the Games shifted eastward – a shift symbolically inaugurated by the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics and consolidating from the Sochi Olympic Games onwards – Olympism, and therefore liberal internationalism, has come under increasing strain. The following sections examine how China and Russia have each leveraged the Olympic stage, and in particular the Winter Games' opening ceremonies, as a platform to question the normative foundations of the liberal international order, albeit through different modes and extents, revealing the complexity and asymmetry of their respective engagements with the international society.

4. China's Ways of Contesting Liberal Internationalism in the Olympic Arena

China's engagement with liberal internationalism is critically examined through the lens of Zhang Yimou's artistic direction of the 2022 Beijing Olympics opening ceremony, as a symbolic articulation of the "narrative of the nation" (Hall, 1992: 293). In framing his vision, Zhang himself stressed the need to differentiate the 2022 ceremony from the highly acclaimed spectacle of 2008, remarking that "the burden" was now "different," as China was "striving to be different from 2008" since "the era is different" (*China Daily*, 2022). Echoing the broader contemporary political discourse of Xi Jinping's "new era" (*xin shidai* 新时代), the artistic director envisioned the 2022 opening ceremony as the platform to present a new,

confident China to the world. Unlike the 2008 ceremony, which celebrated China's millennial civilization achievements – seeking both to explain China to the world and foster a sense of national identity and cohesion – the 2022 opening event aimed primarily to highlight the cultural confidence of the Chinese people and their ability to inspire the world with their values and philosophy of life.

In this context, the artistic director repeatedly invoked the notion of “romance,” which he described as emblematic of such a renewed self-confidence, inspiring others to “view the entire world from a very tiny detail,” symbolised by the unique cauldron lighting (ShanghaiEye, 2022). As Zhang (CGTN, 2022) put it: “by expressing a romantic feeling at such a grand opening, we are hoping to depict the romantic perspective which is in fact a perfect reflection of (China's) cultural confidence,” capable of “amazement of the world” and making the country proud. This newfound sense of confidence was already evident in the selection of the Olympic dates. While the 2008 opening ceremony was developed around symbols of good auspices, the 2022 Beijing Olympics were presented as a “sign from heaven”¹ for China to start “its new path as a mature international actor” (Cabula and Pochettino, 2023: 25) with the same ambition, courage, and strength symbolized by the Year of the Tiger (Olympics.com, 2022). This idea was reflected in the forward-looking tone of the 2022 Games, contrasting with the retrospective outlook characterizing the 2008 spectacle.

The Winter event began, in fact, with a luminous floral LED display, culminating in fireworks spelling out the word “spring,” signalling China's technological prowess and symbolising a hopeful new beginning after the pandemic. Since the global pandemic has called for a fresh and robust vision of world order – inspired by new values and ethical commitments rooted in solidarity, mutual respect, and a shared sense of global responsibility – the Olympic ceremony sought

¹ The emphasis on auspicious symbolism in 2008 is visible in the deliberate choice of the opening date – 8 August 2008, with the number eight regarded as a sign of luck and prosperity in Chinese culture. Instead, the 2022 Games' opening coincided with the *lichun* 立春 (the “Beginning of Spring” in the traditional 24 solar terms) and the 24th edition of the Winter Olympics, thus being interpreted as a sign of China's preparedness.

to embody and project that vision (*Shanghai Eye*, 2022). This aspiration was echoed in the Olympic motto “together for a shared future” (*yiqi xiang weilai* 起向未来) and Beijing’s contribution to the philosophy of Olympism, to which it added the term “together” to the traditional dictum “faster, higher, stronger” (IOC, 2021). By contributing to the ideals of Olympism with a message of unity and inclusivity against the pandemic’s divisiveness and amidst the diplomatic boycott led by the Biden administration, the 2022 opening ceremony projected China as a constructive force in global governance and as a catalyst for change at a time when human progress stands at a crossroads. This role was embodied by the innovative cauldron lighting, delivering the idea of a “shared future under low carbon,” combined with the visual language of the Games. From the dominant red hues of 2008, the 2022 opening ceremony has instead embraced elemental tones – blue for water and green for earth – underscoring China’s projected role as a responsible global actor in ecological transition and the advancement of a new paradigm of “ecological civilization.”

