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SPORTS IN AUSTRALIA'S SOFT POWER STRATEGY: OPPORTUNITIES FOR
IMPLEMENTATION BY OTHER COUNTRIES

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Abstract

Australia, being a successful example of using sports for foreign policy, has significantly improved its international influence in the Pacific region. Yet, political, cultural, and economic peculiarities can doubt the similar application of sports by other countries. This article examines Australia's use of sports and sports diplomacy as key instruments of its international strategy. The purpose of the article is to analyze Australia's use of sports within soft power efforts, explore its methods, principles, and frameworks, and evaluate whether this framework can be applied by other countries to achieve similar soft power objectives. This study performs a comprehensive review of literature, official Australian government publications, and specific case studies to understand the outcomes and applicability of the approach. The novelty of the research lies in its detailed examination of the specific conditions and strategies that have made Australia's sports diplomacy successful. Key research findings highlight that Australia's effective use of sports diplomacy is rooted in its effect of sports on national identity, strong sports culture, advanced infrastructure, strategic partnerships, and connections with communities, particularly within the Pacific region. The article proves that the 2015-18 and 2030 Sports Diplomacy Strategies have successfully fostered cultural, sports, and people-to-people connections and enhanced Australia's influence and presence globally. The article concludes that while Australia's sports diplomacy model is highly effective, its application by other countries may be challenging. The reasons refer to varying levels of national perception of sports, sports culture, financial resources, and international influence. For actors with similar conditions, a comprehensive approach is applicable, whereas for emerging and developing nations it may be best to adopt specific elements of the strategies depending on the needs and resources.

Keywords: *sports diplomacy, public diplomacy, strategy, Australia, Pacific region.*

СПОРТ У СТРАТЕГІЇ М'ЯКОЇ СИЛИ АВСТРАЛІЇ:
МОЖЛИВОСТІ ЗАСТОСУВАННЯ ІНШИМИ КРАЇНАМИ

Анотація

Австралія, будучи взірцем використання спорту в рамках міжнародної політики, досягла значного впливу у Тихоокеанському регіоні. Тим не менш, політичні, культурні, та економічні особливості ставлять під сумнів використання схожої моделі іншими країнами. Стаття досліджує спорт і спортивну дипломатію Австралії як ключові інструменти її міжнародного впливу. Метою статті є аналіз використання Австралією спорту у контексті здійснення м'якої сили, дослідження її методів, принципів і рамок, а також оцінка можливостей її застосування іншими міжнародними акторами. Дослідження передбачає комплексний огляд літератури, офіційних публікацій уряду Австралії та конкретних ініціатив, що дозволяє зрозуміти перспективи цього підходу. Новизна дослідження полягає в детальному вивченні умов і програм, які зробили спортивну дипломатію Австралії успішною. Основні результати дослідження показують, що ефективне використання Австралією спортивної дипломатії

впливає з ролі спорту у формуванні національної ідентичності, високій спортивній культурі, розвиненій інфраструктурі, стратегічних партнерствах, та зв'язків із громадами, зокрема в Тихоокеанському регіоні. Доведено, що стратегії спортивної дипломатії 2015-18 і 2030 років успішно сприяли налагодженню культурних, спортивних, і міжособистісних зв'язків і підвищенню впливу Австралії на міжнародній арені. У статті зроблено висновок, що хоча модель спортивної дипломатії Австралії є надзвичайно ефективною, її впровадження іншими країнами може бути ускладнене через різницю у сприйнятті спорту населенням країн, фінансових ресурсах і наявному міжнародному впливі. Для країн із інституційними та політичними умовами схожими до австралійських така комплексна модель може бути застосована, в той час як для країн, що розвиваються, доцільніше буде використовувати окремі методи підходу, зважаючи на ресурси, ставлення населення до спорту і особливості розвитку.

Ключові слова: спортивна дипломатія, публічна дипломатія, стратегія, спортивна політика, Австралія, Тихоокеанський регіон.

Problem statement.

