



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Academy of Sport

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SPORT AND BRITAIN'S UK SOFT POWER COUNCIL

Introduction

1. The paper (i) forms a response to The UK Soft Power Group invitation to contribute to the Strategic Framework set around the UK Government's priorities for soft power and (ii) supports the strategic case for sport as a means to enabling the UK Government's soft power priorities.

Purpose

2. The paper sets out the compelling case for the use of sport as a UK Soft Power Council Asset². It explains how sport can enable the Foreign Secretary's five pillars of government before presenting three key strategic actions.

Background

3. The UK Government will shortly announce the formation of its UK Soft Power Council. It will adopt a strategic soft power policy framework grounded in progressive realism. An approach that recognises a hard-headed realism about what Britain is now and not what it was. An approach that offers a new geopolitical partnership.
4. Sport has long served as a conduit for soft power, allowing nations to project cultural values and foster international goodwill without the coercive mechanisms associated with hard power. Sport's role in soft power is more pertinent than ever, given the current geopolitical landscape. The term "soft power" itself, though debated in its efficacy, remains a crucial rhetorical tool for encapsulating non-military influence efforts.
5. The UK can both contribute to agreed international priorities but also learn from how other nations have utilized sport in the pursuit of foreign policy objectives,

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² The paper builds upon previous contributions from the (i) UK Soft Power Group and (ii) the Academy of Sport. The paper advances further 2023 review of sport as a soft power asset commissioned by the Academy of Sport.

6. For example, **France's Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs** (MEAE), has used French sports expertise to strengthen sports institutions, including the deployment to Africa of international technical experts (ITE) in sport.^{3 4 5}
7. France's use of sport as a tool to enhance international engagement and co-operation comes in many forms: the hosting of major sporting events, support for French candidacies, indirect and direct French sports aid, support for the international development of French sport companies, the hosting of conferences, the forging of mutual bilateral relationships through sport, the preservation and promotion of the French language, the use of sports ambassadors to formally and informally convey messaging **and** France's vision and expertise for accessible, inclusive and sustainable sport to foreign authorities, the world of sport and the general public.
8. The UK Sporting ecosystem is complex. To maximise influence, persuasion and the winning of friends, the UK already has many tools at its disposal, but it could make more of the sporting assets and options.
9. The rationale for the use of sport, might recognise a number of policy drivers: attraction, national brand, promoting national culture, promoting co-operation and international engagement, regional influence, diaspora engagement, geopolitical influence, domestic engagement, building networks, strengthening outreach and supporting the domestic economy.
10. If sport is anything it is a pillar of connectivity. UK sport has untapped, un-coordinated scale and reach – city to city, region to region and country to country. Modalities of delivery through sport differ and can be used to deliver specific outcomes. There is also a diaspora that connects to the United Kingdom through sport but also a sports diaspora that has significant international presence.
11. The digital dimension of UK sport significantly amplifies its soft power reach and impact. From the Premier League's sophisticated global streaming platforms to cutting-edge esports initiatives, Britain's sporting institutions are pioneering digital innovation. This technological leadership enables unprecedented engagement with global audiences, particularly younger demographics, while showcasing British expertise in sports technology and data analytics. The digital transformation of sport provides new channels for cultural diplomacy and creates opportunities for British technology exports, further strengthening the UK's position as a leader in both sporting excellence and digital innovation.

³ French experts have been placed in regional institutions or sports Ministries in Senegal (two experts), Gabon, Rwanda, Tanzania and Cameroon.

⁴ Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs (2024). Sports diplomacy: Olympic and Paralympic Games the run up to Paris 2024. 3 May 2024- <https://franceintheus.org/spip.php?article11495>

⁵MEAE actively worked to support France's economic attractiveness and outreach abroad. Between 2021 and 2023 decentralized co-operation through sport enabled the financing of 35 cooperation projects between French and foreign local government bodies, with the support of French embassies and consulates being valued at about £2.7 million.

12. Ernst and Young's impact evaluation of the soft power, trade and influence from the City of London's hosting of major sporting events (MSE's) points out that MSE's have the potential to deliver £4 billion in soft power, trade and investment impacts over the next decade.^{6 7}
13. Yonder's 2023 British Icon Index III positions the Premier League as Britain's top soft power asset engage across populations beyond those interested in football, and an unrivalled appeal among young people.
14. British Universities were also in the top 3 assets reminding us of, the almost daily role of sport in our universities both within and beyond the UK⁸.
15. Countries are using foreign policy tools, such as trade agreements, investment treaties, and diplomatic relations, to promote their sports-related exports and attract foreign investment to their sports industries. Such investments can have implications for foreign policy and diplomatic ties between countries.⁹
16. Amid current geopolitical challenges, the strategic use of sport can foster international cooperation, enhance national prestige, and contribute to global stability. By adopting a nuanced and integrated approach, policymakers can harness the full potential of sport to advance foreign policy objectives in an increasingly complex world.

