

# POLICY BRIEF

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## FOOTBALL DIPLOMACY *REDUX*: THE 2015 ASIAN CUP AND AUSTRALIA'S ENGAGEMENT WITH ASIA

### WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

*There is growing recognition of the potential to use Australia's membership of the Asian Football Confederation to broaden and strengthen engagement with Asia more generally. So far, however, examples of football diplomacy have largely been episodic and ad hoc. With Australia hosting the 2015 Asian Cup there is an opportunity to launch a more concerted and sustained effort to strengthen Australia's broader ties to Asia through sport. The question is what is the most effective and efficient way to do this?*

### WHAT SHOULD BE DONE?

*The Asian Cup will offer government, business and community groups an opportunity to strengthen and broaden their networks in Asia. Much of this they can do on their own. Nevertheless, the Australian government and Football Federation Australia, with support from business and community groups, should establish a framework that will encourage and facilitate these efforts. The three key priorities are:*

- *Coordinate: bring together the key stakeholders in the form of a Football Asia Council to pool scarce resources, build synergies and avoid duplication;*
- *Communicate and connect: build a digital hub as a one-stop-shop for information about both the Asian Cup and the various football diplomacy networking opportunities around it, along with an associated social media platform;*
- *Enable: provide targeted support to those groups already planning football diplomacy activities around the Asian Cup.*



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As an independent think tank the Lowy Institute requires a broad funding base. The Institute currently receives grants from Australian and international philanthropic foundations; membership fees and sponsorship from private sector and government entities; grants from Australian and international governments; subscriptions and ticket sales for events; and philanthropic donations from private individuals, including ongoing support from the Institute’s founding benefactor, Mr Frank Lowy AC.

Lowy Institute Policy Briefs are designed to address a particular, current policy issue and to suggest solutions. They are deliberately prescriptive, specifically addressing two questions: What is the problem? What should be done?

The views expressed in this paper are entirely the author’s own and not those of the Lowy Institute for International Policy.

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In 2005, the Lowy Institute published a Policy Brief that examined the implications of Australia's entry into the Asian Football Confederation for the country's broader relationship with Asia.<sup>1</sup> That paper suggested a number of ways that Australia could leverage this new sporting relationship to strengthen diplomatic, business and people-to-people linkages with the region. In the eight years since the paper was published, the idea of using football diplomacy to deepen Australia's engagement with Asia has gained wider currency in government, sporting, business and community circles. Football diplomacy was referred to in both a 2007 parliamentary inquiry on Australia's public diplomacy and in the Federal Government's *Australia in the Asian Century White Paper*.<sup>2</sup>

Football diplomacy is being put into practice in episodic and *ad hoc* ways. In 2011, for example, Australian footballer Joel Griffiths, at the time a star player in the Chinese domestic league, helped draw a crowd to a business breakfast in Beijing put on by a visiting NSW trade delegation. On another occasion Australia's Ambassador in Moscow took the opportunity of a visit by Australia's national team to Uzbekistan to present credentials in the Uzbek capital and meet local officials. But for every instance like these, where the opportunity to mix sport with business or diplomacy was taken up, many more have been missed.

There is, however, a new opportunity on the horizon to make a more concerted, sustained and coordinated effort to use football to deepen Australia's engagement with Asia (broadly defined to include the Middle Eastern end of the Asian continent). In January 2015 Australia will host the Asian Football

Confederation's (AFC) Asian Cup. Held every four years, it brings together the top 16 national teams in Asia. Australia (as host), Japan, South Korea and North Korea have already qualified. Qualification for the remaining 11 spots is currently underway. Many of these will probably be filled by Middle Eastern members of the AFC, including Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran and the United Arab Emirates. There is a reasonable chance that India (through the Challenge Cup), China, Hong Kong, Thailand and Malaysia will also qualify.

