

## Interview – Simon Chadwick

Written by E-International Relations

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Simon Chadwick is Professor of Sport and Geopolitical Economy at Skema Business School in Paris, with more than 25 years' experience in the global sport industry. He co-founded and co-directs the China Soccer Observatory (University of Nottingham, UK) and is Founding Editor of GeoSport, a digital sports platform created with the French Institute for International and Strategic Affairs. Chadwick previously founded and directed the University of London's Birkbeck Sports Business Centre, and Coventry University's Centre for the International Business of Sport. His journal articles have been published in the European Sport Management Quarterly, the Journal of Sport Management and the European Business Review. His latest book – The Geopolitical Economy of Sport: Power, Politics, Money and the State – will be published shortly by Routledge.

### **Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?**

The most exciting research and debates now concern the global pivot from the Global North to the Global South, which is connected to the emergence of a multipolar world. We're now beginning to see a move away from the US and Global North's established hegemony of international sport with the emergence of China, the Gulf region, India and certain parts of Africa. This of course, has been brought about by globalisation. However, particularly for sport, the phenomenon of digitalisation has led to a much more rapid change with social media. We're heading towards new interesting areas of research such as Web 3.0 and the Metaverse and their potential impact on international sport. Climate change and the issues it creates are also significant for the world of sport in terms of depleting resources, with increasing competition for those resources leading to the emergence of new technologies and new ways of doing things, with nations diversifying their economies to include sport. This is impacting existing global systems of power and influence, and in broader terms, what I refer to as the study of the geopolitical economy of sport. From a sport perspective, this is a really significant time. We now live in a much more diverse, dynamic, but much less predictable world, which some would perhaps suggest is threatening. Nevertheless, it's interesting and exciting! I think when looking back on history in the future, we will regard this period as a pivotal moment in human history. What's significant is that we're all part of this moment.

### **How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?**

I was just a very ordinary schoolboy who loved to watch and play sport! However, whilst studying Economics at university during the 1980s, there were profound changes taking place in the world, specifically the dismantling of Communism and the rise of Western Liberalism, particularly Reaganomics. Very soon after that, one of the outcomes of this in Britain was the formation of the English Football Premier League, whose origins can be traced back to what I believe is Thatcherite economics. Around this time, I decided to study for a PhD, researching football shirt sponsorship. Not only did this strengthen my academic career, but I also began to work more with organisations in the sports industry and for that matter, Governments. I subsequently advised on sponsorships, policy and strategy amongst Governments around the world and began travelling extensively to Asia. What appeared to me from my travels is that China, Qatar and Saudi Arabia shared a lot that was often significantly different to what I'd experienced previously in Europe and North America.

So, I began to reconceive the world of sport as not just being a European or North American phenomenon, but in

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much more global terms, especially within the context of this global pivot. So, for the last 15 years, there has been a significant focus not just on Asia, but the relationship between Europe and Asia and more generally between the Global North and the Global South. For a considerable part of those 15 years, I've been trying to make sense of the world because certainly in looking at writing and research on sport, nobody was really explaining what I was seeing or what I was experiencing in an accurate way. So, I started to explore different perspectives on the world, networking with political scientists, diplomacy experts and people with expertise in sociocultural aspects of the Gulf region. Thus, I adopted this much more expansive conceptualisation of sport. This ultimately led me to the geopolitical economy of sport, which I now write about, and what I'm trying to argue is an appropriate framework within which to look at sport.

I'm influenced by a lot of people who challenge the world by going in a different direction to the way in which most people go. So, it is difficult and unfair of me to single out any person. However, James Dorsey who writes about the turbulent world of the Middle East and football was instrumental in my thinking and shaping the way that I see the world. Jonathan Sullivan at the University of Nottingham, who cross-validated my interest in Chinese football, is somebody who has also spurred me on.

**In a recent article, you stress the need to establish a new field of research known as the geopolitical economy of sport. Why is this necessary?**

When analysing the history of modern sport, I essentially see three eras. The first is the European era which began in the 19th century, and if we think about football in particular, a lot of European football clubs were established at the end of the 19th century or at the start of the 20th century. These clubs were formed for sociocultural reasons above anything else, being very much about community, identity and social cohesion. Out of these sociocultural institutions, came the system of global governance that we still have now in world sport, such as UEFA, FIFA and the World Cup. FIFA is still a Swiss based organisation whose presidents have historically been European and this hegemonic effect of European sociocultural motives for engaging with elite professional sport remains today.

