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SPORTS AND CULTURAL DIPLOMACY: DISTINCTION AND INDEPENDENCE IN FOREIGN POLICY

Background. *The growing influence of communication technologies and global events has reinforced the role of sports diplomacy as a foreign policy tool. Yet, scholars continue to classify it under cultural or public diplomacy. This ambiguity arises from the broad definition of soft power, in which both culture and sport serve as mechanisms of attraction and influence. The primary question is whether sports diplomacy functions as a complementary approach or as an independent instrument. The study aims to define cultural and sports diplomacy boundaries and highlight factors that enable sports diplomacy to function as a standalone foreign policy tool.*

Methods. *The research combines political, comparative, and content analyses with concretization. The methods help to explore the links to soft power, contrast environments, actors, and tools, and examine practical cases from France, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Australia.*

Results. *The findings indicate that soft power provides a comprehensive framework for public, cultural, and sports diplomacy, with each operating in distinct settings. Cultural diplomacy operates in a symbolic–normative space shaped by the exchange of ideas and values, whereas sports diplomacy functions in a performance–competitive environment driven by organized events, sports networks, and mass audiences. Its late institutionalization and difficulty in measuring outcomes explain its marginalization. Nevertheless, the recent examples indicate change. The French model demonstrates how cultural diplomacy gained weight through institutionalization. A similar trend can be observed in sports diplomacy, where Qatar and Saudi Arabia utilize state-led events and tournaments to enhance their global reputation. Australia's Sports Diplomacy 2030 strategy is a compelling example of how a country can use sports as a strategic diplomatic tool.*

Conclusions. *Sports diplomacy can no longer be viewed as a subset of cultural diplomacy. The distinct environment, unique actors, and specific tools support its difference from other types of diplomacy. When backed by institutional frameworks, funding, and strategic vision, it emerges as an effective standalone foreign policy instrument. Recognizing its distinct role expands the diplomatic toolkit and offers states new ways to project soft power.*

Keywords: *Sports diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, public diplomacy, soft power, foreign policy, culture, sports.*

Background

The rapid development of communication technologies and their effect on the international events of the global landscape support the rise of sports diplomacy as a robust foreign policy strategy. It finds new application and reemerges as a substantial diplomatic instrument. Nevertheless, there is no general perception of it as a standalone and effective tool within the scientific community. Instead, many consider it a part of public diplomacy as a broad category that involves different aspects, from culture to science, that form respective subcategories. Others consider diplomatic efforts around sports part of cultural diplomacy and ignore the necessity to use culture and sports independently.

Despite the further analysis being made in this article, it is worth admitting that the source of such ambiguity emanates from the nature of the soft power concept. Soft power is traditionally recognized as the main neoliberal approach behind the rise of public diplomacy. There, both culture and sports act as drivers and set the ground for the development of the platforms for diplomatic activity. It is especially true considering the recognition, reach, and power deriving from the international cultural exchange and sports events. Moreover, that is where the overlap among public, cultural, and sports diplomacy appears.

Cultural diplomacy is widely regarded as a core component of public diplomacy, and sports diplomacy may be viewed as falling under the umbrella of either cultural or public diplomacy. In this regard, the question arises whether sport is a part of culture and how it changes the application and perception of sports diplomacy. If generalization is made, sports diplomacy may be subsumed under cultural duplicity. In its turn, it may lead to confusion, resulting in an inability to grasp the emerging power of the sport diplomacy approach.

This article aims to identify the main differences between sports diplomacy and cultural diplomacy, examine the reasons why scientists ignore sports diplomacy as an independent tool in international relations, and argue that sports diplomacy can function as a powerful form of foreign policy instrument. The article would display sports diplomacy as a distinct and standalone tool, referring to differences and recent institutionalization of the approach as the primary justification.

Methods

The research presented in this article implements a combination of different approaches that include political analysis, comparative analysis, content analysis, and the method of concretization. They allow for examining distinct features of sport and cultural diplomacy and evaluating the conditions under which sports diplomacy can be considered an independent instrument of foreign policy.

