

# SPORTS DIPLOMACY AND SOFT POWER: AN ANALYSIS OF INDIA'S INTERNATIONAL ENGAGEMENT THROUGH THE OLYMPIC MOVEMENT

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## ABSTRACT

*Where the medal table measures sporting success, it captures little of what sport does diplomatically. This paper sets the scoreboard aside and asks a different question: through which modes does India actually engage the world by way of the Olympic Movement, and what kind of soft power does each mode generate? Rather than read influence off performance, the study builds a four-part typology representational, relational, developmental and normative engagement and maps India's conduct onto it across the years 2008 to 2025. The evidence is documentary and episodic: policy texts, the hosting of the 141st IOC Session in Mumbai in 2023, the reinstatement of the Indian Olympic Association after its 2012 suspension, the 2036 hosting bid, and patterns of bilateral sport cooperation. Two findings stand out. India's engagement is broadening from a narrow, athlete-centred register toward a more institutional one in which it seeks a voice inside the Movement, not merely a place on its podium. Yet the conversion of that engagement into branded, durable influence is uneven, checked by recurrent governance disputes at home and by the awkward fact that the country's most globally resonant sport long sat outside the Olympic frame. Olympic engagement, this analysis concludes, is becoming a deliberate but still secondary channel of Indian soft power promising in its institutional ambition, constrained in its delivery.*

**Keywords:** *International engagement<sup>1</sup>; Sports diplomacy<sup>2</sup>; Soft power<sup>3</sup>; Nation branding<sup>4</sup>; Olympic Movement<sup>5</sup>; India<sup>6</sup>.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

A country can lose almost every event and still gain from the Games. That apparent paradox is the entry point for this paper. International relations scholarship has grown comfortable with the claim that sport carries

diplomatic weight, yet much of the writing on India still reaches first for the medal count a habit that confuses athletic outcome with diplomatic effect. The two are related but not the same [2]. A javelin thrown well in Tokyo and a hosting bid lodged in Lausanne both belong to a country's international engagement, but they work on different audiences, through different actors, and toward different ends. India is a useful place to test that distinction. Its material rise is not in doubt, and its soft-power reputation built on cinema, cuisine, yoga and a far-flung diaspora is widely acknowledged. What is less settled is how the Olympic Movement fits that reputation. For most of the twentieth century India treated the Games as a competitive arena and little more. The shift toward treating them as a diplomatic one is recent, and it has accelerated: a clutch of athlete successes since 2008, the staging of the 141st IOC Session in Mumbai in 2023, and the decision to bid for the 2036 Summer Games together suggest a state that now reads the Olympic platform as a venue for engagement, not just competition. The paper's argument turns on that word, engagement. Instead of asking whether India wins, it asks *how India shows up* and proposes that the answer comes in four distinct modes. Setting them out, and watching how their balance has changed, says more about the country's sporting soft power than any tally of bronze and gold. The contribution, then, is a typology and its application: a way of seeing Olympic diplomacy as a repertoire of engagements rather than a single performance [4].

## **2. CONCEPTUAL ANCHORS: SOFT POWER, PUBLIC DIPLOMACY AND SPORT**

### **2.1 FROM SOFT POWER TO NATION BRANDING**

Joseph Nye's soft power remains the obvious starting point: the capacity to obtain preferred outcomes through attraction rather than force or inducement. But for a study of engagement the more useful neighbouring concepts are public diplomacy and nation branding. Jan Melissen's account of a "new" public diplomacy describes states reaching past their counterparts to foreign publics directly, often in partnership with non-state actors a description that fits a national Olympic committee almost exactly [6]. Simon Anholt's work on competitive identity adds a warning the sporting literature too often ignores: a nation's image cannot simply be advertised into existence; it is earned through what a country does and is only loosely steerable by campaigns. That caution shapes the analysis here, which treats branding as an aspiration India pursues rather than an outcome it controls.

### **2.2 A TYPOLOGY OF SPORTS-DIPLOMACY MODES**

Building on Stuart Murray's separation of state-led international sports diplomacy from the diplomacy conducted by sporting bodies themselves, this paper proposes four modes through which a state engages internationally via sport. Representational engagement uses athletes and teams as carriers of national image. Relational engagement builds ties through cooperation, exchange and convening [9]. Developmental engagement extends capacity coaching, facilities, training to partner states, trading expertise for goodwill. Normative engagement works inside the institutions of the Movement to shape rules, recognition and agendas.

