

The Olympics doesn't just mirror geopolitics; it is geopolitics

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The [hero's welcome](#) planned for returning Australian Olympic athletes testifies to the close relationship between sport, nationalism and national identity. A euphoric [Anthony Albanese](#), in praising our high-achieving athletes, knows that a country's gold medal tally is a crude but effective way of showcasing a nation's strength.

The Lowy Institute's 2023 [Comprehensive Power Index](#) lists the US, China, Japan, India, Russia and Australia in descending order of their perceived overall power. Against this backdrop, the final medal tally of the Paris Games presents interesting reading.

The US and China each [finished](#) with 40 gold medals. Although China still trailed behind the US in the total medal tally, everyone knows it's the gold that matters.

Team China has come a long way compared with four years ago in [Tokyo](#). As the Chinese media [observed](#), Paris represents a significant historical moment, marking the end of US dominance in world sport. To observers of the geopolitical rivalry between the two superpowers, the symbolism of this 40-40 draw cannot be overstated.

That is why when Harvard professor of politics Graham T. Allison was watching the Games, his mind was clearly also on politics. He called the Paris Games the '[geopolitical Olympics](#)':

China's rise from essentially nowhere to become the leading rival of the United States in the Olympics mirrors its rise in virtually every other dimension to become the defining geopolitical rival in the twenty-first century.

As is also the case in geopolitics, Team China was banking not only on its athletes topping the medal tally but also on its rival losing.

That is why the women's basketball match between France and the US was equally nail-biting for many Chinese spectators. More than just a success for an underdog, a win for France would effectively be a win for China, given the US would thereby lose one gold medal, enabling Team China to come out on top. The French put up an impressive fight, but stopped short of pulling off a miracle, meaning China and the US shared top spot.

The Olympics not only *mirrors* geopolitics; it is *part of* geopolitics. Parallel with the adrenalin-pumping race for gold in Paris, an equally intense and much more intricate drama between Team US and Team China has been unfolding outside Stade de France, with the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) awkwardly caught in the middle. Australia also played a substantial role in the drama.

News of the spectacular win by Chinese swimmer Pan Zhanle in the 100-metre freestyle, breaking his own record and beating Australian swimmer Kyle Chalmers, was met with mixed reactions.

A breathless and triumphant Pan told Chinese media Chalmers had previously [ignored](#) him, and that American swimmer Jack Alexy had also treated the Chinese team with disrespect since he arrived in Paris. Pan felt unfairly treated because, even though he had been tested for drugs [21 times](#) in the two months before coming to Paris, he was still not considered ‘clean’.

Pan told Chinese media he attributed his phenomenal performance to his ability to channel his pent-up anger and resentment. ‘I felt they looked down upon me ... And I felt the weight of the entire Chinese nation at that moment.’

Chalmers thought Pan’s remark was ‘[a bit weird](#)’, and said he had not at all ignored Pan. The two rivals finally [cleared](#) the air towards the end, but suspicion about Pan’s performance continued to do the rounds in the commercial media, many of which included a video clip of Australia’s coach [Brett Hawke](#) angrily insinuating that Pan’s victory was an outcome of taking drugs.

Chinese swimmers were the [most](#) tested athletes in Paris, having been tested nearly 200 times in the first 10 days after arriving in France. The International Testing Agency’s [data](#) from 2023 shows that Chinese swimmers were tested three to four times more than their Australian counterparts.

Despite his win, Pan was a victim of the ongoing stoush between the China Anti-Doping Agency (CHINADA), the US Anti-Doping Agency (USADA) and WADA. He was a formidable force in the pool, but he must have felt powerless in the murky waters of hostile public opinion surrounding the controversy of some Chinese athletes testing positive four years ago.

Rivalry between swimmers goes hand in hand with narrative contests in the media. Just before the Paris games, *The New York Times* published an [article](#) accusing WADA of continuing to clear doping Chinese athletes, claiming that two more Chinese swimmers had tested positive due to food contamination in 2022. In response, CHINADA issued a [statement](#) calling the article ‘misleading’ and a ‘distortion’, saying the paper was engaged in the politicisation of doping issues. The statement also outlined similar cases where US athletes had tested positive due to food contamination and medication.

The Chinese media outlet [Global Times](#) also accused the US of double standards, saying that it was a case of ‘thief crying ‘catch thief’>. This was following a [Reuters](#) report detailing WADA claims that USADA had let several athletes who had breached drug rules between 2011 and 2014 continue competing on the condition they agreed to go undercover to supply information on other athletes. The Chinese media are now also calling for a continuous investigation into the alleged doping of US athletes, including sprinting star Erriyon Knighton.

USADA and WADA have been in a public war of words over the past few years, with USADA repeatedly challenging the legitimacy of WADA. But late last month the US went further: a bipartisan group of US lawmakers [introduced](#) the ‘Restoring Confidence in the World Anti-Doping Agency Act of 2024’, which would give the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) permanent authority to reduce or revoke US funding for WADA. Some [predict](#) that if Donald Trump wins the US presidency in November, US funding for WADA will become even more precarious.

The next Olympic Games will be in Los Angeles. Given that the US will be the host, it may have a fair chance of wresting its top-dog status back. But China will not stand still. The 2028 Games will be even more riveting to watch than Paris.

Harvard professor Graham T. Allison — who’ll be watching the Games with interest — is recognised for identifying a historical pattern he named [Thucydides’s Trap](#): the idea that when a rising power threatens to displace a ruling one, ‘the most likely outcome is war’. Let us hope that he is wrong.

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