Sport's Contribution to the Foreign Secretary's Five Pillars

17. ***A Britain reconnected to defend the UK's security***: Sport plays a vital role in protecting the UK's security by strengthening international relationships and building trust between nations. Through sporting diplomacy and major events, the UK develops valuable networks that enhance intelligence sharing and security cooperation. Team GB's success on the global stage, combined with the Premier League's worldwide reach, gives the UK significant soft power that can be leveraged to advance security partnerships and strategic interests.
18. ***A Britain reconnected to champion the UK's prosperity***: Through sport, Britain amplifies its economic influence and creates new commercial opportunities worldwide. The UK's sporting ecosystem, from Premier League football to Formula 1, to the Jockey Club, to golf generates substantial export earnings and attracts significant inward investment. Major sporting events and partnerships open doors for British businesses, while sports technology and

⁶ Ernst & Young (2021). The impact of major sport events: Study of soft power, trade and investment impacts. <https://www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/assets/about-us/working-with-the-community/the-impact-of-major-sports-events-2021.pdf>

⁷ The success of the events being described in terms of enabling: wide reach, overseas visitor attractions, local community engagement, improved perceptions of the UK, high profile locations and the opportunity to show case world class sport.

⁸ Yonder (2023) <https://yonderconsulting.com/the-premier-league-tops-the-british-icon-index/> (accessed 1 December 2024).

⁹ There can be spillover effects generated by the leveraging of sport in foreign policy. These can be **both** positive and negative. Governments, policymakers, and economists need to have the right data, analytical frameworks, and policy tools in order to promote efficient and socially desirable outcomes.

innovation drive growth in key sectors, positioning the UK as a global leader in the sporting economy.

19. ***A Britain reconnected for climate action:*** Sport has a unique ability to demonstrate leadership in environmental stewardship and promote climate action through its global reach. The UK's sporting sector is pioneering sustainable practices, from net-zero stadiums to eco-friendly events, setting new industry standards worldwide. By embedding environmental responsibility across all levels of sport, from grassroots to elite competition, Britain reinforces its commitment to addressing the climate crisis while inspiring international partners to follow suit.
20. ***A Britain reconnected for international development:*** Sport serves as a powerful catalyst for international development, fostering social inclusion and economic growth in developing nations. Through targeted sports programmes, coaching initiatives and facility development, Britain helps build community resilience and creates pathways for youth development. The UK's sporting expertise and resources, when shared through international partnerships, support capacity building and sustainable development objectives whilst strengthening diplomatic ties with emerging nations.
21. FCDO have maintained a sustained effort, particularly through the Commonwealth's unique sporting framework which connects 2.5 billion people through shared athletic traditions. The Commonwealth Games, grassroots development programmes, and sport-based initiatives across member nations demonstrate the distinctive power of these historical connections. Through the Commonwealth Secretariat, sport enables advancement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) while strengthening diplomatic, cultural and commercial ties across this vital network. This could be further strengthened by aligning sport diplomacy efforts with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Such alignment will make the UK's commitment to sport in development explicit, and enhance the legitimacy and appeal of initiatives, particularly in areas such as health, education, poverty and environmental sustainability."
22. ***A Britain reconnected for diplomacy, to re-establish the UK as a trusted, reliable and influential partner:*** Sport serves as a cornerstone of Britain's diplomatic influence, offering unique opportunities to build trust and forge connections where traditional diplomacy may falter. Through sporting events, cultural exchanges, and shared athletic endeavours, the UK cultivates meaningful relationships with nations across the globe. Britain's sporting heritage and values-based approach to competition reinforces its reputation as a trusted international partner, while providing neutral ground for diplomatic engagement and strategic relationship building.
23. Sport as a platform for international relations, political goodwill and global cooperation across public, private and third sector organisations, within and between cities, regions, communities and countries, remains an underutilized tool for enabling and sustaining diplomatic wealth.

Recommendations

24. This paper recommends **three key strategic actions** to provide the necessary structure, resources and focus to fully harness sport's potential to advance Britain's international interests across the Foreign Secretary's five foreign policy pillars and maximise sport's contribution to the UK's foreign policy and soft power objectives:

- 1) The UK Government should establish a dedicated **Sports Diplomacy Unit within the FCDO**, working in partnership with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the Devolved Administrations, to coordinate the strategic deployment of sporting assets in support of foreign policy goals. This unit would align sporting initiatives with diplomatic priorities and ensure a coherent approach across government.
- 2) The UK should develop a comprehensive **Sports Partnership Programme** targeting priority regions and nations, leveraging Britain's sporting expertise, infrastructure and commercial strengths to build strategic relationships. This programme would combine elite sport, grassroots development, and commercial opportunities to create lasting partnerships that advance multiple foreign policy objectives simultaneously.
- 3) The Government should create a **Sport Innovation and Sustainability Fund** to position the UK as a global leader in developing environmentally sustainable sporting practices and technologies. This initiative would support British sport organisations in pioneering green solutions while creating export opportunities and enhancing Britain's soft power through environmental leadership.

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