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Golf Diplomacy as a Deliberate Instrument of Informal Interaction and Socialization For Foreign Policy

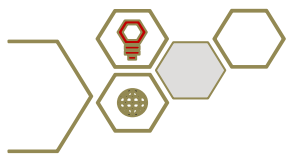
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Abstract: Purpose. Golf diplomacy, either as a separate instrument or a part of sports diplomacy, has been present in the practice of different international actors for decades. Golf diplomacy has been examined, yet the existing research focuses on the Asian region and lacks the framework that explains why and how golf-based meetings produce foreign policy results. This article aims to answer this gap by developing a model for golf as a deliberate diplomatic instrument, analyzing its application for diplomacy and the informal interaction of elites worldwide.

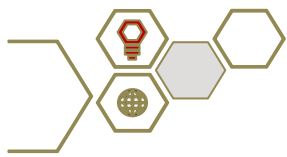
Methods. The study resorts to the qualitative comparative analysis of diplomatic practice in ASEAN countries, the U.S., Japan, Finland, Australia, South Korea, and Ukraine. The article uses three theoretical concepts to develop a framework: Erving Goffman's dramaturgical view of interactions, Alexander Wendt's understanding of repeated interactions' role, and Joseph Nye's soft power concept.



Results. The study shows that golf diplomacy works under three mechanisms: 1) a backstage setting that lifts pressure and enables position testing without pressure; 2) socialization via repeated and continuous co-presence of diplomats, allowing to generate trust; 3) exerting soft power due to the shared values and signals. The comparative analysis underlines that these mechanisms work within diverse cases. The case of ASEAN's founding shows the institutionalization of golf diplomacy within the region due to its effect on cooperation. The Abe-Trump and Stubb-Trump cases emphasize the effect of golf meetings on Japanese security interests and outline significant economic and security dividends for Finland. The Australian case covers the use of non-state actors with golf capital to support foreign policy, while the case of South Korea confirms the investment in golf for diplomatic interaction on the highest level. Lastly, the actions of Ukrainian actors, both low and high-level, represent that golf diplomacy, when not all conditions are met, may have a symbolic or limited effect and bring no tangible results.

Conclusions. Golf diplomacy is a deliberate instrument that involves three prerequisites to be effective: continued investment into multiple diplomatic meetings, access to pressure-free informal settings, and a shared attitude towards golf among the parties involved. When these conditions are met, the golf diplomacy would contribute to the tangible outcomes such as agreements or security arrangements. If they are not met, the bonding is likely to provide no bonding and bring rather symbolic results. Future research should pay attention to whether the framework may be used across other sporting formats, cultural contexts, and levels of diplomatic affairs.

Keywords: sports diplomacy, golf diplomacy, sports, elite socialization, diplomatic practice, foreign affairs, face-to-face diplomacy.



Гольф-дипломатія як стратегічний інструмент неформальної взаємодії та соціалізації у зовнішній політиці

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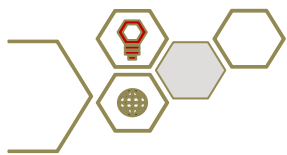
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Анотація. Мета. Гольф-дипломатія, як окремий інструмент або складник спортивної дипломатії, є частиною дипломатичної практики різних країн вже досить давно. Вона є предметом досліджень, однак наявні роботи здебільшого зосереджені на практиці азійських країн та не пропонують моделей або механізмів для пояснення, чому і яким чином зустрічі на найвищому рівні для гри в гольф можуть бути ефективними й допомагати досягати зовнішньополітичних цілей. Ця стаття має на меті заповнити цю прогалину шляхом створення аналітичної рамки, що дозволить окреслити гольф як дипломатичний інструмент, що використовується свідомо, та проаналізувати використання гольфу у світовій дипломатії.

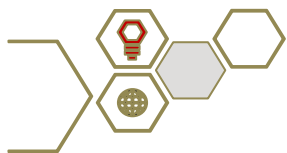
Методи. Це дослідження використовує метод якісного порівняльного аналізу дипломатичної практики країн АСЕАН, США, Японії, Фінляндії, Австралії, Південної Кореї та України. Для розробки аналітичної моделі для пояснення ефективності гольф дипломатії стаття спирається на драматургічний підхід Ірвінга Гоффмана до розуміння взаємодій, уявлення Олександра Вендта про вплив повторювальних взаємодій на формування інтересів, а також концепцію м'якої сили Джозефа Ная.