In particular, political analysis was applied to assess the relation to soft power concepts as well as to understand the phenomenon of using sports and culture in foreign policy. It helped to see how these types of diplomacy are institutionalised and may act independently. The comparative analysis is crucial to systematically analyze and contrast sports and cultural diplomacy across three dimensions: operational environment, key diplomatic tools used, and actors involved. This method is essential to identify where the types of diplomacy converge or diverge. Besides, content analysis was implemented to examine the definitions of the concepts and their perception, and to find cases of the usage of cultural and sports diplomacy by leading countries. For this reason, several books, articles, and primary resources, including policy documents and official statements, were subject to examination.

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The theoretical ground of this research lies within the concept of soft power by Joseph Nye, which allows understanding how international actors can leverage sports and culture to exercise foreign policy.

Results

Before comparing sports and cultural diplomacy and setting the first apart, it is vital to see their connection to public diplomacy and their origin in terms of soft power. The analysis shows that even though there are debates over the nature of public diplomacy, it is a broader approach that uses cultural and sports elements in the practice. According to Nye, soft power is concerned with the influence that a nation exerts when others are drawn to its culture and ideas. The particular definition is pretty broad and suggests that a country may use the mentioned elements to conduct foreign affairs and affect other governments and nations. In terms of cultural and sports diplomacy, such a definition determines the basis and the environment for the growth of the debate and the comparison itself.

At the same time, that is where public diplomacy comes into play. According to Jan Melissen, public diplomacy, which is said to be contested by nature, is a "key instrument" of soft power (Melissen, 2010, p. 4). The main reason for this is that public diplomacy is an approach that responds to the transformation of the environment in which international and diplomatic actors operate. As communication technologies change, the expression of diplomacy does as well. Firstly, it results from the change in relationships between actors. Countries aim to conduct diplomacy not just between governments but also to affect and reach a general audience in the country or specific groups and organizations. Secondly, it implies using wider forms and means through which a country speaks about itself. The key sources of such expression are communication technologies, media, and culture. Thus, cultural diplomacy appears to be the primary component of public diplomacy and soft power.

Cultural diplomacy's definitions vary significantly due to the nature of cultural effects. However, it is possible to determine it as "the exchange of ideas, information, values, and traditions" to support and foster the relationships and understanding between countries (Cummings, 2003, p. 2). In the realm of foreign policy, it can be described as an effort of an international actor to administer or affect the international environment by using cultural resources and means that are known overseas. Notably, it is possible to underline that the efficiency of culture depends on multiple things. That is why Cynthia Schneider emphasizes that it can be considered as "soft" or unsubstantial, especially regarding significant international issues (Schneider, 2005, p. 147). The reason is the perception of symbols that culture represents by the group, nation, or audience. According to Matviyenko, culture, as the "aggregate of values that offers an interpretive framework", may fail to produce an intended impact if it lacks appeal (Matviyenko, & Matiash, 2021, p. 5). The real effect on foreign policy can be seen in the long term and is usually pretty hard to evaluate. Nevertheless, it is impossible to ignore that cultural diplomacy, using symbols and values, facilitates the representation of the state.

Sports diplomacy takes an approach similar to cultural diplomacy, yet, instead of information and ideas, it takes place around sports events and engagement of sportspeople. Sports diplomacy can be defined as the practice of using sports, competitions, and events as a vehicle to conduct diplomatic activities and pursue foreign

policy goals (Grix, & Brannagan, 2016). Sports, as a phenomenon, allow for the development of a specific image or perception in certain countries; sports become the platform for sharing ideas and values. Simultaneously, the performance of sportsmen is the prerequisite for it to happen, as the display happens upon the accumulation of attention and perception of the audience.

That is where confusion with cultural diplomacy may arise. Nonetheless, it comes from the interconnectedness of sports and culture, fueled by the encompassing application of the latter in public diplomacy. For instance, cultural diplomacy may include activities such as art exhibitions and concerts, academic exchanges, and language programs. They are all aimed at showcasing a nation's culture and value system abroad and strengthening intercultural ties. Concerning sports diplomacy, the engagement with the audience and a showcase of values revolve around the universal passion for sports as a phenomenon. There, sporting competition and camaraderie are primary factors that create a common ground for a dialogue and further exchange of ideas and values.