But in the second half of the 20th century, we began to see global sport changing from being participatory and sociocultural, to being much more economic and commercial in orientation. This was a shift from the European model to one in which American liberal free market economics become more pervasive. We now see TV rights deals, sponsorship deals, merchandising, and the growth of the ownership of multiple clubs across different parts of the world's franchises. Back in 1978, when football shirt sponsorships were first introduced, there was uproar around the commercialization of the game. Yet now, this is just something we take for granted and tend not to question. Essentially this emerged out of what I would characterise as being the North American era; the second era of modern sport.

However, we're now entering this third era of global sport, characterised by the Global South, particularly Asian nations and Afro-Eurasian nations, which prompted my notion of study of the geopolitical economy of sport. We can think already about Qatar hosting the World Cup, Saudi Arabia's investment in sport and China's global ambitions as ways in which governments have deployed sport for political purposes. So, we're pivoting away from the sociocultural dimension and free market liberal economic model of sport, towards a much more geopolitical model in which states, very often Global South states, are beginning or attempting to exert their influence on sport. What I felt was necessary, was to try and capture this process of change whilst at the same time trying to highlight the significance of countries, governments and networks. I'm not saying that the days of sociocultural oriented or free market liberal sport have gone. But I think what we are seeing is a much more complex country-driven conceptualisation of sport, which I feel that existing scholarly views of sports, don't adequately explain. Hence, this is why I created this notion of the geopolitical economy of sport.

**In *The Business of the World Cup*, you emphasise how nation states' bids for hosting rights are often linked to matters of soft power, diplomacy and international relations. How does the recent 2022 World Cup in Qatar demonstrate this?**

Very aptly. Qatar's desire to host the World Cup was an issue in security. Qatar lives in a dangerous neighbourhood

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and the World Cup was an exercise in trying to address some of the fundamental security challenges that Qatar faces, which is one of the aspects of geopolitical economy. There are some geographic challenges that Qatar faces, but in addition to that, there are certain things I think that Qatar was seeking to do politically and economically by hosting the tournament. In 2009, the year before Qatar won the right to host the World Cup, most people across the world had probably never even heard of Qatar. So, in terms of visibility, the World Cup served a very important purpose for soft power and nation branding. Keep in mind that up until 1971, Qatar was a British protectorate, so Qatar didn't have full control over its own policy and strategy, nor did it have full control over its oil and gas resources. What we've seen since then, is Qatar engaging in a process of nation building and national development and the World Cup has been a means through which to prompt that national development and nation building. For instance, until the World Cup, Qatar didn't have a metro system. Now it has a metro system and a network of five lane highways. So, we're talking about a country that has essentially used a sporting event for the purposes of national infrastructural and economic development.

We can extend that to sociocultural development too. We see a lot of lifestyle and experience provision in Qatar that is linked to football and sport more generally. Clearly that is targeted at its domestic audience. It's also targeted towards an international audience to draw in tourists, with tourism becoming a sustainable industry beyond oil and gas that will help Qatar to maintain its economic standing internationally. It wasn't just simply about sport washing here. This is not a term that I feel especially comfortable with, but I think a lot of commentators in the Global North reduced the Qatar World Cup to sport washing. It was much more complex and nuanced than that.

**You have mentioned how through sport, particularly with its potential 2030 World Cup bid, Saudi Arabia is attempting to position itself as an Afro-Eurasian hub beyond oil and gas. Are we seeing the advent of a potential sporting arms race between Doha and Riyadh?**

