



AUSTRALIAN SPORTS DIPLOMACY TOWARDS ASIA-TAKE THE BASKETBALL ENGAGEMENT AS AN EXAMPLE

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze Australian sports diplomacy toward Asia. According to the sports diplomacy expert Dr. Stuart Murray, "Sports-diplomacy exchanges can promote international understanding and friendship, as well as dispel stereotypes and prejudices." Australia is an Oceanian state well-known for its sports excellence and culture. Because of its geographical location and history, Asian partners have never been neglected or forgotten by the administrators since Britain colonized the land in 1788. Over the years, there has been a clear trend that Australia is employing its sports diplomacy and increasingly engaging with Asia. This study uses the Australian basketball engagement towards Asia as an example of its sports diplomacy towards Asia. Reviewing the Australian government's official guiding documents, 'Australia in the Asian Century White Paper, Australian Sports Diplomacy Strategy 2015-18, Sports Diplomacy 2030, the authors conclude that Australia is increasingly engaging with Asia with its sports diplomacy, including basketball diplomacy. As a result, Australia has acquired a better international reputation and international relations in Asia. Hence, sports diplomacy has become a valuable tool for Australia to exert soft power and enhance international relations in Asia.

Keyword: Sports diplomacy, Australian basketball, Australia-Asia, International relations in sports

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1. INTRODUCTION

This article investigates Australia's sports diplomacy towards Asia, especially basketball diplomacy towards Asia. This article will focus on how and why Australia could benefit from basketball diplomacy. Over the years, Australian basketball national teams not only won numerous trophies in world sports events (Logue, July 25, 2022). Australia also successfully held quite a few international basketball events (most recently, the 2022 FIBA Women's Basketball World Cup Sydney and 2023 FIBA Men's Basketball World Cup Asian Qualifiers in Melbourne), strengthening the ties with Asia neighbors through the medium of basketball (Australian Sports Diplomacy Strategy 2015-18, 2014). The successful basketball diplomacy of Australia not only increases its fame and reputation on the world stage but also contributes to Australian economic development and a better political-security environment (Murray, 2013, 2017). The article aims to fill the research gap on how Australian basketball diplomacy towards Asia is implemented and why it is effective.

Before looking at Australian basketball diplomacy towards Asia, we first must define sports diplomacy and how Australia became adept at it. In a traditional sense, diplomacy is 'the conduct of relations between sovereign states with standing in world politics by official agents and by peaceful means' (Bull, 1977, p. 156), so it is the means to a state's foreign policy ends. Still, sports diplomacy is one of the means to the means of those ends (Murray & Pigman, 2014). According to Murrays and

Pigman (2014), there are four main benefits of sports diplomacy: Force traditional diplomatic institutions to reform, adapt, and experiment; Sports and sportspeople can amplify a state's diplomacy; Sports mega-events can offer significant public diplomacy opportunities: International sport as a diplomatic tool concerns the compatibility of the institutions. Very few people in this world would say no or reject watching and taking part in sports. Sports diplomacy has been a great tool in international affairs, from the famous table tennis contributing to the normalization of Sino-U.S. relations in the 1970s to the Olympics held in different countries("50 years on, Ping-Pong Diplomacy shows lasting value," 2021). States show their image and unique culture through sports events or ties to audiences worldwide. Parrish (2021) argued that sports diplomacy contributes to projecting a positive image to external audiences. It can build better relations between states and enhance internal and external legitimacy, resulting in security gains, access to new markets, and expansion of the tourism industry. A few other scholars (Richelieu, Lin, & Leng, 2021) strengthened the non-economic benefits of sports diplomacy. They considered that significant sports events could raise citizens' perception of their government's ability and support their current political institutions. Moreover, sports also increase community pride and awareness of traditions and cultural and environmental concerns.