Such a comparison presents the first significant distinction. Consequently, cultural diplomacy is about the exchange of ideas, whereas sports diplomacy is about using sports events and performances to showcase. From there, the question arises as to why scientists ignore this clear distinction. The possible explanation lies in the encompassing nature of culture as a term. We can resort to the social definition of culture by Raymond Williams, a culture theorist, who describes it as a particular way of life that expresses meanings and values not in art but in all areas of life, including institutions and ordinary life (Williams, 2007). Such a generalization of the term creates the ground for pretty expansive use of cultural diplomacy as a term.

Another reason is the lack of a long-standing tradition or theoretical framework for sports diplomacy. In particular, cultural diplomacy has been practiced and studied for over a century, including the creation of France's Alliance Française in 1883 and the British Council in 1934 (Matviyenko, & Matiash, 2021). Sports diplomacy, even though used politically throughout the 20th century, including 'ping-pong diplomacy' and 'cricket diplomacy', the term 'sports diplomacy' and a systematic development around it came much later. It was backed by the unclear standing of sports between politics and international relations, as it has been seen as "serious and important and insignificant and trivial at different times," depending on the context and times (Jackson, 2013, p. 274). A fair number of scholars considered mixing sports and diplomacy to be wrong and inappropriate. As Murray suggests, the main reasons refer to the desire of the public to avoid mixing sports and politics; the contradiction between sport-as-competition and diplomacy as the business of peace; and the difference between the culture of diplomacy and sports, diplomats and sportsmen, their traditions and behavior (Murray, 2012). Thus, in the absence of systematic use of sports diplomacy by countries and a lack of standalone strategies, practitioners were slow to formalize it, and it seemed easier to use it as a category of cultural diplomacy.

Lastly, one more factor that affected the perception of sports diplomacy as a standalone method lies in the ability to see its impact. The effect can be even harder to quantify or see, compared to cultural diplomacy that already has developed frameworks, meaning policymakers may undervalue it. For instance, cultural diplomacy may leave tangible outputs, like the number of exchange students or

cultural centers established, whereas sports diplomacy might contemplate subtle shifts in public perception that are not immediately obvious or result from related factors. We can see the clear reasons why confusion between sports diplomacy and cultural diplomacy has existed. However, despite the interconnectedness of sports and culture, sports diplomacy and cultural diplomacy operate in different environments, apply separate tools, and have different effects on the diplomatic practice.

The significant distinction between cultural and sports diplomacy is that the difference in the environments and contexts in which they operate affects their realization. Firstly, cultural diplomacy finds its application in a broad humanitarian space determined by symbolic and normative components of culture. There, in an attempt to better understand the nature of cultural diplomacy, we should resort to the term 'culture'. It is often understood as the system of beliefs, values, norms, and signs that include symbols of communication, allowing the conveyance of identity and collective memory (Lüschen, 1967). With that in mind, one can see the cultural environment as one that is full of symbols expressed through language, art, music, or rituals, which are not static and are pretty interpretive, and that are used by different actors to exchange ideas, information, and identities.

The same may be applied to define the space of cultural diplomacy. Nevertheless, keeping in mind that its primary goal is to project national identity and values within the global cultural sphere, the nation aims to control the narrative and the use of symbols via such institutions. That way, it is possible to conclude that cultural diplomacy operates within a symbolic–normative environment shaped by a nation's and global beliefs, values, traditions, and expressive forms.

In contrast, the sports diplomacy environment is different. The explanation is that sports are more rational in nature, while the environment is more regulated and tangible. Considering the effect on sports diplomacy, it implies a different focus in implementation and space in which actors operate to achieve foreign policy goals. Above all, according to the study of Lüschen, the German-American sociologist, sport is a 'rational and playful activity' that is rewarded extrinsically and depends on the organic, personality, social, and cultural systems (Lüschen, 1967, p. 127). The interconnectedness with culture is vivid, as the culture affects the activity, yet does not necessarily imply the symbolism. It is possible because sports involve competition, organized rules, and performance at the core (Lüschen, 1967). They are the elements that require organization and framework to happen, and if combined under one event, can attract an audience and international attention. Upon this, it is possible to identify the environment in which sports diplomacy operates. A possible suggestion is that sports diplomacy works in a performance-competitive environment, which is shaped by the organization of activity, competition, and rules upon which actors can project messages, share values, and support communication.

