

On sports diplomacy in the Pacific

by Sam Risdon

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Fans make their way into Mount Smart Stadium, Auckland ahead of Tonga's victory over New Zealand in the Pacific Championship.

Photo Credit: Ileini Taloa

As eager global audiences tune in to watch the latest and shiniest sporting event, it is becoming increasingly difficult to discern how important the sport on display actually is. Major sporting events bestow on the hosting nation the opportunity to construct favourable narratives supported by a zealous media with empty column-inches to fill. The machinations behind the scenes of ever-more-lucrative major sporting events only add to the uneasy feeling that the spectacle on our screens is increasingly secondary to something hidden.

The converging of sport and politics is nothing new of course. Modern iterations of this phenomenon include Beijing's hosting of the 2008 Olympics, framed as China's celebratory emergence into the elite group of super-power nations. [Belton \(2021\) writes](#) that Russia's hosting of the 2018 FIFA Men's World Cup was altogether a more sinister effort at attaining respectability and legitimacy for a regime committed to imperialism and violence. Furthermore, Gulf states Qatar and Saudi Arabia [have begun purchasing large stakes and assets](#) in major sporting institutions including golf, boxing, football (with the goal of hosting the 2034 World Cup) and tennis. Critics point to this as the most egregious attempt yet to use the self-promotional qualities of sport to construct favourable state narratives.

For Pacific nations, wealth funds and billionaires looking for a sporting plaything are not feasible soft power options. However, examples have recently emerged of Pacific actors embracing sports diplomacy. The clearest and most thorough example is the likely expansion of the Australian National Rugby League (NRL) to include a team based in Papua New Guinea. The Australian government has [backed the initiative](#) said to be worth \$600 million over 10 years and it remains a key public relations and foreign policy initiative for the Albanese government. The ABC [recently reported](#) the deal included "an assurance PNG will not sign a security deal that could allow Chinese police or military forces to be based in the Pacific

nation”.

Pacific nations that have recently switched diplomatic recognition to the People’s Republic of China (PRC) have used sports diplomacy to foster warmer relations. The Chinese-built and Chinese-funded Pacific Games stadium was handed over to Solomon Islands within four years of formally establishing relations. Additionally, reports from Nauru in recent weeks suggest that the upcoming Micronesia Games (2026) will be **hosted at a stadium built and funded** by Chinese development partners. Nauru established diplomatic relations with the PRC in January 2024.

The Fiji Government’s recently released **Foreign Policy White Paper 2024** devoted an entire section to sports diplomacy, stating: “Integrating sports into our diplomatic strategy aligns with our broader sustainability goals”. The paper’s tone on sports diplomacy is pragmatic, noting Fiji’s potential to be competitive at major sporting events such as Rugby 7s at the Olympics and the Rugby World Cup, both events with viewership figures well into the millions. The paper seeks to synthesise Fiji’s priority economic and social issues with positive global media narratives, including through sporting success.

Former Fiji men’s rugby captain Waisea Nayacalevu’s recent interview with a British outlet sheds some light on how sport provides a unique platform for Pacific people to communicate priority issues to a global audience. While not exactly flattering to the authorities throughout his interview, **Nayacalevu says**, “The president loves rugby and he was trying to get me to be an ambassador for climate change. I don’t have time now — maybe after rugby”. Symbolic in the article is the appearance of the Brazilian footballer Neymar, a poster boy of the Qatar sports diplomacy/sportswashing enterprise. His appearance in the article neatly exemplifies the divergent models of sports diplomacy; one model that seeks to use sport’s global reach to be heard, the other to drown out criticism of a state’s actions and policies.

The recent expansion of the FIFA men’s World Cup to automatically include the best qualifier from Oceania has combined the interests of authorities looking to win a spot on this lucrative platform and European football’s elites embracing football’s perceived final frontier. Membership of FIFA, with all the bells and whistles that come with it, is spotty throughout the Pacific, with 11 nations holding full membership. Qualifying for the men’s World Cup 2022 **assured each team of USD\$9 million**.

Nauru and Marshall Islands (RMI) are building the foundations for a national team. RMI played their first match, albeit not a full 11-a-side match, in mid-2024. Their stated goal: **FIFA membership by 2030**. Spiritually led by UK based Lloyd Owens,

the RMI project has a thorough, staged development strategy centred on providing “opportunities to Marshallese people, [to] promote our culture and raise awareness of the challenges we face”. RMI is a long way from qualifying for FIFA’s showpiece event, but they articulate the potential for sport to bring their voices to a wider audience. New Zealand Football’s insistence on remaining in the Oceania qualifying confederation is the major obstacle to seeing a Pacific nation at a World Cup, but the gap is closing and, as the rewards and incentives increase, we can expect to see this reflected in increased competitiveness on the field.

Sport as a political tool is not a new phenomenon; its propaganda potential has been realised for decades. Yet, something distinctive about contemporary sports diplomacy has emerged. The NRL expansion project with PNG reflects the willingness of wealthy governments to spend big on sports diplomacy as part of Pacific public relations initiatives aligned with foreign policy objectives. Conversely, those with smaller wallets but a well-defined strategic plan have recognised the potential sport provides in a globalised media and popular culture landscape. The tension between extreme wealth and innovation is a reality of modern sport — one increasingly, however, where big money wins.

Disclosures:

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