

BEIJING OLYMPICS : WHAT ARE CHINA'S INTERESTS ?

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Credit: International Olympic Committee

INTRODUCTION TO BEIJING OLYMPICS

The Olympic Games are one of the oldest international competitions. Founded in Ancient Greece, it became a feast of Classical Western civilization. At the end of the 19th century, Greece revived this tradition and set up the first modern Olympics in Athens in 1896. States started progressively to recognize the potential of such an event, when it comes to political communication and influence. During the *interbellum* era between the two World Wars, and especially since the Cold War, the Olympics were deemed one of the most important international events. Hence, states used them to show their strength to the rest of the world.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a disruption in the history of this great competition. In history, only three modern Olympic Games were cancelled: in 1916, 1940, and 1944 due to World Wars. The pandemic caused the 2020 Tokyo Olympics to be postponed in 2021. No Games were ever postponed before.

When it comes to the Olympics, the choice of the host country is of the utmost importance. Since one decade, China is acting as a challenger to the West, especially to the United States. This nation went from begin a developing country with a high democratic potential to an authoritarian superpower. The "Middle Kingdom" launched international and disrupting projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013, or the Asian Infrastructure Investment Banking in 2016.

Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics have three characteristics. They are the second Games to be held during the COVID-19 pandemic, they dub Beijing as the first city to have held both Summer and Winter Olympics, and eventually they highlight tensions between China and other countries. We will now see how the Games are used by China to promote its international objectives in a pandemic context.



WHAT MAKES THE OLYMPICS POLITICALLY INTERESTING FOR STATES?

Since the early 20th century, the Olympics gained a strong political importance. It is both a way to highlight a city, hence improving its local economy, and a way for a country to get the world's limelight during the Games. As a matter of example, the 1936 Berlin Summer Olympics were used to present Nazi Germany as a respectable power as tensions were growing in Europe. Hitler used the Games to show off Germany's development and resilience since the end of World War I. It also carried an ideological message on the superiority of Nazism as a political doctrine. This use of international events by a country reminds the notion of *soft power*.

Harvard Professor Joseph Nye coined the concept of *soft power* in 2004 in his famous book *Soft Power: the means to success in world politics*. He explains this concept as follows:

"A country may obtain the outcomes it wants in world politics because other countries - admiring its values, emulating its example, aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness - want to follow it. In this sense, it is also important to set the agenda and attract others in world politics, and not only to force them to change by threatening military force or economic sanctions. This soft power - getting others to want the outcomes that you want - co-opts people rather than coerces them. Soft power rests on the ability to shape the preferences of others"

Joseph Nye, 2004, p.5

This definition shows why many states want to host such an international competition. Beside sports achievements and the number of medals won by each country, the host nation has the opportunity to feature its culture, history and recent achievements. A good example is Russia with the 2014 Sochi Olympics and its inauguration ceremony emphasizing the importance of Russian history and an economic revival after the end of the Soviet Union and a decade of crisis. This showed the world that Russia was back in the international scene and abandoned its Soviet heritage. Still, the war in Ukraine alienated the country as a reminiscence of the USSR.



Credit: The official poster of the Games of the XI Olympiad, Franz Würbel

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When considering the 2022 Beijing Olympics, we see China's intention to present itself as the new major power in the midst of domestic and international tensions. Domestically, feuds with Hong Kong, human rights violation against Uyghurs in Xinjiang, and a privacy-invading control over citizen's life create tensions. Internationally, the country has an alienating attitude toward many Western countries, as well as several of its neighbors. This context is represented in the Olympics, as shows the choice of the two athletes who brought the Olympic flame to Beijing: a Uyghur and a Han, and the U.S. diplomatic boycott of the 2022 Beijing Olympics, followed by other states.

Despite being controversial, China still gets benefits from hosting the Olympics. The country can show its close ties to its allies like Russia. It is also a great opportunity to showcase the country's logistical tour de force to host a major international event during a pandemic, as the new Omicron variant has emerged.

China also matches diplomatic blows received with an offensive diplomacy, punishing states which do not comply to its will. The wolf warrior diplomacy is a good example of this phenomenon. Disliking China by diplomatically boycotting the Olympics is likely to be punished by the "Middle Kingdom" in the future. This strategy could eventually be counter-productive in the long run as Orville Schell explained it in his Foreign Affairs article. Indeed, it appears difficult to combine offensive diplomacy and "sweet talks" in such international settings (Scehell, 2022, p.4).

