

Cricket-diplomacy in South Asia

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Nationalism has been growing across the world. B. C. Upreti (2006), an author of many books concerning South Asian diplomacy, finds South Asia is experiencing extreme nationalism, which threatens to lead to major conflicts. For example, British colonialism divided Colonial India into India and Pakistan, separating them by religion and unionizing them under it (Upreti, 2006). Kashmir, a disputed region, caused tensions between India and Pakistan. Eventually, these tensions boiled over, and war seemed certain. In response, India refused to play Pakistan in cricket, the most popular sport in the region, and two countries came to a ceasefire (Næss-Holm, 2007). This act was the start of what is now called cricket-diplomacy. Despite the tensions caused by nationalism, both countries used the cultural unity of cricket for diplomacy. The universal culture of cricket could connect people despite tensions. Cricket has become universal in South Asia as the dominant sport. Orlando Patterson, a John Cowles Professor of Sociology at Harvard University, and Jason Kaufman (2005), previously a professor at Harvard University, find that Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and India have the highest average percentage of sports articles about cricket than any other cricket playing nation, implying that these nations care the most about cricket. Although the Kashmir dispute cricket-diplomacy was a success, the 1945 Dynamo tour of the UK, a similar occasion of heightened nationalism was not. George Orwell, an English author who wrote literary criticism of authoritarianism, totalitarianism, and nationalism, asserted that the Dynamo tour only heightened tensions (Orwell, 1968). He found the match full of controversy, stemming from nationalistic bias. Similarly, matches such as the 2019 Cricket World Cup still harbor nationalistic sentiments from both sides. Before the 2019 World Cup, “42 Indian soldiers” died by an attack from a “Pakistan-based militant group” and “TV adverts from each country” insulted the other (Ingle, 2019). Even though nationalistic bias

leads to sports controversy, cricket-diplomacy has been thought of as a more effective replacement of traditional democracy. Stewart Murray (2012), Associate Professor of International Relations at Bond University, finds that traditional diplomacy has become less advantageous post-Cold War because of new threats, which traditional diplomacy is not accustomed to. Moreover, traditional diplomacy is less transparent despite constituents wanting more transparency (Murray, 2012). Therefore, diplomats are looking towards public diplomacy, a superset of sports-diplomacy, to combat these problems. Although sports-diplomacy is seen as a boon to ally tensions in South Asia, its effectiveness depends upon the divergence between unity and nationalism. This begs the question: Despite current tensions, can cricket-diplomacy promote unity among South Asian countries? Although the tensions between Pakistan and India threatens to upend cricket-diplomacy, its diplomatic exigency, success in Afghanistan, and possible betterment through the Olympics warrants advancing its use in South Asia.

Sport diplomacy

Traditional diplomacy has not prevailed with post-Cold war threats, so public diplomacy is seen as an alternative (Murray, 2012). Sports diplomacy seems like a worthy option because sport is growing (Murray, 2012). One well-known example is Ping-Pong diplomacy, which developed Sino-U.S. relations when there was a cutoff of relations after the Communist revolution (Murray, 2012). The US and China used the unity of ping-pong to forge US relations, and it was effective because of its universal appeal. HOOPS showcases basketball throughout the world, and taken together it is evident that sport, as a whole, has a universal appeal (*HOOPS: Community portraits by Bill Bamberger, n.d.*). Each of the basketball courts in the images is unique, reflecting the culture that encompasses the region; however, they share the same underlying structure of the game. This example shows that despite large cultural differences, the

game is universal, the elements of the game persist despite its environment. Although sport's universality can unite nations, the emotional involvement of fans can also create heightened nationalism, ruining the uniting nature of sport. George Orwell (1968) attributes this "sporting spirit" to ruining international relations. He cites how people aligned themselves in controversy in accordance with their nationality during the Glasgow (Orwell, 1968). Moreover, Orwell (1968) reasons that the competitive nature of sport can only lead to division; although Næss-Holm (2007) agrees that the tribal essence of sport can divide, he also contends that sport can be a vent for tensions. Sport can help eliminate previous views of the other nations and focus nationalism on the minor wins or losses of a game (Næss-Holm, 2007).

