

India's Sports Diplomacy: Strengthening Bilateral Ties in the 21st Century

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Abstract—This research paper explores the growing significance of sports diplomacy in India's foreign policy, analyzing its historical context, key milestones, and the role of major sporting events in promoting international relations. The study begins by examining India's engagement in global sporting events, tracing its evolution from traditional sports like wrestling and kabaddi to its contemporary involvement in cricket, hockey, and the rapidly growing Indian Premier League (IPL). Through the lens of multi-sport diplomacy, the paper highlights India's use of sports as a tool to foster cooperation, especially within regional groupings such as South Asia and Southeast Asia.

A key focus is on cricket diplomacy, particularly its impact on relations with neighboring countries like Pakistan, where sporting ties have often served as a diplomatic bridge during times of political tension. The research also delves into India's ambassadorial efforts around mega sporting events, exploring how these events enhance the nation's image as a reliable global partner. In addition, the paper investigates cultural diplomacy through sports, focusing on India's influence in Africa and Southeast Asia, and how sports initiatives support its "Look East" policy and foster soft power.

Challenges and opportunities in India's sports diplomacy are critically assessed, including the growing influence of Indian sports leagues, potential diplomatic hurdles, and the alignment of policy frameworks to maximize the benefits of sports diplomacy. The conclusion underscores the strategic role of sports diplomacy in strengthening bilateral relations, projecting India's global image, and enhancing its presence on the international stage. As India continues to invest in sporting infrastructure and international collaborations, its sports diplomacy holds promise for further diplomatic achievements and global recognition.

1. INTRODUCTION

The universal passion for sports can be leveraged to influence diplomatic, social, and political relations and is generally referred to as 'sports diplomacy'. In the complex world of international relations, nations often look to achieve policy imperatives by fostering collaboration and goodwill through sporting ties; and it, of course, also serves to promote showcase progress.

India has a rich sporting heritage deeply rooted in traditional games like wrestling, kabaddi, and archery alongside modern sports such as cricket and hockey. Ancient sports like Mallakhamb showcase the country's blend of physical strength and agility, while colonial-era cricket has become a national

passion. India's success in international arenas, including multiple Olympic medals in shooting, wrestling, and badminton, highlights its growing prominence in international sporting events. The rise of popular leagues like the IPL and Pro Kabaddi, combined with initiatives like Khelo India, a government program aimed at reviving sports culture at the grassroots level, has increasingly brought attention to the potential of sports as a diplomatic instrument.

India's foreign policy in the 21st century has been shaped by its geopolitical realities, economic ambitions, and aspirations to be a leader in global governance. Sports diplomacy, which focuses on people-to-people connections through athletic endeavors, fits seamlessly into India's soft power approach. As defined by political scientist Joseph Nye, soft power is the ability to shape the preferences of others through appeal and attraction rather than coercion [**DiPLO**].

India's engagement in international sports plays a significant role in its diplomatic endeavors. As a nation with over 1.45 billion people and a rapidly expanding economy, India's sporting landscape offers multiple avenues for international engagement.

2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF SPORTS DIPLOMACY

The concept of sports diplomacy is not new. Throughout the 20th century, sports has played a significant role in shaping diplomatic relations between nations. One of the most notable examples is "Ping Pong Diplomacy" which refers to the exchange of table tennis players between the United States and China that played a key role in improving relations between the two nations. In 1971, a US team played a series of matches in China becoming the first group of Americans to visit the country since 1949. [**National Museum of American Diplomacy**]

In a similar vein, sports diplomacy has also played a crucial role in India-Pakistan relations. A prime example is the rivalry between athletes Milkha Singh and Abdul Khaliq in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Milkha Singh, representing India, famously defeated Pakistan's Khaliq, at the Asian Games in 1958 and again in Lahore two years later. While the athletes themselves were not explicitly friendly, their rivalry forged a

new relationship between India and Pakistan. The impact of their competition was so significant that it garnered attention from the highest levels of government. Pakistani President General Ayub Khan bestowed upon Milkha Singh the title of 'Flying Sikh', while Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru referred to Khaliq as the 'Flying Bird of Asia'. This exchange of honorifics by the nations' leaders underscores how athletic competitions can transcend mere sport and become instruments of diplomatic engagement. **[Raksha-Anirveda]**

A. Key Milestones in India's Sports Diplomacy

India's participation in international sporting events dates to pre-independence. The Indian hockey team's dominance in the 1920s and 1930s is one of the earliest examples with the team securing its first Olympic gold medal at the 1928 Amsterdam Games **[Sportsmatik]**. Indian tennis also made an impact when Ghaus Mohammad became the first Indian to reach the Wimbledon quarterfinals in 1939 **[aitatennis]**. Following independence, India officially debuted as a sovereign nation at the 1948 London Olympics marking its entry into the global sporting arena.

