Player Naturalization and Indonesia's Sport Diplomacy: Building National Image

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ABSTRACT

Sport diplomacy has become an increasingly significant instrument through which states seek to strengthen bilateral and multilateral relations while projecting a favorable international image. This article examines player naturalization in Indonesian football as a case of sport diplomacy in practice, focusing on the naturalization of players for the national team and its broader implications for Indonesia's international image. Employing a qualitative, literature-based approach informed by soft power theory and the concept of sport diplomacy, the article argues that naturalization does not automatically constitute diplomacy; rather, its diplomatic value emerges when improved sporting competitiveness is translated into international visibility, public engagement, cultural representation, and diplomatic interaction. The analysis traces this mechanism through Indonesia's multitrack diplomacy, comprising government institutions, football associations, and public communication, showing how naturalization is simultaneously associated with simultaneously produces diplomatic gains and domestic tensions concerning national identity, local player development, and policy sustainability. Drawing on sources from outside the Indonesian football ecosystem, the analysis finds indications of international visibility and bilateral interaction but limited evidence of effects on national image. The findings suggest that naturalization functions most effectively as sport diplomacy when it is embedded within a coordinated and sustainable national strategy rather than treated as an isolated recruitment policy aimed at short-term competitive success.

Keywords: Sport Diplomacy, Player Naturalization, National Image, Indonesia

Diplomasi olahraga telah menjadi instrumen yang semakin penting bagi negara-negara dalam memperkuat hubungan bilateral maupun multilateral sekaligus memproyeksikan citra positif di panggung internasional. Artikel ini mengkaji kebijakan naturalisasi pemain sepak bola Indonesia sebagai bentuk praktik diplomasi olahraga, dengan berfokus pada naturalisasi pemain untuk tim nasional serta implikasinya terhadap citra Indonesia di dunia internasional. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif berbasis studi literatur yang dilandasi teori soft power dan konsep diplomasi olahraga, artikel ini berargumen bahwa naturalisasi tidak dengan sendirinya menjadi diplomasi; nilai diplomatiknya muncul ketika peningkatan daya saing olahraga diterjemahkan menjadi visibilitas internasional, keterlibatan publik, representasi budaya, dan interaksi diplomatik. Analisis ini menelusuri mekanisme tersebut melalui pendekatan multitrack diplomacy Indonesia, yang melibatkan lembaga pemerintah, asosiasi sepak bola, dan komunikasi publik, serta menunjukkan bagaimana naturalisasi menghasilkan berkaitan dengan keuntungan diplomatik sekaligus ketegangan domestik terkait identitas nasional, pembinaan pemain lokal, dan keberlanjutan kebijakan. Dengan merujuk pada sumber di luar ekosistem sepak bola Indonesia, analisis menemukan indikasi visibilitas internasional dan interaksi bilateral, tetapi bukti pengaruh terhadap citra nasional masih terbatas Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa naturalisasi berfungsi paling efektif sebagai diplomasi olahraga apabila diintegrasikan ke dalam strategi nasional yang terkoordinasi dan berkelanjutan, bukan diperlakukan sebagai kebijakan rekrutmen yang berdiri sendiri untuk mengejar keberhasilan kompetitif jangka pendek.

Kata Kunci: Diplomasi Olahraga, Naturalisasi Pemain, Citra Nasional, Indonesia

Introduction

In the context of deepening globalization deepens, international relations are increasingly influenced by political, economic, and cultural factors. Beyond political and economic interests, cultural and social dynamics also play a crucial role, with sport gaining prominence in this context. Sport diplomacy involves deliberately using sporting events, exchanges, and achievements to advance diplomatic goals, enhance inter-state relations, and build a positive global image (Trunkos & Heere, 2017). Because of its unique ability to bring together people from diverse backgrounds, sport serves as a powerful platform for dialogue, cultural exchange, and mutual understanding, often surpassing traditional diplomatic channels. As international competition grows across various sectors, governments are increasingly recognizing sport not just as recreation but as an important strategic tool of statecraft.

The diplomatic potential of sport is closely connected to soft power, which is defined as the ability to influence others through attraction instead of coercion or material rewards (Nye, 2004). Achievements in sports, hosting major events, and the emotional and emotive power of competition allow countries to showcase their cultural values, technological progress, and organizational skills to international audiences in a way that tends to be non-confrontational (Santos, 2021). Historical examples, such as the "Ping Pong Diplomacy" between the U.S. and China in the 1970s, and Nelson Mandela's strategic use of the 1995 Rugby World Cup to promote reconciliation in post-apartheid South Africa, illustrate how sporting events can open diplomatic opportunities and help improve a nation's international image (Nygård & Gates, 2013). These instances highlight that the diplomatic benefits of sport come from intentional political framing, not just athletic performance.