Australia's AFC Asian Cup 2015 Local Organising Committee (LOC) expects the tournament to attract some 45,000 visitors and have a potential television reach of 2.5 billion viewers.<sup>3</sup> How many people will actually come to Australia or watch the tournament on television will depend on a number of variables, including which teams eventually qualify. Nevertheless, amongst the visitors will be senior political and business leaders, including those who occupy positions in either the football hierarchy of their countries or are involved as sponsors.<sup>4</sup> The last Asian Cup in Qatar in 2011 attracted television audiences of 209 million and 41 million in Japan and Korea respectively. In China, it attracted a viewership of just over 156 million, even though China exited the tournament early.<sup>5</sup>

The Asian Cup will, therefore, present a significant opportunity for Australia to promote its image and national branding, as well as its goods and services, and strengthen networks in the region. In order to understand and leverage the opportunities that the Asian Cup will generate, the Lowy Institute and the Asian Cup LOC held a day-long conference on

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23 November 2012, bringing together senior government, business, tourism, sport and community representatives. The keynote address was delivered by the Hon. Dr Craig Emerson MP, Minister for Trade and Competitiveness and Minister Assisting the Prime Minister on Asian Century Policy. The conference was organised around four sessions: trade and investment, tourism, diplomatic relations, and social and community ties.

This paper harvests and refines some of the key ideas that emerged from the conference. In particular, it focuses on the practical things that can be done to catalyse and facilitate a football diplomacy program in the lead up to, during, and beyond the 2015 Asian Cup.

**What is football diplomacy?**

At its simplest level, football diplomacy is the use of a common interest in football to create networks. These networks can be used for a variety of other purposes, including diplomacy, forging political and business connections, promoting products, tourism, development, and education. Football diplomacy can be as simple as organising a function at a match between an Australian and Asian team that brings together business people with a common interest in the game, who then form connections with each other that serve their commercial interests. It can involve social and community festivals in the lead up to and during major games. It can be undertaken virtually, through social media.

The original Lowy Institute Football Diplomacy Policy Brief listed concrete examples of the way that football could be used to promote political, business and community

engagement with Asia. These included obvious ideas like holding business networking events around matches and tournament, and using football matches to promote travel and tourism to Australia. It also pointed to the way that football could provide a less transactional relationship between Australia and Asia by providing a common point of conversation between societies that did not revolve around things being bought and sold (e.g. an exotic holiday or a ‘Western’ education).

At the same time, the original Brief underlined the need to be realistic about what can and cannot be achieved by football. It noted that Australia’s membership of the AFC would not necessarily make Australia more ‘Asian’. It pointed to the way that sport can also reinforce negative national stereotypes. In this respect it is important not to over-inflate expectation of what Australia’s football relationship with Asia might be able to achieve.

Nevertheless, a cautious appreciation of the networking opportunities that will be created by the 2015 Asian Cup suggests that, managed properly, the tournament could leave a substantial legacy in terms of Australia’s engagement with its broader region. A number of these opportunities were raised at the November conference, but four in particular are worth highlighting:

***Football diplomacy as a means for broad-spectrum engagement***

A key observation of the Federal Government’s *Australia in the Asian Century White Paper* was that a deeper understanding of Asia – and a deeper Asian understanding of Australia – would only come from relationships built by a broad spectrum of business, community and

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educational groups in Australia with their counterparts in Asia. The Asian Cup provides just such an opportunity by providing a focal point around which a wide variety of groups can create new engagement and networking opportunities, or strengthen existing links. Examples mentioned at the November conference included the hosting by local ethnic communities of teams from their country of origin, to promote an understanding in Asia of Australia's society and its diversity; or organising parallel Asian Cup street football competitions to strengthen links between Australian groups working in the 'sport for development' field and their counterparts in Asia.

*Football diplomacy as a way to refine Australia's image in the region*

A number of participants noted the way that Germany used its hosting of the 2006 World Cup to change its international image. Germans went from being seen as stern and humourless to more laid-back and cheerful. A number of participants argued that Australia's image in Asia did not require such a major renovation. It was felt, however, that the country's image was still too closely tied with its natural or physical features like Uluru and the Sydney Harbour Bridge rather than its people. In that regard it was felt that, in the same way that cricketer personalities like Steve Waugh had helped personalise Australia's image in South Asia, football could be used to personalise Australia's image in the rest of Asia. This could be done not just through the Australian players at the tournament, but also by creating opportunities for interaction between locals and those visiting from Asia by bringing together fans at events outside of matches or via social media.

