



## Lesson Guide

# Ping Pong Diplomacy - Can History Repeat Itself?

### Vocabulary List

**Diplomacy** (n) - the profession, activity, or skill of managing international relations, typically by a country's representatives abroad or the art of dealing with people in a sensitive and effective way

**Sport Diplomacy** - Sports diplomacy is a new term that describes an old practice: the unique power of sport to bring people, nations, and communities closer together via a shared love of physical pursuits. (As defined by Stuart Murray in his paper [Sports Diplomacy: History, Theory, and Practice](#), published on 27 October, 2020 on Oxford Research Encyclopedia)

**International Relations** - International relations can be defined as political activities and other kinds and aspects of interactions among two or more states. (There are many working definitions of international relations and this one is from an article "[International Relations Introduction](#)", by **Awais Khan**, published in 2019, on ResearchGate.com)

### Suggested Discussion Topics

1. Is sports diplomacy a modern day phenomenon? What is the oldest form of sports diplomacy? (The ancient Olympic Games in Greece),
2. Sports diplomacy is the vehicle to bring people, nations, and communities together. Not all sports diplomacy efforts were successful. Ask the students to explore other examples of sports diplomacy and whether they achieved the intended objective. Compare a failure with a successful sports diplomacy event such as Ping Pong Diplomacy, how are they similar or different and what is(are) the crucial element(s) that made a difference?
  - a. Success: the South African President Nelson Mandela using the Rugby World Cup to unite the blacks and whites in South Africa.
  - b. Failure: North Korea was allowed to join the Olympics in 2018 in an attempt to bring it out of isolation and to the negotiating table. Today, North Korea is still isolated, refusing to negotiate with the U.S. and South Korean on its nuclear weapons program.
3. When the U.S. table tennis players were invited to China for the exhibition games, the Chinese players played "easy games" with their American counterparts under the slogan "Friendship First, Competition Second". Imagine a different sport, such as football or



baseball, where the Americans are better at, and the Chinese were invited to the U.S. to play exhibition games. Do you think the American players would play easy games in the spirit of “Friendship First, Competition Second”?

4. What is the value of “saving face” that is a key element of Chinese culture and is there an equivalent or similar value in American culture?

## Suggested Activities

1. On a map of Asia, mark all countries with which the United States was allied in the 1950s and 1960s. Ask the students what they observe? Do the same exercise again but mark the countries with which the U.S. is allied with today. Discuss how China might react to today’s reality given its rise as an economic power.
2. Ask students to find situations in their communities where groups are divided. Could they use sports or other forms of activities such as music and food to reduce tension or help heal the divide?
3. If the students have already read Romeo and Juliet by Shakespeare, ask them to devise a sports activity that could be used to resolve or de-escalate the long standing feud between the Capulet and Montague families so the two young lovers may unite. Put on a mini play for the class. (Or use West Side Story about resolving the rivalry between the Sharks and the Jets)
4. Have students research the life story of the two Chinese ping pong players, Rong Guotuan and Zhuang Zedong, and see how the Cultural Revolution impacted their lives differently. Have the students explain what the Cultural Revolution was?

## Reference Materials:

- [Famous instances of sports diplomacy](#), Gina-Marie Cheeseman, March 25, 2019, Stacker
- [How Nelson Mandela Used Ruby as a Symbol of South African Unity](#), history.com
- Downloadable East Asian Political Map:  
<https://www.freeworldmaps.net/asia/eastasia/political.html>
- [Rong Guotuan, the Chinese table-tennis pioneer who died by suicide after being framed](#), July 21, 2021, The Economic Times
- [Tragic 'spy' who sparked China's table tennis domination](#), July 21, 2021, France 24
- [Remembering Rong Guotuan](#), by Steven Cheung, translated by Chung Lau, circa 1990
- [Zhuang Zedong. Skilled in China Foreign Relations and Ping-Pong. Dies at 72](#), By [Douglas Martin](#), Feb. 11, 2013, The New York Times
- [Zhuang Zedong](#), wikipedia
- [Zhuang Zedong obituary](#) Feb 13, 2013, The Guardian
- [Cultural Revolution](#), original November 9, 2009, updated April 3, 2020