

VOL
62



How the Women's Asian Cup reinforces Australia's Indo-Pacific diplomacy

Sarah Leary



INDO-PACIFIC ANALYSIS BRIEFS 2026

The Perth USAsia Centre's Indo-Pacific Analysis Briefs seek to provide perceptive and contemporary insights from across the region. The series features leading analysts from Asia, Australia and the US to deliver up-to-the-minute assessments on issues of national and regional importance. This series will shine a light on the issues that remain critically important to Australia and the Indo-Pacific at a time when global events may otherwise dominate the news cycle.



AUTHOR

Sarah Leary

Senior Research Adviser: First Nations
Foreign Policy, Perth USAsia Centre

Sarah Leary leads the Centre's suite of policy advocacy, research and partnership activities focused on Western Australia's engagement with Australia's First Nations Foreign Policy agenda.

A proud Palawa woman, she brings to the Centre 14 years' experience in the Australian Government working across the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and Attorney-General's Departments. Her public sector experience spans strategic policy and trade and investment facilitation to designing and implementing large-scale programs to improve private-sector development, gender equality, and sports diplomacy outcomes across the Indo-Pacific.

During her diplomatic career, she served in Solomon Islands, Cambodia, and Vietnam, as well as deployments to the Australian Permanent Mission to the United Nations in New York and Australian Embassy in Washington DC. As an advisor to Australia's Ambassador for Women and Girls, Sarah supported Australia's UN Human Rights Council campaign and represented Australia at the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in 2012.

Sarah is a highly regarded public diplomacy practitioner and sought after public speaker, having spearheaded Australia's largest ever public diplomacy investment – PacificAus Sports – to deepen Australia's ties to the Pacific, culminating in the stronger inclusion of Pacific athletes in Australia's Super Rugby Pacific franchise, and the Tokyo Olympic Games.

Originally from Tommeginne Country in North-West Tasmania, Sarah holds a Bachelor of Arts majoring in International Relations from the University of Tasmania and a Masters in Diplomacy and International Strategy from the London School of Economics. She speaks Indonesian and is a former journalist with Fairfax Media.



KEY MESSAGES

- 1** The Women's Asian Cup is not just a showcase of elite women's soccer, but a strategic opportunity for Australia to strengthen Indo-Pacific ties through sports diplomacy.
- 2** Sport fosters enduring people-to-people links that bridge political divides, including during periods of contest and competition.
- 3** Hosting the Asian Cup underscores Australia's commitment to advancing gender equality and regional integration in uncertain times.



When the Women's Asian Cup kicks off in Perth on 1 March 2026, Australia will play host to one of the Indo-Pacific's premier women's soccer tournaments – at a time when participating nations across our region are navigating new theatres of contest and change.

Eleven teams from across the region – China PR (China), Japan, Korea Republic (South Korea), Philippines, Vietnam, Chinese Taipei (Taiwan), DPR Korea (North Korea), IR Iran (Iran), Uzbekistan, Bangladesh, and India – will compete on Australian soil.

Make no mistake, this is a chance for Australian crowds to witness some top-tier soccer. But for those attuned to diplomatic tradecraft, it is also a timely reminder of how international sports tournaments can be leveraged as a powerful tool of connection.

Australia's engagement with sports diplomacy is not new, but it has evolved strategically. My own experience as one of the early architects of *PacificAus Sports* under the 2018 Pacific Step-up – an AUD52 million sports diplomacy initiative spanning rugby union, rugby league, netball, cricket, and soccer, showed how sport supports resilience in bilateral relationships when other forms of diplomatic exchange are disrupted – such as during COVID-19.

That program deepened people-to-people links, supported Pacific athletes' inclusion in Australian competitions, and reinforced Australia's commitment to the neighbourhood. Australia's hosting rights of the Women's Asian Cup extends this logic both westward and northward into broader Indo-Pacific terrain.

Why Australians should care about sport diplomacy

Sport as a Vehicle for Statecraft

Why should Australians – and our regional partners – care about sports diplomacy? First, sport remains one of the few arenas where contest occurs on equal terms, yet the aftermath fosters cooperation. On the soccer pitch, national teams embody rivalry; off it, shared preparation, travel, media coverage, and fan interactions create people-to-people links and memories that endure.