Within this global context, Indonesia has increasingly turned to football, particularly and specifically to the naturalization of foreign-born players of Indonesian descent, as a strategy to enhance the competitiveness of its national team. Over the past two decades, the Indonesian Football Association (Persatuan Sepak Bola Seluruh Indonesia, PSSI) has pursued naturalization policies to address ongoing challenges and persistent difficulties in competing at regional and continental levels, most visible in the Southeast Asian Games (SEA Games) and various tournaments under the Asian Football Confederation (AFC). Naturalized players, many of whom have developed technical and tactical experience in more competitive foreign leagues, are expected to raise the overall standard and quality of the national team while offering local players opportunities to learn from higher-level standards of play. This approach is especially evident; policy has become particularly visible in the composition of Indonesia's U-23 national team, which competes in tournaments of significant carrying substantial regional and continental importance.

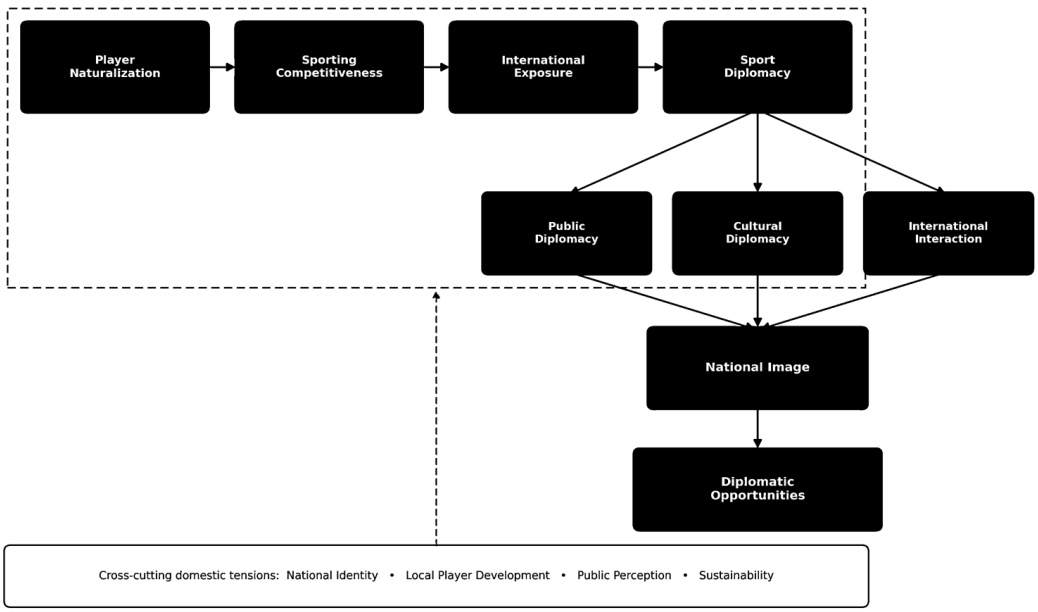
Sporting success generates effects that have implications that extend beyond the immediate results of competition outcomes. Strong international performance by a national team often fosters domestic pride, attracts international media attention, and creates opportunities for cooperation in trade, culture, and diplomacy. In Indonesia, football achievements serve as an indicator of professional sports governance and national unity, supporting efforts to host international events and attract investment in sports infrastructure. However, translating the conversion of sporting results into

diplomatic outcomes is neither automatic nor uncontested; it depends on the management, communication, and reception of these results by both domestic and international audiences.

The academic significance of this development lies in the fact that naturalization, as a policy instrument, does not inherently result in sport diplomacy. Existing literature has explored whether it translates into sport diplomacy automatically. Existing literature on sport diplomacy has examined the general relationship between sporting achievement, soft power, and national image (Nye, 2004; Nygård & Gates, 2013; Santos, 2021), but comparatively little attention has been paid to naturalization as a specific mechanism link specifically as a mechanism connecting domestic sporting policy to international diplomatic outcomes. Furthermore, the domestic tensions related to national identity, local player development, and public perception in Indonesia accompany this process in the Indonesian context. This article addresses this gap by examining how asking: how player naturalization functions as an instrument of Indonesia's sport diplomacy in building national image.

This article argues that player naturalization operates as an instrument of sport diplomacy when improved sporting competitiveness leads to increased international visibility, public engagement, cultural representation, and diplomatic interaction. The effectiveness of this process depends on coordination across multiple diplomatic tracks and on balancing the pursuit of international competitiveness with the sustainability of domestic sporting development and national identity. Figure 1 introduces the analytical model guiding the subsequent discussion, outlining the pathway from naturalization to sporting competitiveness, international exposure, sport diplomacy, and ultimately, national image and diplomatic opportunity, while situating this process within the domestic tensions that shape and influence its outcome.