*Using football diplomacy to promote trade and tourism*

The practice of using sporting events for business networking and to promote tourism is well established.<sup>6</sup> The November conference raised some specific business and tourism-related benefits that are worth highlighting. One participant from the business community noted that the advantage of networking programs of this type was that they offer small and medium enterprises an opportunity that they might not ordinarily have to mix with representatives from larger corporations looking to fill local supply chains. Other participants noted that football provided a means to promote Australia and Australian products to the growing Asian middle class that is spending more time and income on sport and leisure activities. In terms of tourism, it was noted that whilst the Asian Cup would attract visitors to Australia, creating wider positive experiences and connections for these people would be critical to ensuring that they returned to Australia in future years.

*Football for development*

Organisations such as Magic Bus, streetfootballworld, the Laureus Sport for Good Foundation, Beyond Sport, and in Australia, Football United and The Big Issue, provide examples of the way that sport has been used to promote social good and development.<sup>7</sup> Streetfootballworld's Football for Hope Festival, held alongside the 2010 FIFA World Cup in South Africa, brought together a range of international organisations that use football to tackle everything from environmental pollution in the slums of Kenya to gang culture in Ecuador.<sup>8</sup> Magic Bus has used sport programs in India to mentor children and educate them on a range of issues

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including gender and health. In Australia, Football United has used football to teach young people life skills, particularly in refugee communities, and to promote social cohesion. The AFC runs its own social responsibility effort in the region through its ‘Dream Asia’ program.<sup>9</sup>

The Asian Cup offers a particular opportunity to strengthen exchanges and cooperation between Australian organisations working in football for development and their counterparts in the region. Australia has recognised expertise in this field which is relatively underdeveloped in Asia.<sup>10</sup>

Beyond these four specific ideas, another key observation that emerged from the November conference was the need to avoid focusing too narrowly on the 2015 Asian Cup. As one conference participant noted, Australian teams at club, national, men’s, women’s and youth levels are already playing their Asian counterparts on a regular basis – in 2011 alone there were over 70 of these matches. Moreover, there are just over 60 Australians playing in the region, including in Japan, the UAE, Thailand, Singapore, Korea, Indonesia, India and China; a decade ago there were 20.<sup>11</sup> Many of these are potential ambassadors for Australia, at a time when Australia’s diplomatic service is one of the smallest in the developed world.

In that regard, the 2015 Asian Cup should be seen as a way to invigorate Australia’s football diplomacy more generally and to build capacity in particular fields of engagement, such as football for development. This also means looking beyond the specific teams that qualify for the tournament. The Asian Cup is the peak

footballing event in the region and attracts Asia-wide attention. For example, in 2011, 24 million people in Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam watched the Cup despite the fact that none of these countries were playing.<sup>12</sup>

**Building a framework for football diplomacy**

The focus of this Brief is not principally on the opportunities that will be created for football diplomacy by the Asian Cup – this was covered in the original Football Diplomacy paper. The focus here is on what needs to occur to grasp these opportunities. As is already clear, football diplomacy is not just something done by diplomats – or footballers, for that matter. It is not necessary, nor is it really feasible, for one central body to plan, fund and run the full range of possible football diplomacy activities. Nevertheless, one clear conclusion of the November conference was that there needs to be a framework to encourage and facilitate the efforts of various groups to undertake football diplomacy activities around the 2015 Asian Cup. In this regard, three key priorities ahead of the 2015 tournament emerged from the discussion at the conference:

***Coordinate***

Because football diplomacy brings a diverse range of stakeholders and participants, there needs to be some mechanism to ensure that the various events and programs organised by different groups do not compete with each other for attention and attendance. In some cases there are legal and commercial issues that need to be managed; for example, to ensure that any business networking activity at a Cup venue does not infringe on sponsors’ rights, or

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even fall foul of regulations governing the bribery of foreign officials. More importantly, coordination would help identify synergies and complementarities between organisations and events.

Coordination needs to occur at two levels. First, there needs to be coordination within particular sectors. A number of working groups or taskforces have already been formed to plan or coordinate activities ahead of the Asian Cup, including in the tourism and sport for development sectors. The business sector, by contrast, seems less well organised at this stage, although a number of state-based business and government organisations appear to be planning for networking activities around the Asian Cup.

