



INSIGHTS

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Sportswashing: The Newest Weapon in Influence Operations in Irregular Warfare

The mobilizing power of sports remains one of the strongest catalysts for international interaction, bringing people together to address issues, challenge social norms, and bond over shared goals. Sports, like most entertainment industries, tend to be adjacent to politics. Individual teams and players challenge, upend, and address social issues, such as racism and integration with baseball great Jackie Robinson and the T.C. Williams High School football team, or sexism with Billie Jean King's famous "Battle of the Sexes" match. Still, involvement in external social issues was not the primary goal of professional athletics.



Photo by [My Profit Tutor](#) on [Unsplash](#)

However, the intersection of sports and international politics has never been more pronounced in today's globalized and connected world. While sports have historically served as a platform for nations to showcase their talents and promote global or national unity, a growing trend is emerging where foreign investment in sports, teams, and even players are used as a tool of influence operations in irregular warfare. This phenomenon of "[sportswashing](#)" emerged in 2015 and blurs the lines between competition and geopolitics.

IWC MISSION: The IWC serves as the central mechanism for developing the Department of Defense's (DOD) irregular warfare knowledge and advancing the Department's understanding of irregular warfare concepts and doctrine in collaboration with key allies and partners.

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Sportswashing involves using major international or national sporting events, teams, or players to divert attention from a country's unethical conduct inside and outside of its borders. Often, political leaders use sports to [stoke nationalism](#) and [deflect attention](#) from chronic social issues, support for nefarious causes, and human rights concerns. This phenomenon exists in democratic and authoritarian societies and captures the attention of foreign and domestic markets. The difference between sportswashing and international politics involving sports is a thin line. Fascist states in the 1930s, like Italy and Germany, hosted World Cups and Olympics and attempted to advertise the power of their nations rather than divert attention from their internal problems. In the height of the Cold War, the U.S. and Soviet Russia boycotted each other's Olympics in [1980 and 1984](#), not as an example of sportswashing but as a tool of international politics. The key difference between the two concepts is when governments or high-powered individuals start buying controlling interests in teams outside their own. This allows the owning country to change the narrative and instead use sports as a tool of control. Foreign investment in sports takes this concept to another level, where foreign entities or individuals acquire significant stakes in sports teams, leagues, or organizations, often as a means to exert influence or further their interests, as a tool of irregular warfare.

The United States Department of Defense (DoD) originally [defined irregular warfare](#) as “a form of warfare where states and non-state actors campaign to assure or coerce states or other groups through indirect, non-attributable, or asymmetric activities.” Over time, the DoD expanded and revised the definition in that irregular warfare favors asymmetrical approaches to erode an adversary's power, influence, and will. In this modern age, a government's ability to control and influence what different populations think of them allows for economic growth expanded geopolitical influence, and a skirting of moral quandaries. In the case of sports, sportswashing provides a perfect opportunity to buy controlling interests in one market to change perceptions in another. This can manifest in various forms, from state-owned enterprises buying teams to wealthy individuals purchasing clubs for personal gain. Several instances of foreign investment in sports have gained international attention in recent years across football (soccer), golf, and basketball. While the actions of the sponsoring states are sometimes only trying to win “hearts and minds,” they can impact diplomacy, the private and public sectors both domestically and internationally, distract from internal or human rights concerns, or foster a sense of nationalism.

In 2017, AC Milan was bought by a Chinese investor virtually unknown in both Italy and China. The club was “[bleeding money](#)” and looking for any investor to help remedy the problem. As for China, it was looking for outside investments to “[strengthen the nation](#).” Those buying football clubs originally had [the support of the state](#). President Xi Jinping professed his love of the sport and wanted China to be a superpower by 2050. Thus, those with the money and the assets to invest acquired teams such as AC Milan, the Wolverhampton Wanderers, and Southampton FC to gain access and control of the foreign markets. In 2017, 20 European football clubs were [owned by major Chinese investors](#).

Over the past six years, however, that number has [dropped by half](#), as the Chinese Communist Party felt taken advantage of by the Europeans without offering anything in return. Chinese companies and entrepreneurs have invested heavily in European football clubs. While China acted as the financier of the operation, because of corruption, financial crisis, and the pandemic, it did not see the dividends payout. The failure of China does not point to a failure in the power of sportswashing, but rather a financial overreach.

When Saudi Arabia launched the LIV Golf series in 2022, it became the talk of the industry. With high-profile players and the wealthiest winnings in golf history, LIV was labeled a money grab as Saudi Arabia claimed to “[reinvigorate golf](#).” This play, however, was not all about the game but rather an opportunity

for Saudi Arabia to “reshape its reputation,” develop its economy outside oil, and divert negative connotation in connection to human rights abuses. This tournament epitomizes the term sportswashing and its use as a tool in irregular warfare. In press briefings, contestants both praised Saudi Arabia for creating a “[once-in-a-lifetime opportunity](#)” while denouncing their human rights records and dismissing Saudi Arabia’s role in the murder of Jamal Khashoggi.

Golf is not the only sport Saudi Arabia has invested in lately. In May of 2023, it was reported that Cristiano Ronaldo doubled his salary with a move to the Saudi Arabian Al Nassr, making him the [highest-paid soccer player in the world](#). For other well-known stars, even if Saudi Arabian teams did not sign the players, the government still worked on contracts for them to act as tourism ambassadors. Lionel Messi turned down a contract to play in Saudi Arabia, instead choosing the United States for family reasons, but he signed a commercial deal with [Saudi’s Tourism Authority](#). Though Saudi Arabia did not secure Messi for his feats on the field, it seems they came out ahead.