Against a climate of external hostility, the Games were represented as the elevation of Chinese humanism rooted in its ancient philosophy and framed around the idea of *One World, One Family*. This was celebrated during the closing ceremony by fireworks displaying the Chinese expression *Tianxia Yi Jia* (天下一家), meaning “all under the heaven as one family.” This message of unity was visually performed, among others, by the representatives of China’s 56 ethnic groups raising the national flag and by the snowflakes bearing the names of individual nations merging to form a larger snowflake illuminating the globe, to emphasize the need for solidarity to address global challenges. Central to this narrative is the above-mentioned *tianxia*, a notion recently revitalized by philosopher Zhao Tingyang (2021) and that has become a foundational concept within the Chinese School of International Relations, sparking significant debate among IR scholars². Regardless of its different interpretations,

² Critics have pointed out how this notion may conceal a revival of a Sino-centric world order, blending cosmopolitanism, nationalism, and hegemonism. See: Callahan, W.A. (2008) Chinese Visions of World Order: Post-Hegemonic or a New Hegemony? *International Studies Review*, 10(4), 749–761. Callahan, W.A., and Barabantseva, E. (Ed.) (2012) *Tianxia, Empire and the World: Chinese Visions*

the revival of the *tianxia* hints at the Chinese leadership's aspiration to offer a philosophical contribution to the normative foundations of the international order, and Olympism as well.

In this spirit, the 2022 Olympics were conceived by Zhang Yimou as an occasion to stage a global, responsible, and confident China, grounded in its self-proclaimed “5,000 years of uninterrupted civilisation.” While this civilizational narrative might not appear entirely new, the 2022 edition shifted the emphasis. The 2008 Games indeed celebrated the country's monumental past and the contributions to the world's civilization, most notably through the four great inventions (paper, printing, gunpowder, and the compass). The 2022 ceremony, instead, projected a renewed sense of cultural and techno-scientific confidence, emphasizing themes such as technology (*keji* 科技), sustainability (*kechixuxing* 可持续性), and future (*weilai* 未来) (Chong and Cloet, 2024). Through these globally resonant issues, Zhang Yimou conveyed an image of unity and shared progress, challenging perceived unilateral approaches to global governance as symbolized by the U.S.-led diplomatic boycott of the Games. As Cabula and Pochettino note (2023), the Beijing Winter Olympics signals the transition from *advertising* Chinese culture to *legitimizing* China's approaches to global governance by “telling China's story well” (*jiang hao Zhongguo gushi* 讲好中国故事). Whilst promoting an image of openness and harmony was at the center of the 2008 Games' spectacle – as part of the Chinese leadership efforts to project China's “peaceful rise” and its contribution to the creation of an “harmonious world” – the 2022 Games were rather framed through a “negative soft power” discourse, highlighting the effectiveness of the PRC's governance system against the Covid-19 pandemic and showing its ability in providing “simple, safe and splendid” Games (*jianyue* 简约, *anquan* 安全, *jingcai* 精彩), albeit the accusations of human rights' violation coming from many Western democracies.

of World Order for the 21st Century. In *China Orders the World?: Soft Power, Norms and Foreign Policy*, pp. 91-117. Johns Hopkins University Press.

5. Russia's Ways of Contesting Liberal Internationalism in the Olympic Arena

According to Konstantin Ernst, the creative producer of the Sochi ceremonies, known as “the premier visual stylist of the Putin era” (Yaffa, 2014) and head of Channel One – Russia’s most-watched state-owned television network – the Sochi Games were meant to present a “cross-section of the best” of the Russian people (Afisha Daily, 2014). In this vein, the opening ceremony celebrated Russian historical achievements and cultural heritage proudly bearing the epithet “Russian” while seeking resonance with universal values (Afisha Daily, 2014). The Games were officially presented as the embodiment of peaceful and international dialogue, with Sochi as an “ideal location” being “the home of more than a hundred different European, Asian and Middle Eastern cultures.” (cf. Edenborg, 2013). Yet, the use of the Cyrillic alphabet to order the entrance of participating countries and the space-themed elements of the ceremony – ranging from the Olympic torch’s journey to the International Space Station and cosmonauts serving as flag bearers, to depictions of lunar rovers, rocket scientists, and national icons such as Yuri Gagarin – collectively symbolized an effort to project a national identity anchored in the legacy of “Great Russia” (Persson and Petersson, 2014).

References to national culture, literature, and history pervaded the Sochi Olympics’ opening ceremony. Across the interviews, Ernst repeatedly emphasized that, because of Russia’s frequent misrepresentation abroad, the Olympic arena was a crucial stage to showcase a “different, modern” country and to convey what he regarded as an objective portrayal of Russia’s cultural essence (Agapov, 2014). A central strategy for presenting such a “different Russia” lay in breaking with tradition – for example, by moving the Parade of Athletes to the beginning of the ceremony and staging a vertical spectacle that departed from the horizontally oriented formats of previous editions (Afisha Daily, 2014). To be sure, among the reasons behind this choice was that competing with the sheer scale of synchronization and human interaction displayed in Beijing’s 2008 would have been, in Ernst’s view, “presumptuous, to say the least” (Afisha Daily, 2014). This did not mean, nevertheless, a lack of ambition;

