

Game for diplomacy?

Sports has been used for diplomatic ends with varying degrees of success

by Peh Shing Hwei

Call it Ping Pong Diplomacy Version 2008.

Thirty-seven years after American table tennis players crossed the Pacific to open the doors of China, the simple game of bats and balls is once again bouncing to the fore of international politics.

This time, it is to build ties between long-time rivals China and Japan. A game is planned between Chinese President Hu Jintao and Japanese Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda, when the former arrives in Japan on Tuesday for a visit.

"Including this kind of fun event in a tense itinerary is necessary to improve relations," said a senior Japanese Foreign Ministry official.

The use of sports in diplomacy seems to be a tried-and-tested method.

The Chinese and Japanese used it as recently as last year, when Premier Wen Jiabao pitched to a university baseball team and sprinted around the field.

Mr Fukuda returned the favour when he went to Beijing, playing a game of catch with Mr Wen.

"Sports is really useful to show the two countries' friendly relations now, as well as the warm personal ties between the leaders," Renmin University analyst Shi Yinhong told The Sunday Times.

"It leaves a strong impression with the people. But it is largely symbolic. It's not as if Premier Wen is very good in baseball or Mr Fukuda plays ping pong very well."

The most famous example of sports diplomacy in the last century is the original ping pong exchange of 1971, when Americans played exhibition games with the Chinese in Beijing.

It helped pave the way for then-president Richard Nixon's historic trip to China the next year – the first by an American president – and the beginning of rapprochement between the two

Cold War enemies.

Since then, there have been many copycats, with varying degrees of success.

One successful, yet little-known, episode was between the Chinese and the South Koreans in the early 1990s.

Despite the protests of close ally North Korea, China participated in the 1986 Asian Games and the Olympics two years later in Seoul. This goodwill gesture was reciprocated by strong Seoul support for Beijing to host the 1990 Asiad.

South Korea also provided US\$15 million and other significant donations to help China host the Games successfully.

By 1992, these two countries, which fought bitterly against each other in the Korean War, normalised relations.

Even in Singapore, a little round of "golf diplomacy" came into play, leading to a Free Trade Agreement with the United States.

In 2000, then-prime minister Goh Chok Tong first discussed the idea of an agreement with then-president Bill Clinton during a round of night golf in Brunei.

Mr Joan Marks, who led an American wrestling team to Iran in 1998 – dubbed an act of, yes you guessed it, "wrestling diplomacy" by the media – summed up the strength of sports in diplomacy when he wrote: "It returned the American flag to Iran – with honour, without chauvinism and in an atmosphere of mutual respect."

But the fact that the US and Iran are far from buddies today shows that sports diplomacy will never be the silver bullet to achieve political breakthrough.

Yet, after weeks of display of sports and politics intertwined in the ugliest possible manner – as seen in the chaos and violence surrounding the Beijing Olympic torch relay – it is timely to remember that politicians and sportsmen are useful bedfellows for peace and progress.

Instead of wishing that sports not be politicised, as some have remarked after witnessing trouble along the torch relay route, it would be more helpful to lobby for sports to help smoothen the edges and reach into corners that bilateral meetings and talks are unable to.

A leaf can be taken, for example, from US President George W. Bush's book. He named two famous athletes – world figure skating champion Michelle Kwan and former baseball player Cal Ripken Jr – as envoys to improve the US' image in China last year.

More ping pong, golf, and even wrestling diplomacy, and it could go a long way towards bridging the differences and misunderstandings that trailed the torch relay route around the world.

shpeh@sph.com.sg