

## Chinese Soft Power And Public Diplomacy: Football As A Tool To Promote China-Brazil Relations

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### Abstract

Since the proclamation of the People's Republic of China (PRC), 70 years ago, sports have been used as a political and diplomatic tool. In October 2014, China issued the policy “Opinions on Accelerating the Development of Sports Industry and Promoting Sports Consumption” (国务院关于加快发展体育产业促进体育消费的若干意见). Since then other public policy documents have been published to leverage the growth of the country's sports industry by promoting the development of strategic sectors to meet a bold goal: by 2025 the sport industry generates \$ 813 billion for the economy of the country. One of these public policies is the “China’s medium and long-term football development plan (2016-2050)”- (中国足球中长期发展规划 2016—2050年), thereafter ‘The Plan’. That plan is also relevant for China's diplomatic and trade relations, as explicitly demonstrate the perception of sports as an instrument of public diplomacy and soft power. 45 years ago, the PRC and Brazil established their diplomatic relations. Since 2009, China has become Brazil’s main trading partner. And more recently, since the release of ‘The Plan’, football has served as a form of exchange between the two countries. This paper, based on the literature review and the analysis of the mentioned public policy documents, aims to analyze the Plan trying to understand the innovative character of this public policy, from the perspective of innovation theory, especially in the contributions of Peter Drucker, who sees innovation as “an economic and social term”. As well seeks to identify how the Plan contribute to the development of the Chinese sports industry and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), while serving as a public diplomacy and soft power tool, and in that way how football can contribute to forge closer ties between Brazil and China.

**Keywords:** China, Brazil, Soft Power, Public Diplomacy, Football, Belt and Road Initiative

Texto recebido em 12/11/2019 e aprovado em 27/11/2019.

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## INTRODUCTION

Between October 24 and 26, 2019, Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro paid his first state visit to China. On October 25, Bolsonaro met his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing. According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, Xi thanked Bolsonaro for his warm congratulatory message on the 70th anniversary of the founding of the PRC and also pointed out, “China and Brazil are the most representative emerging market countries and largest developing countries of the east and west hemispheres” (MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF THE PEOPLE’S REPUBLIC OF CHINA, 2019). During the visit, the two countries also issued a joint statement between the People's Republic of China and the Federative Republic of Brazil. In this joint statement, the two Heads of State underlined the role of China-Brazil High-level Coordination and Cooperation Committee (COSBAN) to boost relations between the two countries. But for the analysis of this paper, we draw attention to points 6 and 8 of this 12-point document. The 6<sup>th</sup> in which both Presidents expressed their determination to cooperate with development and investment policies, such as China's Belt and Road Initiative. And especially point 8, which highlights “the role of cooperation in the cultural, educational and **sports fields** to increase mutual knowledge and understanding, in particular on **football-related issues...**” (our emphasis).

In recent years, regarding the sports field, football has taken on a special focus as a link to strengthen the exchange between the two countries. And it is not the result of chance. This is because the growth of the Chinese sports industry is one of the goals of the current government. In October 2014, the Chinese State Council issued a document to boost China's sports industry: “Opinions on Accelerating the Development of Sports Industry and Promoting Sports Consumption” (国务院关于加快开展体育产业促进体育消费的若干意见). This strategy is commonly deemed as the milestone marking the take-off of the Chinese sports industry (LIU, 2017). To meet that challenge, the Chinese government sees the development of football as the driving force behind this growth process. For this reason, “The Overall Reform Plan to Boost the Development of Football in China” (中国足球改革实施方案) was issued in 2015,

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a kind of preamble to the main document, from April 2016: “China’s medium and long-term football development plan (2016-2050)”- (中国足球中长期发展规划 2016—2050 年), thereafter “the Plan”.