Australia is a state which is proud of its own rich and robust sports culture. The latest Australian official sports diplomacy document-the, Australian Sports Diplomacy 2030, brings up the fact that Australia excels at many sports and, over the years, Australia has shared its expertise to help build sporting capacity across Asia and the Pacific. It stressed the importance of Asia in its strategy, arguing that Australia's sporting rivalry with its Asian neighbors provides some of the region's strongest sports competition and interest. However, Australia's basketball diplomacy towards Asia needs to draw more attention, like sports such as cricket and tennis (Stoddart, 2008; Zhao & Knijnik, 2021), even though Australia also excels in basketball. Australia has won numerous titles in the world and regional basketball events, including the Olympics, the Basketball World Cups, the FIBA (The International Basketball Federation. The original French name: Fédération Internationale de basket-ball amateur) Asia Cup and FIBA Oceania in the last few decades. Table 1 lists the notable titles of Australian basketball national teams over the years.

Table 1: Australian national men's and women's basketball team titles

Australia Basketball/Titles	Championship	Silver	Bronze	Fourth	Fiba Ranking In 2022
The Boomers (Men's National)	19 Times In Fiba Oceania (1971, 1975, 1978, 1979, 1981, 1983, 1985, 1987, 1989, 1991, 1993, 1995, 1997, 2003, 2005, 2007, 2011, 2013, 2015)) 2 Times In Fiba Asia (2017, 2022) 1 Time In The Commonwealth Game (2006).	2 Times In Fiba Oceania (2001, 2009)	1 Time In The Olympics (2020)	4 Times In The Olympics (1988, 1996, 2000, And 2016) Fiba World Cup (2019)	3
The Opals (Women's National)	15 Times In Fiba Oceania (1974, 1978, 1982, 1985, 1989, 1995, 1997, 2001, 2003, 2005, 2007, 2009, 2011, 2013, 2015) 1 Time In Fiba World Cup (2006)	3 Times In The Olympics (2000, 2004, 2008) 1 Time In Work Cup (2018) 1 Time In Fiba Asia Cup (2017)	2 Times At Olympics (1996, 2012) 4 Times In World Cup (1998, 2002, 2014, 2022) 2 Times In Fiba Asia Cup (2019, 2021)	2 Times At World Cup (1979, 1994) 1 Time At Olympics (1988)	3

In 2015, FIBA announced that Australian Boomers (Men's national team) would play regular games and be admitted to FIBA Asia Cup as part of FIBA's revamped international program. Since then, Oceania's Australia and New Zealand have joined the Asian qualifying zone for Asia Cup and FIBA

World Cup events (Ward, 2015). Since then, the Boomers have secured gold medals in FIBA Asia Cup (2017, 2022). The admission of Australian basketball to the Asia Cup reveals that Australia's tendency towards the Asia region has made some difference in Asia. At the same time, Australian basketball also received a more substantial reputation and recognition in Asia.

2. METHODS

The method in this research is Research and Development. The development of research instrum This study uses the qualitative approach based on content analysis and observation methods to analyze Australia's basketball diplomacy towards Asia. The main aim of the content analysis method in this article is to get a deep understanding of Australian sports diplomacy strategies and their reasons. The content analysis will be applied to three primary guiding documents of Australian strategic sports diplomacy towards Asia: Australia in the Asian Century White Paper 2012, Australian Sports Diplomacy Strategy 2015-2018, and Australian Sports Strategy 2030. These three documents reveal Australia's sports diplomacy attitude, agenda, and principles. Reviewing these three documents, we can understand how and why Australia engages with Asia through sports diplomacy. According to Kobierecki (2020), Australia was the first country in the world which come out with its first sports diplomacy plan in 2014. The foresight of the Australian government towards sports has brought massive awareness and exposure to this "isolated" Indo-Pacific state, especially the reputation in Pacific states, Asia, and beyond.