The Olympic Games themselves are not the sole conveyors of political messages. Athletes also play a big role in sharing ideas. To take an Olympic example: as 1936 Games were organized by Berlin to assert the supposed dominance of the Aryan race, African American athlete Jesse Owens actually made history by winning four gold medals, hence destroying Nazi fantasies. More recently, in 2016, athlete Colin Kaepernick knelt during the U.S. national anthem during a football match to protest against police brutality. These examples show the great impact athletes may have as ideas bringer.



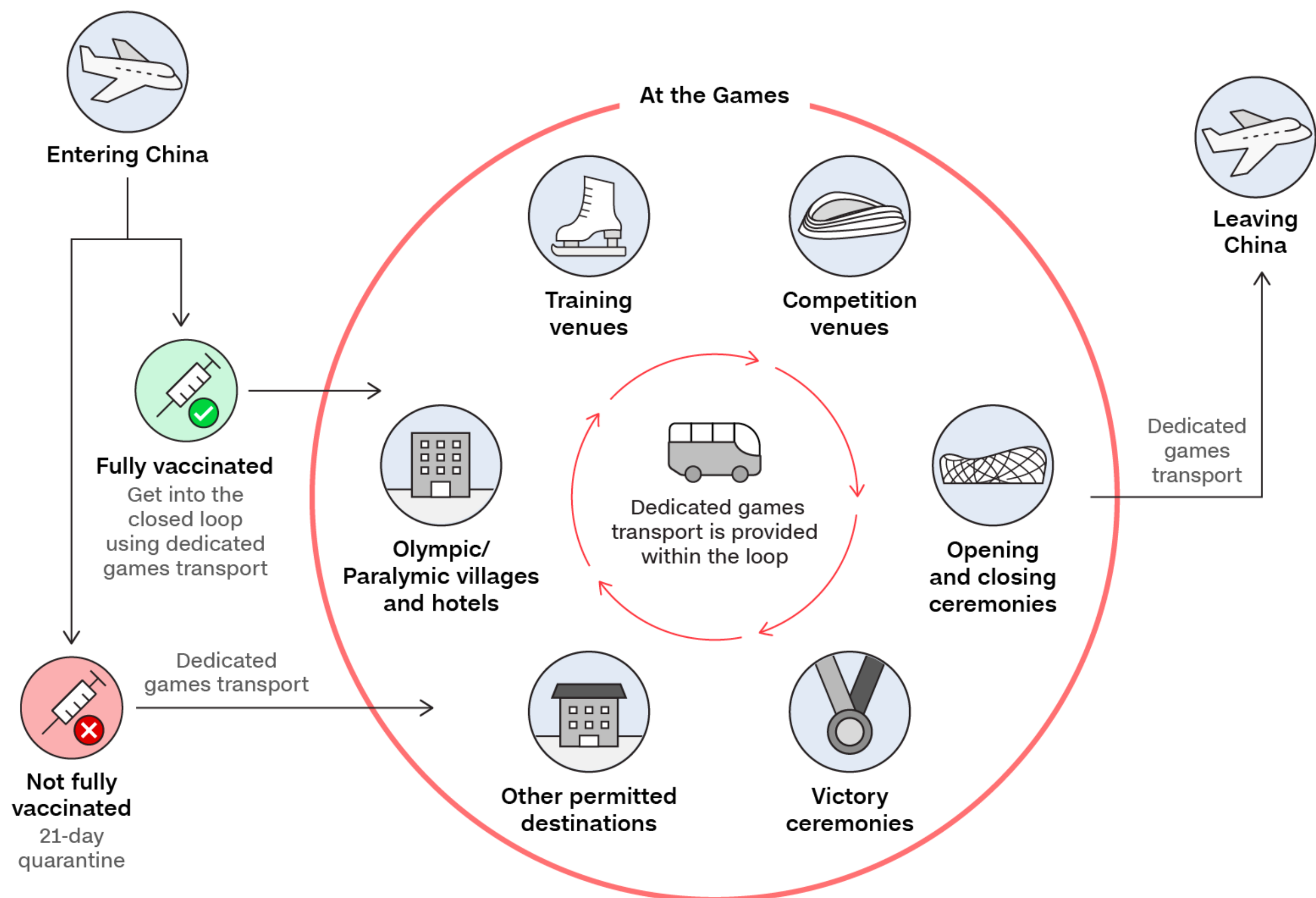
Chinese President Xi Jinping, right, and Russian President Vladimir Putin pose for a photo prior to their talks in Beijing, China, Feb. 4, 2022.