In addition to serving as a driving force for the development of China's sports industry, the Plan highlights, as we will show later, the recognition of the relevance of football to Chinese diplomatic and trade relations. Elite sports have long been used as a political tool, at the service of geopolitical and ideological strategies and, as Gupta puts it, also as a tool for exposing your country to the world (GUPTA, 2009, p. 182). After all, sport is a good way to promote the country's image internationally, seeking acceptance and legitimation (ALLISON; MONNINGTON, 2002). So it is no novelty to affirm that the economic, political and social roles of sports are focus of a great deal of attention in the politics and policymaking realm (KORNEEVA; OGURTSOV, 2016). Since the proclamation of the People's Republic of China the political use of sport has been recurrent. The 1950s were also marked by the first steps taken towards the setting up of an elite sports system in China (HONG, 2008). As we will see later, the politicisation of sport has continued over the decades and remains a reality to this day. Elite sport, thus, can serve as a resource for public diplomacy (BRANNAGAN; GIULIANOTTI, 2018; DUBINSKY, 2019), namely the so-called sports diplomacy (ABDI et al., 2018; JARVIE; MURRAY; MACDONALD, 2017; NYGÅRD; GATES, 2013), that can help a country achieve its desired international relations by exercising the power of attraction, or as Joseph Nye, a soft power tool (NYE, 2012).

In this context, China can be deemed as a good case study. This paper aims, through the analysis of the policy document, to understand the Plan by assessing its power to introduce change and novelty as an important part of sports diplomacy (CHINA’S NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND REFORM COMMISSION, 2016, p. 2) and in promoting the "strengthen the international cooperation and exchanges of talent in the football industry” (CNDRC, 2016, p. 10), trying to understand, through the observation of some cases, how football contribute to the development of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). And taking insights form the theory of innovation, namely on the conceptualization of the innovation criterion provided by Drucker (2011, p. 148): “Innovation is not a technical term. It is an economic and social term. Its criterion is not science or technology, but a change in the economic or social environment”, this paper

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intends to answer the following question: is there an innovative role in establishing different forms of relations, cooperation and exchanges between Brazil and China, noting the merit of the link between sport, in this particular case football, diplomacy and soft power?

**FROM EMPIRES TO REPUBLICS**

The exchanges between Brazil and China dates to 1810, with the Chinese migrating to Brazil to plant tea and teach their skills to Brazilians. In 1880 the first diplomatic agreement would be signed, in Tientsin (currently Tianjin), between the Empire of Brazil and the Qing Dynasty: the Sino-Brazilian Treaty of Friendship, Trade and Navigation (SIMAS, 2011). In 1911, Sun Yat-sen proclaimed the Republic of China, which was recognized by Brazil in 1913, with Brazilians installing diplomatic representation in China in 1914 (FUJITA, 2003, p. 59 e 60). In 1949, Brazil did not recognize the People's Republic of China (FUJITA, 2003; SIMAS, 2011), however, in the early 1960s an attempt was made to approach the PRC, including the visit of the Vice-President João Goulart to China, the first so far, in 1961 (BECARD, 2011, p. 31 e 32). The military coup in 1964, however, marked a retreat in relations, with the dictatorship's option to align itself with the Western powers - USA (BECARD, 2011, p. 32).

It was not until 1974 that Brazil recognized the PRC. For Fujita, since the normalization of diplomatic relations in 1974, "Brazil and the People's Republic of China have been building a solid and consistent bilateral relationship based on an intrinsic logic of mutual benefit" (FUJITA, 2003, p. 59), Becard, however, argues that "despite the desire to Brazil and China in promoting bilateral cooperation, relations developed slowly in the early years" (BECARD, 2011, p. 32).

In 1993, Brazil and China established a "Strategic Partnership" - the first of its kind celebrated by China (GONÇALVES; BAUAB BRITO, 2010) - and in 2004 the China-Brazil High-level Coordination and Cooperation Committee (COSBAN) was created. In 2009, China became the largest destination for Brazilian exports, absorbing 15,2% of the total exported by Brazil (IPEA, 2011). In 2012, the relations were elevated to "comprehensive strategic partnership" status and the Global Strategic Dialogue between Ministers of Foreign Affairs was established along with the Ten-Year

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Cooperation Plan (2012-2021). In 2012, China also became the main supplier of products imported by Brazil. In 2018, Brazilian exports to China totalled US\$ 64.2 billion (26,7% share on Brazilian exports) and the imports represented US\$ 34.7 billion, meaning that the flow of trade between the two countries reached the historical mark of US\$ 98.9 billion: US\$ 29.5 billion of commercial surplus. From January to October 2019, bilateral trade totalled US\$ 81.6 billion, with a favorable Brazil surplus of US \$ 21.5 billion. Despite all this, the Brazilian-Chinese relationship seemed to be at risk after the election of Bolsonaro, a far-right politician, who has cultivated an anti-China and anti-communist rhetoric, and following the president's decision to move closer to countries governed by leaders with whom he agrees with ideologically, such as the United States. However, as Bolsonaro's visit to China in October 2019 has shown, the Brazilian government came to realize that it is not smart to distance itself from its largest trading partner. And as mentioned above, the two countries issued a joint statement in which, among others, they express their determination to cooperate with development and investment policies, such as China's Belt and Road Initiative, and emphasize the importance of the “role of cooperation in the sports fields”, aimed at increasing mutual knowledge and understanding, expressly mentioning “football-related issues”.