Second, there needs to be an overarching mechanism for coordination between sectors. A number of participants at the conference endorsed the formation of a 'Football Asia Council' – an idea proposed in the original Lowy Institute Brief in 2005, and supported by FFA in its submission to the Federal Government's *Australia in the Asian Century White Paper*.<sup>13</sup> Such a Council would bring together key stakeholders with an interest in using the tournament for networking and engagement purposes. A key role for the Council would be to bring representatives from the various working groups or steering committees together. It should be big enough to be representative, but not so big as to be unworkable – ten to twelve members would seem optimal. It should meet reasonably regularly, but, more importantly, establish a mechanism to exchange information between meetings. It would require some resourcing and would need a small permanent secretariat

(perhaps two to three people seconded from government, FFA and business), but would still be a reasonably light-touch way to coordinate a variety of football diplomacy-related activities.

An overarching coordination mechanism would help make the most efficient use of limited resources for staging football diplomacy activities by promoting cooperation and partnerships between groups in different sectors. For example, a number of the panelists at the November conference noted that tourism bodies and private-sector operators were already fairly well advanced in their efforts to use the Asian Cup to attract visitors to Australia. Yet these efforts would undoubtedly benefit from coordination with bodies that were planning business networking activities or conferences, providing an extra incentive for visitors to come during the tournament. Another example is the proposal by The Big Issue to hold an International Community Sports Festival in conjunction with the Asian Cup that would integrate an Asian Street Football Festival and a sport for development event with other community and business events and Asian Cup Live Site activities.

The benefits of establishing such a Council should not just be seen in terms of the 2015 Asian Cup. If it worked well it would provide a sound basis for ongoing coordination of Australian football diplomacy in Asia beyond 2015.

***Communicate and connect***

It was apparent during the November conference that whilst parts of government, the business sector and wider community were conscious of the networking opportunities that will be created by the 2015 Asian Cup, not



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everyone was. An effort needs to be made to broaden this awareness and it must be done early enough for organisations and groups to plan football diplomacy events or programs. Even more importantly, there is a need to start raising awareness amongst those in Asia who are thinking about visiting for the Asian Cup of the networking and engagement opportunities that will be present around the tournament.

The LOC is obviously a key player in this effort as the primary source of information about the tournament and the teams that will compete. Australia's diplomatic network in Asia will also be critical. Even if it is not the sole preserve of diplomats, football diplomacy needs their support. In particular, Australia's diplomatic and trade missions in Asia will be key to identifying prospective participants for networking and engagement activities. This applies to those who might already be planning to visit Australia for the tournament, but also to those who might be induced to come by the addition of some political, business or other networking opportunities alongside the tournament. Other existing networks could play an important communications role, including large Australian firms with a strong presence in Asia, community groups with networks in the region, bilateral councils and chambers of commerce, as well as Australian players and the diaspora community in the region.

As a number of participants in the November conference noted, a key component of this communication effort should be some form of digital information platform. In the words of one participant, what is needed is a one-stop portal that provides prospective visitors with everything from tickets and information on

games, to links to business, community or social networking activities. The portal could also be an information-sharing mechanism for those planning football diplomacy events around the Cup, not least to avoid conflicts and duplication.

There also needs to be some form of social media platform that would allow fans visiting Australia for the 2015 Asian Cup, as well as those watching it in Asia and Australia, to connect with each other. This should be supported by a regional campaign, perhaps around the theme of connect@AsianCup2015. The ultimate goal would be to ensure that visitors for the Asian Cup, or even viewers of it on television, get more from the experience than simply a game of football; that they make some lasting personal connections as well. Some sectors, such as tourism, are already working on their own social media components, but as with the information portal there is virtue in a one-stop-shop approach.

The proposed Football Asia Council, especially its secretariat, should be at the heart of any communication and social media effort. The Council could share responsibility and pool limited resources to build the information portal and social media platforms. But it would also leverage the existing communication networks in Asia of the various government, sport, business and community stakeholders alongside these new platforms.

***Enable***

Another key message from the November conference was that, while many of the networking activities planned for the 2015 Asian Cup will be organised independently, they will need support. FFA, the LOC and



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both federal and state governments, have a significant financial investment in the tournament and an interest in its delivering broader benefits to the community. Enabling and facilitating a range of football diplomacy activities will help to deliver a return on that investment. This would not simply be a case of providing funding – although this will also be necessary in some cases. Access to venues, players and teams, official endorsement of events, and the good offices of Australia’s diplomatic missions in the region are just some of the other ways that FFA, the LOC and government could support a diverse program of football diplomacy activities created around the Asian Cup.