This is what Saudi Arabia itself says that it is trying to do. I think Saudi Arabia sees itself as the country that that will be at the centre of a new world, and we can return to geopolitical economy here. Geographically, Saudi Arabia occupies a very important and strategic location in the world. It's essentially at the end of the Eastern Mediterranean, adjacent to the Red Sea and Persian Gulf. It provides a connection between Europe and Africa, but also across Asia as well. What really emphasises how significant Saudi Arabia has become, particularly the way in which it sees itself and the plans that it has, is that during the Qatar World Cup, President Xi Jinping visited the Gulf region. But Xi didn't go to Qatar. He went to Saudi Arabia. The fact that there is now this strengthening relationship between Saudi Arabia and China is really symbolic. Saudi Arabia's vision, the power that it has regionally and the resources that are at its disposal, means that it can begin to extend its range and influence, beginning to project itself not just in the Gulf region or across the Middle East more generally, but down into Africa and across into Asia and Europe too. I think Saudi Arabia's potential selection of Greece as a partner for the proposed 2030 World Cup bid, is also significant. If Saudi Arabia can exert some influence over the Eastern Mediterranean, then you are talking about influencing what goes through the Suez Canal, what travels through the Bosphorus into the Black Sea and what travels down out through the Mediterranean into the Atlantic. We've seen through Britain's colonial past that the Eastern Mediterranean is significant in terms of power, with Britain still having presence in Malta, and Cyprus, alongside its past influence in Palestine and Egypt.

I do think Saudi Arabia is interested in football. I think Saudi Arabians are interested in football. I think there is a reason for this country to want to host the World Cup in sporting terms, but one of the crucial features of the geopolitical economy is that sport is merely the means to an end, not an end in itself. Therefore, bidding for the right to stage the World Cup, is a Saudi policy instrument.

**You have mentioned how China's Zero-COVID policy has eroded its recent capacity to accumulate soft power through sport. How do you expect a post-COVID China to act in the geopolitical economy of sport?**

I think that China, in sport industry terms, is more challenged than it was. It had this ambition that by 2025, it would become the world's biggest domestic sport economy. Maybe that will still happen and maybe the Chinese Government will find a way of reporting the data to validate this intended or desired position, but I'm not entirely sure

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that I would believe those figures. Nevertheless, despite COVID, China still sees sport as being an important industrial development project and a means through which to engage in international relations and soft power diplomacy. There was an example just before Christmas, with Saudi Arabia's public investment fund investing in Chinese online gaming business and I think this form of collaborative activity will become more prominent and more frequent. What China realises now is that if it's going to go head-to-head in sport terms with Europe and North America, it's going to lose. So, it needs to collaborate with others, particularly those that share its vision of the world. This is why Saudi Arabia is important for China because the Saudis and the Chinese both have a vision of the world in which their influence on global sport is more significant than it has been historically. I do think we will see many, many more collaborative projects between not just China and Saudi Arabia, but also China and Abu Dhabi, China and Egypt, China and others in Africa. We already know that for the last 15 years; China has actively engaged in a policy of stadium diplomacy in Africa. So, I think that sport as an avenue of international relations and diplomacy will grow in prominence and China will seek to position itself as a collaborator and friend with countries across the Afro-Eurasian region, rather than a competitor. I think China's competitor is obviously the United States and what China will seek to do is to adopt a different approach in relations with Afro-Eurasia.

**You have highlighted how sport mirrors the emerging multipolar system, with its pivot from the Global North to the Global South. How has sport impacted the nation branding and image of the Global South in general?**

We can talk endlessly about the Gulf and what its investment has done and how that has changed things politically and economically, but I would also look to the example of the Indian Premier League (IPL) cricket. The commercial development of IPL cricket, in a country and sport in the Global South, has had profound effects. We tend to talk a lot about China's football ambitions or Saudi Arabia and Qatar's sporting ambitions, but in India and the IPL cricket, we have a sport that has had a profound effect on cricket globally. But I would also argue on other sports more generally because of the way in which the IPL has challenged the very foundations of sport as it has implemented a new format sport which is very much taking the lead.

Another example that's worth highlighting as well is South Africa, where socio-culturally and politically, sport has been used to change perceptions of the country both internally and externally. Malaysia, for instance, has used its associations with motor racing, particularly its global energy group 'Petronas', as a sponsor of the Mercedes F1 team. Mercedes F1 team has been world champions for 8-9 years in the past decade, so there is now a legitimacy to such countries from not only their businesses, but also their government institutions. That has been achieved through an involvement in sports.

This is very much the emergence and immature phase of the influence that the Global South is having on sport. But what we will see over the next 50 years is that this influence on global sport will increasingly strengthen as we are now beginning to see event sponsors from the Global South outnumbering sponsors from the Global North in some cases. 30-40 years ago, most of FIFA's sponsors were North American or European. Now what we've got with FIFA and the World Cup, is Chinese sponsors that are in the majority, where in Qatar 2022, four of the sponsors were Chinese and only two were from the United States. By the time we get to for instance 2050, states like China, India, South Africa, Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Russia and Pakistan and others, will be much more powerful and perhaps in some cases even dominant compared to the Global North.