**ON THE COURSE OF COOPERATION AND CULTURAL EXCHANGE**

In September 2013, Xi Jinping evoked the history of the Silk Road. Recalling Zhang Qian's travels to Central Asia “on missions of peace and friendship” (XI, 2014, p. 315), Xi emphasized how those journeys helped to open “door to friendly contacts between China and Central Asian countries” (p. 315). Further on Xi extols the ancient Silk Road as the “exchanges and mutual learning” provided by the interactions among the Eastern and Western civilizations along the route contributed to “the progress of human civilization” (p. 315). Therefore, Xi calls on the countries of the Eurasian region to have “an innovative approach and jointly build an economic belt along the Silk Road” (p. 317), thereby laying the foundations of what would initially be called “One Belt One Road”, now the “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI). The Chinese leader's political discourse, based on promoting the strengthening of “trust, friendship and cooperation, and promoting common development and prosperity” (p. 316), follows the

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Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence<sup>4</sup>. This is evident when Xi affirms China's commitment not to interfere in either the internal affairs or the foreign policies of the countries (p. 316). That is why Liu & Dunford (2016) claim that China is not only intending to reestablish the old trade route, but to use the cultural message of the Silk Road as a basis for international cooperation. The Silk Road, according to the same authors, would be a metaphor for peace and cooperation, openness and inclusion, mutual learning and mutual benefit.

The BRI aims to establish an open platform that enables mutual benefits to those involved through cooperation in economic, political and cultural exchanges. The cultural dimension component is mainly represented through the promotion of '*people-to-people ties*'. The Office of the Leading Group for Promoting the Belt and Road Initiative ( 推□“一□一路”建□工作□□小□□公室)<sup>5</sup> reckons people-to-people bonds as "*the cultural foundation for building the Belt and Road*", as well an ingredient needed to materialise "*the common dream of all peoples to enjoy a peaceful and prosperous life*" (CHINA'S NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND REFORM COMMISSION, 2019). In May 2017, Presidents Mauricio Macri (Argentina) and Michelle Bachelet (Chile) attended the 1st BRI Forum, in Beijing. At the occasion, Xi "told Macri that the LAC region was a 'natural extension' of the Maritime Silk Road, showcasing that the possibility of its inclusion in the BRI has become more salient" (IISS, 2018). Panama was the first to sign such an agreement with China, in November 2017. In May 2019, at the time of the 2nd BRI Forum, a total of 15 countries from the LAC region have signed BRI-related MOUs with China, among them the Southern Americans Bolivia, Chile, Ecuador, Venezuela and Uruguay.

Giulianotti & Robertson (2004) argue that sport, in particular football, is one of the most dynamic and sociologically enlightening domains of globalization. As 'the global game', it helps us theoretically and empirically explore the multidimensional and long-term processes of globalization. Giulianotti also says that football is one of the great cultural institutions (GIULIANOTTI, 2010, p. 42), reflecting the social, political and economic context in which it finds itself. It seems pertinent, then, to observe how the Plan can help to understand the political and geopolitical aspirations of the country, serving as an instrument of public diplomacy and soft power.

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## THE PLAN

Throughout the 20th Century, despite some attempts, China was unable to succeed in this football (LEITE JUNIOR; RODRIGUES, 2018). The professionalisation of football in China has occurred only during the 1990s. The first professional championship was launched in 1994, and, for a brief period, it gained popularity (HONG; ZHOUXIANG, 2013). Despite being the first professional sport in China, Chinese football continues to lack competitiveness. After a few attempts of the Chinese authorities to fight football fraud, 2011 is commonly seen as the beginning of a new phase of professional football development in the country (HONG; ZHOUXIANG, 2013).