One key issue in terms of government support for business networking will be the role of Austrade. In the past it has run business networking activities around major sporting events such as the Olympics and Rugby World Cup. More recently, however, it has decided to scale back these activities, especially in Australia.<sup>14</sup> Whilst state governments and the private sector could fill the breach to some degree, both lack Austrade’s experience with these types of events and its extensive overseas network, particularly in Asia. To mount an effective business networking program around the 2015 Asian Cup the government should allocate some additional resources to revive Austrade’s ability to manage these types of events.

The Football Asia Council would also play an important enabling role. It would allow the key stakeholders to develop a clear sense of what broader football activities are being planned and a way, therefore, to avoid waste and duplication. It would also provide a means

to match or connect non-government or non-FFA funders with those planning football diplomacy activities.

**Beyond football**

Major international sporting events are a big investment. Few countries make that investment without asking what the legacy of these events will be. Often this is seen in terms of a dollar return or improvements to physical infrastructure. As this Policy Brief has argued, the 2015 Asian Cup offers Australia a less tangible, but arguably more valuable, legacy by providing a vehicle for a broader and deeper engagement with Asia, especially at a time when countries around the world are competing to connect with the region.

While the 2015 Asian Cup offers this opportunity, it needs to be grasped. A number of organisations are already planning to leverage the opportunity through their own football diplomacy activities. This Brief argues that a number of basic steps can and should be taken to further enable and facilitate the efforts of these groups, but also to encourage and support others to do the same. Indeed, creating a vehicle for coordination and cooperation should leave a legacy of its own by ensuring that Australia’s football diplomacy with Asia does not end with the Asian Cup in 2015: it begins with it.

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NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Anthony Bubalo, *Football diplomacy*. Policy Brief, Lowy Institute for International Policy, October 2005.

<sup>2</sup>Australia. Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs Defence and Trade, *Australia's public diplomacy: building our image*. Canberra, Commonwealth of Australia, August 2007; Australia in the Asian Century Taskforce, *Australia in the Asian Century: White Paper*. Canberra, Commonwealth of Australia, October 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Football Federation Australia. *Qualifying for AFC Asian Cup Australia 2015 begins*: <http://www.footballaustralia.com.au/news-display/qualifying-for-afc-asian-cup-australia-2015-begins/60164>.

<sup>4</sup> Seniors positions in Gulf region Football Associations are often filled by senior members of the ruling family. In Qatar, for example, the Emir also heads the local federation. AFC partner corporations include major Asian corporates including Toyota and Nikon.

<sup>5</sup> All audience figures cited from World Sports Group, *Japan, China and Korea are top viewership markets for AFC Asian Cup 2011*: <http://www.worldsportgroup.com/news/japan-china-and-korea-are-top-viewership-markets-for-afc-asian-cup-2011/>.

<sup>6</sup> Tourism and Transport Forum Australia, *Sports Tourism Issues Paper*. Sydney July 2012

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.magicbus.org>;  
<http://www.streetfootballworld.org>;  
[www.laureus.com](http://www.laureus.com);[www.beyondsport.org](http://www.beyondsport.org);  
[www.footballunited.org.au](http://www.footballunited.org.au);  
<http://www.thebigissue.org.au/community-street-soccer/about/>

<sup>8</sup><http://www.southafrica.info/2010/footballforhopefestival.htm#.USqW1aX8dmg>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.the-afc.com/en/about-dream-asia>.

<sup>10</sup> Author interview with Steve Persson and Peter Danks, *The Big Issue*, 13 February 2013.

<sup>11</sup> Email communication, Football Federation of Australia.

<sup>12</sup> World Sports Group, *Japan, China and Korea are top viewership markets for AFC Asian Cup 2011*.

<sup>13</sup> Football Federation Australia, *FFA submission to the Australia in the Asian Century White Paper*. Sydney, March 2011.

<sup>14</sup> Austrade, *Reform of the Australian Trade Commission: maximising our value*. Canberra, May 2011.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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