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WHAT ARE SANITARY CHALLENGES FACED BY CHINA IN ORGANIZING THE 2022 BEIJING OLYMPICS?

China is the second country to host Olympic Games during the COVID-19 pandemic. Like in Tokyo in 2021, a strict sanitary protocol was put in place to ensure safety of athletes and personnel throughout the Games. An "Olympic bubble" has been set up by the organizing committee.

Throughout their stay, participants will train, compete, eat, sleep and commute inside a series of bubbles that isolate them from the rest of the city.



Note: The closed loop applies to all three zones: Beijing, Zhangjiakou and Yanqing.

CNN Source: International Olympic Committee
Graphic: Natalie Leung, CNN

Olympic 2022 COVID-19 bubble schematic. Credit: CNN.

This bubble filters people coming from abroad, but a selection has also been made, domestic citizens allowed to go see the Games in person. Indeed, tickets were not open to sale to anyone, even in China. The International Olympic Committee's website mentions that "tickets should not be sold anymore but be part of an adapted program that will invite groups of spectators to be present on site during the Games" (IOC, 2022). However, there is no detail on selection's criteria. As of February 8th, it appears that more spectators will be invited to attend the Games as the situation is deemed under control by the organization committee.

So far, we may see that China is not only setting itself as a first-class power through the Olympics, but also as a "sanitary" one. Unlike Japan in 2020, China did not postpone its Olympics, despite the recent finding of a new COVID-19 variant: Omicron. Said variant has first been characterized by its high contagiousness rate. Furthermore, the most widely used Chinese-manufactured vaccine: Sinovac, seems to be ineffective against this last variant. Due to these conditions, hosting the Olympics is a real challenge, and China is showing the world that despite all odds, it can host such events in complicated circumstances.

THE OLYMPICS FIT A MODERN CHINESE NARRATIVE ABOUT INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

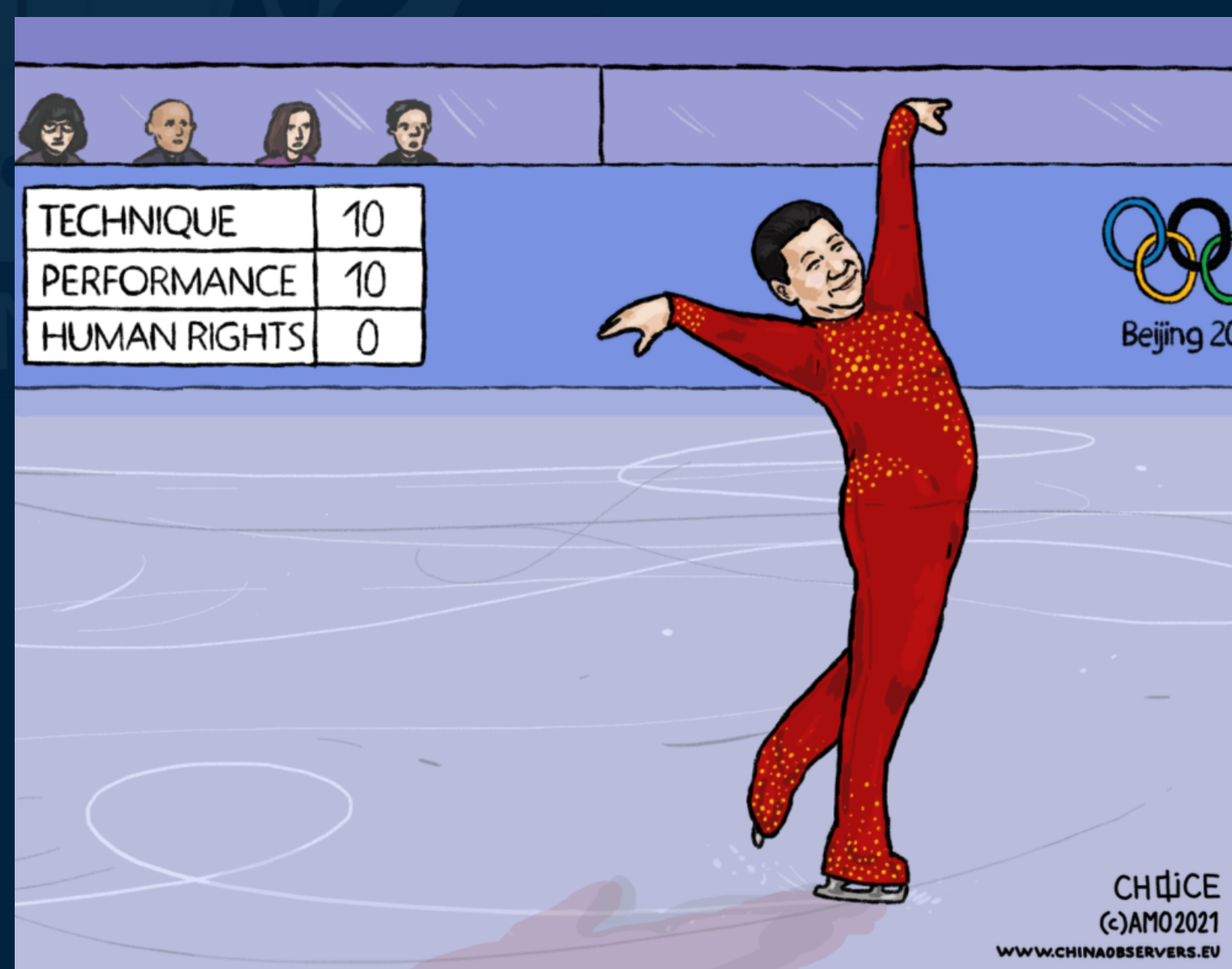
We must remind that since Beijing's 2008 Summer Olympics, China's situation changed completely on the world scene. In 2008, this country was still developing and did not have many international ambitions. Now, everyone agrees to say that the "Middle Kingdom" is one major player in international affairs, thanks to its massive production, investment capacity, and has many industrial and political ambitions. This change of scale alienated other nations, such as the United States, but also to some extent European states. Other factors only worsen the relation between China and Western powers, such as the non-respect of human rights. Even in Asia, China has a dubious reputation namely because of its territorial claims which offense many of its neighbors.