The Asian Games hosted by India in 1951 and 1982, showcased the country's organizational capacity for large-scale international events. India's reputation in cricket was bolstered by winning the ODI World Cup in 1983 and 2011, and co-hosting the 1987 World Cup with Pakistan marked a significant instance of regional cooperation despite political tensions. The 2010 Commonwealth Games in New Delhi was the largest multi-sport event ever held in India, while events like the Formula 1 Indian Grand Prix (2011-2013) and the 2017 FIFA U-17 World Cup further expanded India's influence in the global sporting landscape. **[Olympics ODI]**

India's cricket tours to England in the 1950s and 1960s, not only fostered sporting ties but also served as cultural exchanges, maintaining relations with the former colonial power **[Cricketnmore]**. During the Cold War, sports exchanges with the Soviet Union, China, and the US were instrumental in shaping India's foreign relations. In the 1950s and 1960s, India hosted football matches with the Soviet Union which enhanced political and cultural ties. A 1956 goodwill exchange with China and tennis matches between India and the US further exemplified the diplomatic role sports played during this period **[History of Indian football]**.

Today, sports diplomacy is more institutionalized with governments and sports bodies actively leveraging it to foster diplomatic relations. Entities like India's Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports work closely with the Ministry of External Affairs to engage on global platforms such as the Commonwealth Games and the Olympics thereby making sports an integral part of India's foreign policy efforts.

B. Participation in global sporting events

India's participation in the Olympics, Asian Games, and Paralympics has been consistent since independence. The nation's presence on these prestigious global platforms was not

merely about sports but also a statement of its sovereignty, identity, and international standing. Similarly, India's participation in the Commonwealth Games has underscored its commitment to the Commonwealth of Nations and fostered diplomatic goodwill among member countries.

These events have provided platforms for India to engage with other nations, showcase its cultural diversity. For instance, India's hosting of the 1982 Asian Games in New Delhi promoting regional solidarity and cooperation. During the 2010 Commonwealth Games, also held in New Delhi, India took the opportunity to highlight its rich cultural heritage through grand opening and closing ceremonies. These ceremonies, combined with the organization of events, served as a form of cultural diplomacy, allowing India to engage directly with other nations, deepen its international ties, and project its growing economic influence and soft power to the world.

3. MULTI-SPORT DIPLOMACY AND INDIA'S GLOBAL REACH

In the modern era, India has gone beyond cricket and hockey to other sports like football, wrestling and badminton amongst others, facilitating diplomatic ties with countries such as China, Japan, and Australia. Sports exchanges – where Indian players train abroad and international teams are hosted in India – foster cultural exchange, building diplomatic goodwill, and promoting collaboration between nations. Additionally, such initiatives raise India's international profile and demonstrate its commitment to global cooperation by using sports as a bridge to strengthen diplomatic relationships. **[Diplomatist]**

A. India's engagement through sports

Multi-sport engagements have diversified India's sports diplomacy portfolio by creating platforms for broader bilateral cooperation. For instance, the India-Japan sports exchanges have complemented the growing strategic partnership between the two countries.

The India-Egypt Kabaddi Tournament hosted by The Embassy of India in Cairo underscored the deepening relationship between India and Egypt, fostering mutual understanding through sports diplomacy. **[Daily News]**, while the success of the IPL (cricket) and ISL (football) leagues has attracted international players and coaches leading to opportunities for cultural exchange.

B. Fostering cooperation among regional groupings

As nations within regional groupings come together in a non-political setting, the shared love of sports allows for strengthening ties and foster corporation.

1. BRICS(Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) Games: Over the years, India's participation in the BRICS Games, a multi sporting event, has provided them with a platform to engage with major emerging economies. Additionally, India's Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports organizes training camps with partner countries, benefiting

over 500 BRICS athletes annually. These camps not only develop talent but also build lasting relationships beyond sports. [Infobrics]

2. South Asian Games: As a founding member of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), India has played a crucial role in organizing and participating in the South Asian Games. The camaraderie allows for people-to-people relationships and goes a long way in fostering regional cooperation. [Times of India]

3. Asian Games: India's historic performance at the 2022 Asian Games with a record-breaking medal tally of 107 including 28 golds enhanced its standing among Asian nations [mygov]. Further, by hosting two Asian Games, India has created multiple channels for cultural exchange, bilateral cooperation, and soft power projection. This strategy aligns well with the broader foreign policy objectives of enhancing its global influence and fostering positive relationships across different regions. Evidence of this can be seen in bilateral agreements with countries like Australia in sports development and training which underscores the role of sports diplomacy in advancing diplomatic goals. India's collaborations in football with Japan and its exchanges in badminton with China further highlight the effectiveness of this strategy in deepening ties, extending beyond sports into areas such as trade, education, and cultural diplomacy.