This comparison indicates that the cultural diplomacy environment is fluid and interpretive, focusing on value and rooted in the exchange of ideas, while sports diplomacy is event-driven and audience-intensive, relying on spectacle and consumption of competition that is possible due to organization. There, cultural diplomacy is effective in a permanent institutional environment, while sports diplomacy works better in event-focused settings that invite a mass audience and opportunities for engagement.

Having identified how sports diplomacy and cultural diplomacy vary in nature and environment, it is possible to outline their effects on the actors, tools, and results. In particular, the profile of actors involved in these two types significantly differs. Cultural diplomacy actors are usually a combination of diplomats and non-state actors. The latter become the driving force and implementers of policy and include civil society, the academic community, businesspeople, and others. The reasoning is that their role is more about generating ideas, while the government's role is in creating conditions for their implementation and coordination (Matviyenko, & Matiash, 2021). Artists, performers, intellectuals, civil society organizations, universities, and even diasporic communities play supporting roles, as they facilitate the exchanges of ideas or contribute to turning knowledge into symbols. However, as the cultural environment requires consistency of messages and values to frame social expectations and guide behavior, the government grants organization and order. It means the activities in which actors participate are often state-backed or state-facilitated, ensuring the achievement of foreign policy goals.

In contrast, when analyzing sports diplomacy, more attention is given to the events, competition of sportsmen, and networks built around them. The primary actors become the governments, organizations, and non-state actors that organize the events and form the values and traditions behind the events where performance takes place. They refer to sports arenas, tournaments, or significant world events like the Olympic Games. For example, Germany put sports diplomacy into the center of its cultural diplomacy strategy when organizing the 2006 FIFA World Cup, while Qatari authorities underlined that hosting sports mega events was a suitable tool to support better "relations between East and West" (Grix, & Brannagan, 2016, p. 265). The organization of such events was impossible without developing an agenda that included national associations, federations, and world organizations like FIFA. Nonetheless, the sportsmen play a crucial role as well; when they compete internationally, their conduct and image form perceptions of their nation. If they have enough fan capital to affect international relations, they can be a tool that will support diplomatic efforts or reinforce the power of a particular event. For instance, the transfer of football star, Cristiano Ronaldo, to the Al Nassr club from the Saudi League resulted in a rise in users from "850,000 to 11 million," increasing the international coverage and bringing the Kingdom recognition (AlSaeed, 2025, p. 1659). Furthermore, the participation in sports diplomacy is not limited to sportsmen. Media, coaches, and even fan movements can be participants in sports diplomacy, and their actions can influence the climate in which diplomacy occurs, thus affecting the message conveyed.

The further comparison contemplates the analysis of the tools and effects of culture and sports diplomacy, where institutionalization may significantly impact the realization of the concepts as foreign policy instruments. In particular, the cultural diplomacy tools contemplate sharing a nation's cultural and intellectual life, as well as arts, music, language, and heritage. The tools include educational exchanges, language teaching, arts and performance tours, festivals, museum and heritage collaborations, and media broadcasting. A significant role in the management of tools lies within the institutions that a foreign policy suggests. A vivid example of this is the use and popularization of British education worldwide. By creating scholarships, countries are able to invite and affect elites of other countries via sharing their culture and values

(Matviyenko, & Matiash, 2021). Significantly, such scholarships are usually financed by the government institutions. Notably, institutional support appears to be a decisive factor in making cultural diplomacy effective and sustainable.