Another research method this article has used is the observation method. Observation allows researchers to study people or certain phenomena in a relatively natural environment to understand things or issues from their perspective. This article used this observation method to attest to the practical Australian basketball culture and international events organizing capability. The article could teach practical Australian basketball strategies and practices through observing the opening ceremonies and games. In 2022, two major basketball events happened in Australia: The FIBA Men's World Cup 2023 Asian qualifier games in Melbourne (June 30- July 4 2022) and the 2022 FIBA Women's World Cup in Sydney (September 22-October 1, 2022). The author flew to both cities to observe these two basketball events. How and why Australia bid and organized the grand basketball events is analyzed. In FIBA Men's World Cup 2023 Asian qualifier games, 4 teams in Group B have been involved: Australia, China, Chinese Taipei, and Japan. Australian boomers swept Group B with 6 wins and 0 losses. The statistics of Group B is as listed in the following table,

Table 2: FIBA Men's World Cup 2023 Asian qualifier group B games

TEAM	P	W/L	+/-	PTS
AUSTRALIA *	6	6/0	148	513/365
CHINA *	6	4/2	96	493/397
JAPAN *	6	2/4	-66	417/483
CHINESE TAIPEI	6	0/6	-178	366/544

*Advance to the Second Round

Source: FIBA Website

In FIBA Women's World Cup 2022 Sydney, the Australian Opals suffered a heartbreak failure in the semi-final against China but secured third place against Canada in the end (Wildes, 2022). Both events revealed the talent and excellence of Australian basketball. They demonstrated their ability to organize great international games, rich traditions, unique culture, and mature basketball fans. During FIBA Women's World Cup, we observed a high group of disciplined but passionate Australian basketball audiences. The attitude or ability to accept the loss in games showed Australia's matureness and sports spirit.

3. RESULT

3.1 Australia's sports diplomacy

As discussed previously, Australia excels in many sports, including basketball. In the meantime, it is also the first state which come out with sports diplomacy strategy. Sports diplomacy has become vital for Australia to engage with other states. However, existing literature must pay more attention to Asia's role in Australia's sports diplomacy, especially basketball. Asia was not the focus of Australia's foreign policy in the first few decades after the establishment of the Australian Commonwealth. Australia's mindset was oriented towards the British Empire and Europe in the early decades after the Federation's establishment in 1901. After World War II, Australia shifted its strategic focus to the U.S. Nevertheless, Australia's current economic focus has already moved into Asia (*Australia in the Asian Century White Paper* 2012). Asia has created many economic miracles and become the world production center. Asia is becoming increasingly vital for Australia due to the increasing economic ties, geographical proximity, demographic change within Australia, and security desires (Gao, 2022).

In 2012, Australia government officially launched the document "Australia in the Asian Century While Paper" which acknowledges the significance of Asia and its influence on Australian economy, society, and strategic environment. It says, "The Asian Century is an Australian opportunity. As the global center of gravity shifts to our region, the tyranny of distance is being replaced by the prospects of proximity. Australia is in the right place at the right time—in the Asian region in the Asian Century." It also strengthened the Australia's deep and broad relationships with Asian partners across educational, cultural, sports and social dimensions. Also, the people-to-people ties between Australia and Asia are believed to have deepened and transformed Australian society.

Economically, Asian economies have become main trading partners of Australia. Twelve of Australia's largest fifteen trading partners are from Asia, accounting for two-thirds of Australia's total exports. Also, more than 40% of Australian nominal GDP comes from trade with Asian partners. Over the next ten years, Asia will deliver two-thirds of global growth (Howard, 2022). Geographically, Australia is an Oceanian state located in between The Indian Ocean and the Pacific, north neighboring with Indonesia and further faced with other rising Asian states such as India, Japan, and China. Though Australia geographically is close to Asia, it once strictly restricted the immigrants from Asia. There were only 0.3% of Asian racial origins citizens in the Australian population according to the 1961 Census of Australia. In sharp contrast, 26% of all births in Australia in 2016 had at least one parent born in Asia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017). Over half Australia's overseas-born population is from Asian states: India, China, Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Sri Lanka are among the top 10 countries. The growing number of Asian immigrants in Australia has further strengthened the ties between Australia and Asia. The Australian Asian diaspora also extends its sports diplomacy influence to a broader audience than traditional activities allow (*Australian Sports Diplomacy Strategy 2015-18*, 2014).