the creative director in fact declaratively aspired to “tell the story of the country in a way that no one has ever told it before” (Satarov, 2014), realizing the most technologically advanced ceremony in the history of the Olympics to highlight Russia’s innovative capacity and its uniqueness (IOC, 2014b). The event, however, took an unexpected turn when a technical malfunction during the performance prevented the final Olympic ring from opening – a moment that quickly went viral on social media, interpreted as an ironic symbol of Russia’s restrictive stance on LGBTQ+ rights, with the missing ring “afraid of coming out” (BBC, 2014). The glitch occurred indeed in the context of the campaign led by the United Russia party to ban the propaganda of nontraditional sexual relations to adults and minors, prohibiting LGBTQ+ organizations from establishing a Pride House at the Olympics. The event has been widely interpreted as a performative repudiation of Western liberal norms. The enactment of the so-called “gay propaganda” law came in fact at a time when countries like the United States and the United Kingdom were expanding protections for LGBTQ+ rights. Among the harsh reactions from Western leaders, then-U.S. President Barack Obama voiced his disapproval by declaring that “nobody” could be “more offended” by the anti-gay legislation than the US (Smith-Spark, 2013) – words also echoed by the then British Prime Minister David Cameron, expressing “deep concern about the abuse of gay people in Russia.” (Associated Press, 2013).

Quite ironically, Ernst’s declared intent was to let the “people all over the planet” get to know, understand, and love Russia, so that they could see its “greatness and diversity” (Satarov, 2014). The opening ceremony’s performance sought to do so by narrating over a thousand years of Russian history through the eyes of Lyubov, meaning “love” in Russian – a young girl representing, in Ernst’s words, the “feminine side of Russia” (Gibson, 2014). In this sense, the representation of the country through the 11-year-old girl would constitute, in the words of the creative producer, a “declaration of love for our Motherland” (Agapov, 2014). Notwithstanding, the opening ceremony unmistakably displayed a Russian “we” intrinsically exclusive, visually expressed by the inflatable structure of St. Basil’s Cathedral under the projected letter мы, “we” in Cyrillic alphabet. The representation of monastic images of Sts. Cyril and Methodius,

as well as Moscow's Orthodox Sretensky Monastery choir, performing the Russian national anthem, illuminate the mutually reinforcing relationship between the Orthodox church and Russia's anti-gay laws. These images, along with the constant reminiscences throughout the ceremony to Tsar Peter the Great and Russian national heroes, suggest that "Putin's sport complex in Sochi" operated as an "imperial forum," constituting the imposing setting for the people's worship of him as the nation's great masculine leader (Bonde, 2017: 363-389). Aligning with this reading, some scholars have described the opening performance as an instance of a "state-sponsored homophobia" (Van Rhee, 2014), conveying a nostalgic imperial narrative celebrating Russia's national grandeur while falling short of fostering the emotional universality and sense of love it ostensibly aimed to evoke.

6. Lessons from the 2014 and 2022 Winter Olympics on the Contestation of Liberal Internationalism

A comparison of the Chinese and Russian opening ceremonies, viewed through the perspectives of their respective artistic directors, reveals notable divergences in how each engages with its civilizational past. While Beijing draws on a form of "traditionalism" rooted in Confucian principles, this reference is less about nostalgia for past grandeur and more about mobilizing tradition as a resource to express confidence in China's modernization path and, by extension, in its contribution to a renewed global governance ethic. In the case of Sochi, the retrospective tone of the opening ceremony – imbued with nostalgia for the Soviet era – functioned not only as a symbolic reaffirmation of Russia's historical might, but also as an instrument of domestic consolidation, aimed at cultivating a collective sense of national belonging anchored in the image of a resurgent state seeking recognition and legitimacy on the global stage. As argued by Grix and Kramareva (2015), the hosting of the Sochi Games and the annexation of Crimea were mutually reinforcing events, exemplifying the integration of both soft and hard power resources to spur nationalism. Notably, in preparation for the Olympics, Putin introduced a special security regime in Sochi "that was similar to

those imposed during emergency situations” (International Crisis Group, 2014: 4). The military forces concentrated in the city for the security of the Games were deployed in neighbouring Crimea immediately after the closing ceremony. In effect, Putin and his closest inner circle, all former KGB agents, gathered on the morning of the Olympic closing ceremony and made the decision to invade Crimea (Orttung and Zhemukhov, 2017: 82). The annexation and the ensuing backing of separatist movements in Eastern Ukraine, however, effectively undermined any efforts to reshape Russia’s global image and to enhance its soft power. The ceremony of the Olympic torch relay was a particularly illuminating performance of power politics,

largely covered as a showcase of symbolic vindication of Russia’s sovereignty in general and over its most politically sensitive territories (Kaliningrad, the Kuril Islands, the North Pole, etc.) (Makarychev and Yatsyk, 2014: 3).

Failing to achieve the legacy promises made in the bid book and breaching the Olympic Truce, Russia’s contestation of liberal internationalism was articulated through a discourse of “civilizational specificity” and, presumably, impunity.