Even though globalization brings both positive and negative developments into the international system, it is hard to ignore that these shifts transform traditional paradigms of diplomacy. In this context, there is a rise of soft power as the method that countries use to affect international standing and reach geopolitical goals. As soft power allows influencing and attracting international state and non-state actors, sports backed by media and the rising image of sportsmen become an effective and powerful tool for public diplomacy. Therefore, Australia's use of sports in terms of sports diplomacy as a component of soft power provides an interesting case for examining how other countries can use their methods.

The strategy of sports diplomacy that Australia demonstrates how the country can affect its economic, social, and cultural relations in the region via sports. Moreover, it provides a great case on how a government can set the course for national organizations, organs, sports entities, and non-state actors to work together in shaping the image and exerting economic and cultural influence. The case of Australia seems to be pretty universal as their application of sports diplomacy fits the soft power concept defined by Nye and leverages the role of non-state actors and cultural diplomacy in shaping international perceptions.

However, the effectiveness of the soft power efforts by Australia depends on many factors, including the existing sports system, solid budgets and frameworks, available image and influence, and developed partnerships. Each strategy has its limitations and opportunities, and its results are likely to be different if applied in an unlike setting and environment. Notably, it raises the ques-

tion of whether any country can create a similar state-led policy that will be as effective. Via analysis of strategy and initiatives and exploration of the sports landscape, the piece will examine its applicability and offer new insights into the integration of sports into the soft power strategy of the state actors.

The purpose of the article is to analyze Australia's sports diplomacy strategy, explore the methods, principles, and frameworks behind it, and suggest whether their framework can be replicated by other countries to achieve similar soft power objectives.

Literature review.

The analysis of how Australia uses sports in public diplomacy is impossible without consideration of the terms of soft power and the role of sports diplomacy in it. Thus, the analysis of Australian policy requires first resort to the definition of soft power. Joseph Nye, in his article *Soft Power: Evolution of Concept*, discusses how the term developed and criticized, and underlines that soft power, as the ability to make a change via non-coercive methods, and related behavior often includes "positive attraction and persuasion" instead of manipulation, coercion, or payment [Nye 2021: 7]. That way, it provides that soft power is about pulling, not pushing, and allows this article to analyze how sports can be utilized. Trunkos and Heere, offering an extensive review of using sports throughout history, cover that sports can provide insights, raise awareness about the country, act as a bridge to differences or platform for agreements, and create a legacy and improve image globally [Trunkos & Heere 2017].

Notably, Kobeirecki, in his overview of the

sports diplomacy concept, pays attention to the development of the term and the rising influence of non-state actors and individuals backed by the fragmentation of diplomatic institutions [Koberecki 2020: 20]. It coincides with what Stuart Murray observes in his book *“Sports Diplomacy: Origins, Theory and Practice”*. In his book, he outlines the role of non-state sporting actors and pays significant attention to their influence in building partnerships and networking alongside state diplomatic efforts [Murray 2018]. The particular studies allow getting an idea of how sports are used as a tool in public diplomacy and provide the ground for the consideration of the case of Australia and what allowed them to develop an effective strategy.

The official publications and strategies by the Australian government and institutions form the basis for the examination of Australian sports diplomacy. However, other works by Stuart Murray were crucial for the understanding of the specifics of Australian sports diplomacy. In particular, he outlines the importance of sports for Australians, equaling it to religion, and shows the role of sports in the country prior to the adoption of any government-led initiatives [Murray 2013]. Alongside his works, the article analyzed officially adopted Strategies by the Australian Government, in particular, *“Australian Sports Diplomacy Strategy 2015-18”* and *“Australian Sports Diplomacy Strategy 2030”*, helping to identify principles and approaches taken by the executives. The review of sports management and governance took place, backing the understanding that financing of the sports system and the proper balance in terms of federal and local management were crucial for Australia setting a solid ground for the implementation of the strategy [Stulajter 2021]. With these works in mind, one can evaluate the foundation of Australian strategies and see why they had the chance to be successful.

Even though some researchers provided the limitations of sports diplomacy, the literature review offers space to study the reasons and conditions for the application of similar strategies worldwide. It offers an opportunity to provide the key issues and opportunities that the case of Australia can offer other countries.

The main results of the research.