At a time of trade tensions, territorial disputes, and geopolitical chess moves, sporting tournaments such as these offer an ironic counterpoint: when the theatre of competitive sport allows leaders in government and business to create a more relaxed space for dialogue.

Engagements 'on the margins' of sport play an important role for our diplomats seeking to build Australia's reputation as a responsible regional leader who listens.

Prior to 2018, sports diplomacy activity by Australia was characterised as 'sporadic, anecdotal and ambiguously grouped.'¹ In contrast, Australia is now consistently leveraging sport as a diplomatic tool. There are now tailored engagement platforms like *PacificAus Sports* available to Australian diplomats seeking to deepen people-to-people connections in the region.

Australia's sports diplomacy transition has prompted shifts in Australian diplomatic practice itself, where leveraging sport is now considered a routine, rather than irregular, tool of engagement.

International visit programs and leaders' meetings are now routine fixtures on the margins of major sporting events. Australian Embassies, High Commissions, and Consulates now prioritise sports diplomacy in their annual public diplomacy budgets. And, at the institutional level, Australia has a Sports Diplomacy 2030 strategy guiding this work.²

It is also true that Australia's economic linkages with the Indo-Pacific are underdeveloped relative to the strategic narrative diplomats tell each other about Australia's interests in the region. By 2030, the Indo-Pacific will account for 58 per cent of global GDP⁸, yet Australia's trade and investment ties lag far behind their potential.

Australia's efforts to facilitate deeper Indo-Pacific sporting connections and other major regional events go some way towards addressing this gap.

Sports diplomacy helps sustain relationships at grassroots and institutional levels – coaches exchange notes, players form friendships, officials build networks – long after the final whistle. Hosting the Women's Asian Cup signals Australia's willingness to invest in these softer (yet vital) people-to-people linkages, complementing other diplomatic and economic efforts.

Empowering Women and Navigating Political Tensions

The tournament's female-only focus is another selling point. Women's sport has long punched above its weight in both development and diplomatic circles. It challenges stereotypes; promotes gender equality; creates leadership, economic, and employment opportunities for women globally; and amplifies the achievements of women through broadcast and other sponsorship deals. Teams from Iran, where female players may face domestic restrictions, highlight sport's role as a platform for visibility and agency.

The presence of both Korea, China PR and Chinese Taipei, as well as other South Asian nations underscores soccer's capacity to also facilitate contact between countries who rarely share neutral ground elsewhere. This aspect of sports diplomacy – bringing competing nations together on the field when geopolitical rivalries broil at home – is often overlooked by the broader community, yet it holds profound potential for maintaining a degree of dialogue during tense periods. Adversaries must balance national pride with the demands of fair play, creating rare moments of shared purpose that can help soften the edges of bilateral disputes (see Box 1).

BOX 1 Case studies: Sport as a vehicle for dialogue

A classic case study is the 1971 "Ping-Pong Diplomacy" between the United States and China. At the height of the Cold War, an American table tennis team's visit to China – sparked by a chance encounter between players – thawed decades of isolation, paving the way for President Richard Nixon's historic visit to China and the eventual normalisation of relations between the two powers. In the Indo-Pacific context, similar dynamics have played out in cricket diplomacy between India and Pakistan, where matches have occasionally prompted high-level talks amid longstanding border disputes. These examples show how sport can serve as a low-stakes entry point for diplomatic engagement, allowing countries to interact without immediate political concessions. In these ways, Australia's hosting of the Women's Asian Cup could quietly contribute to regional stability in ways that extend far beyond the scoreboard.

Australia, as host, can facilitate these encounters without overt politicisation – providing security, smooth event logistics, and a safe, clean, and welcoming environment that subtly advances Australia's interests.



It's an important time to forge a favourable impression among Indo-Pacific nations of who we are, what we stand for, and how we play the game.