China’s approach to the 2022 Olympic event has rather emphasized the contribution of the country’s civilizational unicity as a means of “inject(ing) fresh energy into human development,” presenting its millennial history both as the foundation of its current global standing and as a resource for advancing a renewed “global civilization” (State Council Information Office of the PRC, 2023). By portraying itself as a “responsible” global actor and a provider of “Chinese solutions” (*Zhongguo fang’an* 中国方案) in a world confronted by “grey rhinos” (*hui xiniu* 灰犀牛) and “black swans” (*hei tian’e* 黑天鹅), the narrative of the Games was articulated as a symbolic response to the perceived spiritual and moral crisis of the liberal international order and the increasingly adversarial posture of Western liberal democracies toward China’s rise. In this light, the PRC’s commitment to “win the glory of the country” should be understood as intrinsically linked to “showing the world the spirit and the values of the Chinese people” and the country’s unique contribution to building a “shared future for mankind” (New China TV,

2022). Through a “negative soft power” discourse (Callahan, 2015) that differentiates an “inclusive China” from an “exclusive West,” Zhang Yimou has cast Beijing as a driver of transformation “within” the Olympic Movement and its philosophy. Seeking to enrich the Olympic spirit with the values of Chinese humanism, the 2022 opening ceremony has staged a sort of “humanistic Olympics,” set to the evocative notes of John Lennon’s “Imagine” (Hwang and Huang, 2023), inviting the world to imagine a future where the “Chinese Dream” takes global form.

All in all, the two mega-events diverged significantly in their orientation. On the one hand, the Sochi Olympics positioned Russia as a trailblazer of an alternative sporting order, projecting a nostalgic vision of imperial grandeur that challenges the very nature of the Olympic values. On the other hand, the Beijing Winter Olympics operated within existing institutional frameworks, advancing a human-centered philosophy of Olympism and presenting China as an indispensable force shaping its future trajectory, as further echoed in the context of the 2023 Asian Games under the theme *Heart to Heart @Future*.

7. The Sino-Russian Contestation of Multilateralism in the Olympic Arena

The Sochi Games inaugurated a new chapter for multilateralism in the Olympic arena and, more specifically, for China’s Olympic diplomacy, as they marked the first instance of a Chinese head of state participating in a major international sporting event abroad. Over 43 intense hours in Sochi, Xi Jinping engaged in 12 bilateral and multilateral meetings, highlighting the leadership’s ability to leverage such events to advance multilateral and bilateral relations (People’s Daily, 2014). The success of multilateral mechanisms in the context of the Sochi Games was also remarked during the 2022 Beijing Olympics, with the Chinese Foreign Minister and official discourse repeatedly emphasizing the external support for the realization of the mega-event. Liu Xianfa, for instance, described this participation as reflective of “where international justice lies and what the international community aspires for,” ultimately “demonstrating

the US government's failure to politicize the event." (Office of the Commissioner of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC in the Macao Special Administrative Region 2022). At the Beijing 2022 Olympics, President Xi met with more than 30 foreign leaders from Central Asia countries, the Middle East, and South America, consolidating the PRC's bilateral ties, particularly with countries participating in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and from the Global South. Discussions focused on infrastructure investments related to the BRI and energy cooperation, with Argentina officially joining the initiative (NDRC PRC, 2022). Bilateral cooperation with Eastern European countries has also been upgraded, proving the limited effects of the US-led boycott on the European context (Strina and Gobbel, 2023).

While it is not new that the Olympic Games provide an informal platform for world leaders to meet and engage in diplomatic dialogue (Trunkos and Heere, 2018), what is increasingly significant is the way in which such interactions have begun to serve as instruments of political contestation. The most vivid example lies in the joint statement released by the Russian Federation and the PRC in the context of the Beijing 2022 Olympics titled "The International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development." The document, which is the result of a three-hour discussion between Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin just before the Beijing Winter Olympics opening ceremony, includes no fewer than 15 references to "multipolarity" and "multilateralism," revealing how both states strategically leveraged the Olympic moment to articulate and legitimize their shared vision of a reconfigured global order. In the declaration, Beijing and Moscow call on all states to "seek genuine multipolarity with the United Nations and its Security Council playing a central and coordinating role" and promote "the democratization of international relations" to "jointly build international relations of a new type." Multilateralism is listed as the first of the "momentous changes" of this "new era," condemning attempts at hegemony by certain countries that "pose serious threats to global and regional peace and stability, and undermine the stability of the world order." This opposition towards those actors that "continue to advocate unilateral approaches to addressing international issues" and "interfere in the internal affairs of other states, infringing their legitimate rights and

interests, and incite contradictions, differences and confrontation” is clear-cut, explicitly targeting the US (President of Russia, 2022).