Pre-conditions for the Adoption of Strategy

A fair examination of the Australian approach to conducting soft power initiatives related to sports should consider the key documents on par with the prerequisites to their development and adoption. In this regard, it is crucial to determine the foundation of Australian sports cultures, existing principles, and events that allowed using sports effectively within the realm of public diplomacy.

The main factors that set a promising ground refer to the popularity of the sport in Australia, effective sporting policy, advanced facilities, and sports networks as well as the existence of the communities in other countries. In particular, around 41% of Australians name sport as an activity that they do at least once a week [Clearing House for Sport 2023]. While 6.5 and 7.6 million Australians participate in organized sports and attend live sporting events, respectively [Australian Sports Commission 2015]. In addition, the role of sports can be compared to religion, as there is a “quasi-religious faith” in a sporting identity in Australia that it seems odd when, within a certain group, a person is not interested in sports [Armstrong 2020: 75]. Interestingly, it has a connection to British imperialism, and under the Anglo-Australian paradigm, Australia became a “paradise of sport”, where doing sport became a “definer” of an Australian [Sebastian et al. 2023: 211]. That way, it clearly illustrates that sports have intervened with the culture and presents a great source that can be used in governmental initiatives. When conducting public diplomacy, the Australian bodies can consider sports as a prolongation of culture, especially in terms of the types of sports like Australian football cricket, or rugby.

In regard to sports heritage, the Australian government has paid significant attention to sports policy development, being competitive enough to bring sports results in international sports events and such mega-events as the Olympic Games. In the aftermath of the Olympic Games in Beijing in 2008, where the country experienced a decrease in medals, the government significantly reviewed Australian sports policy [Sotiriadou and Brouwers 2012]. It resulted in the

reconsideration of the existing standards and principles, focusing on the development of elite sports and making it a priority. As a result, the changes in the federal and local levels in regard to professional sports growth allowed setting standards. Such a devotion to sports policy resulted in an increase in financing, the creation of advanced facilities, and a focus on professional sports.

Another factor that contributed to the usage of sports as a sports power is — the diverse communities in the Pacific region and the increase of people of Pacific heritage that live in Australia. In particular, according to diverse sources, the Pacific population constitutes around 1% of the total population of Australia [Ravulo 2015]. The latest census data contemplates that around 337,000 people of Pacific heritage lived in Australia in 2021 [Liu and Howes 2023]. For Australia, it offers certain opportunities for using soft power to connect with and impact the communities that live in the Pacific region. A significant number of sports teams in Australia consist of people of Pacific heritage, while around 42% of sportsmen in the Australian league have families of Pacific origin [Leary 2021]. For Australia, it establishes good conditions and prospects for the creation of partnerships, raising of ambassadors, dissemination of values, and forging meaningful connections with communities across the Pacific.

Analysis of Strategy 2015-2018

Now, having a general understanding of the prerequisites for the adoption of the full and comprehensive soft power approach with sports at the center, it is crucial to switch to the principles, goals, and methods provided in the Sports Diplomacy Strategy 2015-18 by the Australian executive organs.

To start with, the ultimate goal of the first strategy was to capitalize on the opportunities and maximize people-to-people connections, support cultural exchange, and spark trade and investment in the region. Importantly, the joint administration of the Department of Affairs and Trade and the Department of Health's Office for Sport developed and handled the program. Considering this, it is fair to say that the overall method can be characterized as government-led, having significant support from the vertical powers and federal bodies.

Subject to the official document, the strategy had four primary objectives supported by specific initiatives: 1) connect people and institutions, in particular, via sports exchange programs and mentoring; 2) enhance the sport for development, in particular, partnerships via Australian and regional organization in Pacific region and volunteer programs; 3) showcase Australia with help of business partnership programs like Match Australia, sports envoys and mega-events; and 4) help innovation and integrity via government-to-government sports agreements and seed-funding programs [Australian Government 2015]. From there, each goal had the support of at least two government initiatives targeted at the national state and non-state actors and aimed at building relationships with partners in the Indo-Pacific region.