4. CRICKET DIPLOMACY WITH NEIGHBOURING COUNTRIES

A. Historical overview of cricketing ties

Cricket has played a significant role in shaping India's diplomatic relationships with its neighboring countries, most notably Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. India and Pakistan have a long-standing cricketing rivalry that has been both a reflection of and a respite from political tensions. The 1952 Test series between the two nations marked the beginning of their cricketing ties, and subsequent matches served as platforms for cultural exchange and diplomatic dialogue. India toured Pakistan for a full Test series for the first time in 1989 as part of a diplomatic initiative called the "Friendship Series" when many Indian fans reported being welcomed like long-lost family members. In 2011, after a series of high-level discussions between the two countries, they agreed to restart their peace talks to resolve all outstanding issues, including the complex matter of Kashmir. Despite periods of political strain leading to the suspension of matches, cricket has often been a bridge for easing tensions between the two nations. [ResearchGate]

Beyond Pakistan, cricket diplomacy has also played a pivotal role in India's relations with Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. India supported Bangladesh's bid for Test status in 2000 and fostered closer ties through regular bilateral series. India has also played a key role in Afghanistan's cricket development, providing training facilities at Greater Noida and Dehradun stadiums and supporting junior teams [The

Diplomat]. The IPL has provided a platform for players from all these countries, enhancing camaraderie and goodwill through the shared passion for cricket.

B. Learnings from cricket diplomacy

Cricket diplomacy has demonstrated both successes and limitations of sports as a tool for fostering robust ties between India and its neighboring countries. On the positive side, cricket has facilitated people-to-people contact and cultural exchange, fostering goodwill and shared experiences among citizens of different nations. Iconic matches, have offered platforms for informal diplomacy, sometimes contributing to the de-escalation of conflicts. The ability of cricket to bring people together, even during tense political periods, cannot be disregarded.

However, the limitations of cricket diplomacy are equally significant. Political interference has often led to the suspension of cricket ties, making sports a casualty of larger disputes. Additionally, security concerns surrounding high-profile matches can complicate diplomatic efforts as seen in various instances where safety concerns halted scheduled games. Moreover, the overemphasis on cricket risks overshadowing other forms of sports diplomacy that could also contribute to strengthening regional ties. Ultimately, while cricket diplomacy has its successes, it cannot address deep-rooted political conflicts alone and must be part of a broader, more comprehensive diplomatic strategy. [ResearchGate]

5. MEGA SPORTING EVENTS: A DIPLOMATIC PERSPECTIVE

A. Ambassadorial efforts surrounding international events

Mega international sporting events, such as the ICC Cricket World Cup and Hockey World Cup, have become pivotal in advancing diplomatic ties. India has leveraged its role as the host of the ICC Cricket World Cup to promote cultural diplomacy by inviting Heads of State, dignitaries, and business leaders to witness matches alongside political meetings.

For instance, during the 2011 ICC Cricket World Cup, India's diplomatic outreach extended to fostering people-to-people ties with cricket-loving nations like Australia, the UK, and South Africa. Similarly, during the 2018 Hockey World Cup in Bhubaneswar, the government used the event and its role as title sponsor to engage with foreign diplomats and promote Odisha Tourism. Such efforts not only celebrate sports but also work as strategic tools in foreign policy, subtly contributing to better international relationships and trade opportunities [Times Travel].

B. Benefits of these events - India's image as a reliable global partner

Hosting mega sports events offers India a powerful avenue to project itself as a reliable global partner, extending far beyond the realm of sports. These events bring international visibility

by attracting foreign dignitaries and media attention. They promote opportunities for economic partnerships, tourism, and infrastructure development. Furthermore, India's ability to successfully organize such large-scale events reinforces its image as a capable and trustworthy partner, essential for strengthening diplomatic relations on the global stage.

6. CULTURAL DIPLOMACY THROUGH SPORTS: INDIA'S INFLUENCE IN AFRICA AND SOUTHEAST ASIA

India's sports diplomacy extends beyond hosting events and bilateral exchanges, encompassing broader outreach, particularly in Africa and Southeast Asia. This approach aligns with India's foreign policy objectives of strengthening ties with these regions through soft power initiatives.

A. Sports initiatives between India and African countries

India's sports diplomacy with African nations has played a significant role in strengthening ties, offering an alternative to the influence of other global powers on the continent. Through initiatives like cricket development programs, India has extended coaching expertise and infrastructure support to 26 African countries. The Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) has organized training camps for African cricketers, contributing to the growth of the sport [Embassies of India]. These sports initiatives, integrated with India's broader diplomatic engagement in Africa, have generated goodwill and enhanced its standing among African youth complementing India's economic and political partnerships in the region.