**With sport reflecting multipolarity, is sport also inadvertently contributing to the acceptance of a more culturally relativistic international landscape?**

My view is that, essentially, sport is being appropriated and weaponised. Sometimes in soft ways. But I think also sometimes in much harder ways too for national and regional interests. I'm thinking particularly here of the way in which Putin and Russia used sport and Russia's network of power and influence in engaging with sport was significant. One could highlight Gazprom's sponsorship of sport as one example of this. UEFA did not do its due diligence on Gazprom and Russia when it signed its initial deal with the Russian state and the gas producer back in 2013. Already at that point, Russia's expansionist ambitions were becoming more apparent. Keep in mind that the UFC also renewed its deal with Gazprom in 2016, by which time Crimea had been annexed and there had been

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several incidents. The shooting down of the Malaysian Airlines plane being one example. But it's interesting that as concerns about Russia and Putin have grown, UEFA still signed another renewal with Gazprom in 2020 and in the summer of 2021, less than six months prior to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. So, I think the way in which Putin and Russia deployed sport for geopolitical purposes, for example through sponsorship, is illustrative of what we now see happening in the world, but I think what's significant about all of this is the challenges that it poses. In this multipolar world, for other countries and for other regional blocs, my view has always been that UEFA should have been more vigilant and should have engaged in more rigorous geopolitical risk assessment in signing deals with the likes of Gazprom.

It's almost as though there's a paradox of liberalism, where for liberal nations in the Global North, they need to be less liberal in order to be able to defend against the challenges now being posed by the likes of Russia and Saudi Arabia. Suffice to say, the nature of multipolarity is now becoming more omnipotent and it is calling for countries, governments but even sports organisations and sports businesses to make a call on how they respond to these developments and position themselves in dealing with them.

### **Which upcoming sporting events do you view as having a major impact on international relations and the geopolitical economy of sport?**

I think the Paris 2024 Olympics has the potential for some fractiousness. Obviously, France is part of the Western Alliance of NATO and the European Union. But I think that Paris 2024 is possibly a little too early to analyse, because we're still trying to understand and get to grips with the challenges posed by Russia and the re-emergence of China post-COVID. The significance of Saudi Arabia globally is an act that is still playing out and we don't know the final drama.

So, for me, the major one is the FIFA World Cup in 2026, which will take place in the United States, Canada and Mexico. In some ways, Mexico is a little bit of an outlier. But both the United States and Canada sit front and centre stage of this global geopolitics that is now being played out. Many people will know already about United States' relationship with China and Russia. But it's worth noting how sour and poor Canada and China's relations have become. You must also keep in mind that names like TikTok, Hisense, Vivo, Qatar Airways and others potentially, are going to land on the White House lawn in 2026. The response of the US government depends upon who will be President at the time. Perhaps there may even be a boycott territory for the 2026 FIFA Men's World Cup. That may depend upon FIFA itself, because it increasingly finds itself in an invidious position. We saw how at Qatar 2022 World Cup, the day before the matches kicked off, Gianni Infantino, made a one hour impassioned speech. To put it politely, I don't think the delivery and coherence of this message was as perfectly crafted as it could have been, but Infantino had a point. One of his points was that he had to manage a global governing body. In these days of fractious geopolitics, it is very challenging trying to reconcile the disparate needs and demands of different stakeholders. This requires deftness, that I'm not entirely sure Infantino has, but at least he recognises that there are big challenges ahead. So, long story short, I'll go with the next troublesome one, the FIFA Men's World Cup 2026.

### **What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?**

In our field, which I'm calling geopolitical economy of sport, International Relations and diplomacy are a subset, so I guess the lesson that I'd give is to always be open and always think. Always listen, debate and learn from different sources such as magazines, websites and YouTube, not just the news and books. Make sure you're nourishing yourself with lots of interesting things from lots of different places, and not just from the Global North and South, but every part of the world. I think that there have been some truly great political thinkers with real gravitas and it's important to pay attention to these people, even whilst you may not agree with them. For example, people like Barack Obama, Tony Blair, even Kissinger, whose longevity helps to frame some of the issues and challenges that we face. Short-term, knee-jerk reactions are social media oriented. Contemporary culture doesn't appreciate that.