Figure 1. Analytical Model of Player Naturalization as Sport Diplomacy



Source: Processed by the author

As illustrated in Figure 1, naturalization alone does not constitute sport diplomacy by itself. Its diplomatic relevance arises only when enhance merges only once improved sporting competitiveness generates international exposure, which is then and that exposure is subsequently channeled through public diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, and international interaction to shape a broader national image and create diplomatic opportunities. This conversion process is continually influenced, eventually, by diplomatic opportunity. This conversion process, however, does not occur in a vacuum: it is continuously conditioned by domestic tensions related to surrounding national identity, local player development, public perception, and sustainability. Which is why these factors are represented as a cross-cutting frame around the entire model, rather than as a separate, discrete final stage. Accordingly, the model conceptualizes sport diplomacy as an outcome that requires active production, rather than as an automatic result. The model therefore treats sport diplomacy as an outcome that must be actively produced rather than one that follows automatically from sporting success. The following sections examine each stage of this pathway in turn, beginning with the theoretical relationship between sport diplomacy, soft power, and national image, and subsequently addressing before turning to the specific case of player naturalization in Indonesian football.

Method

This study employs a descriptive qualitative method with a literature study approach. This method was selected to elaborate the historical background, institutional mechanisms, and diplomatic outcomes generated by Indonesia's player naturalization policy as it functions, or fails to function, as an instrument of sport diplomacy. In case study research, an event, problem, process, activity, program, or one or more individuals is investigated in depth (Creswell, 2014); the case examined in this study is Indonesia's player naturalization policy in football, with supporting reference to the naturalization of players in basketball ahead of the 2023 FIBA World Cup, both of which are read through the analytical model presented in Figure 1. The data used in this study consist of secondary data. Secondary data were obtained from books, journal articles, book chapters, online news articles, and other references relevant to the research topic (Creswell, 2014). To assess whether the diplomatic effects attributed to naturalization are observable beyond the Indonesian football ecosystem, the study additionally draws on a purposive selection of sources originating outside that ecosystem, namely international and Dutch media reports, statements by foreign government institutions, and cross-national perception indices, covering the period 2017-2026. The analysis traces indications of the conversion mechanism within these sources and does not claim to measure causal effects. Data from these sources were analyzed descriptively by tracing them through the naturalization-to-national-image pathway outlined in the analytical model, so that the diplomatic benefits and domestic tensions identified in the discussion can be understood as the result of a single, interrelated policy process, rather than as separate empirical findings.

Results and Discussion

Sport Diplomacy, Soft Power, and National Image

Sport diplomacy is understood as a specialized extension of public diplomacy, in which sporting events, exchanges, and achievements are mobilized to build relationships, foster dialogue, and pursue diplomatic objectives across state and non-state boundaries (Trunkos & Heere, 2017). Unlike conventional diplomatic instruments, sport diplomacy relies on the emotive and unifying qualities of competition, which allow it to reach both

governmental and popular audiences simultaneously. This dual reach distinguishes sport diplomacy from purely intergovernmental forms of engagement and situates it within the broader architecture of nation branding and international public relations.

The explanatory power of sport diplomacy is most fully realized when read through the lens of soft power, Joseph Nye's (2004) concept describing the capacity of a state to achieve its objectives through attraction rather than coercion or payment. Soft power draws on resources such as culture, political values, and foreign policy conduct, and sport constitutes one of its most accessible channels precisely because athletic competition speaks a largely universal language. Mega-sporting events such as the Olympic Games or the FIFA World Cup provide host nations with a global platform on which to display cultural identity, technological capability, and organizational competence, elements that shape how international audiences perceive a country long after the competition itself has ended (Dubinsky, 2019; Santos, 2021).

Historical cases illustrate how sport can be deployed deliberately for diplomatic effect. The Ping Pong Diplomacy of the 1970s, in which table tennis exchanges between American and Chinese athletes helped open a channel for broader political engagement between two adversarial states, remains a canonical example of sport functioning as a neutral diplomatic platform (Nygård & Gates, 2013). Equally instructive is Nelson Mandela's strategic use of the 1995 Rugby World Cup, in which a sport historically associated with South Africa's white minority was reframed as a symbol of national unity, thereby advancing post-apartheid reconciliation while simultaneously projecting a renewed national image abroad (Nygård & Gates, 2013). Both cases demonstrate that the diplomatic value of sport is not intrinsic to competition itself but is generated through deliberate framing, narrative construction, and political timing.

The relationship between sporting success and national image operates through a comparable logic. Victories in international competition generate domestic pride and are frequently read abroad as evidence of a country's organizational capacity, human resource management, and developmental trajectory. States such as China and Brazil have used the Olympic Games and the FIFA World Cup, respectively, to assert their emergence as global actors, leveraging these platforms to advance economic and diplomatic interests well beyond the sporting arena (Santos, 2021). At the same time, the relationship between sport and national image is neither automatic nor risk-free. The 1936 Berlin Olympics remain a cautionary example of how sporting spectacle can be appropriated for propagandistic ends, while contemporary cases of corruption, discrimination, or excessive nationalism illustrate that the diplomatic returns of sport depend heavily on the credibility and consistency of the values a state claims to project (Nygård & Gates, 2013). Sport diplomacy, in other words, is only as effective as the authenticity of the narrative that accompanies it; any perceptible gap between a state's sporting image and its domestic conduct risks undermining the intended diplomatic outcome.