Issued in April 2016, the "China's medium and long-term football development plan (2016-2050)" - (中国足球中长期发展规划 2016—2050年) is the latest Chinese effort to try to improve and develop football in the country. The Plan represents a public policy strategy formulated and implemented by the Chinese Government, under the competence of the State Council's Office of the Inter-Ministerial Joint Conference on Football Reform and Development (足改部际联席会议办公室). This body brings together, among others, 11 Ministries, 4 State Council Commissions, 5 government agencies, as well as the Chinese Communist Party's Propaganda Department and a range of bureaus, agencies and commissions at the provincial and local government levels.

Currently, the Chinese men's team is only 69th in the FIFA World Men's Rankings<sup>6</sup>. There is, therefore, a long way to go, as acknowledged in the plan. Accordingly, to transform China into a future global football power, the original plan proposed three development stages, each one establishing goals to be fulfilled in 2020, 2030 and 2050, respectively (CHINA'S NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND REFORM COMMISSION, 2016): **by 2020:** 20,000 specialized football schools, 70,000 football fields, 30 to 50 million primary and secondary school students practicing the sport; **by 2030:** 50,000 specialized football schools<sup>7</sup>, the Chinese Men team being one of the best in Asia, and the Women team established as "world-class"; **until 2050:** the Men team in the top-20 of the FIFA ranking, established as a global football power. It is worth to mention that the overarching goal to establish China as a "world-class football power" by 2050 aligns with broader national objectives culminating with the 100th anniversary of the founding of the PRC in 2049.



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The scope of the Plan is broad, aiming at points such as the educational system (CNDRC, 2016, 6), increasing the physical education's academic load, with emphasis on football, and encouraging the practice of football as a public health issue (aiming at the well-being physical and mental development of young people, as well as strengthening the physical conditioning of the masses). Here we see the importance of implementing public policies that integrate such an ambitious plan with the promotion of education as a springboard of for emerging talents by promoting new cultural habits, such as the practice of football. The football development plan is aware of this. For this reason, it aims to promote the strengthening of grassroots football and community football, talent training, increasing the scale of youth participation in football, developing football schools to promote interest and cultivating fans (CNDRC, 2016, pp. 3, 4, 5).

The Plan, however, also covers points such as the promotion of cultural and diplomatic exchange with other nations (as we will address later in this chapter). As well as aspire making football the driving force behind the development of the entire sports industry in the country, so that this will become a relevant sector in the national economy, helping the country to continue to grow and thrive, as mentioned before.

The far-reaching nature of the Chinese plan is well illustrated by figures such as the stated aim to ensure that the national sports industry will generate US\$ 460 billion by 2020 (CNDRC, 2016) and US\$ 813 billion by 2025 (Opinions on Accelerating the Development of Sports Industry and Promoting Sports Consumption). For comparative reference, it is estimated that the global sports industry traded around US\$ 1.3 trillion in 2017, US\$ 519.9 billion of which in the United States alone (PLUNKETT RESEARCH, 2018). Accordingly, the Chinese plan makes explicit the ambition to foster its national sports industry in ways that will allow China, in a five-year period, to draw near the current size of the United States market.

### **SPORT, PUBLIC DIPLOMACY AND SOFT POWER**

Diplomacy is “the application of intelligence and tact to the conduct of relations between the governments of independent state” (SATOW, 1957, p. 1). Dubinsky says “the term public diplomacy was applied during the Cold War referring to the process of international organizations trying to achieve foreign policy goals by engaging with



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foreign publics” (DUBINSKY, 2019, p. 1). The author adds that “new public diplomacy refers also to non-state actors” (p. 1) and explains that public diplomacy comprehends communications and interactions by governments, policymakers, organizations, and individuals to influence foreign publics to achieve a more favorable image of the nation and ultimately achieve foreign policy goals (DUBINSKY, 2019). Essentially, public diplomacy seeks to exercise influence by building positive and resilient affiliations, which other parties consider to be attractive and valuable (BRANNAGAN; GIULIANOTTI, 2018). Finally, sport diplomacy happens when international sport is consciously employed by governments as an instrument of diplomacy (ABDI et al., 2018).