Russia and the PRC’s critics of what they see as the excesses of U.S. power and the destabilizing effects of unilateralism on the international order are not new. In the Chinese case, Foreign Minister Wang Yi (2021) has long remarked that “the past few years saw unilateralism running unchecked” since “a superpower” – the US – “had chosen to put its own interests above other things.” American “pseudo-multilateralism,” accordingly, has been used as a “pretext” to “form exclusive blocks” and “to divide the world along ideological lines,” and thus must be countered with a “true multilateralism” that provides “a firm commitment to upholding the UN-centred international system.” In the words of Russia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the UN represents the “embodiment of true multilateralism,” with the UN Charter constituting “the necessary conditions for truly multilateral cooperation, which are regulated by universally recognised norms of international law” (Lavrov, 2023). All in all, the joint declaration issued at the Beijing Winter Olympics positions China and Russia as authentic, principled defenders of the international order, casting the United States – the very power long seen as its torchbearer – into its principal spoiler. Despite proclaiming to the world their “no-limits friendship” (President of Russia, 2022), important divergences have soon surfaced. As Wishnick (2016) observes, Beijing and Moscow are less genuine allies and more “partners of consequence,” united by shared scepticism of the Western-led order and a pragmatic need for cooperation.

The Olympic Games hosted by both China and Russia have consistently highlighted the complexities of their partnership and their pragmatic nature. For instance, in the context of the Beijing 2008 Olympics, China’s response to Russia’s military intervention in Georgia reflected a delicate balancing act between maintaining its strategic partnership with Moscow while upholding its image as a responsible global actor, as demonstrated by the cautious statement regarding the aggression and President Hu Jintao’s opposition to Russian efforts to secure recognition for Abkhazia and South Ossetia at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit in Dushanbe (Leoni and Strina, 2024). Similarly, at the Sochi Games, while uneasy in the role of mediator between Russia and the West, China

pragmatically advanced its strategic interests by concluding a historic 30-year, \$400 billion natural gas agreement between Gazprom and China National Petroleum Corporation for the construction of the “Power of Siberia” pipeline (Reuters, 2014). This being said, from Sochi 2014 to Beijing 2022, the Olympic arena has evolved into a symbolic stage for the coordinated contestation of multilateralism. The record of 65 heads of state and international organizations participating in the Sochi Games, driven largely by Global South representation amid the symbolic absence of many Western leaders, only anticipated the trajectory by which the Olympics would increasingly serve as a platform for contesting multilateralism and advancing alternative visions of global order.

8. The Sino-Russian Contestation of Environmentalism in the Olympic Arena

Since the 1990s, the connection between global mega-events and environmental responsibility has become increasingly institutionalized, prompting hosting countries, including China and Russia, to actively engage with sustainability issues within the Olympic platform. Rather than challenging environmentalism as a core norm of the liberal international order, both states have leveraged the Games to highlight national achievements and technological innovation in addressing climate change, positioning themselves as champions of sustainability on the global stage. As for Russia, the 2014 Sochi Games were meant to set the bar for sustainability primarily domestically (Müller, 2014a). The Sochi 2014 Olympic Winter Games were presented as a mission “to efficiently integrate sustainable development principles into all aspects of Games preparation and delivery,” establishing new “barrier-free standards” for urban planning and construction in Russia (IOC, 2014a; International Paralympic Committee, 2014). The implementation of a sustainable mega-event was said to be possible thanks to the international expertise, which was “a unique asset to the Sochi 2014 Games legacy”. As declared by Alexander Zhukov (Sochi Organising Committee, 2012), the Chairman of the Supervisory Board of the Sochi 2014 Organising Committee, “the best practices from all over the world are coming

to Sochi, and they will then spread across the entire country, creating a sustainable Games Legacy” and “raising standards to international levels across the board.” Yet, ineffective governance, lack of institutional controls, and intense time pressure resulted in lasting environmental harm and excessive infrastructure development. The Sochi Olympics have gone down in history as the most expensive Games ever held – exceeding \$51 billion in costs, a number that would be even higher if operational expenses were included – turning the region into the world’s largest construction site (Müller, 2014b).