Sport diplomacy operates as a conversion mechanism, transforming sporting performance and spectacle into international attraction that can be leveraged for broader diplomatic, cultural, and economic objectives. This conversion is neither immediate nor assured; it necessitates institutional coordination, intentional communication, and a narrative that resonates with both domestic and international audiences. This conversion logic, rather than sporting achievement alone, underpins the analytical approach to examining player naturalization as an instrument of Indonesia's sport diplomacy in the following sections.

Player Naturalization as Sport Diplomacy

Player naturalization is not a recent phenomenon in Indonesian football. Still, its systematic use as a strategy to strengthen the national team has intensified since the 2000s, when the Indonesian Football Association (PSSI) began actively addressing Indonesia's persistent underperformance relative to increasingly competitive neighbors in Southeast Asia and across the wider Asian confederation. Naturalized players are typically selected for their prior experience in domestic and international leagues. They are expected to bring technical proficiency, tactical maturity, and competitive exposure that complement the talent already present within the domestic pool.

PSSI's adoption of this policy can be traced to four interrelated considerations. The first is performance pressure: repeated underachievement in SEA Games and AFC qualifying competitions created institutional urgency to improve results in the short to medium term, particularly as public expectations surrounding the national team grew alongside the increasing commercial and media visibility of regional football. The second is the limited pool of experienced local players. At the same time, Indonesia possesses considerable young footballing talent; opportunities to compete in highly competitive leagues remain constrained, leaving many domestic players without the exposure needed to perform at the international level. Naturalization, in this sense, functions as a mechanism for closing an experience gap that domestic competition alone has not yet been able to close. The third consideration is regional competitiveness, as neighboring states such as Thailand and Vietnam have themselves pursued player recruitment and squad-strengthening strategies, creating pressure for Indonesia to adopt comparable measures in order to remain competitive within ASEAN and Asian football. The fourth is squad cohesion: naturalized players, through their exposure to more advanced football environments, are expected to contribute not only individual skill but also a more professional competitive culture that can be transmitted to teammates over time, gradually raising the baseline standard of the domestic squad as a whole.

The diplomatic significance of naturalization begins to emerge once these sporting objectives are pursued successfully. Improved performance by the U-23 national team in tournaments such as the AFC U-23 Asian Cup functions simultaneously as a sporting outcome and as a signal of institutional competence, evidence that Indonesia can manage recruitment, training, and infrastructure to international standards. This signal is what converts a footballing result into a diplomatic asset: success on the pitch has ben accompanied by international media attention (Duerden, 2024, 2025; NOS, 2024) and may reinforces perceptions of Indonesia as a credible and professionally managed sporting nation. The basketball case shows a related but differently sequenced logic. Indonesia was awarded co-hosting rights for the 2023 FIBA World Cup in December 2017 (Interaksyon, 2017), and the naturalization of players such as Lester Prosper and Brandon Jawato, approved by the House of Representatives in 2020, formed part of an effort to build a national team able to qualify for a tournament that Indonesia was already due to co-host (Henson, 2019; Spin.ph, 2020). Naturalization in basketball therefore followed, rather than produced, Indonesia's hosting position (on the nation-branding significance of that position, see The basketball case is instructive precisely because it shows that the same logic applies beyond football: naturalization functions as a diplomatic instrument to the extent that it is paired with a broader hosting or branding strategy, rather than pursued as a sport-specific measure in isolation. Naturalization, understood this way, functions less as an end in itself and more as an investment in the broader project of nation branding.

This dynamic extends into the regional diplomatic arena. Within ASEAN, sustained competitiveness enabled in part by naturalized players allows Indonesia to position itself as a leading footballing nation among its neighbors. Regional reactions point in this direction: Vietnamese media covered Indonesia's naturalization process extensively, and a Vietnamese national-team defender likened facing Indonesia to facing the Netherlands, although the coverage also carried allegations that Jakarta has denied (Duerden, 2024). At the same time, success at the AFC level demonstrates Indonesia's emergence as a credible actor in Asian football more broadly. Given that several ASEAN states have pursued comparable naturalization strategies of their own, Indonesia's results in head-to-head regional competition function as a relatively legible benchmark through which relative standing, and by extension relative diplomatic weight within the region's footballing community, is continuously assessed. Because many naturalized players retain family or professional ties to their countries of origin, their inclusion in the national team can also creates informal channels of interaction between Indonesia and those countries, opening possibilities for cooperation that extend beyond the football pitch itself. These channels are strengthened further when sporting success is accompanied by consistent investment in domestic football management, since regional and continental credibility rests not only on isolated results but on the perception that Indonesia can sustain competitive performance over time. Indicative evidence of such channels includes the Dutch Embassy's choice of 'Football Unites' as the theme of its King's Day 2025 celebration in Jakarta (Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Indonesia, 2025) and the oath-taking of naturalized players at the Indonesian Embassy in The Hague (Republika, 2024; Radio Republik Indonesia [RRI], 2025). The same ties also generate friction, as the 2026 'passportgate' episode under Dutch nationality law showed (Radio Republik Indonesia, 2026).