Since the proclamation of the PRC sports have been used as a political and diplomatic tool. From the so called "sovietisation of sport" in the 1950s, fundamental in the establishment of contacts with the Soviet Union and Eastern European countries (HONG; ZHOUXIANG, 2012a); the Games of the New Emerging Forces (GANEF) - through GANEF China aimed at strengthening its leadership in the Third World as an alternative to the powers of the United States and Soviet Union (HONG; ZHOUXIANG, 2012b) and also promoted sport as a revolutionary diplomacy (QINGMIN, 2013); the "ping-pong diplomacy", which allowed Chinese rapprochement with the United States during a period of tension in Sino-Soviet relations (HONG; ZHOUXIANG, 2012c); the Olympic strategy which was implemented from the 1980s (HONG; ZHOUXIANG, 2012d) and deepened after the bad results in the Seoul Games (1988) with the implementation of the elite sport system, 'juguo tizhi' (□国体制), which in English, literally, means 'the whole country support for the elite sport system', a political strategy that can be summarized as the quest for glory at the Olympic Games (HONG; ZHOUXIANG, 2012e, 2012f). That glory was achieved in 2008, when Beijing hosted the Summer Olympic Games. Hosting the Games was an important part of the whole Olympic strategy: “Beijing’s success was regarded as a milestone on the road of national revival” (HONG; ZHOUXIANG, 2012g, p. 153). China believes that through the 2008 Beijing Games it was able to show the world its development and that it has managed to position itself as a world power: economic and sports. "The image of a highly modern nation, efficient and increasingly prosperous" (GIULIANOTTI, 2015, p. 290) was what the country tried to sell to the world, seeking not only the establishment

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of diplomatic and commercial relations, but also the development of tourism. According to Giulianotti (2015), mega-events such as the Olympic Games and the World Cup, “can be considered one of the most powerful contemporary manifestations of globalization.”

And that brings us to a key concept to understand the Plan and how this public policy is connected to the BRI, as a diplomatic tool. We are talking about what Joseph Nye calls soft power (Nye, 2012). Following the author, "power is the ability to influence others to achieve the results they want, which can be done through coercion, payment or attraction" (Nye, 2012, p. 151). In contrast to hard power, which would be characterized by coercion (e.g., military force) or pay (e.g., economic force), there would be soft power. As Nye (2004, p.5) explains: "A country can obtain the results it desires in international politics because other countries - admiring its values, emulating its example and aspiring to its level of prosperity - will want to follow it". Cultural achievements and sports success are ways to win the admiration of others. That is why sports can be a very useful tool in the exercise of soft power (BRANNAGAN; GIULIANOTTI, 2015, 2018; CHARI, 2015; CHEN; COLAPINTO; LUO, 2012; DELGADO, 2016; KRZYZANIAK, 2016; LEITE JUNIOR; RODRIGUES, 2017; SAMUEL-AZRAN et al., 2016).

The concept of 'soft power' was introduced in China in 1992 and has since generated a number of discussions and became a central concept in the political formulation in the Chinese Communist Party (XU; WANG; SONG, 2018), having been adopted in the official language of the CCP in 2007, in the then President Hu Jintao's speech at the party's 17th National Congress. Cultural legacies and achievements, besides sports success are ways to win the admiration of others. After all, culture is an important source of power and promoting a compelling culture is one of the main means to build an external national image (NYE, 2008, p. 95). In a speech at the 12th group study session of the Political Bureau of the 18th Central Committee, Xi Jinping stated that the strengthening of “cultural soft power is decisive for China to reach the Two Centenary Goals and realize the Chinese Dream of rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” (XI, 2014, p. 178).

As far as public diplomacy is concerned, the Plan explicitly demonstrates its perception of football as an instrument of sport diplomacy. For example, the policy

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paper discusses the growth of the international exchanges, seeing the rise of football activities as "an important part of sports diplomacy" (CNDRC, 2016, p. 2). It goes further and draws attention to the need to strengthen the "international cooperation and exchanges of talent in the football industry" (CNDRC, 2016, p. 10), adding that the foreign exchange channels of football must be expanded, encouraging all bodies to host various forms of international football exchange activities and all kind of football experts to go abroad for study and training, and, finally, supporting the more outstanding experts to work in international organizations (CNDRC, 2016, p. 16). The Plan also refers to the importance of increasing "the level of domestic and foreign opening up and develop win-win cooperation" (CNDRC, 2016, p. 5). As we can observe, "cooperation" and "exchanges" are two keywords both in the Plan and in the Xi's speech from 2013, showing how both initiatives play a fundamental role in the Chinese geopolitics and are consistent with the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, that are "the most important diplomatic name card of China in the contemporary world stage" (Zhengqing & Xiaoqin, 2015, p. 67). To what extent has sport, in particular football, contributed to China's BRI? This is what we will discuss in the next section of this chapter.