B. India's Look East policy and relations with ASEAN nations

India's sports collaborations with ASEAN nations have played an integral role in advancing its 'Look East' policy which aims to deepen political, economic, and cultural ties with Southeast Asia. Sports events such as badminton tournaments and collaborative coaching programs in disciplines like football and boxing have fostered a sense of mutual understanding between India and ASEAN countries like Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand. Indian athletes and coaches have not only showcased their talent but also acted as informal ambassadors, representing India's growing influence in the region.

These collaborations extend beyond the realm of sports and complement India's broader strategic and economic goals. For instance, joint sports initiatives have opened doors for cooperation in other areas such as education, tourism, and technology. Sports events have become platforms for promoting tourism, where athletes and visitors explore the cultural heritage of the host countries, leading to a boost in tourism industries. By integrating sports into its 'Look East' policy, India has successfully used cultural diplomacy to strengthen its diplomatic relations and foster regional cooperation with ASEAN nations. [Sportstar]

C. Ambassadors of India's soft power

Prominent Indian athletes and sports coaches have significantly contributed to building India's soft power abroad, particularly through their global presence and engagement in philanthropic and cultural initiatives. Sachin Tendulkar, known as the "God of Cricket," through his global fan base and his work was previously the Goodwill Ambassador for UNICEF India. His influence extends beyond the cricket field, promoting education and health initiatives, thus enhancing India's image on a humanitarian level [Unicef]. Similarly, Mary Kom, a six-time World Amateur Boxing champion, has inspired many international female athletes like Ramla Ali, Somalia's first female boxer to compete at global events [History Glow]. Her success has served as a testament to India's growing sporting capabilities and its potential in sports.

Athletes like Viswanathan Anand, a five-time World Chess Champion, have promoted India's intellectual prowess internationally. Anand's success has helped popularize chess in India, leading to increased international collaborations in the sport. These athletes, through their achievements and global outreach, have positioned themselves as cultural ambassadors, contributing to India's soft power by enhancing its international goodwill and influence [Forbes India].

7. CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN INDIA'S SPORTS DIPLOMACY

A. Potential diplomatic roadblocks

Efforts in sports diplomacy, face significant diplomatic roadblocks due to political tensions and regional conflicts. The long-standing rivalry between India and Pakistan exemplifies how political disputes can overshadow the potential of sports diplomacy. Despite numerous attempts to use cricket as a bridge, such as the "Friendship Series" and the 2011 World Cup semi-final, political and military tensions have repeatedly led to the suspension of bilateral matches. For instance, after the 2008 Mumbai attacks and the 2019 Pulwama incident, India's cricketing ties with Pakistan were severely impacted with calls to isolate Pakistan from international cricket circuits. [The Indian Express]

Beyond Pakistan, regional conflicts also pose challenges in other areas. India's strained relations with China and security concerns in regions like Kashmir can limit its engagement in sports diplomacy. Moreover, complex visa regulations and security concerns during major events pose logistical hurdles that complicate sports diplomacy efforts. [ResearchGate]

B. Leveraging the growing popularity of Indian Sports Leagues

The Indian Sports Leagues present significant opportunities for sports diplomacy. The IPL, with its global reach, attracts international players and fans, fostering cultural exchange and strengthening ties with cricket-playing nations. It provides India a unique platform to engage with countries like - Australia, South Africa, and England, where cricket holds cultural significance. Similarly, the growing popularity of the

Pro Kabaddi League opens avenues for engagement with nations in South Asia, helping India promote traditional sports while fostering regional camaraderie. Leveraging these leagues can boost India's soft power and contribute to broader diplomatic efforts.

C. Policy Alignment

To enhance sports diplomacy outcomes, a comprehensive strategy integrating sports with foreign policy is essential. Increased investment in world-class sports infrastructure will allow India to host more international events and attract global talent. Furthermore, leveraging digital platforms and engaging the Indian diaspora can enhance global reach. Public-private partnerships should be encouraged to fund sports exchanges and development programs to strengthen India's global influence through sports.

8. CONCLUSION

India's sports diplomacy has emerged as a strategic tool in its foreign policy, contributing to strengthening bilateral ties and expanding global presence. Further, by hosting global events, it has leveraged sports to foster international cooperation and project itself as a reliable and capable global player. These efforts have facilitated cultural exchanges, showcased the nation's soft side, and supported broader diplomatic engagements. As India continues to invest in and nurture its sporting talent, the future looks promising with the potential for even greater achievements and recognition.

The future of the nation's sports diplomacy holds significant potential in strengthening bilateral ties globally by adapting to emerging trends in sports and international relations. By investing in international sports exchanges and sports infrastructure including digital platforms, India can enhance its engagement with various countries. A rank of 28 in the 2023 Global Soft Power Index showcases the progress it has made and, as a regional sporting power, India's sports diplomacy will continue to play a key role in shaping global perceptions and fostering international cooperation.

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