The modes are analytical rather than watertight; a single episode can carry more than one. Their value lies in separating engagements that look alike on the surface but rest on different logics.

## 2.3 THE OLYMPIC MOVEMENT AS A DIPLOMATIC ARENA

The Olympic Movement qualifies as an arena, not merely a stage. The IOC recognises members, mediates disputes, and negotiates with governments from a position of considerable autonomy; the biennial Sessions function as summits; the Olympic Truce, renewed by the UN General Assembly before each Games, gives even the symbolism a multilateral form. A state that engages this arena is doing more than sending athletes. It is entering a forum where standing is conferred and contested which is precisely why hosting a Session or lodging a bid carries diplomatic meaning out of proportion to any sporting result [5].

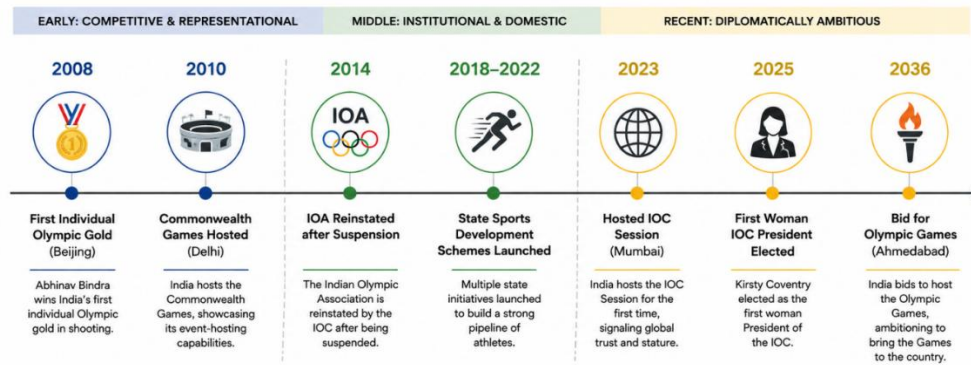
## 3. APPROACH

The study is interpretive and case based. India is treated as a single case examined through embedded episodes of engagement between 2008 and 2025, the period over which the country's Olympic posture visibly changed. Three kinds of evidence are read together: policy and institutional documents, including the National Sports Policy, the Target Olympic Podium and Khelo India schemes, and communications from the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports and the Indian Olympic Association; discrete diplomatic episodes, such as the Mumbai Session and the 2036 bid; and the framing those episodes received at home and abroad. Each episode is sorted into the four-mode typology and read for the kind of soft power it plausibly generates. *No claim is made that engagement produces measurable foreign-policy returns*; the attribution problem that haunts soft-power research forbids it [6]. The aim is more modest and, for that reason, more defensible: to describe the shape of India's Olympic engagement and to judge, qualitatively, where it is strong and where it is thin.

## 4. MAPPING INDIA'S ENGAGEMENT

### 4.1 AN ENGAGEMENT TIMELINE

Figure 1 arranges the principal episodes chronologically. Read across, it shows engagement deepening in kind, not just frequency. The early markers are competitive and representational a first individual gold in 2008, a home Commonwealth Games in 2010 [15]. The middle years are institutional and domestic the reinstatement of the IOA in 2014 after its suspension, and the launch of state schemes to build a pipeline of athletes. The most recent markers are the most diplomatically ambitious: hosting the IOC Session, electing the body's first woman president, and bidding to stage the Games themselves.



Source: Author's compilation from official and institutional records.

Figure 1: Timeline of India's Olympic-related international engagement, 2008–2024

Table 1: A typology of India's Olympic sports-diplomacy modes

Mode	Underlying logic	Lead actors	Illustrative instance
Representational	Athletes and teams carry national image to foreign publics	Athletes; media; the state as amplifier	Celebration of Chopra's 2020 gold as a marker of a rising India
Relational	Cooperation and convening build ties and trust	Government; IOA; partner bodies	Hosting the 141st IOC Session in Mumbai (2023)
Developmental	Sharing capacity earns goodwill from partners	Government; federations; coaches	Coaching and facility cooperation with South Asian and African partners
Normative	Working inside the Movement to shape rules and standing	IOA leadership; IOC interlocutors	The 2036 hosting bid and engagement with IOC reform

Source: Author's typology.