This process of alienation of China specifically by the United States was highlighted by President Obama administration's pivot to Asia in 2011 and by Professor Allison's Thucydides trap theory from 2012. This Harvard Professor wrote several papers on this phenomenon, its most important in the matter being the book *Destined for War* published in 2017. The metaphor of the Peloponnesian war describes the decline of a hegemony while another power is rising, here the United States and China. As ancient history echoes contemporary politics, we must understand each player's motivations and objectives to correctly analyze the situation. Let us now focus on Chinese theories and their application in the context of the Olympics.

Until the "century of humiliation" from the mid-19th century to the mid-20th century, China was used to being the hegemony in Asia. Such perspective on the world echoes in political theory. One of them is called "Mandate of Heaven" and originated in the Zhou dynasty. This theory acknowledges the supreme role of the Chinese emperor, domestically, but also abroad. Hence, from a Chinese perspective, all foreign political leaders were hierarchically subordinated to the emperor. This situation has set China as a

benevolent ruler in hierarchical world. Hence, we may deduct that this country may try to create a profitable environment for commerce. This doctrine echoes the current situation, with the Belt and Road Initiative for example. When it comes to the Olympics, this reminds states boycotting the Games that their actions are likely to be punished in a way or another, because no state should challenge Chinese leadership in a hierarchical world.

These doctrines highlight the importance of Professor Nye's *soft power* defined above. In this context, the Olympics play a particular role by showing China's logistical and sanitary capacities, prestige, and greatness despite international rivalries. The Olympics have also the purpose of serving China's international projects by picturing China in the best way possible. Its resilience in hosting the Olympics may be seen by its partners as reassuring when it comes to common projects, like investments or the Belt and Road Initiative.



Credit: CHOICE, 2022

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CONCLUSION

To sum up, we may say that the Olympics are a great opportunity for states to showcase their organizational skills, history, and culture. China is especially prone to use such tool to promote its *soft power* thanks to its historical conception of world order. Hence, the Olympics become one of many tools China has to promote its objectives internationally.



Credit: CHOICE, 2022

The 2022 Beijing Olympics are also special due to the COVID-19 pandemic. But this challenge also strengthened China by showing its ability to host the Games despite all odds, and without postponing it unlike Japan. Finally, we may remind that this competition has stopped from being purely sports-driven since almost a century, and that the gold medalist of the Games is almost always international politics.



Activists rally in front of the Chinese Consulate in Los Angeles, California on November 3, 2021, calling for a boycott of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics due to concerns about China's human rights record [Frederic J Brown/AFP]

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