Table 3 Australia's overseas-born population by country of birth in 2021 — top 10

Country of birth(b)	2011		2021	
	'000	%(c)	'000	%(c)
England	991.04	4.4	967.39	3.8
India	337.12	1.5	710.38	2.8
China(d)	387.42	1.7	595.63	2.3
New Zealand	543.95	2.4	559.98	2.2
Philippines	193.03	0.9	310.62	1.2

Vietnam	207.62	0.9	268.17	1.0
South Africa	161.59	0.7	201.93	0.8
Malaysia	134.14	0.6	172.25	0.7
Italy	201.68	0.9	171.52	0.7
Sri Lanka	99.74	0.4	145.79	0.6

Source: Statistics on Australia's estimated resident population by country of birth, Australian Bureau of Statistics.

In the security area, Australia is leaning toward allies U.S. and UK. Mini-lateral security mechanisms such as AUKUS (multipurpose military alliance including Australia, United Kingdom and United States) and QUAD (India, Australia, United States of America and Japan) to balance rising Chinese influence in the region (Chirathivat, Rutchatorn, & Devendrakumar, 2022; Masuhr & Schepers, 2021). Australia and China bilateral relationship became sour after Australia openly asked for a COVID-19 origin investigation. Then, the official communication channel between the two states stagnated for nearly three years due to economic sanctions (Xue, 2022). However, the lousy relationship continued the sports channel between China and Australia. In 2021/2022 season, the Chinese basketball player Zhou Qi joined the Melbourne Phoenix team to play in the Australian professional basketball league NBL (Winter, 2021). The tense political relation did not impair the sports communication and ties between Australia and China, which proved the positive diplomatic effect of international sports. According to Murray and Pigman (2014), international sport's most famous diplomatic effect is suspending, deferring, or sublating conflicts between politics.

When there is a conflict between states due to political and economic interests, sports diplomacy can always play a special role in international relations. As mentioned, Australia is one of the few global states adept in sports diplomacy. Australian sports diplomacy documents strengthened the significance of sports diplomacy for Australia. In the first sports diplomacy strategy document, the Indo-pacific and Asia are addressed as the core region to which Australia shall pay attention. It also pointed out that Australia aims to expand and coordinate sports diplomacy activity and major sports events in the region and beyond. Australia reiterated its dedication to sports diplomacy into Asia-Pacific and others in the latest sports diplomacy document. It promised to increase the funding for partnership programs in Asia and the Pacific. For instance, the Australian Sports Partnerships Program (ASPP) values A\$ 6 million annually and uses multi-sectoral partnerships between sporting, development, and government organizations. It also promoted Australian values such as gender equality, disability inclusion, and leadership creation this program. ASPP initially focuses on six Pacific countries (Fiji, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Tonga and Vanuatu) in addition to four Asian countries (India, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka) (*Sports Diplomacy 2030*, 2019).

Hence, Australia is increasingly engaging with Asia through its sports diplomacy given its sports excellence, economic impetus, people-to-people ties and security concerns. These are the reasons behind the government's attention on sports diplomacy towards Asia. Australia has secured the economic gains, reputation, and a stable regional order from sports diplomacy. In the next section, the paper will investigate Australia's basketball diplomacy towards Asia as an example to elaborate on how and why Australia uses basketball to engage with Asia.

3.2 Australia's basketball diplomacy towards Asia

Basketball is ranked in the top three team sports for participation in Australia, Europe, Southeast Asia, and Western Pacific nations. It is also one of the most popular team sports in Asia and beyond (Scanlan & Dalbo, 2019). Basketball provides high-level competitions for professional players in regional and worldwide sports and creates a lucrative business and entertainment for billions of people. Equally important, this sport has contributed to the people-to-people communication and has become a vital international diplomacy tool for

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states. Australia's basketball diplomacy towards Asia came from its sports diplomacy guiding documents (Australia in the Asian Century White Paper, Australian Sports Diplomacy Strategy 2015-2018, and Sports Diplomacy 2030). There are a few measures which Australia has taken to exert basketball diplomacy influence towards Asia. It includes hosting international basketball events, shifting Australian basketball to Asia and engaging Asia into Australian basketball development.