## 4.2 REPRESENTATIONAL ENGAGEMENT

This is the oldest and most legible mode. Individual triumphs Bindra in 2008, Chopra in 2020, Manu Bhaker's double in 2024 are received less as sporting facts than as national ones, and the state amplifies them accordingly [11]. The register is attraction: a foreign public that watches an Indian win something is invited, gently, to revise its picture of the country. The limit of the mode is its dependence on individuals and on outcomes the state cannot guarantee. Representation attracts, but it does not, by itself, build anything that outlasts the result.

### 4.3 RELATIONAL ENGAGEMENT

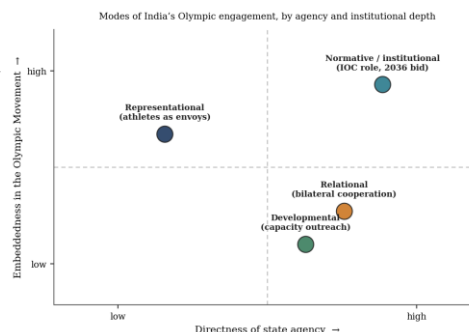
Relational engagement is where India’s recent activity is most striking. Convening is its purest form, and the Mumbai Session of 2023 the first held in India in forty years was convening at the highest level the Movement offers. Hosting placed Indian officials in sustained contact with the global sporting establishment and lent the country the temporary authority of a host. The decision taken at that Session to clear cricket for the 2028 programme had an obvious resonance for Indian audiences, folding the country’s favourite sport back into the Olympic family [13]. Relational engagement of this kind builds relationships and standing at once; its weakness is that the goodwill it generates is easily dissipated if the institutional house is not in order.

### 4.4 DEVELOPMENTAL ENGAGEMENT

The developmental mode is the least visible and, for a state with Global-South ambitions, potentially the most valuable. Extending coaching, training opportunities and facility expertise to smaller sporting nations trades a modest outlay for durable relationships and a reputation as a partner rather than a patron. India’s activity here is real but uneven, and it sits awkwardly beside a domestic system still working to produce its own podium finishers [13]. The mode’s promise leadership of a sporting Global South remains more aspiration than achievement.

### 4.5 NORMATIVE AND INSTITUTIONAL ENGAGEMENT

The newest mode is the one with the highest ceiling. Seeking a voice inside the Movement through the conduct of the IOA, engagement with IOC reform, and above all the 2036 bid is an attempt to move from being acted upon to helping set the terms. Figure 3 locates the four modes on two axes: the directness of state agency and the depth of embeddedness in the Movement. Normative engagement sits in the demanding upper-right quadrant, high on both, which is exactly why it is the hardest to sustain [10]. It requires the state to be both assertive and institutionally credible at the same time.

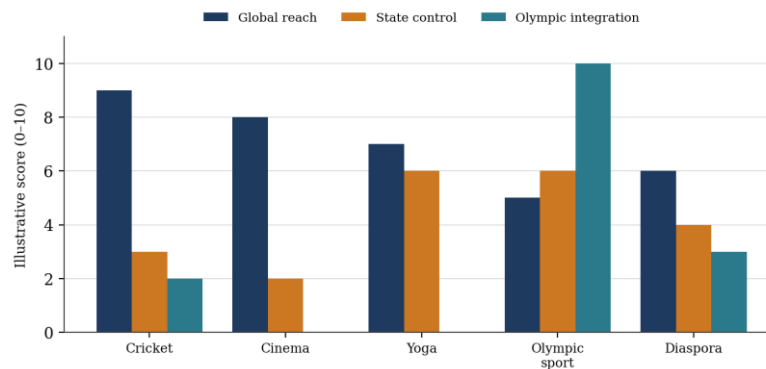


Source: Author’s construction.

