

THE JOURNAL OF
POLITICAL STUDIES

Editorial Committee of The Journal of Political Studies

Source: *The Journal of Political Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (Nov., 2014), pp. 1-61

Published by: Joomag on behalf of Editorial Committee of The Journal of Political Studies

Stable URL: <http://www.journalofpoliticalstudies.com>

The Journal of Political Studies is a private company located in Edinburgh, Scotland.

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BASKETBALL DIPLOMACY REBOUD: RODMAN'S BASKETBALL DIPLOMACY IN NORTH KOREA AND A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO FUTURE SUCCESS

“Sport has the power to change the world. It has the power to inspire. It has the power to unite people in a way that little else does. Sport can awaken hope where there was previously only despair.”

-Nelson Mandela¹

“Sport is a language every one of us can speak.”

– Ban Ki-moon²

***47 Introduction**

In a previous presentation I examined Celebrity/ Sports Diplomacy (CD/ SD) in detail as applied to Dennis Rodman's Basketball Diplomacy (BD) in North Korea.³ It was primarily descriptive in nature and not strongly argumentative. My conclusion essentially was that while I do support CD/SD, I also said that more must be done than simply an exhibition game.

Nevertheless I stated that it was in this general trial and error of introducing new and provocative forms of diplomacy which may be the first few steps to direct diplomatic relations between the US and North Korea. Thus where my presentation left off is where this paper picks up the dribbling ball of US diplomacy with North Korea.

***48** This paper re-examines the event by giving three new arguments for the future success of BD in North Korea. To begin with, I do acknowledge the basic success of an exhibition basketball game featuring North Korean and American players. However with regard to the very real diplomatic potential, A) I argue that BD in North Korea failed to truly achieve any higher level diplomatic success due to several fundamentally flawed reasons in the production and execution of the match.

¹ Livingston, Kristen. (2011) The Power of Sport: Should sport and diplomacy mix? Nelson Mandela Quote, Exchange The Journal of Public Diplomacy.

² Nisha7x (2012) Sports as Cultural Diplomacy, Political and Culture Diplomacy 2 Blog, London Metropolitan University, Ban Ki-Moon Quote.

³ In Ambassador Wilfried Bolewski's Course in Foreign Policy Formation and Diplomacy at the American Graduate School in Paris (Class Session 11: Celebrity diplomacy and its contribution to humanitarian public policy), I made a presentation entitled *Dennis Rodman's Basketball Diplomacy in North Korea* on April 30th, 2014.

Secondly, B) this paper argues how a few necessary changes could have made BD in 2013 with the US and North Korea mirror the success of the historical Ping Pong diplomacy in the early 1970's between the US and China (Murray, 2011). Finally, C) my last section will outline my guidelines and strong recommendations to ensure that future BD in North Korea will be met with success.

Argument A) A look at why Rodman's Basketball Diplomacy failed to achieve real diplomatic success

When VICE media brought Dennis Rodman and members of the Harlem Globetrotters to Pyongyang, North Korea (aka the capital of one of the world's most reclusive state) to play an exhibition basketball game with North Korean and American players, they had an unprecedented challenge in itself. In fact, it was this unique story of basketball diplomacy in "the hermit kingdom" which put VICE media on the mainstream map for unconventional international news coverage.

As VICE had stated from the beginning; the whole goal of their mission was to simply "*engage with North Koreans through the cultural vehicle of basketball*" (VICE, 2013). They were successful in their primary goal and even became the first group of Americans to meet the new leader of North *49 Korea, Kim Jong-Un (VICE, 2013). So on this basic level as stated before, I do acknowledge their success with regard to their original sports diplomacy goal. However with regard to achieving real higher level success in single handedly changing diplomatic relations between North Korea and the US or even releasing Kenneth Bae, they were not successful (Cuomo, 2014).

Specifically, I argue that they were not successful for certain fundamental reasons in the production and execution of their historical exhibition match. There were several fundamental differences with BD and Ping Pong Diplomacy. Also in general, there were many differences from previous successful endeavors of CD/SD; for example Bono's successful campaigns in Africa (Cooper, 2010; Murray, 2011).

Thus to begin with, one of the reasons BD failed to achieve any real diplomacy between the US and North Korea is because the exhibition game was not supported, backed and/ or included entourage from both governments of the participating countries. North Korea's

government was clearly in favor of the exhibition match as their Supreme Leader, Kim John-un was literally watching the game right next to Dennis Rodman in the Pyongyang arena (VICE, 2013).

However, the US State Department did not authorize or support this exhibition basketball match in any way. There was no entourage representing the interests of the US government in any form or way. Thus there was no foundation for formal relations to even be built. Without at least the support of the US government, a second step (the first being the game) of informal talks during the halftime for example isn't even possible. Hence it was a fundamental flaw in the production and execution of BD in North Korea. In the end it leads the game nowhere, meaning without the possibility of even new diplomatic talks, such as ones similar to the Six Party Talks to even be offered again (Elegant, 2006; Livingston, 2011; Todd, 2013). *50

This was a fundamental difference with Ping Pong Diplomacy which occurred in the early 1970's between the US and Maoist China. Scholars have compared modern day North Korea to the China of the early 1970s. Like North Korea today, China was once economically closed off from much of the world. It wouldn't be until the late 1970s when Deng Xiaoping would famously introduce capitalistic economic reforms which paved the way for China's current economic growth (Levs, 2013; Murray, 2011; VICE, 2013).