Indian and Pakistan

One hindrance to cricket diplomacy is the animosity between India and Pakistan. Cricket is "pivot[ing] to Asia" with a growing fan base in India and Pakistan (Ayres 2015). Therefore, the grievances between the two nations affect the whole cricket world. Alyssa Ayres, a senior fellow for South Asia on the Council on Foreign Relations, warns that India's dominance in cricket politics and its power to corrupt the International Cricket Council (ICC) will lead to further corruption. This is especially concerning since India is part of the Big Three, a group of the three biggest cricket-playing nations, and, because of its "sheer market size," it has much control over the sport (Ayres, 2015). Because of India's control over the ICC, India is likely to win over cricket conflicts with Pakistan, resulting in further animosity between the two nations. Cricket corruption is a major hurdle to pass in order to make sure future controversies do not break out that ruin the reputation of cricket-diplomacy. Cricket corruption would be a compounding factor to tensions between India and Pakistan. Another problem is that cricket can bring up historical conflicts between the two nations, resulting in more controversies. In an article published by the

British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), credited as being one of the most unbiased and trusted news sources in the UK, the author reports that the disputed land of Kashmir was brought up when a “former Pakistani captain...and ex-India opener” fought on Twitter (*India, Pakistan cricketers spar over Kashmir*, 2018). Athletes have significant impacts as advocates. Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, UN Under-Secretary-General and Executive director of UN Woman, finds that female athletes are advancing gender equality by “using their status to start important conversations” (Mlambo, 2019). Likewise, Cricket players can have major political and cultural power. In fact, the current Pakistani prime minister, Imran Khan, used to be a cricket captain. If people see cricketers fight on Twitter on sensitive issues like Kashmir, cricket-diplomacy can lose out and result in a net negative. However, if done correctly, cricketers, as role models for the country, can shape how politics is discussed, allaying tensions. Before the 2019 Cricket World Cup games, the “Indian cricket board called for Pakistan to be expelled from the World Cup” because of the death of “42 Indian soldiers” by Pakistan (Ingle, 2019). Again, because of India’s control over the ICC, India had the advantage of kicking Pakistan out. Not only would this suspension ruin cricket-diplomacy by rejecting it, but it would also stress tensions more. Although these potential problems could lead to the deterioration of cricket-diplomacy, currently, Sean Ingle (2019), the chief sports reporter for The Guardian, reports that some consider India and Pakistan cricket relations as “cordial” and believe that the players are more careful to appease both nations. Although cricket corruption and the remembrance of historic grievances are major obstacles to cricket-diplomacy, cricket still unifies the region. Arne Næss-Holm (2007), a Director of International Programs for the Norwegian Church, under the supervision of Andreas Selliaas, a commentator on sports politics and adviser to the Norwegian Olympic and Paralympic Committee, finds that that cricket permeates South Asian society and it even

“provide[s] a sense of national unity.” Cricket’s national unity contradicts the diversity of the region (Næss-Holm, 2007). This unity is the same unity seen in HOOPS, in which many regions share the same elements of basketball (*HOOPS: Community portraits by Bill Bamberger, n.d.*). Basketball’s universal appeal connects many people who may not come in contact with each other. Similarly, cricket connects many people despite regional differences. The Pakistani president Zia-ul Haq traveling to India for a cricket game demonstrates to the two nations that India and Pakistan are not so different and share the game of cricket. Both nations were created from the same region and thus share the same history. However, the two nations only diverged because of British colonialism. British colonialism led to increasing nationalism and subsequent division after the drawing of borders by the British (Upreti, 2006). After British colonialism, colonial India was partitioned into modern India and Pakistan (Næss-Holm, 2007). Since religion was the governing factor of separation it became a cause of nationalism (Upreti, 2006). Moreover, it was during this partition the diplomatic problems, such as the dispute over Kashmir, of today were created (Næss-Holm, 2007). The unity of cricket-diplomacy can help revert tensions to before British colonialism.