Analyses of the evolution of China’s environmental discourse in the context of the Beijing Games, instead, have shown how the PRC shifted from compliance with international standards at the 2008 Summer Games to its (self-) elevation on the podium of a symbolic “green medal” for sustainability during the 2022 Winter Olympics (Vomeri and Gregori, 2023). Hosting the 2022 Winter Games, Beijing aimed to make newer and greater contributions to the Olympic Movement by not limiting itself to following international rules as it had been in 2008 but setting new standards. For instance, the creation of an Advisory Committee responsible for the supervision of sustainability matters was one of the signals of Beijing’s willingness to present itself as a standard-setter, making the 2022 Beijing Olympics a new environmental benchmark for future Olympic Games (Beijing Organising Committee, 2022). Even artificial snow – among the focal points of environmental concerns surrounding the 2022 Beijing Olympics – became an opportunity to reaffirm China’s commitment to environmental protection and guarantee the quality of Olympic performances (Li, 2022). Leveraging the visibility of the Games, China has promoted a new development concept centred on sustainability, advancing its quest for a “harmonious” and “beautiful” socialist country through ecological revitalization and decarbonization. From a rising power once intent on proving its credibility by complying to international practices, the PRC has sought to reposition itself as a proactive architect of a new ecological paradigm, reaffirming the Chinese leadership’s commitment to multilateral climate action in the face of a fragmented global climate regime and growing U.S. retrenchment, most notably exemplified by President Trump’s second withdrawal from the Paris Agreement. Nevertheless, ecologically, the Games continued the trend of expansion through large-scale

construction, and, despite some venue reuse, they were also characterized by budget overruns and limited fiscal transparency (Chen et. al., 2025).

Sustainability pledges by Olympic hosts have often revealed a wide gap between promises and outcomes. Yet, while in the Chinese case the Games were leveraged as a vehicle for advancing a vision of “ecological civilization” (*shengtai wenming* 生态文明) as a normative contribution to humankind, Russia’s approach to Olympic sustainability has instead largely produced overambitious commitments that ultimately fell short in practice, not only exposing a persistent gap between rhetoric and reality but also amplifying it to a greater degree than in previous editions (Müller, 2014a).

9. Back to the West: the 2024 Paris Games

As the host of the Games in 1900 and 1924, Paris became the second city to host the Summer Olympics three times (after London, which hosted the Summer Games in 1908, 1948, and 2012). To secure its bid to host the Olympic Games in 2017, Paris built a global coalition that reflected a newfound collaborative spirit in international sports, culminating in a deal with Los Angeles that guaranteed the 2024 Olympics for Paris and the 2028 edition for the U.S. – a diplomatic compromise that capped a fervent French campaign and garnered unexpectedly broad international support (Krasnoff, 2017). Since the 2014 Sochi Olympics, the Games have been held outside the West, highlighting the rising prominence of the East in the global sporting arena. In many ways, Paris’s venue after London in 2012 appeared to be a return to the origins of the Games invented by de Coubertin. However, the Games unfolded against a backdrop of acute geopolitical tensions, including the protracted Russia-Ukraine war and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. One month before the opening ceremony, the French Service for Supervision and Protection from Foreign Digital Interference released a document denouncing a Russian “Matryoshka campaign” to target the French support of Ukraine and the Paris 2024 Olympics (Viginum, 2024). The shadow of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict loomed over the Paris Olympics, too. Fearing terror attacks, French authorities massively ramped up

security for the Games, flooding Paris streets with up to 45,000 police and soldiers armed with assault rifles (Leicester, 2024). With reference to the context of domestic politics, the Olympic Games served as a litmus test for the government's stability. President Emmanuel Macron seized the opportunity presented by the Games to delay the appointment of the Prime Minister, while the far-right capitalized on the enhanced security measures to propagate their vision of public tranquillity through an augmented police presence (Leroy and Anibaldi, 2024).

The opening ceremony was the embodiment of Macron's ambitions. It combined landmarks like the Eiffel Tower with fashion representations of modern France, including members of LGBTQ+ communities. During the Olympic Games, the French president posted "This is France!" several times on his social media platforms. Meanwhile, those from the extreme right contested Macron's vision of diversity and modernity. This was evident in reactions to the opening ceremony's reference to Leonardo da Vinci's painting, *The Last Supper*, which featured drag queens, a transgender model, and a naked singer. France's Catholic church condemned the sketch as a "mockery of Christianity" (CNA, 2024). The Russian foreign ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova described the opening ceremony as "an LGBT mockery of a sacred Christian story" and the President of the International Boxing Association (IBA), Umar Kremlev, as "pure sodomy" (cf. Goretti, 2024: 2). Within a few days, the controversy over LGBTQ+ moved from the opening ceremony to the sporting ground. Five days after the opening ceremony, IBA released a *communiqué* stating that two women participants in Paris 2024 – Lin Yu-ting and Imane Khelif – had been disqualified from the IBA Women's World Boxing Championships New Delhi 2023 after they had been "subject to a separate and recognized test, whereby the specifics remain confidential" (IBA, 2024). Since 2022, the International Boxing Association (IBA) has been one of the few international sports federations still led by a Russian citizen, and the only one to permit athletes from the Russian Federation to compete under their flag and with their anthem, despite having been suspended by the IOC since 2019 over governance and integrity concerns. Kremlev, its president, is reportedly a close associate of Vladimir Putin, having built a fortune in construction and security while also

running a taxi business (Saintourens, 2022). Two days afterwards, commenting on the boxing match between a “female athlete” and a “transgender boxer,” Putin’s Spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, lamented that the International Olympic Movement was “losing face, becoming a victim of these pseudo-liberal manifestations, which sometimes border on perversion” (TASS, 2024). After Khelif won the gold medal, French prosecutors opened a probe into cyberbullying by claiming that several prominent figures had taken part in online harassment over her gender. Prosecutors said X owner Elon Musk and former US President and presidential candidate Donald Trump were named in the complaint filed by Khelif’s lawyer (Al Jazeera, 2024).