Thus it was a truly amazing feat when the US State Department supported the exhibition match back then in the early 1970's. The US clearly hoped for a formal engagement of direct diplomacy with Beijing. Real diplomacy is exactly what occurred 3 months after Ping Pong Diplomacy, when Nixon famously visited Mao in Beijing to start direct diplomatic relations with China. Thanks to Ping Pong Diplomacy, the US and China have had direct diplomatic relations to this day (Levs, 2013; Murray, 2011).

The next reason I argue why BD failed to achieve any higher level success is because of their lack of CD/SD sustainability. Rodman, Bae's family and groups for engaging North Korea politically all failed in linking themselves together to a new or existing NGO which could withstand the test of time, and/or the ups and downs of a celebrity/sports diplomat. BD in North Korea then literally hung on the shoulders of very few people who were just not prepared to handle the situation for greater success. For example, Bono puts on massive concerts and starts campaigns for Africa supported by corporations and NGOs/ IGOs. He ensures that even if his

name just starts the movement, the trickles in the water will continue due to the institutions in place to help him fight for a cause (Bolewski, 2014; Cooper, 2010; Wheeler, 2011).

Likewise with George Clooney and Angelina Jolie's campaigns in the Sudan, they had the help of NGOs essentially holding them up so they *51 could speak about the cause. The NGO was there before them and can withstand their level of current celebrity status. That is the necessary level of sustainability which Rodman's basketball diplomacy in North Korea lacked. Thus as negative as it sounds, this lack of sustainability for BD in North Korea I argue is the final nail in the coffin for CD/SD in North Korea anytime soon (Bolewski, 2014; Via, 2010). However we can learn from these mistakes and if such a rebound of BD occurs in North Korea, my next section goes over what should have been done differently.

Argument B) What could have been done differently with Rodman' Basketball Diplomacy in North Korea?

This section of my paper takes the failures highlighted from my first argument and expands on what I believe should have been done/ what can be done if and when there is BD in North Korea again.

First of all, if there is another BD exhibition game in North Korea then the US State Department, Congress or even Obama himself at least need to support it. Better yet Obama or Kerry should visit Kim Jong-un in Pyongyang or even a more neutral area such as Beijing. They need to help organize and defend the symbolic show of engagement. If the US government was supporting the exhibition match, the media perhaps would have been less antagonizing to the whole event. Also the celebrity/ sports diplomats involved would most likely be more wisely picked, meaning somebody more educated and with a better public image (Stephanopoulos, 2013).

I firmly believe that if the US State Department sent representatives or even if John Kerry went to Pyongyang informally first (such as to watch a basketball game), then the trip would lead to real diplomatic talks. Such as Kerry returning with a formal and official agenda. Hence, I stress that US government backing is key to the success of any BD in North Korea and *52 cannot be overlooked in the future.

Secondly, if this US State Department backing became a reality then I firmly believe that NGOs, corporations, intergovernmental institutions and other Celebrity/ Sport diplomats (perhaps with better qualifications than Rodman, this topic will be discussed in Argument 3) would be coming out of the woodwork to start a new sustainable institution/ organization. Perhaps even government money/contracts would be given for this. For better or worse in the international world the US does provide legitimacy if it officially backs a cause. Thus the same goes with BD in North Korea. The US can and needs to back this.

If the US backed some NGO/ IGO and a celebrity/ sports diplomat to take the front page news, then the world would have seen it as an act of the US government. The media perhaps wouldn't have seen it as some American bad boy basketball player making friends with a dictator (Cuomo, 2014; Murray, 2011). If the US did it in China in the 1970's, then why can't they do it now?

Argument C) My own guide to future successful sports/ celebrity/ basketball diplomacy missions in general; both A) Fundamental Necessities and B) Strong Recommendations:

I want to say that CD/SD (and especially BD with regard to North Korea) are all very provocative and untraditional forms of diplomacy. Every aspect of its use can be complex and even controversial. I also know its goals can vary largely from the region, celebrity, cause or country. I simply wanted to make a practical guide from the lens of my background research on Rodman's Basketball Diplomacy in North Korea, the materials given in class and as instructed by Ambassador Bolewski. Any further in-depth research into a specific example not mentioned in my presentation or paper, or another hypothetical application of SD/CD/BD would be outside *53 the scope of this short paper. However such research speculation would indeed be an interesting topic to study much more in-depth.

A) Fundamental Necessities

I argue that there are 7 key fundamental necessities for successful BD/CD/SD. The first is that in both countries; each leader or government officials, or a good proportion of the citizens must be highly interested, passionate and emotional about the sport being played or the celebrity

diplomat involved. For example baseball or basketball are widely played and enjoyed sports in the US, but if rugby or cricket was offered as a form of SD, then most Americans just wouldn't have the same understanding of the sport as in other countries.