Success of Cricket in Afghanistan

Afghan cricket is a success story of unity between many ethnicities and the national improvement from moving to cricket. After living in refugee camps in Pakistan, Afghans brought cricket with them (The rise of Afghanistan cricket, 2018). The ICC, the official director of cricket games, accounts that what formed as a game played in camps turned professional when the Afghan team astonishingly made it to the semi-finals of the 2006 Asian Cricket Council Trophy and galvanized the public under the team’s spirit (The rise of Afghanistan cricket, 2018). Eventually, they were awarded Test status in 2017, the highest rank a nation could get for cricket

(The rise of Afghanistan cricket, 2018). During a discussion with the Afghan President, Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton commented on the success of the Afghan cricket team. In her comment, she found the team meeting "tough international challenges with skill, dedication, and teamwork," suggesting that cricket is a pursuit that can advance diplomatic relations (*U.S.-Afghanistan strategic partnership discussions, 2010*). Furthermore, the Secretary of State and the Afghan President both comment on the impressive progress Afghanistan has made as a country (*U.S.-Afghanistan strategic partnership discussions, 2010*). Afghanistan's transition from war to development is a theme expressed in the cricket team. This echoes the position of Sara Fane, creator of Afghan Connection, a charity that uses sports to improve lives in Afghanistan. She believes that cricket's unity of the region has led to the "put[ing] down [of] guns and pick[ing] up [of] bats" (The rise of afghan cricket, n.d.). In particular, Sara Fane notes that the national team brings unity throughout the vast number of ethnicities in Afghanistan (The rise of afghan cricket, n.d.). If Afghanistan, a country that harbors a great deal of ethnicities, can unite under cricket, why can't cricket unite other nations with similar heterogeneities of backgrounds?

Cricket in the Olympics

Since cricket corruption and heightened nationalism can lead to further tensions, one solution is spreading the game, which can lead to diluting the power of the Big Three and connecting it to the rest of the world, preventing nationalistic disputes by the viewership of the world stage. The Olympics tried to introduce cricket before. Ayaz Memon (2012), one of the most prominent cricket journalists in the world, recalls the Commonwealth Games in the late 1990s, which included cricket sponsored by the Big Three. At the time, cricket was played in a day length game and was only played by a few nations, which discouraged its introduction by the International Olympic Committee (Memon, 2012). However, since then, cricket has developed

the Twenty20 match, which is played in about 3 hours, on the timescale of other Olympic sports. Moreover, Cricket used to be popular to now major Olympic players such as the United States and Canada with “the first official international cricket match in the world” taking place between the United States and Canada (Kaufman & Patterson, 2005). Currently, however, cricket is still restricted to “ten core constituencies,” which are the remains of the commonwealth nations with the exception of Canada (Kaufman & Patterson, 2005). By spreading cricket to the rest of the world, cricket can become more universal and connect more nations together.

Conclusion

Although this report focuses on South Asia, the arguments for sports-diplomacy can translate to the impact sports-diplomacy has on the whole world. Whether sports-diplomacy is viable depends on the question: can sports overcome their tribal half nature in order to promote unity? Given the circumstances of South Asia it is possible for cricket. The need of a replacement to traditional democracy and the turbulent relations between India and Pakistan bring exigence. Moreover, its power to unite Afghanistan and mediation of conflict between India and Pakistan show that cricket-diplomacy is more a uniting force than a divisive one, and sharing cricket with the Olympics shows how it can be enabled to unite more nations. Cricket-diplomacy is still fairly new, and to use it to ally divisions, it is necessary to understand how it promotes unity among South Asian countries.

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