When questioned about sportswashing, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman said, “[w]ell if sportswashing is going to increase my GDP by one percent, then I will continue doing sportswashing.” As an increase in GDP allows Saudi Arabia more buying power in the political sphere, Crown Prince Bin Salman, Saudi Arabia has invested upwards [of \\$1 trillion in sports](#) and sports-related projects. The most recent investment came in the form of the uncontested FIFA World Cup 2034 bid. This win is seen as a “[clear-cut unadulterated](#)” example of sports washing as Saudi Arabia can “stoke nationalism at home, deflect attention from human rights problems, and garner national prestige.”

Foreign investments in teams cause far-reaching implications for geopolitical influence and ethical considerations. When countries bid to host major sporting events such as the Olympics or FIFA World Cup, they do so to showcase their economic and infrastructural development. For example, the [2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi](#), Russia, and the 2022 World Cup in Qatar were used to leverage their interest on a global scale. In Russia, the Winter Games were intended to showcase their development and power. Instead, they highlighted problems of billions of dollars fueling organized crime syndicates and state corruption.

In order to win its bid to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup, Qatar employed several means of irregular warfare to secure its position. Qatar went as far as [hiring a former CIA officer to collect](#) intelligence and information that was used to target voting committee members for their support of a World Cup bid. It was intended that the press surrounding the games would favorably present the ideas that the country supported, and the government would be able to limit conversations that did not support a positive image of the country. Political leaders shaped conversations by refusing to allow players and spectators to support the [LBGTQ community publicly](#). This was not the only limit on personal expression. The Iranian team and spectators were prevented from [expressing their support](#) for the Iranian protests that had engulfed the nation. Patrolling agents were employed to ensure that pre-Revolutionary Iranian flags were not brought into the stadium, and free tickets were given to “[cultural agents](#)” who supported Qatar and Iran’s official stances. If the country controls the press and the people in charge of a transnational sporting event, then they can promote whatever narrative fits their interests.

As foreign investors with their agendas enter the sports arena, ethical concerns may arise, especially when they have little regard for the traditions and values of the sport or the community it serves. In the hit Apple TV show [Ted Lasso](#), one of the characters refuses to support the actions of the team’s sponsor, Dubai Air, because of its connections to a larger company responsible for significant environmental degradation in Nigeria. The character was initially excited to be chosen to participate in an ad for the company, but realized the values of Dubai Air did not match his own. In the case of the show, the owner dropped the advertising contract, but the likelihood of a real-world team being able to do that is not high.

While sportswashing tends to work in favor of the buying nation, that is not always the case. One of the most recent examples of this was documented in the Netflix documentary [ICARUS](#). In this documentary, Bryan Fogel started out trying to prove how easy it was to evade drug testing requirements, and instead uncovered the deep-rooted and well-funded Russian state-sponsored doping program. Through his research, Fogel was connected with Grigory Rodchenkov, the director of Moscow's Anti-Doping Centre. Throughout the project, Rodchenkov admitted to some unsavory acts that enhanced the performance of athletes in the [Sochi Winter Olympics](#), all with the knowledge and approval of President Vladimir Putin. Rodchenkov is subsequently fired, faces trial, and wonders whether Russia's medal wins in Sochi, "[emboldened Putin](#) in his decision to meddle in the Ukraine." How can sportswashing be used in the irregular warfare playbook? Foreign investments in sports can influence and manipulate a host nation's cultural and political narratives, subtly advancing their own agenda. Historically, states used sports as part of formal diplomatic strategy. Because of the connective power of sports, countries can use them to foster positive relationships between different communities. The United States Department of State started using sports as an official arm of national diplomacy in the 1950s. Commonly called "[ping-pong diplomacy](#)," the United States leveraged the tabletop sport in their efforts to build official diplomatic ties with the People's Republic of China in the 1970s.

In 2002, the U.S. centralized the use of sports by creating the Sports Diplomacy Division. The Division boasts of four programs intending to "promote mutual understanding through shared educational and cultural interests for the [promotion of friendly relations](#)." Two of the programs allow for cultural exchanges. One of the programs offers youth athletes, coaches, and administrators from around the world the opportunity to visit the United States for about two weeks, and participate in clinics focused on team building, leadership, and conflict resolution. The other program takes elite American athletes into underserved communities abroad to teach and demonstrate the power of sports. While the U.S. government does not outright own the teams, it is working to influence other's perceptions of the nation. These actions used United States citizens to help change political perceptions, whereas the sportswashing now uses foreign nationals.

In the summer of 2008, before the Beijing Summer Olympics, Iran's basketball team embarked on a world tour to train and build cultural bridges with different countries and their respective basketball teams. The exchange program stemmed from the Bush administration and was used as "[an olive branch invitation](#)" between the United States and Iran. The National Basketball Association (NBA) welcomed the competition as an opportunity to demonstrate how "something as simple as a [game of basketball can promote understanding](#)." One of the caveats for the Iranian team was that they were instructed not to talk about politics. The Utah Jazz's coach, Jerry Sloan, said, "[t]his is not about politics. I'm in basketball. [I'm not in politics](#)." In part, the goal was not to change and challenge predominant Iranian political views but to build a bridge with the common people through citizen exchanges. In return, it helped humanize Iranian citizens, as the team helped host a [youth hoops clinic](#) in an effort to challenge unfriendly perceptions about them.

Foreign investment in sports as a tool of influence operations and irregular warfare is a complex and evolving aspect of modern geopolitics. As nations and individuals continue to leverage their financial power within the sports industry, it is essential for stakeholders, including sports organizations and governments, to strike a balance between embracing investment and safeguarding the integrity and values of sports. It is crucial to remain vigilant, transparent, and ethical in the face of sports washing and the growing intertwining of sports and global politics.

The views expressed are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the Department of Defense, Defense Security Cooperation Agency, or the Irregular Warfare Center.