### **THE PLAN UNDER THE LIGHT OF THE THEORY OF INNOVATION**

Can innovation theory inform the discussion of the Plan implications on China's relations with the world and more precisely with Brazil? Yes, if you consider innovation not as a technical term, but as an economic and social term (Drucker, 2011, p. 148). If you look at innovation as a means to foster change in the social and economic environment, inducing new patterns of behaviour and creating new habits (DRUCKER, 1985, 2011), and, at the same time, understanding that "the measure of innovation is the impact on the environment" (DRUCKER, 2011, p. 150). The Plan presents the overall goal of shifting the habits of sporting practice and consumption, fostering change in the social and economic environment. But also promoting the establishment of diplomatic relations and cultural exchanges. Joseph Schumpeter argues that "it is [...] the producer who as a rule initiates economic change, and consumers are educated by him; they are, as it were, taught to want new things, or things that differ in some respect or other from those which they have been in the habit of using" (SCHUMPETER, 1982, p. 65).

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Schumpeter's reference to the need for educating consumers to change their consumption habits finds some parallel in the Plan. In the sense that this policy document seeks to promote the popularization of football - the practice of sport and the consumption of its products - as a way of developing the country's sports industry. By establishing innovation as a change in the wealth-producing potential of existing resources (DRUCKER, 1985), we see the innovative nature of the Plan.

The Plan states that Chinese state will lead the "reform and innovative development" and will be the responsible for fully displaying that "football has a leading role for China's sports development and reform". The document clearly prescribes a distribution of tasks which seems to be regarded to ensure the conditions for an innovative public action (as, for example, sport administration departments and educational administration departments). The Plan also highlights the role of non-governmental partners. Indeed, it foresees an "extensive" participation of civil society in its implementation. Investments in football also provide the possibility of establishing innovative trade and diplomatic relations. Since the Plan, large Chinese corporations made significant investments in both domestic and overseas football markets.

**CONNECTED BY FOOTBALL...**

According to the spirit of this novel strategy, the government limits its action to the guiding and supporting the development of the industry while fostering a structure that allows for setting forth a competitive market structure (ZHAN, 2013). As soon as the Plan was published, large Chinese corporations made significant investments in both domestic and overseas football and sports markets. In that sense, it is important to remember that investments in football can provide the possibility of establishing trade and diplomatic relations. We must also consider that investing in sports at an international level brings the possibility of creating a state brand, helping to establish a national brand name (GUPTA, 2009b, p. 1786). There is also the influence exerted by what Mills called the Power Elite. He argues that "the power elite are not solitary rulers. Advisers and consultants, spokesmen and opinion-makers are often the captains of their higher thought and decision" (MILLS, 1956, p. 4). According to Mills these include professional politicians, administrators, and celebrities. Football business can be that political and economic tool, as a means through which to accumulate and exert power,

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to acquire legitimacy and credibility, and to exert influence over the governance of sport. That's what happens, for example, in the Italian power elite, according to Doidge, between business, politics, and football extends into football governance (DOIDGE, 2018, p. 118).

One of the most notable examples is the relationship with the United Arab Emirates. In 2014, China signed a major oil and gas deal with Abu Dhabi, the capital city of the United Arab Emirates and also capital of the Emirate of Abu Dhabi. The UAE is a strategic partner to China, since the country is close to both overland and maritime Belt and Road routes. In October 2015, Xi Jinping visited the United Kingdom. The Chinese president has been to Manchester with the then British Prime Minister, David Cameron. During his stay in Manchester, Xi went to the Etihad Campus, the training centre of Manchester City, a club owned by City Football Group, which belongs to Abu Dhabi United Group. Two months later, in December 2015, a group of Chinese investors, headed by China Media Capital, acquired a 13% stake in the company that owns Manchester City for \$400 million. In the same month, during the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, Shaikh Mohammad Bin Zayed, state visit to China, it was launched a US\$10 billion UAE-China joint strategic investment fund. In February 2019, City Football Group bought Sichuan Jiuniu Football Club a football club based in Chengdu, Sichuan, China.