The second necessity is that the event cannot be turned into a proxy to express nationalistic tensions between two countries. For example the soccer wars between El Salvador and Honduras teach us what not to do with SD (Murray, 2011). It must be used to bridge the gap between two countries without good diplomatic ties. The third necessity is that SD cannot be used by a country simply as a proxy to deliver propaganda to their domestic audience, and participating international audiences as well. Hitler's Nazi Olympic Games in 1936 is an excellent example of SD being used for this wrong reason (Livingston, 2011).

My fourth main necessity guideline is that the CD/SD must be back backed by both governments in the participating countries. As mentioned earlier, this was a crucial difference between the success of Ping Pong Diplomacy and the failure of BD (Todd, 2013). My fifth main necessity guideline is that the CD/SD must have solid sustainability before, during and after the event to provide transparency and ensure the goals of the diplomacy will be met over time (Bolewski, 2014). As stated earlier; Bono, Clooney and Jolie all had NGO's and other strong institutions already in *54 place backing them up. Rodman's BD is was almost completely dependent him and perhaps a few other people. This is a lot of pressure and responsibility on just a few people. This explains why Rodman cracked under the American media pressure with regard to Bae (Cuomo, 2014; Stephanopoulos, 2013).

My sixth fundamental guideline is that there must be international media coverage by at least one global media outlet. They must be there to document, film and present the story to the whole world. Only VICE was there and when they got back to the US: Al Jazeera, CNN, BBC, etc., all ran stories on their unique experience with basketball diplomacy. VICE had been a growing news media outlet before but this event pushed them onto the map as a major news media competitor (Al Jazeera, 2013; VICE, 2013). Finally the seventh and arguably one of the most important fundamental guidelines is that at the SD event itself, informal talks must be held which would eventually lead to formal diplomatic talks. This is the real point of SD. Once the confidence is built, it must be harnessed and used immediately to lay the foundation for

diplomacy. I argue with these seven explicit fundamental guidelines CD/SD/ BD will be successful in the future.

B) My Strong Recommendations:

The following six recommendations are to ensure the complete success of CD/SD/BD in the future. They would follow in addition to my 7 fundamental guidelines. The first is that these forms of diplomacy would be more successful if all other means of traditional diplomacy have been exhausted first. It would argue for the need for unconventional forms of diplomacy, hence CD/SD/BD (Kellner, 2010). The second recommendation is that you choose mentally and emotionally stable sports/ celebrity diplomats. It's no secret that Rodman checked into an alcohol rehab center *55 after the failure of the Bae incident (Cuomo, 2014). The third recommendation is that the sports/ celebrity diplomat should have the cleanest image as possible to the public world. For example, an ideal person would perhaps be somebody with a background in charity, or other popular activism under their belt. This way if the issue that the SD/CD/ BD deals with is controversial then the sports/ celebrity diplomat can best harmonize it with their positive public image. My fourth recommendation is that the sports/ celebrity diplomat should already have a lot of knowledge, passion and life experience about the issue they will deal with. For example, maybe there is a Korean NBA player or one who spent time in South Korea and already knows some Korean language/ culture. Essentially ideal sports/ celebrity diplomats should have their own initiative to take on the issue themselves and not be forced into it by external forces. To show good faith from China, Jeremy Lin would have been a good addition as a referee in BD. In the past, China has been the country which mediates between North Korea and the US (for example Six Party Talks). If China has already attempted to harmonize their interests in previous diplomatic talks, why not in BD?

My fifth recommendation is obvious, but still needs to be said. The sports/ celebrity diplomat must be willing to fit the events into their professional schedule; even if it means not being able to star in a movie, TV show or play a season. They have to make their own personal sacrifices for the higher calling of diplomacy. Likewise with these sacrifices, they have to be willing to take any public criticism which may come their way with such an unconventional form of diplomacy. This must be taken into consideration especially if the issue is controversial. My

sixth recommendation is that the event needs to at least start a precedence of annual events between the two countries. For example, a yearly exhibition match of BD would allow more opportunities for the US State Department to send representatives without the scrutinizing heat of *56 heavy media attention (assuming after a while the news corporations and the general public would lose interest in stories of repeated BD and thus allowing for US State representatives to “quietly” attend such events.)

Conclusion

This paper sought to pick up the ball on BD in North Korea where my descriptive presentation had left off. I explained why basketball diplomacy specifically did not achieve any high level goals. I argued what should have been done/ what could be done the next time if BD is redone in North Korea. Finally I ended the paper with my seven fundamental guidelines for BD, and then finished with my own six strong recommendations to future BD missions. If Ping Pong Diplomacy was successful in the past, then I firmly believe BD can be successful in the future. Rodman’s BD in North Korea was just the first shot. I want to keep the diplomatic ball alive on this and rebound. If BD was done again considering my arguments, guidelines and recommendations then I firmly believe that the rebound of basketball diplomacy would be a slam dunk the next time around.

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