It is essential to note, however, that naturalization alone does not constitute sport diplomacy. The presence of a naturalized player on the field is primarily a sporting fact; its diplomatic value emerges only when this fact is transformed into international visibility, media attention, transnational interaction, and public engagement that extend beyond the football community. Table 1 summarizes this conversion mechanism, illustrating how specific aspects of the naturalization policy generate sporting outcomes that subsequently produce diplomatic functions and influence Indonesia's national image.

Table 1. Player Naturalization as a Sport Diplomacy Instrument

Policy Dimension	**Sporting Function**	**Diplomatic Function**	**National Image Effect**
International experience	Technical/tactical capacity	International exposure	More competitive image
Sporting competitiveness	Stronger team performance	Diplomatic visibility	Sporting reputation
Transnational networks	Foreign football connections	International interaction	Internationally connected image
Team development	Naturalized and local players	Institutional management	Professional sports governance
International	Regional/global	Interaction	Recognition and

competitions	exposure	platforms	branding

Source: Processed by the author, based on Trunkos and Heere (2017) and Puspitasari and Indrawati (2021)

As Table 1 illustrates, the diplomatic value of naturalization is distributed across several interlocking dimensions rather than concentrated in any single outcome. International experience embedded within naturalized players enhances technical and tactical capacity, which becomes visible internationally and feeds into perceptions of Indonesia as an increasingly competitive footballing nation. Broader sporting competitiveness, sustained across multiple tournaments, provides diplomatic visibility that reinforces Indonesia's sporting reputation over time rather than through a single isolated result. The transnational networks created through naturalized players' prior connections to foreign clubs and federations generate opportunities for international interaction that position Indonesia as a more internationally connected footballing actor. Team development that successfully integrates naturalized and local players signals institutional management capacity, contributing to an image of professional sports governance. At the same time, participation in regional and global competitions provides recurring platforms through which these various forms of recognition and branding can accumulate. Read together, these dimensions indicate that naturalization functions as sport diplomacy precisely to the extent that its sporting gains are systematically converted into international exposure and diplomatic interaction, the mechanism examined in greater detail in the discussion of multitrack diplomacy that follows. Table 1 specifies this mechanism analytically; the empirical evidence for each link, drawn from sources outside the Indonesian football ecosystem, is assessed in the subsection on evidence of diplomatic effects below.

Diplomatic Gains and Domestic Tensions

The diplomatic gains generated by player naturalization are considerable, but they are inseparable from a parallel set of domestic tensions that condition their long-term sustainability. On the gains side, improved national team performance may strengthen strengthens Indonesia's international recognition as a country capable of professional sports management, encompassing recruitment, training, and infrastructure that meet international standards. This recognition may contributes directly to national branding, positioning Indonesia as an increasingly credible actor within regional and continental football, and, by extension, within the broader field of international sport. Success on the pitch can also generates soft power in Nye's (2004) sense, as competitive performance and displays of sportsmanship create positive associations that can be leveraged in subsequent diplomatic engagement. A concrete illustration of this dynamic is Indonesia's fourth-place finish at the 2024 AFC U-23 Asian Cup, an achievement that received coverage from international outlets (Al Jazeera, 2024). This coverage points to heightened international visibility, although the sources reviewed here do not show that foreign audiences read the result as evidence of a more professionally managed footballing system rather than as an isolated sporting result; that interpretation remains a proposition to be tested.

These gains extend into concrete forms of bilateral and multilateral interaction. Naturalized players' continuing ties to their countries of origin can create informal channels through which Indonesia may cultivate closer relations with those states. At the same time, international matches and tournaments can function as platforms for cultural exchange, sports tourism, and broader cooperation. The presence of naturalized players from footballing systems abroad may also opens avenues for cooperation with international federations and clubs, reinforcing Indonesia's

integration into transnational sporting networks. Collectively, these dynamics illustrate that the diplomatic value of naturalization is not confined to the moment of victory but accumulates through the ongoing relationships and platforms that competitive success makes possible. Yet the indicative evidence assembled in Table 3 suggests that such interaction is observable but largely symbolic and administrative, and not free of friction.