The analysis of the strategy of the government of France shows how placing cultural initiatives within a robust institutional framework transforms them into a stand-alone and impactful instrument of foreign policy. First of all, the French government is seen as the pioneer in adopting cultural diplomacy as a standalone strategy and building institutions that supported the popularization of French culture abroad. Institut Français and the Alliance Française, founded in the 20th century, now operate as part of a global network to promote the French language, art, and heritage. They ensure that initiatives and efforts are coherent, guided, and aligned with national priorities. In particular, Institut Français acts under the Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs (MEFA) and supports creative industries, cooperation, and cultural projects, while Alliance Française is subsidized by MEFA and initiates business partnerships, language instruction, and artistic exchange (Tounta, 2022, pp. 45–46). With these agencies, France can engage with the audience worldwide and reinforce France's image and influence worldwide. Such an approach shows that the French state plays a central role by allocating resources and defining strategic objectives, making cultural diplomacy a crucial part of foreign policy.

Such institutionalization signals a long-term commitment and supports the idea that cultural diplomacy efforts are consistent and effective. In this regard, the question arises whether sports diplomacy can be as effective and act as a standalone strategy, not only a complementary tool within public diplomacy efforts. Most countries use tournaments and competitions to showcase their country and form their image through the performance of sportspeople. However, today, more and more countries use sports diplomacy as a comprehensive strategy that becomes a platform for negotiation, image development, and connecting with people. For instance, Qatar and Saudi Arabia use sports mega-events to shape their image worldwide, improve their reputation abroad, and foster trade (Gryshuk, 2024). Except for the case of acquiring famous sportspeople mentioned earlier, these countries managed to become centers for sports events related to football, boxing, and Formula 1. Their success stems from substantial government funding, coordinated institutional backing, and alignment with broader economic and political goals.

Yet it is not the only case. The recent development of the Australian Sports Diplomacy approach proves that sports diplomacy may work as a standalone foreign policy tool. In particular, Australia has been developing several strategies to leverage sports diplomacy as a leading tool in strengthening its presence in the region and supporting relations with countries. Since 2015, they have adopted strategies, with the latter one defining the use of sports by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in cooperation with national sports organizations and the private sector (Australian Government, 2024). Such an approach was chosen as Australia has a significant sports capital characterized by the popularity of sport, perception of it as a national value, and strong sports infrastructure. Under these strategies, the particular model financed and coordinated the creation of sports events, networks, and programs across the Indo-Pacific. For instance, the PacificAus Program aimed at creating partnerships within neighbouring countries, which resulted in over 50 partnerships and reached 1.5 million people (Australian Government, 2019, p. 7). It supported

the friendly image of Australia and allowed the development of sports networks with the population in neighbouring countries. Nevertheless, recent news shows that sports diplomacy has allowed the country to strengthen its relationship with its neighbors and improve its standing in the region. In particular, on the same day, the Australian government signed an agreement to invest \$600 million to support the inclusion of the Papua New Guinea rugby team into the Australian rugby league, alongside signing a new security deal (Henderson, & Brancatisano, 2024). That way, leveraging the popularity of this kind of sport in Papua New Guinea and using it as a platform for fostering relationships between countries, Australia managed to strengthen its influence in the neighboring region and gain leverage against the proliferation of such actors as China.

In the end, both examples show that when sports diplomacy is embedded in a clear institutional strategy with long-term funding and inter-agency coordination, it can deliver sustained diplomatic influence. Whether through the spectacle of global mega-events or targeted community-level engagement, institutionalization transforms sports from a soft power instrument into a strategic pillar of foreign policy.

Discussion and conclusions

This analysis and comparison of the sports, cultural, and public diplomacy explored the relationship between the concepts within the broader framework of soft power, while asking whether sports diplomacy deserves recognition as an effective standalone foreign policy instrument.

The research confirms that the approaches derive from the logic of soft power, as they seek to attract and influence through non-coercive means. Despite this shared foundation, public and cultural diplomacy have long enjoyed greater scholarly and policy attention, benefiting from a century of practice, a well-developed institutional framework, and tangible outputs such as the use of communication, media, cultural aspects, and exchange of ideas. Sports diplomacy, by contrast, has often been subsumed under cultural and public diplomacy. The reasons refer partly to the nature of "culture" as a term and the broad use of tools, partly to the absence of sustained strategies and measurable short-term results by governments in relation to sports diplomacy.

