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How Ice Hockey Could Thaw US-Russia Relations ^[1]

The recent telephone conversations between President Donald Trump and President Vladimir Putin over the Ukrainian war point the way to normalizing of bilateral relations, which have been severely strained in the past few years. It is still too early to predict the exact outcome of this diplomatic approach, as high-level delegations from both states continue to negotiate a wide range of issues. However, there are clear signs of a *détente* that could relax strained relations. Such a relaxation is needed not only to resolve the Ukrainian conflict, but also for the global stability that could be achieved by stabilizing U.S.-Russian relations. The restoration of diplomatic relations between the U.S. and Russia could take a variety of forms, with a game of hockey between the national leagues on North America and Eurasia thawing political and diplomatic tensions.

President Putin proposed, and President Trump accepted, the idea of organizing a hockey game between the National Hockey League (NHL) and the Kontinental Hockey League (KHL). The NHL is composed of 32 teams from the US and Canada, while the KHL is made up of 23 teams from Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and China. Launched in 2008, the KHL project is one of Russia's most attractive and positive efforts in the international arena.

The hockey theme was reinforced in the media just recently when Russian-born Alexander Ovechkin, captain of the NHL's Washington Capitals, scored his 895th career goal breaking Wayne Gretzky's previous record. Russian hockey players traditionally play in the NHL, while a few Americans and Canadians play in the KHL. What is important here is that hockey could once again become a soft diplomatic tool to ease hard foreign policy tensions. Hockey was intertwined, even embedded, into global affairs, highlighting a sports diplomacy approach. It has happened before: during the Cold War.

Making their debut at the 1954 World Ice Hockey Championship in Stockholm, Sweden, the Soviet national hockey team beat the Canadian national team. The same happened on the 1957 exhibition tour in Canada when the Soviets once again defeated their hosts and began to dominate Olympic and world championship hockey in the next four decades. From the very beginning, the NHL professional players did not participate in the Olympics or the Summit Series, lately known as the Super Series. For instance, in 1954, the NHL's professional club, the Toronto Maple Leafs, suggested match against the Soviet team, but it did not happen. It could be that the Soviet leadership did not see a private commercial club as a rival to a national team. But it changed soon.



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The Cold War ice hockey series went beyond just sports history, marking the beginning of East-West sports standoffs. The sports competition also became an indicator of tight relations or the relaxation of political and diplomatic approach between the two blocks and competing ideologies of a capitalist and a socialist regime.

The *détente* of the late 1960s changed the ice hockey landscape significantly, leading to the Super Series of 1972, one of the greatest events in hockey history. The round of diplomatic negotiations lasted almost 3 years before an agreement was signed and the Soviet and Canadian teams would be able to meet.

For Super Series 72, the Canadian national hockey team was already represented by NHL professionals, while the Soviet hockey team was able to build a reputation as the "Big Red Machine," as it was dubbed in the Western media. The Series was the best against the best, with the Canadians winning four games to three, with one draw. Beyond the sporting competition, both teams had a sense of national pride. The media interest on both sides of the world was huge, representing the Cold War competition and claiming the superiority of two blocs, including in sport.

From a purely sports perspective, the Super Series, as well as regular championships, tournaments and hockey exchange visits, allowed two hockey models to intertwine, enriching both of them with competing techniques and styles. The NHL and KHL now play compatible hockey with compatible player levels. Foreign players, who initially come from to different sports schools and styles, bring multiculturalism into play.

The geopolitical restrictions of the last three years have prevented Russia from taking part in international tournaments. Ice hockey is no exception. Because any sporting competition that brings together the best athletes is a catalyst for the development of sport in all its forms. Isolated within national borders, top-level sport is doomed to decline. There is a constant need for the international competition with the compatible counterparts.

From a diplomacy perspective, narrowed to sports diplomacy, there are a few points to be considered.

First, sports events provide an informal platform for leaders and for high profile representatives to meet and engage in dialogue, especially when relations between states are strained and some issues of international importance require immediate resolution. It is common when state leaders visit sports events. By hosting international sporting events, a country signals that it is open for broader dialogue.

Second, sport can be used as a bridge between countries and peoples. Fans are familiar with the rules of a game or competition. This means that cultural and linguistic differences between people will not be divisive. Communication between fans should go more smoothly, giving the host country a more favorable light of friendliness and openness. Such communication could help to build trust.

Third, athletes and sportsmen can also serve as goodwill ambassadors, creating awareness of the nature of bilateral or multilateral relations between countries. For example, Alexander Ovechkin's speech about breaking the record, was a vociferous embrace of the Russian people.

The U.S. and Russia have tremendous experience in hosting sporting events, and the use of such a tough game as soft power should be given another round.