Australia has globally recognized expertise in hosting major sporting events and they excel at delivering opening and closing ceremonies, arts and cultural programs and engaging communities around major events (*Sports Diplomacy 2030*, 2019). During the FIBA Men's World Cup Qualifier and FIBA Women's World Cup, the author visited Melbourne and Sydney to observe how Australia used the international basketball sports and exerted its diplomacy. A few exciting features of Australian basketball diplomacy are noted: Firstly, Australian aboriginal people and culture were promoted in both basketball events. There were aboriginal people performances at the opening and closing ceremonies in both basketball events, which promoted the culture and identity of Australia to the audiences and the world fans. Australia also had the capacity, facilities, and experience to hold those basketball events. There were so many side activities that audiences could take part in before going into the stadium to watch the games: including cultural activities, a small temporary basketball court for fans to play, arts drawing, dancing, and commercial activities. The ability and attitude towards game failure reveal the Australian fans' sports civility and maturity.

Conversely, many tragedies happened in sports events due to the misbehaviors of fans including the recent tragedy in East Java, Indonesia (Rebecca Ratcliffe, 2022). The ability to accept failure or negative game results shows the sports culture of a nation. During the semi-final game between China and Australia in FIBA Women's World Cup, Australian fans have shown their high level of civility and maturity. The game was a vital game for both teams and a tight game. Nevertheless, in the last few seconds, the Australian team did not nail the advantage but failed the game by two points. As a host country that excels in basketball, Australian fans showed unbelievable calmness and control. There were no curses, hateful words, anger during and after the game. On the contrary, the Australian fans were full of passion, support, and understanding towards their national players (There were also many international audiences, including many Asians in the stadium).

As many know, Australia is also an Oceania state that always partakes in Oceanian sports events. However, with the rising of Asia and increasing economic ties with Asia, Australia applied to partake in Asian sports events, including basketball, football, and others. Taken basketball as an example, Australia and New Zealand are always the two countries that went to the FIBA Oceanian Cup finals. To access Asian markets and improve the competition standard, Australia and New Zealand applied to play at FIBA Asia Cup for some years. In 2015, the Australia and New Zealand teams were officially admitted to FIBA Asia Cup. Australia also made a further step to join Asian Games, rated the second-largest multi-sports event behind the Olympics (Larkin, 2019). After the Australian Olympic Committee, president John Coates lobbied for inclusion at the Asian showcase for nearly two decades, Australian five sports. These, including basketball, soccer, volleyball, bench volleyball and fencing, are invited to compete at the 2022 Asian Games in China (This Asian game was later postponed to 2023 due to COVID). This will also be Australia's first time participating in the Asian Games, a key

milestone for Australian basketball diplomacy towards Asia. Besides that, Australia also funded basketball programs in the Pacific and Asia, promoting Australian gender equality in basketball and helping Asian states build their basketball capacities ("Basketball Without Borders launches at the AIS," 2022). In 2022, Basketball without Borders (BWB), the NBA and FIBA's global basketball development and community outreach program, invited 60 high-school-age boys and girls from 15 states across the Asia-Pacific region to the Australian Institute of Sport to have intensive training. This young talented basketball from Asia and the Pacific region got the chance to learn basketball skills from NBA players and the best Australian players in Australia.

Another basketball diplomacy measure of Australia is to engage Asia into Australian development. Even as early as 2006, the National Basketball League (NBL), the Australian professional league tried to expand into Asia. However, it failed as the Singapore Slingers cited an unexpected rise in travel costs (Hides, 2015). In 2015, the NBL boss Larry Kestelman restressed the importance of engaging Asian counterparts into NBL. He said, "We have already started that process; we have reached out to China and contacts in the Philippines. We are open for business as far as we are concerned in Asia". His vision is to play both during the regular season and in the off-season more and more games and interact with Asian partners. Though the goal has yet to be achieved, NBL has attracted lots of intention from Asia. Excellent Asian basketball players are allowed to play in the NBL.

