

Contesting the International Order

For quite some time, sport can no longer be regarded as a mere backdrop to international affairs. From its very modern inception, it was invested with the ambition of providing a sphere of international coexistence governed by principles distinct from those of power politics, an aspiration famously captured in the ideal of *pax olympica*. In *You Must Change Your Life*, Peter Sloterdijk (2013) reads this project through the figure of Pierre de Coubertin, portraying modern sport as a universal and secular form of belief, endowed with its own rituals, temporalities, and normative claims. Yet this founding promise has increasingly been put to the test. Despite the universalist rhetoric and the aura of neutrality that have long accompanied sporting institutions, contemporary sport has become one of the most revealing arenas through which the transformation of the global order is disclosed.

The disputes that traverse the international sporting system – from controversies over the participation of states involved in armed conflicts, to tensions surrounding the neutrality of governing bodies, to the growing instrumentalisation of mega-events – mirror the fractures reshaping international society. The notion of sport as a domain insulated from politics thus appears as a fragile construct, persistently contradicted in practice and never as exposed as it is in the present phase of systemic transition.

The Focus of this issue, “Sport and International Politics in the Changing World Order”, situates itself precisely at this critical juncture: it interrogates sport as a distinctive arena in which the meanings, boundaries and ambitions of contemporary international society are continually reframed, contested and renegotiated. This does not mean treating sport as a passive echo of external political dynamics, but recognising it as an increasingly consequential terrain on which power is enacted: through institutional decisions that affect the legitimacy of states; through symbolic conflicts that redefine identities and

allegiances; and through the strategic use of global events as platforms for visibility and influence. Whether the issue concerns the eligibility of athletes during wartime, governmental pressure on international federations, or attempts by emerging powers to project alternative visions of internationalism through Olympism, the sporting world has become a genuine arena of world politics.

This centrality is not an isolated phenomenon: it forms part of the broader processes that, over the past decades, have reshaped the foundations of the international order. The successive phases of globalisation – from early confidence in market-led integration, through the speculative accelerations of financialised capitalism, to the current landscape marked by technological fragmentation and the return of geopolitical rivalry – have eroded the expectation of an ever more cooperative and integrated world. Inequalities along global value chains, the weakening of multilateral institutions and the persistent reassertion of power politics have tested the idea of a spontaneous convergence toward shared forms of governance. Within this shifting environment, the international sporting system has itself become a site of contestation, exposed to mounting pressures and increasingly implicated in the redefinition of authority, legitimacy and global competition.

A similar evolution is evident in the realm of regional security. The contemporary Middle East offers one of the clearest laboratories of how power dynamics are being transformed. Here, terrorism is not a marginal or episodic phenomenon, but a strategic instrument embedded in regional rivalries and indirect confrontations among states. External funding networks, the political use of armed groups and the proliferation of transnational militias reveal how sovereignty is continuously eroded by forms of intervention that blur the line between state and non-state actors. These dynamics generate self-reinforcing cycles of instability whose effects reverberate far beyond the region, complicating the already fragile pursuit of a coherent global order.

Against this backdrop of disalignment and profound change, sport acquires a distinctive analytical value. It offers a vantage point from which to observe the tensions between universalism and fragmentation, cooperation and rivalry, cosmopolitan aspirations and the resurgence of national identities. The controversies that permeate

the sporting world do not merely reflect global political conflicts; they actively participate in shaping them. Sport becomes a laboratory in which emergent forms of power, evolving strategies of influence and shifting configurations of legitimacy are tested and contested.

This issue invites readers to embrace this perspective not as a peripheral exercise but as an essential interpretive lens. Sporting arenas – with their capacity to mobilise collective imaginaries, condense geopolitical tensions and render visible the normative dynamics of international society – no longer occupy the margins of global politics. Increasingly, they constitute one of its vital centres, where the possibilities, contradictions and limits of international coexistence in the twenty-first century are most vividly played out.