It offered a strong framework where the government tried to affect several dimensions related to knowledge and networking, sports and cultural partnerships and ties, developing sports as a business, and offering a foundation of values and principles. The initiatives from each of the dimensions could supplement one another, especially those that refer to linkages and partnerships. The reason is that they all see development, support, and cultural exchange as priorities and are characterized by a comprehensive approach.

The results of sports diplomacy require evaluation in terms of the adopted programs, changes in the number of partnerships, and effects on communities in the Indo-Pacific region. Let's start with the ground that Australia managed to achieve within the first goal. Before all, the Strategy facilitated the creation of the Sports Diplomacy Massive Open Online Course for sports persons and managers at La Trobe University with the help of the Centre for Sport and Social Impact (CSSI) and the Australian Government's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade [La Trobe University 2024]. This program is illustrative as it was a solid attempt to leverage the image and experience of professional athletes and diplomats supporting knowledge exchange, offering mentoring, and teaching the role of sports diplomacy to people related to sports. It set a solid ground for non-state actors to see the value in connections and partnerships.

Next, it is important to evaluate the effect of corporations and sports initiatives on people who participated in them. For instance, the Sports Exchange Australia program was aimed at developed and developing countries in the Asia-Pacific region. Upon the research with 2,500 respondents across Asia-Pacific, the program representatives underlined that sport was seen as a “unifying force and a power for good”, especially regarding the “sense of separation on geographical sense” [Sports Exchange Australia 2021: 6-9]. It underlines that programs strengthened the understanding of sports as a cultural phenomenon having significant power in Australia.

Another program with a significant impact that is worth analysis is Pacific Sports Partnerships. It was an AUD \$39 million flagship program that allowed the Australian government to support regional organizations and fund projects and certain types of sports in the region [TeamUp 2021]. The 2030 Strategy highlights the success of this program, emphasizing the governmental success in building links in the Asian region. In particular, Pacific Sports Partnerships, with more than 50 partnerships, enabled 1.5 participation in sporting activities and significantly improved the ties with the Asian region, including India, Japan, Singapore, and Malaysia [Australian Government 2019: 7]. Thus, it is no surprise that it became a central program for the development of the Organisation of Sports Federations of Oceania (OSFO), and thanks to the partnership allowed the enlargement of its regional and international membership to 26 financial sports, from archery and badminton to taekwondo and judo [OSFO 2019]. Based on these, one can conclude that Australia managed to create a diverse system of sporting partnerships that it could use to share values, build image, and use for trade, tourism, or investment.

Regarding other crucial programs related to partnership development, such initiatives as TeamUp and PacificAusSports appeared during the first strategy. The TeamUp, having more than 60 partners from 13 sports, has had a strong impact on smaller communities, offering champion inclusion, connecting people, and attracting women and people with disabilities [TeamUp 2019]. A great example of one of the TeamUp initiatives

is the “Smash Down Barriers” program, giving significant attention to para-table tennis and operates in Fiji, Kiribati, and Vanuatu [International Paralympic Committee, 2015]. At the same time, the PacificAus, another flagship program, focused more on high-performance sports partnerships to help elite professionals grow and now has a significant reach in such countries as Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, and the Solomon Islands [PacificAusSports 2021]. As a result, the provision of networking and exchange initiatives worked on with extensive programs related to supporting communities, developing sports there, and building opportunities for elite sportsmen to grow. It allowed the Australian government to implement a people-to-people approach attracting people to Australian values via sport and culture. Therefore, it can be said that Australia significantly improved its standing in the region by supporting communities and their sports development.

Overview of the Australian 2030 Sports Strategy

Before jumping to the analysis of the next strategy, one should consider the conditions and opportunities that the first approach provided. It is clear that Australia used the perception of sports and sporting entities to reach the Pacific population of the region. They used initiatives to support and develop communities, attracting people to their values and offering them a sense of connection that some could lack due to geographical isolation. Lastly, it set a solid foundation for the knowledge exchange and raising sports professionals as envoys. As a result, the Australian government got access to diverse communities and tools to attract them culturally and economically. The next step would have been to capitalize on the connections, sports diplomacy knowledge, and economic side of sports.