Moreover, the comparison reveals that cultural diplomacy operates within a symbolic–normative environment, where meaning and values are conveyed through artistic and intellectual exchange. Here, the main tools include language teaching, exhibitions, and academic partnerships, and aim to produce consistent, long-term engagement. In contrast, sports diplomacy functions in a performance-competitive environment shaped by organized events, rules, and mass audiences. In this case, the tools refer to competitions, athlete performances, and sporting networks, which provide immediate visibility but require deliberate structuring to yield lasting diplomatic outcomes.

The research proves that sports diplomacy can be a standalone and effective foreign policy tool. The basis for such proof becomes institutionalization, a decisive factor in the mentioned domains. The case of France's cultural diplomacy, anchored in the Alliance Française and Institut Français under direct government oversight, demonstrates how coherent structures and funding ensure consistency, visibility, and strategic alignment for foreign policy efforts. Similarly, sports diplomacy can achieve comparable influence when backed by long-term institutional support, as shown by Qatar and Saudi Arabia's mega-event government-led strategies and Australia's Sports

Diplomacy 2030 framework. These cases underline that, when embedded in a clear policy vision with agency-backed coordination and investment, sports diplomacy extends beyond symbolic gestures and becomes a credible pillar of foreign policy.

In conclusion, recognizing sports diplomacy as distinct from other types of diplomacy allows for a fresh view on a unique environment, tools, and effects. Appropriately institutionalized, it can stand independently as an effective, strategic instrument in the modern diplomatic toolkit. The subsequent development of the approach and practice as a foreign policy strategy will depend on how the countries use it when conducting foreign policy.

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**СПОРТИВНА І КУЛЬТУРНА ДИПЛОМАТІЯ:
РОЗМЕЖУВАННЯ ТА САМОСТІЙНІСТЬ У ЗОВНІШНІЙ ПОЛІТИЦІ**

Вступ. Зростаючий вплив комунікаційних технологій і глобальних подій посилює роль спортивної дипломатії як інструмента зовнішньої політики. Водночас науковці продовжують відносити її до культурної чи публічної дипломатії. Така двозначність впливає із широкого визначення "м'якої сили", у межах якого культура і спорт служать механізмами привабливості та впливу. Основне питання полягає в тому, чи функціонує спортивна дипломатія як допоміжний, чи самостійний інструмент. Дослідження має на меті визначити межі між публічною, культурною та спортивною дипломатією і означити фактори, що дають змогу спортивній дипломатії діяти як самостійний інструмент зовнішньої політики.

Методи. У роботі поєднано політичний, порівняльний і контент-аналіз із методом конкретизації. Ці підходи дозволяють дослідити зв'язки із "м'якою силою", порівняти їх середовища, акторів і засоби, а також розглянути практичні приклади країн Франції, Катару, Саудівської Аравії та Австралії.

Результати. Результати свідчать, що "м'яка сила" формує загальну рамку для публічної, культурної та спортивної дипломатії, проте кожна з них діє в окремому середовищі. Культурна дипломатія функціонує у символічно-нормативному просторі, що формується обміном ідеями та цінностями, тоді як спортивна дипломатія розгортається у змагально-перформативному середовищі, визначеному подіями, спортивними мережами та масовою аудиторією. Її пізня інституціоналізація та складність у вимірюванні результаті пояснюють її маргіналізацію. Проте сучасні приклади свідчать про зміни. Французька модель демонструє, як культурна дипломатія посилює вплив завдяки інституціоналізації. Подібна тенденція простежується у спортивній дипломатії: Катар і Саудівська Аравія використовують державні заходи і турніри для зміцнення міжнародної репутації. Стратегія "Sports Diplomacy 2030" в Австралії є переконливим прикладом того, як країна може застосовувати спорт як стратегічний дипломатичний інструмент.

Висновки. Спортивну дипломатію не слід розглядати лише як підкатегорію інших видів дипломатії, вона заслуговує на незалежний статус. Її особливе середовище, специфічні актори та інструменти підтверджують її відмінність від інших типів дипломатії. За умови інституційної підтримки, фінансування та стратегічного бачення вона постає як ефективний самостійний інструмент зовнішньої політики.

Ключові слова: спортивна дипломатія, культурна дипломатія, публічна дипломатія, м'яка сила, зовнішня політика, культура, спорт.

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