### ...BRAZIL-CHINA

Since the profound change introduced by Deng Xiaoping leadership and the development of the so-called '*socialism with Chinese characteristics*' and the inherent 'socialist market economy, Chinese authorities have been prolific in issuing a number of reforming policies, fully acknowledging that sports, of high cultural and economic relevance, could not be apart from the changing dynamics (HU; HENRY, 2017). Yu et al. refer to "a new socialist/centralist approach", using football to promote both political and cultural nationalisms (YU et al., 2017, p. 20). Keeping the ideal of the reform and opening up, which is a fundamental characteristic of 'socialism with Chinese characteristics', the Plan establishes the need to promote "the opening up of football", emphasizing that it is necessary that "high-level football talent comes to work in China" (NDRC, 2016, p. 16). As soon as the Plan was launched the CSL has drawn

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considerable attention, mainly due to the hiring of foreign players, involving highly inflated transfer prices and salaries. Overnight, the Chinese Super League was under the spotlight. Some of these foreign players were Brazilian. Not that it is a novelty the migratory flow of Brazilian footballers. The talent of the Brazilian player has become an appetizing target in globalized football dominated by business. It is not surprising that currently there are 23 Brazilian players in the Chinese Super League. The innovation in this market has to do with the level of some of these players. Brazilian National Team athletes such as Oscar, Hulk, Paulinho, Ramires, Renato Augusto and Alexandre Pato are playing or have recently played in the CSL. In the specific case of Oscar, Hulk, Paulinho and Ramires, it was even more surprising because they left the European continent and headed for China, going against the current of the migratory flow of football, which is markedly Eurocentric.

In the field of the international cooperation and exchange of talent in the football industry (NDRC, 2016, p. 10), one of the goals of the Plan is to have 50,000 specialized football schools in China by 2025. For that, the Plan is emphatic in the need to support "the construction of a number of schools that are specialized in campus football" (NDRC, 2016, p. 9). The former Brazilian player Ronaldo (three times FIFA World Player of the Year and twice France Football's Ballon d'Or winner) has football schools in China. The so-called Ronaldo Academy are located in seven different cities and has eight schools. In the pursuit of knowledge exchange, Shandong Luneng, a CSL club, acquired Desportivo Brasil, a corporate-club from Porto Feliz in the state of São Paulo. The Grupo Traffic with the objective of training and preparing young talents to be negotiated to professional clubs created Desportivo Brasil. Shandong Luneng bought the club and every year they take 30 Chinese young players to spend a season training in Desportivo facilities. In the same way, in 2017 the CSL club Shanghai SIPG opened a training facility in Londrina, in Paraná. This endeavour is a partnership of the Chinese club with the Brazilian club Londrina EC and with two other private partners – SM Sports and Grupo Figer. The place has a built area of 1,100m<sup>2</sup>. The complex is for the exclusive use of young Chinese and the first Shanghai SIPG delegation to arrive in Paraná was the U18 team, with 25 athletes, including some from the China Youth National Team. It was even speculated that the Chinese club considered to take over Londrina EC, having negotiated with the club administrators its acquisition. More

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recently, the media reported alleged interests of Chinese investors in clubs such as CSA, from Alagoas, and América, from Minas Gerais. So far, however, it has been mere speculation. But we recall that Brazilian legislators are currently discussing bills aimed at transforming football clubs into companies, which could facilitate this type of investments in the future.