Based on the evaluation of the Australian Sports Diplomacy 2030, the soft power approach had a goal to elaborate upon sports as a cultural phenomenon and use accumulated opportunities and resources to strengthen the image and brand of Australia worldwide, increase collaboration between government, industry, and sports entities, and reinforce the connections established between Australia and Pacific communities.

It coincides with the key objectives set in the latest strategy. They refer to 1) empowering Australian sport to represent the country abroad 2) forming and supporting linkages with neighboring countries 3) boosting trade, tourism, and investment 4) reinforcing communities in the Indo-Pacific region and worldwide [Australian Government 2019].

The first goal requires the Australian government to improve sports state and non-state entities and work with professional sportspersons to acquire the necessary skills to represent the country and reinforce its image and representation. In this regard, Sports Diplomacy states to “develop tools to share knowledge” and expertise of sports diplomacy and sports industry” and creates a new Sports Diplomacy Advisory Council [Australian Government 2019: 11]. It will allow sportspersons, coaches, administrators, and managers to know techniques and principles to represent the country. It should add to the education efforts and support the sports diplomacy courses created within the first strategy. Besides, for better synergy between government and industry, the course “Sport for Sustainable Development: Designing Effective Policies and Programmes” for government officials and policymakers was created [Commonwealth Secretariat 2020]. However, despite the fact that sportspersons usually represent Australia worldwide, the federation and inter-governmental organizations seem to be the key audience of such programs. It underlines the focus on the usage of state bodies and not professionals’ image, at least in the global arena.

The second goal contemplates the development of pathways and sports codes for Pacific athletes and sports entities to improve professionally and take part in sporting events in Australia and abroad. For Australia, it is an opportunity to enhance its presence and standing in the Pacific and turn Australia into a platform for sports success for Pacific athletes. For example, Australia already helped Fiji to get bronze medals via the support of the national women’s team and helped 170 Olympic and Paralympic sportspersons representing Pacific nations get ready for the big tournaments [Leary 2021]. It allows Australia to build solid and trusting relationships with Pacific nations and support presence in the region. In

terms of the global arena, Australia can use great performances to raise awareness about the country. At the Olympic Games, the performance of Kathy Freeman, representing the Aboriginal population of Australia, has “put a face to a nation or an ethnic group that people knew little about” [Trunkos & Heere 2017: 11]. At the same time, having a diverse and advanced sports system, the country is likely to strengthen its image and reputation in the Indo-Pacific region, especially at big events related to popular sports there, like tennis, rugby, or cricket.

The third goal is concerned with greater efforts in turning sports and culture capital into financial gain and support of trade networks. On the one hand, it can reinforce linkages and bring greater influence on the communities. On the other hand, the development of communities and leagues is likely to bring sponsors. Yet, there is another side, pointing at the opportunities to enhance the image of Australia as a sports and entertainment hub and attract mega-events. The report declares that Australia has been successful in “bidding, hosting, and participating in major sporting events” [Australian Government 2019: 17]. Interestingly, the Olympic Coordination Commission has appraised Australian efforts to host the Olympic and Paralympic Games in Brisbane in 2032 [Coventry 2024]. Thus, the country should significantly benefit from the hosting of mega events and use it to attract investments into the region. Also, the sports tech and e-sport segments have been on the rise, as well as viewership in the Asia-Pacific Sports Market in recent years [Mordor Intelligence 2023]. It implies that Australia can benefit from the developed system of sports technologies and tech and take a certain part of the market in the future.

The fourth goal is to further develop communities and use sports as a tool to bring diversity, equality, and inclusivity into the Pacific communities. That way, the Australian government will be able to connect with the population of the Pacific region on a deeper level. The report indicates the provision of substantial financing with AUD \$6 million a year for the sports Partnerships Program that will allow multi-sectoral partnerships and focus on such countries as Fiji, Papua New Guinea, India, Indonesia, the Philippines, and

Sri Lanka [Australian Government, 2019, p.20]. As a significant part of the program efforts will be targeted at the grassroots level, there is huge potential to attract new generations, share important values, and set a positive image of Australia in these countries for years ahead.

