

# POLITICISING EXCHANGES: ON CHINA USING SPORTING EVENTS TO SCORE GEOPOLITICAL POINTS

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The Asian Games, which were opened on September 23 by Chinese President Xi Jinping in Hangzhou following a spectacular opening ceremony on a scale that has now come to be expected from China, are meant to showcase a broader message of Asian solidarity. The days leading up to the opening ceremony of the 19th edition were, however, marked by anything but. The day before the opening, Union Sports Minister Anurag Thakur cancelled his visit to China as a mark of protest to the last-minute denial of entry to three Indian Wushu players from Arunachal Pradesh. The three athletes — Nyeman Wangsu, Onilu Tega and Mepung Lamgu — were given the accreditation needed to travel along with the rest of the Indian team for the Games. However, in what appears to be a directive issued to the airline by China, the athletes were told they could not board their flight. China has in the past issued stapled visas to Indians from Arunachal Pradesh. Only in July, three wushu players from Arunachal Pradesh, due to take part in the World University Games in Chengdu, were issued stapled visas. In this instance, the decision to bar the athletes appears particularly vindictive as visas were not needed to travel for athletes issued digital accreditations. Indian officials believe Beijing thus went out of its way to bar their travel by instructing the airline to not allow them to board. The Ministry of External Affairs in a statement described the action as “targeted and pre-meditated”.

This is, unfortunately, not the first instance of Beijing using sporting events that should have no place for politics to score geopolitical points. In February last year, Beijing ill-advisedly selected the People’s Liberation Army’s commander involved in the Galwan Valley clash as one of the torchbearers for the Winter Olympics. Both then and now, the organisers have appeared more than happy to look the other way given China’s status as both a willing host and strong financial backer of such events. The acting President of the Olympic Council of Asia, Randhir Singh, who met with President Xi in Hangzhou, in remarks to journalists chose not to call out the denial of entry to athletes, instead only saying the matter was being discussed. Beyond the Asian Games, the latest Chinese action serves as a reminder of the current distrust in bilateral relations, as well as of the absence of adequate channels of communication to deal with long-persisting thorny issues, including visas. New Delhi has correctly made clear that restoring normalcy in relations will not be possible without completing the disengagement process along the Line of Actual Control and restoring peace in border areas. Until Beijing reviews its stance on the border, the current state of affairs, which suits neither India nor China, is likely to endure.

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