At the same time, the naturalization policy generates domestic tensions that directly bear on its diplomatic credibility. The most persistent of these concerns national identity: because naturalized players are often born and raised outside Indonesia, questions arise regarding the strength of their cultural and emotional connection to the country, and whether their inclusion genuinely represents the nation or merely serves an instrumental sporting purpose. These questions touch on broader debates about nationalism, inclusivity, and the meaning of national representation in sport, debates that are not unique to Indonesia but recur wherever naturalization policies are pursued (Sullivan, Ross, & Wu, 2022). A second tension concerns local player development. Heavy reliance on naturalized players risks diverting institutional attention and investment away from domestic talent pipelines, with potentially significant long-term consequences. If the development of young Indonesian players is neglected in favor of short-term naturalization, the sustainability of the national team's competitiveness once naturalized players are no longer available becomes uncertain.

A third, closely related tension involves public perception. Naturalization is often criticized as a quick solution that favors short-term outcomes over sustainable football development, particularly when naturalized players do not meet performance expectations. Media scrutiny in these instances demonstrates how diplomatic gains can be rapidly undermined by domestic criticism, highlighting the necessity of effective public communication in shaping the policy's reception both domestically and internationally. Since international observers follow domestic Indonesian debates over naturalization, as coverage by NOS (2024) and Duerden (2024) illustrates, unresolved public controversies can influence international perceptions, blurring the distinction between domestic and diplomatic audiences. This leads to a fourth tension, sustainability: the long-term legitimacy of naturalization as a sport diplomacy tool depends on its integration within a broader strategy that also supports domestic football infrastructure, coaching, and youth development, rather than operating as an isolated recruitment measure.

These tensions demonstrate that sport diplomacy cannot be separated from domestic legitimacy. A policy that generates favorable results abroad while provoking sustained controversy at home risks producing an image that is, at best, incomplete and, at worst, contradictory, celebrated internationally as evidence of professional sports management while simultaneously questioned domestically as an unsustainable shortcut. For naturalization to function effectively as sport diplomacy, therefore, its diplomatic gains and its domestic tensions must be managed as a single, interdependent policy problem rather than as separate sporting and political concerns. This requirement for integrated management provides the basis for examining how Indonesia's multitrack diplomacy approach seeks to coordinate government, sporting, and public actors around the naturalization policy, discussed in the following section.

Multitrack, Cultural, and Public Diplomacy

Indonesia's implementation of the naturalization policy can be understood through the framework of multitrack diplomacy, in which government, non-government, and public

actors operate along distinct but interconnected channels to advance a shared diplomatic objective, conventionally labeled Track 1, Track 2, and Track 3.

Track 1 comprises government institutions, principally the Ministry of Youth and Sports, the Ministry of Law and Human Rights, and, for matters requiring international coordination, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, whose primary function is to establish the legal and institutional foundation for naturalization, including citizenship procedures and the resolution of dual-citizenship issues with players' countries of origin. This track provides the institutional legitimacy without which the naturalization process could not proceed in a manner consistent with Indonesian law and international norms, and it is also the track through which Indonesia engages, at the state level, with the governments of players' countries of origin whenever citizenship questions require bilateral clarification. An example is the oath-taking of naturalized players at the Indonesian Embassy in The Hague, first held outside Indonesia in September 2024 (Republika, 2024) and repeated in August 2025 (RRI, 2025).

Track 2 involves PSSI together with football clubs, player agents, and international federations, and functions as the operational bridge between government approval and the practical realities of professional football. PSSI negotiates player eligibility, manages the administrative requirements linked to international transfer and competition regulations, and coordinates with foreign clubs and federations to ensure that naturalized players can be released to represent Indonesia. This track supplies the flexibility and technical expertise required to translate Track 1's institutional authorization into an actual playing squad, and in doing so generates the international sporting engagement identified in the discussion of Table 1. Because PSSI operates simultaneously as a domestic sporting authority and as Indonesia's representative within international football federations, Track 2 also functions as a quasi-diplomatic channel in its own right, independent of formal state-to-state engagement.

Track 3 operates at the level of media, supporters, athletes, and the wider public, and is concerned with communication and perception rather than formal procedure. Government agencies and PSSI use press engagement and social media to frame naturalization as part of a broader narrative of modernization and inclusiveness in Indonesian sport, seeking to build both domestic support and a favorable international impression of the policy. Public statements by PSSI chairman Erick Thohir illustrate such press engagement, as when he defended the policy by pointing to FIFA rules and to naturalization practices in other footballing nations (Republika, 2024). Athletes also take part in this track: ahead of the AFC Asian Cup in January 2024, naturalized and local players jointly posted a call for unity on social media in response to domestic criticism (NOS, 2024). Because public perception directly affects the domestic tensions discussed above, Track 3 functions as the mechanism through which sporting and institutional achievements are translated, or fail to be translated, into a coherent public diplomacy narrative. It is also the track most exposed to reputational risk, since it operates in real time and is least insulated from unscripted public reaction when naturalized players underperform or when questions of national identity resurface in public debate. Table 2 summarizes the main actors, functions, and diplomatic contributions associated with each of the three tracks before the discussion turns to how they interact as a coordinated system.