Overall, the second strategy aims to use the government-led approach and the success of the previous strategy to empower Australian sports, strengthen its cultural and economic influence in the Pacific region, use the sports entities to facilitate trade and attract investments, and distribute its sports influence to Asian countries.

Implications and Limitations for Other Countries

The analysis of the Australian approach to sports diplomacy shows that its success can be a result of certain conditions and peculiarities of the Pacific region. As was discussed earlier in the paper, the crucial factor for the success was the significant effect of sports on Australian identity and, therefore its popularity. Other than that, the advanced sporting policy backed by substantial funding, resulting in continuous success in global areas is another factor that allowed the effective implementation of the strategy. Lastly, the reliance on communities or diaspora in the countries is what allowed Australia to distribute its influence all over the Pacific countries. Considering these peculiarities, the Australian government adopted a strategy that uses its sports heritage and system for soft power.

Yet, such a combination of factors poses doubts on whether the whole strategy can be adapted in any country. Firstly, one of the concerns is that the effectiveness derives from the country's power. Australia represents a hard power, having substantial influence and financing that allows large and diverse horizontal and vertical connections with international actors. It comes in line with the fact the top ten countries that have soft power, including Australia, are also the leaders in terms of hard power, meaning that to succeed in the first, the country should have the second [Lekakis 2019: 12]. Yet, it does not imply that the country won't succeed with a soft power strategy with sports in the center. It just can lack resources and influence to be as effective as the Australian Sports Diplomacy was.

Secondly, Australia significantly relies on its identity and sports heritage, the popularity of sports. Not so many countries have that, and even if they have, they may lack a policy or system to use it. For instance, Brazil used mega-events under the Sport-For-Development strategy, yet, in the short term they resulted in wasting and draining substantial resources [Tinaz 2021: 24]. Nonetheless, there is an example of Croatia, which achieved significant image and branding resources after its national team performance in the Football World Cup. Under normal conditions set by the market, such an increase would have cost hundreds of millions of euros, but their success was difficult to maximize due to a lack of infrastructure, policy, and overall strategy [Tomic 2021]. Importantly, EU member states offer no consensus on the general approach to using sports diplomacy, making sports policies across countries quite chaotic [Parrish 2022]. It proves that the comprehensive and effective government-led sports diplomacy strategy requires a balanced and deliberate approach.

In this regard, it is fair to conclude that the cross-institutional and comprehensive strategy, intervening with many different actors, is possible in developed countries that have effective systems and enough financing. Many of the global powers and leading actors fall under this category. Thus, the Australian approach can be applied among economically stable economies with balanced and working sports policies. Considering the emerging and developing countries that have enough sports popularity, they should for sure look towards the Australian model and have it as an example for initiatives. Significant attention should be paid to sports empowerment, sports diplomacy education, and approach to working with communities. Yet, a lot of things would depend on its resources, economy, and support. The right strategy for the countries with decent sports popularity may be the targeted approach, focusing on the empowerment of the sports and using partnerships to reach certain countries or communities.

Conclusion.

Australia's innovative use of sports diplomacy demonstrates the successful integration of a soft power strategy that leverages the nation's

strong sports culture and advanced sporting infrastructure and establishes an international reputation. Key elements include government-led initiatives within two significant strategies that foster people-to-people connections, cultural exchanges, and economic partnerships. The Sports Diplomacy Strategies of 2015-18 and 2030 have created frameworks for using sports to enhance Australia's cultural and economic influence in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond. These strategies have been effective due to the nation's existing sports culture, robust policy support, significant funding, and strategic international partnerships, particularly in the Pacific region.

However, replicating Australia's model in other countries poses challenges. The

effectiveness of such a strategy heavily relies on pre-existing conditions like a strong sports culture, significant financial resources, and international influence. While developed countries with similar conditions might adopt Australia's comprehensive approach, emerging and developing nations may need to focus on specific elements of Australian frameworks. These countries should emphasize sports empowerment, sports diplomacy knowledge sharing, and strategic partnerships tailored to their unique contexts and available resources. In essence, while Australia's sports diplomacy model offers valuable insights, its applicability varies, requiring careful application based on a country's specific strengths and limitations.

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