Figure 3: Modes of engagement by directness of state agency and institutional embeddedness

#### 4.6 OLYMPIC SPORT AMONG INDIA’S SOFT-POWER VEHICLES

None of this should be read in isolation from India’s other instruments of attraction. Figure 2 places Olympic sport beside cricket, cinema, yoga and the diaspora on three rough attributes: global reach, the degree of state control, and integration into the Olympic system. The pattern is telling. Cricket and cinema reach furthest but are only loosely steerable and, in cricket’s case, only now entering the Olympic frame. Yoga is more directly cultivated by the state the UN-recognised International Day of Yoga is the clearest case yet sits outside the Games entirely [3]. Olympic sport is distinctive precisely for its institutional integration: its reach is narrower today, but it is the only vehicle that comes with a seat inside a recognised multilateral body. That is the asset India is now trying to convert.



Source: Author’s assessment; scores are illustrative (0–10).

**Figure 2: India’s principal soft-power vehicles compared on three attributes**

**Table 2: Selected episodes of Olympic engagement and their diplomatic significance**

Year	Episode	Diplomatic significance
2010	Delhi Commonwealth Games	Major hosting test; organisational and corruption controversies blunted the reputational gain an early lesson in soft disempowerment.
2014	IOA reinstated by the IOC	Restored India’s standing within the Movement after a two-year suspension over governance.
2022	Chess Olympiad; first woman IOA president	Event hosting plus a symbolically resonant leadership choice signalling reform.
2023	141st IOC Session, Mumbai	Highest-level convening in four decades; cricket cleared for the 2028 programme.
2024	Letter of intent for the 2036 Games	Formal entry into the hosting dialogue; a direct claim to top-tier status.

Source: Author’s compilation from institutional records and contemporaneous reporting.

## 5. DISCUSSION: DRIVERS AND CONSTRAINTS

The mapping yields a clear direction of travel and an equally clear set of brakes. Engagement is moving up and to the right of Figure 3 toward modes that are more assertive and more institutionally embedded which is what one would expect of a state converting material rise into sporting voice. Three drivers push it there: a genuine improvement in athletic results that makes the ambition credible; a deliberate domestic policy architecture in TOPS and Khelo India; and a wider foreign-policy narrative, sharpened during India's 2023 G20 presidency, of leadership among emerging states. Against these run three constraints, and honesty requires giving them equal billing. The first is institutional. The 2012 suspension of the IOA, and the governance disputes that have recurred since, expose a gap between diplomatic ambition abroad and administrative order at home; the Movement India seeks to lead has more than once questioned how India runs its own house[1]. The second is the branding-substance gap that Anholt warns of: hosting a Session or lodging a bid projects an image, but image untethered from delivery is fragile, as the Delhi 2010 experience showed. The third is structural the country's most powerful sporting export spent almost the whole study period outside the Olympic system, so the Olympic channel has been, of necessity, a supplementary one [5].

**Table 3: Drivers and constraints on India's Olympic engagement**

Drivers	Constraints
Improving and broadening athletic results lend ambition credibility	Recurrent governance disputes within the IOA undercut institutional standing
A deliberate domestic policy architecture (TOPS, Khelo India)	Image projection outpaces delivery, leaving reputational gains fragile
A Global-South narrative reinforced by the 2023 G20 presidency	The strongest sporting asset, cricket, long sat outside the Olympic frame
Institutional milestones the Mumbai Session, the 2036 bid	Returns on engagement are diffuse and resist clean attribution

Source: Author's assessment.

## 6. LIMITATIONS

The typology is a lens, not a measuring instrument, and reasonable readers may sort a given episode differently. The salience attached to each mode rests on documentary interpretation rather than on foreign-opinion data, and the single-case design limits how far the Indian pattern can be generalised. These are the familiar costs of interpretive work, accepted here in exchange for analytical depth [7]. Survey evidence on whether Indian Olympic engagement actually shifts foreign perception, and comparative application of the four modes to other emerging powers, would test what this study can only describe.

## 7. CONCLUSION

Read through its modes rather than its medals, India's Olympic engagement looks both more interesting and more qualified than the celebratory accounts suggest [8]. The country has moved from a representational posture, reliant on individual athletes, toward a normative one in which it convenes, reforms and bids a meaningful deepening of how it engages the world by way of sport. But the engagement converts into durable, branded influence only unevenly, slowed by governance trouble at home and by the long absence of its strongest sport from the Olympic frame. The Olympic Movement, on this evidence, is becoming a deliberate channel of Indian soft power without yet becoming a decisive one. Whether the 2036 bid turns institutional ambition into settled standing is the test the coming decade will set [7].

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