Important differences emerge when compared to the Chinese conduct. Khelif beat China’s Yang Liu to take the gold medal in women’s welterweight boxing, while Lin Yu-ting, the Taiwanese boxer who likewise failed the gender eligibility test, gained the gold medal in the featherweight category. Chinese authorities refrained from reviving the controversy fuelled by the pro-Russian IBA and the global far right. Nor did China show any willingness to follow Russia in its attempt to discredit the Olympic Games and replace them with the organisation of alternative Games, despite explicit Russian overtures positioning China as a potential partner in this effort. In fact, when Russia’s exclusion from the Paris Games was looming, in October 2023, Putin announced that Russia was set to organise a series of alternative international sports events, including a relaunch of the Soviet-era World Friendship Games, first staged in 1984 as a response to the U.S.-led boycott of the Moscow Olympics. Although the initiative did not materialise, the proposal of hosting the 2026 Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Summer Games still remains on the table. Initially floated by President Putin at the SCO summit in September 2023, the idea entails a multi-sport event hosted across several cities, including Moscow and St. Petersburg. In January 2025, Russian Sports Minister Mikhail Degtyarev (May, 2025) claimed that China had expressed support for the initiative, explicitly stating that “a session of SCO high-ranking officials is scheduled to be held in China this year.” In parallel, Russia has also sought to revive the BRICS Games, with President Putin presenting them as part of the bloc’s expanding political and humanitarian cooperation – an effort

that has received cautious backing from China, avoiding any direct challenge to the Olympic movement.

As noted in the analysis of the contestation of liberal internationalism in the context of the 2022 Olympics, Beijing has continued to exploit the flows of the US's leadership by asserting influence from 'within' the existing order while avoiding the direct confrontational path taken by Russia. Whilst the latter imposed a "de facto boycott" by refusing to broadcast the 2024 Paris Games, China embraced the mega-event as a platform to strengthen its global competitiveness. Chinese state-run media prominently celebrated the nation's gold medal tally, tied with the United States at 40, as a symbolic assertion through Olympic performances of China's growing global power (Bloomberg, 2024). Evidence of this can also be found in the issue of doping. The Paris Games were notably marked by a media war between the Chinese anti-doping authorities (CHINADA) and their American counterparts (USADA), with the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) as the third player in the game. The two sporting super-powers, both vying for topping the medals ranking – doubling the third-placed, Japan – accused each other of organized doping (Lepeltier, 2024). In this contentious climate, Chinese swimmer Qin Haiyang and his relay teammate Sun Jiajun – both part of the men's 4x100m medley relay team that claimed a historic victory over the U.S. – faced a slew of doping allegations, followed by contentious claims from the U.S. side that WADA was complicit in covering them up.

Amid the escalating media storm, an article published by the China Daily stressed that the "Confucian values – emphasizing hard work, respect, perseverance, continuous learning and humility" were "evident in Paris, where Chinese athletes not only secured victories but did so with grace and sportsmanship, earning the admiration of competitors and spectators alike." (Flores, 2024). More in general, the article continues, "Asia's resurgence in sports mirrors its broader renaissance in economic, cultural and social development, with China as the prime mover and dynamic catalyst", because "sports victories symbolize a continent reclaiming its rightful place in a new multipolar world, not just as a participant but as a leader" (Flores, 2024). Overall, the 2024 Paris Olympics have contributed

significantly to elevating China in public discourse as a responsible global and “green” actor.

Framed as the “most sustainable” Olympics in history, Paris 2024 introduced ambitious green measures – including making one-third of the food plant-based and limiting meat options, leading to rationing and prompting some delegations, like Great Britain’s, to bring their own chefs. Organizers also chose not to install air conditioning in the Olympic Village, despite rising athlete frustration amid unseasonably hot weather. In many ways, the Games became a moment of “performance anxiety” for a city long associated with global climate leadership. Yet the ambitious sustainability agenda quickly produced a boomerang effect, as practical shortcomings – from event cancellations due to pollution to athletes falling ill after swimming in the Seine – undermined the credibility of the Games as the “most sustainable” ever. Against this background, Thomas Bach, president of the IOC, praised the role of Chinese technology in making the lives of athletes highly comfortable, in particular the contribution of companies such as Alibaba for “greatly increasing the efficiency and sustainability of Olympic Games operations” (IOC, 2024). In a further showcase of its growing technological footprint in the sports arena, China-manufactured hydrogen refuelling equipment was also hailed as making a significant contribution. In particular, Houpu Clean Energy Group, a leading Chinese enterprise in this sector, supplied advanced hydrogen solutions and co-developed hydrogen stations for the mega-event, continuing the “carbon goals” trajectory established during the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics and the Chengdu Universiade (Zhao, 2024).