Table 2. Multitrack Diplomacy in Indonesia's Player Naturalization Policy.

Track	**Main Actors**	**Main Function**	**Diplomatic Contribution**
Track 1	Government institutions	Regulation, citizenship, coordination	Institutional legitimacy
Track 2	PSSI, clubs, federations, players	Recruitment and sporting cooperation	International sporting engagement
Track 3	Media, supporters, public, athletes	Communication and perception	Public diplomacy and national image

Source: Processed by the author, based on Trunkos and Heere (2017) and Aneboa et al. (2024).

The three tracks are most effective when they operate not as parallel activities but as a single coordinated system. Legal and institutional legitimacy secured through Track 1 enables the operational recruitment carried out through Track 2. In contrast, the international engagement this recruitment produces supplies the material that Track 3 subsequently communicates to domestic and international audiences. Coordination failures in any one track weaken the others: administrative delays undermine the credibility Track 3 seeks to project. At the same time, inadequate public communication can obscure legitimate institutional and sporting achievements secured through Tracks 1 and 2.

This multitrack structure also provides the institutional basis through which football connects to cultural and public diplomacy more broadly. The inclusion of batik motifs in the national team jersey, for instance, uses an internationally visible sporting platform to project a distinctly Indonesian cultural identity, merging tradition with the modernity that naturalization is meant to represent. International matches involving naturalized players' countries of origin similarly can create opportunities for coach exchanges, culture-based sports education programs, and tourism promotion linked to match attendance, extending the diplomatic reach of football beyond the result of any single game ((for comparable dynamics in other national contexts, see Lee, 2021). In the Indonesian case, the evidence assembled in Table 3 is indicative rather than systematic. Taken together, these cultural and public diplomacy dimensions demonstrate that naturalization's diplomatic value depends as much on how it is communicated and culturally framed as on the sporting outcomes it produces on the field.

Evidence of Diplomatic Effects Beyond the Indonesian Football Ecosystem

The preceding sections specify the mechanism through which naturalization may become sport diplomacy. A further question is whether the effects attributed to this mechanism are observable beyond the Indonesian football ecosystem, that is, among foreign media, foreign governments, regional rivals, and cross-national audiences that do not depend on PSSI or on Indonesian media. Table 3 assesses six claimed effects against sources of this kind, drawn from the period 2017-2026.

Table 3. Indicative External Evidence for the Diplomatic Effects Attributed to Naturalization

Claimed effect	External actor	Indicative evidence	Strength of evidence
International visibility	Foreign media (Foreign Policy, NOS, AP)	Coverage of Indonesia's naturalization-based squad and the debate surrounding it (Duerden, 2024, 2025; NOS, 2024)	Observed; sentiment mixed
Sporting reputation	Regional rivals (Vietnam)	Extensive Vietnamese media coverage of the naturalization process; a Vietnamese defender likened facing Indonesia to facing the Netherlands (Duerden, 2024)	Limited
International interaction	Dutch football federation (KNVB); Indonesian Embassy in The Hague	Oath-taking of naturalized players at the embassy (Republika, 2024; RRI, 2025); 2026 'passportgate' dispute under Dutch nationality law (RRI, 2026)	Observed; administrative; includes friction
Bilateral ties	Embassy of the Netherlands in Jakarta	'Football Unites' as the theme of the King's Day 2025 celebration (Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Indonesia, 2025)	Observed; symbolic
Diplomatic opportunities	FIBA	Co-hosting rights awarded in December 2017, before the 2020 naturalization of players (Interaksyon, 2017; Spin.ph, 2020)	Not supported (reverse sequence)
National image	Brand Finance Global Soft Power Index	Rank 45th in both 2025 and 2026; score 42.9 (2025) and 42.0 (2026) (Brand Finance, 2025, 2026)	Not supported

Source: Processed by the author from the sources cited in the table.

The evidence supports the weaker claims of the model better than the stronger ones. International visibility is documented across independent outlets, although the coverage is not uniformly favorable: Vietnamese media carried allegations about the naturalization process that Jakarta has denied (Duerden, 2024), and Dutch public-broadcaster coverage reported domestic criticism directed at naturalized players (NOS, 2024). Interaction with the Netherlands is observable but largely administrative and symbolic, and it has generated friction as well as cooperation (Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Indonesia, 2025; RRI, 2026). The claims concerning diplomatic opportunity and national image are the least supported. In basketball, hosting rights were awarded in December 2017, before the players were naturalized (Interaksyon, 2017; Spin.ph, 2020). Indonesia's position in the Global Soft Power Index was unchanged at 45th place in 2026, with a slightly lower score than in 2025 (Brand Finance, 2025, 2026), and an index of general national perceptions cannot, in any case, isolate the contribution of football.