A famous example is the Chinese basketball player Qi Zhou, Zhou was picked in the second round of the NBA by Houston Rockets in 2016. Later he returned to China to play in the Chinese professional league CBA because he did not get to play much on the court in NBA. He soon became a superstar in the CBA and a vital player in the Chinese national team. However, Zhou started having issues with his CBA Xinjiang team when he requested to be traded to other teams. However, the CBA rules only allow him to leave Xinjiang if Xinjiang provides the ceiling salary. As Zhou and Xinjiang could not reach a consensus, Zhou started exploring overseas basketball opportunities. He played with Melbourne in the 2020/2021 and 2021/2022 seasons. Ever since he joined the NBL, NBL has received much attention and awareness in China. Zhou is just one example of Australia engaging Asia in its basketball development. There are also a few other Asian players playing in NBL. The Australian rising basketball star Thon Maker also plays in the Chinese professional basketball league CBA. The basketball flow between Asia and Australia has strengthened the ties between Australia and Asian states. Undoubtedly, the increasing links in sports would positively influence economic ties and people-to-people exchanges.

4. DISCUSSION

This research identifies how and why Australia engages Asia with its basketball diplomacy. Existing studies have strengthened the importance of sports diplomacy, Australian sports diplomacy policy, and Australia's excellent sports culture. For instance, Mar (2014) argued that Australia had used quite a few sports programs to extend national policy such as providing a basis for people to people exchanges; promoting a positive image of Australia; leveraging of major sporting events to enhance business and investment opportunities; and using sports as a catalyst for development. Similarly, Parrish (2021) and Horton (2015) assumed that Australia had recognized the value of sport in building Australia's regional policy and contributing to an improved international image and greater trade and tourism. Best and Austin (2022) also stressed that Australia had confirmed its commitment to hosting international events to achieve its sports diplomacy goals. The existing research has touched on the significance of Australia's sports diplomacy. These researchers believe that sports became a central

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feature of Australian society during the colonial era, a critical force that drove the emergence of a national identity.

However, only a few debates or research focused on Australia's practical basketball diplomacy towards Asia. Australia was not born to lead sports diplomacy in the region. Australia needed to pay more attention to its sports capacity in diplomacy. Even earlier, Murray (2013) provided open suggestions to Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) that Australia should use sports diplomacy to regional neighbors such as Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Indonesia, and the Solomon Islands. Later Australia realized its sports capacity and significance in Asia, becoming a master of sports diplomacy in the Asia-Pacific region. This study uses basketball as an example to elaborate on Australia's adept sports diplomacy by reviewing the existing literature and the three guiding government documents: Australia in the Asian Century White Paper, Australian Sports Diplomacy Strategy 2015-2018, and Australian Sports Diplomacy 2030. The authors also used the observation method to observe the grand international basketball events held by Australia in 2022. The official documents and basketball practices could verify Australian basketball diplomacy together.

The limitation of this study is due to the limitation of time and funding. It would be better if the authors could spend more time on observation at the FIBA Women's World Cup 2022 and FIBA Men's World Cup 2023 Asia Qualifiers. However, the authors could only spend a small amount of time and funding on the observation. Future research could investigate different reactions of Asian partners towards Australian basketball diplomacy and the reasons behind it.

5. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Australia engages with Asia through its adept basketball diplomacy. Australia was aware of the significance of Asia in its economic and security field. Australia has taken a few measures to enhance its basketball ties with Asia, including hosting international basketball events, shifting it to Asia and engaging Asia in Australian basketball development. In sports diplomacy, this study has filled the research gap of Australian practical basketball diplomacy in the existing literature. Though Australia is not part of Asia, it has already taken part in Asian basketball events and received colossal attention and reputation from Asia.

The paper also explained the reasons why Australia is increasingly engaging with Asia. The basketball diplomacy of Australia towards Asia also reveals Australia strategic amity towards Asia. Asia has become the most important trading partner of Australia. To reap the development benefits of Asia, Australia realized it should strengthen the ties through sports diplomacy while maintaining security ties with U.S. and UK. When there is conflict or contradiction between economic and security interests, sports diplomacy is always a good tool for Australia to comfort its close economic partners. The Australian government was the first country who initiate its first sports diplomacy strategy among all the countries, which became the guiding document for Australian basketball engagement towards Asia together with the second sports diplomacy and the Australia in the Asian Century.

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