Sports diplomacy demands careful stewardship

Of course, sports diplomacy is not without risks. Geopolitical sensitivities can sometimes spill onto the field, as seen in past boycotts or protests. For instance, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the Australian Open faced significant controversy over the participation of Russian and Belarusian players. While they were allowed to compete under a neutral flag, tournament organisers banned Russian and Belarusian flags and symbols in the stands to prevent escalation, amid protests from Ukrainian players and fans who called for outright bans. This led to some tense moments, including spectator disruptions and public statements from athletes highlighting the war's impact, underscoring how political conflicts can infiltrate neutral sporting events and venues.

Yet precisely because sport is emotive and public, it demands careful stewardship.

Australia's efforts to carve out a distinctive approach to sports diplomacy – rooted in partnership rather than imposition – has proven effective in the Pacific and may translate well again in Australia during the Women's Asian Cup in 2026. Beyond, we'll have a shot at stretching our sports diplomacy muscles at an even higher level, as Australia prepares to host the 2032 Summer Olympics in Brisbane. By emphasising fair play, cultural exchange, and community outreach around matches, the people of Australia can play a role in reinforcing Australia's international image as a reliable, inclusive partner.

Conclusion

The Women's Asian Cup offers Australia the chance to deepen our relationships in the Indo-Pacific. Yes, it's an opportunity to celebrate elite women's soccer, but it is also an opportunity for Australia to invest in the bilateral relationships that will shape our region's future.

Through sports diplomacy, we can build resilient people-to-people ties that add ballast to our regional relationships during geopolitical uncertainties, promote gender equality in challenging contexts, and facilitate subtle dialogues among rivals – all while enhancing Australia's economic, cultural, and strategic position in the region.

As host, Australia has a unique platform to show it is capable of walking the talk on regional leadership and women's empowerment, ensuring that the benefits of this tournament echo long after the final whistle blows.

Endnotes

- 1 Vickery, J., MacDonald, S., & Cull, N. J. (Eds.). (2025). *Understanding Cultural Diplomacy and International Cultural Relations*. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781035312856>
- 2 Department of Health. (2019). *Sports Diplomacy 2030*. Australian Government. <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/sports-diplomacy-2030.pdf>
- 3 World Economics (n.d.) *The Future is Asian*. <https://www.worldeconomics.com/Thoughts/The-Future-is-Asian.aspx>

About the Perth USAsia Centre

The Perth USAsia Centre is a leading think tank focused on Indo-Pacific strategy. Through our research and educational activities, we strengthen relationships and strategic thinking between Australia, the Indo-Pacific, and the United States. Based at the University of Western Australia, we are a non-partisan and not-for profit institution. We engage thought leaders across government, business, and academia to address challenges and opportunities in the Indo-Pacific region. Since the Centre's inception in 2013, we have informed a broad and diverse community of over 33,000 at more than 900 events across 27 cities in 10 countries.

For more information, contact us via perthusasiacentre@uwa.edu.au

Explore Our Indo-Pacific Online Courses

Deepen your understanding of the Indo-Pacific through our flexible, fully online courses. Designed for early to mid-career professionals across business, government, and education, they provide practical insight into the region and Australia's strategic relationships with Asia – strengthening capability and supporting career development.

Visit our website to learn more: perthusasia.edu.au/education/onlinecourses

Disclaimer

This publication is designed to provide accurate and authoritative information in relation to the subject matter covered. It is provided on the understanding that the publisher is not engaged in rendering any form of professional or other advice or services. No person should rely on the contents of this publication without first obtaining advice from a qualified professional individual or agency.

© Perth USAsia Centre 2026

This publication is subject to copyright. Except as permitted under the Copyright Act 1968, no part of it may in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, microcopying, photocopying, recording or otherwise) be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted without prior written permission. Enquiries should be addressed to the publisher. Notwithstanding the above, educational Institutions (including schools, independent colleges, universities, and TAFEs) are granted permission to make copies of copyrighted works strictly for educational purposes without explicit permission from the Perth USAsia Centre and free of charge.



perthusasia.edu.au



M265, 3rd Floor, Old Economics Building, The University of Western Australia, 35 Stirling Highway, Crawley WA 6009, Australia



- @ perthusasiacentre@uwa.edu.au
- in perth-usasia-centre
- perthusasiacentre
- f PerthUSAsia
- X @PerthUSAsia
- perthusasia.edu.au