Three limitations qualify these findings. First, attribution: the sources show that naturalization coincided with international attention and interaction, not that it caused them, and the literature itself continues to debate how attraction converts into power outcomes (Grix & Brannagan, 2016). Second, sporting competitiveness has not translated into top-level results: Indonesia's 2026 World Cup qualification campaign ended after defeats to Saudi Arabia and Iraq, even though the naturalization program was credited with taking the team to the final stages of qualification for the first time since 1938 (Duerden, 2025). Third, the evidence is documentary and selective, and two

of the international media reports cited here share an author. A systematic content analysis of foreign media, or perception surveys among foreign audiences, would be needed to test the conversion mechanism more rigorously; this is left for future research.

Policy Implications and Sustainability

In the short term, the naturalization policy has yielded clear benefits: naturalized players contribute technical skills, physical conditioning, and competitive experience that result in improved performance and increased public interest, both in stadium attendance and media coverage (Durden,2024). This heightened interest forms the domestic basis for any subsequent international narrative of success, as a national team that does not attract sustained attention at home is unlikely to garner significant attention abroad. Such short-term visibility is diplomatically valuable because it is immediate and widely recognized, providing material for Track 3 communication to shape a favorable public narrative. In the long term, however, the sustainability of the policy depends on more complex factors. Continued reliance on naturalized players without parallel investment in domestic football academies, coaching, and youth competitions risks weakening the development of local talent, potentially undermining future competitiveness once current naturalized players are no longer available. Equally significant is the perception of naturalized players' commitment to Indonesian identity, both domestically and internationally, as this influences whether the policy is viewed as a coherent national strategy or as an ad hoc pursuit of results.

The bureaucratic mechanism underlying naturalization illustrates both the institutional seriousness of the policy and its vulnerability to delay. The process typically begins with PSSI's identification of eligible players, followed by proposal and deliberation in the House of Representatives, verification of legal requirements by the Ministry of Law and Human Rights, and, where dual-citizenship or bilateral issues arise, diplomatic facilitation by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Because this sequence involves multiple institutions with distinct mandates, administrative delay is a persistent risk, and any perception that the process lacks transparency can compound the public perception tensions discussed earlier. Digitalizing key stages of this process, through an integrated system linking relevant ministries and PSSI, real-time progress tracking, and stronger data security for players' personal information, offers a practical means of reducing delay while reinforcing the transparency on which public trust depends.

These considerations point toward several concrete priorities for strengthening naturalization as an instrument of sport diplomacy: closer inter-ministerial coordination to harmonize citizenship and sporting regulations, sustained collaboration with academic and research institutions to generate evidence-based evaluation of the policy's diplomatic and sporting impact, and administrative reform that makes the naturalization process faster and more transparent without compromising legal rigor. None of these priorities can substitute for investment in domestic player development; rather, they are best understood as complementary measures that allow naturalization to function as one component within a broader and more sustainable national sport diplomacy strategy.

Conclusion

This article set out to examine how player naturalization functions as an instrument of Indonesia's sport diplomacy in building national image. The analysis suggests that naturalization does not constitute sport diplomacy in itself; rather, its diplomatic significance emerges through a specific conversion mechanism, in which naturalization

strengthens sporting competitiveness, competitiveness generates international exposure, and that exposure is subsequently translated, through multitrack diplomacy encompassing government coordination, footballing institutions, and public communication, into diplomatic interaction and a more favorable national image. Indonesia's experience with naturalized players in football, and more briefly in basketball ahead of the 2023 FIBA World Cup, suggest that sporting performance can be linked to international visibility and bilateral interaction, while evidence for broader effects on national image and hosting opportunities remains limited: Indonesia's rank in the Global Soft Power Index was unchanged between 2025 and 2026 (Brand Finance, 2025, 2026), and in basketball hosting rights preceded naturalization (Interaksyon, 2017; Spin.ph, 2020).This mechanism operates under persistent domestic constraints. Questions of national identity, the risk of underinvestment in local player development, volatile public perception, and concerns about long-term sustainability all condition how effectively sporting success can be converted into durable diplomatic value. These tensions indicate that sport diplomacy cannot be separated from domestic legitimacy: a naturalization policy that succeeds internationally while generating sustained domestic controversy produces an incomplete and potentially fragile national image, however impressive its sporting results may be. The external evidence reviewed in this article indicates that this value is more readily observable in international visibility and bilateral interaction than in national image, and testing it against systematic data remains a task for future research.

The central policy implication that follows is that naturalization should not be treated as an isolated recruitment policy oriented toward short-term competitive success, but should instead be integrated into a broader and more sustainable sport diplomacy strategy, one that couples the recruitment of naturalized players with consistent investment in domestic football development, transparent and coordinated bureaucratic processes, and deliberate public and cultural communication. When managed in this integrated manner, naturalization has the potential to become not merely a technical solution to short-term sporting deficits, but a genuine and durable instrument through which Indonesia can strengthen its position within regional and global sport diplomacy.

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