## **CONCLUSION**

In recent years, under the leadership of Xi Jinping, China has urged the “Chinese Dream” (中國夢) (PETERS, 2017, p. 1301) as part of the so-called "rejuvenation" pursuit, something that has to do with modernisation of the country and economic success (PETERS, 2017, p. 1302), which is part of the “Two Centenary Goals”: to “realize the Chinese Dream of rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” (XI, 2014, p. 178). This idea of “rejuvenation” also involves China's rise as a protagonist and global leader. And the BRI is undoubtedly the grandiose and ambitious Chinese project. A challenge in which China seeks to deepen its process of opening up to the world. Building on its Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, China stands as a promoter of globalisation, proposing to the countries along the route - maritime and overland - an economic, political and cultural model of cooperation and exchange. Sport has not been left out of plans for economic development and expansion of Chinese influence. The Plan, analysed in this article, is compelling when it says that great efforts are needed to make real “the dream of the rise of football, the dream of a powerful sports nation and the dream of the nation's rejuvenation” (NDRC). 2016, p.3). In addition to the “China Football Dream” (中國足球夢), the search for global leadership in sport is highlighted in the Plan, which mentions the importance of “strengthening international cooperation” (NDRC, 2016, p. 10). “Expand football's foreign relations channels” (NDRC, 2016, p. 16) and for this the Chinese state counts on the participation of the private sector. Which, as we have shown in this article, has made massive investments in football both domestically and internationally. As Scutti and Wendt (2016) put it, football, alongside demography, technological development, economic and military might, is a criterion for evaluating international power. Thus, the authors argue, “geopolitics and football have become inseparable universes” (SCUTTI; WENDT, 2016, p. 105).



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The geopolitics of world football is changing. Emerging countries, such as the BRICS, have perceived in sport, and more specifically in football, a soft power instrument capable of repositioning them in the international context. China has been one of the driving forces of this change. Brazil is on the road of this transformation. As we saw in this article, football is already being used as a connecting element, creating new forms of relations between Brazil and China. We believe there is room for further deepening of these relationships. As the Plan itself dictates, the Chinese are willing to seek knowledge in football to develop the practice in their country, they long for knowledge exchange. Brazil, the five-time World Champion, is a talent barn that can help China find its way to the development of football. There is also a huge Chinese market to be explored. As Ronaldo has already identified through his Ronaldo Academy, spread across seven Chinese cities. But the Plan is not limited to encouraging the opening of football schools. There is a whole incentive to the development of the sports industry that can be exploited by Brazilian companies specialized in that field. On the other hand, Brazil can benefit from Chinese direct investments in the Brazilian market. Since the acquisition of companies and manufacturers in the sports industry, even the control of Brazilian clubs. The recent case of Bragantino, acquired by Austrian Red Bull, is a sign that foreigners companies opened their eyes to Brazilian football market. Chinese companies and entrepreneurs have been investing in clubs around the world, especially in the rich European market, but they have already reached South America. Brazil may be a new route on this journey.

Finally, we understand that the contribution of this work lies in the theoretical approach adopted in the analysis of the Chinese Football Plan. Introducing the discussion of how this Chinese public policy document serves as a tool of China's geopolitical strategy, demonstrating, for example, how football enters the path of the BRI. This is a different perspective, in which sport, particularly football, is considered as a connecting factor. Bearing in mind that we have not exhausted the subject, because we are talking about a strategy that has the ultimate goal of 2050, we understand that we were able to demonstrate, from the presented cases of relationships between Brazil and China, and through football, that sport can open doors and serve as a diplomatic instrument, such as a soft power tool.

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## Notas

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<sup>4</sup> The Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence first appeared as an international agreement, that is, the Agreement between the Republic of India and the People's Republic of China on Trade and Intercourse between Tibet Region of China and India, concluded between China and India in Beijing in April, 1954 (Zhengqing & Xiaoqin, 2015, p. 70). It was Premier Zhou Enlai who first connected the idea of "peaceful coexistence" with the Chinese diplomacy. In a statement in support of the recommendation for peace submitted to the United Nations General Assembly by Soviet Union, he pointed out the principles of equality, mutual benefit, mutual respect for territorial sovereignty (p. 72). The Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence are: Mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty; Mutual non-aggression; Mutual non-interference in each other's internal affairs; Equality and cooperation for mutual benefit; Peaceful co-existence. The Five Principles are considered "the most important diplomatic name card of China in the contemporary world stage, the five principles play a significant role in promoting the peaceful development of China and shaping its image as a responsible power" (p. 67).

<sup>5</sup> The Office of the Leading Group for Promoting the Belt and Road Initiative operates under the National Development and Reform Commission and aims at providing BRI with guidance and coordination.

<sup>6</sup> FIFA World Rankings as of 24 October 2019.

<sup>7</sup> In 2017, the People's Daily (人民日报) reported that China's sporting authorities had altered the original goals of the football development plan. Instead of waiting until 2030 for 50,000 specialized football schools, the goal became to reach the mark by 2025 (PEOPLE'S DAILY, 2017).