The Paris 2024 Games offered Chinese technology a further window of visibility, showcasing the country’s growing capacity to shape the future of international sporting events through innovation and sustainability – even as a non-host nation. Quite on the opposite, the exclusion of Russian and Belarusian athletes from the mega-event under the banner of protecting the “integrity” of international sport provided Russia with an opportunity to denounce what it views as the instrumentalization of sport for political ends. The Russian Olympic Committee condemned the IOC’s suspension as a “counterproductive decision with obvious political motivations,” framing it as another example of Western bias and

exclusion practices (Chiappa, 2024). In this contrasting landscape, where China capitalized on the 2024 Games to enhance its global standing, Russia has further entrenched its resistance *vis-à-vis* international sport authorities, likely deepening the divergence with the PRC in their respective approaches to global sports diplomacy and the international society.

Conclusions

Viewing the Olympic Games as catalysts of international politics allows for exploring the potential of sports mega-events as arenas where the international order is both negotiated and contested. Far from being mere reflections of global politics, this contribution illustrates how the Olympic Games may act as a magnifying glass through which the interplay of norms, power, and legitimacy can be critically examined and interpreted. The comparative analysis of the Sochi 2014 and Beijing 2022 Winter Games has served as a litmus test for decoding the contestation of the international order in place, offering insight into whether and how Russia and China have sought to advance the construction of an alternative sport and world order, both individually and through coordinated efforts.

Designed to showcase inclusivity, technological innovation, and bolstering Russia's soft power both domestically and internationally, the Sochi Games fostered a significant "lost in translation" moment between Russia's self-representation and the expectations of the liberal world. The annexation of Crimea, the enforcement of Putin's "gay propaganda law," and a pronounced emphasis on Russia's civilizational uniqueness all signalled its confrontive stance *vis-à-vis* Olympism and internationalism. As for Beijing, the 2022 Winter Games presented a more confident and proactive posture, portraying China as a leader in sustainable development and an emerging – albeit contested – global power capable of contributing to Olympism and, more broadly, to global governance through a Confucian-inspired humanism.

Convergences were highlighted through the analysis of Sino-Russian Olympic diplomacy during their respective turns as Olympic hosts. In particular, the joint statement issued during the

Beijing 2022 Olympics positioned both China and Russia as leading advocates of multilateralism, leveraging the Olympic platform to articulate a shared vision of a multipolar world no longer dominated by a hegemonic power and unilateral approaches to global governance. However, the “no-limits friendship” between the two, celebrated in the context of the 2022 Olympics, soon revealed its constraints, resonating with earlier episodes in the 2008 and 2014 Olympics. While in the context of the Games, Beijing tacitly endorsed Moscow’s actions – be it the military intervention in Georgia in 2008, the annexation of Crimea in 2014, or the war in Ukraine in 2022 – this convergence stems less from ideological alignment and more from strategic cooperation rooted in a shared dissatisfaction with the US-led order.

Fundamental disalignment in contestation modes was further crystallized in the context of Paris 2024, as Chinese authorities refrained from engaging with the controversies like those fuelled by the pro-Russian IBA or endorsing co-sponsoring alternative sporting events, such as the proposed World Friendship Games, despite Russian pressures. This strategic restraint reflects China’s broader approach of asserting its influence from “within” the existing framework of international sport, in contrast to Russia’s increasingly confrontational stance. It can be claimed that the Sochi Olympics catalysed Russia’s challenge to the very fundamentals of the international order and Olympism. China has rather leveraged the “BRICS phase” of the Games and its recent return to the West as an opportunity to showcase its technological prowess and advance multilateral and bilateral cooperation, particularly with countries in the Global South. By blending the ideals of Olympism with its Confucian philosophy of harmony and unity, the Beijing 2022 Olympics have presented a synthesis for the creation of an “Olympism with Chinese characteristics,” exemplified by the addition of the term “together” to the official Olympic motto.

While framed as a return to the roots of Olympism, the Paris 2024 Games were marked by challenges and controversies reflecting the fractures within the liberal international order itself, suggesting that the contestation of liberal internationalism is not confined to illiberal states but also arises from within the liberal West. This underscores the need for further inquiry into how Olympic diplomacy

may shed light on the internal tensions of the LIO. The return to Olympism's cradle has fundamentally raised the question of whether contemporary developments are steering us toward a "post-Olympism", shaped less by universal ideals than by the fractures and voids of a changing world order.

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