Результати. Це дослідження показує, що гольф-дипломатія функціонує завдяки трьом складовим: 1) залаштунку і його середовищу, яке знімає тиск та



дозволяє вільно висловлювати позиції дипломатам; їх соціалізації та спільній присутності; а також опосередкованому впливу дипломатів один на одного завдяки поширенню цінностей. Порівняльний аналіз кейсів і прикладів підтверджує цю тезу. Приклад, що стосується заснування організації АСЕАН демонструє, що гольф-дипломатія була інституціоналізована як наслідок її ефективності в розвитку співробітництва. Приклади, що стосуються взаємодії між прем'єр-міністром Японії Сіндзо Абе та президентом США Дональдом Трампом та взаємодії між президентом Фінляндії Александром Стуббом та Дональдом Трампом, підкреслюють вплив гольф-зустрічей на захист японських безпекових інтересів та доводять суттєві економічні та безпекові дивіденди для Фінляндії, відповідно. Австралійський приклад висвітлює залучення акторів, що мають спортивний гольф капітал, для підтримки зовнішньої політики держави, в той час, як кейс Південної Кореї вказує на свідоме інвестування в гольф як інструменту дипломатичної діяльності на найвищому рівні. Нарешті, дії українських дипломатів, як на низовому, так і на найвищому рівні, свідчать про те, що якщо одна з цих складових відсутня, гольф-дипломатія може не давати відчутних результатів, а мати лише символічний ефект.

Висновки. Гольф-дипломатія є інструментом, який держави використовують стратегічно, ефективність якого забезпечується трьома необхідними умовами: 1) інвестуванням у проведення необхідної кількості зустрічей 2) доступом до неформального середовища де відсутній зовнішній тиск 3) спільною зацікавленістю сторін у грі в гольф. За дотримання цих умов гольф-дипломатія сприяє досягненню відчутних результатів, наприклад, укладанню угод чи забезпеченню домовленостей у сфері безпеки. Якщо вони відсутні, взаємодія, найімовірніше, матиме суто символічний характер. Майбутні дослідження мають з'ясувати, чи може ця модель бути застосовуваною до інших видів спорту, культурних контекстів та рівнів дипломатичної діяльності.

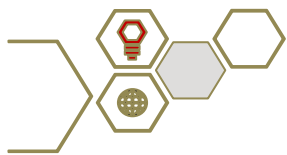


Ключові слова: спортивна дипломатія, гольф-дипломатія, спорт, соціалізація еліт, дипломатична практика, зовнішні відносини, дипломатія вічна-віч.

Problem statement. For decades, the sports environment has provided the space for international actors to cooperate, communicate, and conduct diplomatic relations. Its development has led to the emergence of the field of sports diplomacy. Today, it is more and more recognized either as an influential part of public diplomacy or a standalone foreign policy strategy due to the attractiveness and social impact of sports. Yet, as traditional diplomatic channels continue to erode and the role of personal connection in international relations grows, informal ways to conduct diplomatic activity gain attention. In this regard, the tournaments and mega sports events offer a background for the meetings of international leaders, while some types of sports, such as golf, appear to be great for informal diplomatic activity. Despite mentions in memoirs and journalistic articles, and even case studies, golf has rarely become an object of scholarly research. As golf diplomacy enables informal dialogue and elite socialization and allows for the promotion of foreign policy interests, a certain gap exists. Thus, the question arises whether the recent development and use of golf by leaders proves that golf diplomacy is effective for foreign policy and has the potential to be a recurring and institutionalized foreign policy tool worldwide.

Analysis of worldwide publications. The exploration of golf diplomacy and its role in foreign policy requires appealing to diverse parts of the literature on international relations, diplomacy, politics, and social theory. Moreover, the analysis of golf diplomacy is impossible without considering the broad sports diplomacy category and the role of sports in public diplomacy. Therefore, this article elaborates on the work of international and national researchers.

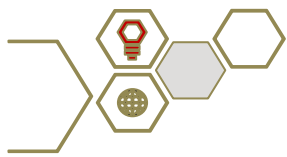
International scholars like Stuart Murray, Jonathan Grix, and Paul Brannagan [1;2] are in the avant-garde, shaping sport diplomacy as a separate category within



foreign policy studies, underlining its characteristics and differences within the public diplomacy category. Simultaneously, an array of Ukrainian researchers, including Iryna Gridina, Serhiy Movchan, Iryna Matiash, and Viktor Matvieynko [3;4], also explore the use of sports in relation to soft power and public diplomacy. Among them is Serhiy Kulyk [5], who focuses on the use of sports by international actors to affect foreign policy. They significantly contribute to the development of this field within the Ukrainian academic context, placing sports diplomacy within the wider analysis of Ukraine's policy instruments.

The golf diplomacy also contemplates the appeal to informal interaction in diplomacy. In this regard, Marcus Holmes and Nicholas Wheeler and their works on interpersonal diplomacy and social bonding in international relations provide solid ground for understanding the role of backstage interaction on negotiation and trust-building [6]. Wendt shares theoretical ground to explain how interactions and elite socialization can translate the use of environment into diplomatic outcomes [7]. At the same time, it is hard to ignore Joseph Nye's soft power concept that sets the whole evolution of sports diplomacy into motion [8]. Erving Goffman's dramaturgical view of front-stage and backstage interactions provides the ground for consideration of informal settings in social relations, respectively [9].

Recently, a small but growing number of studies have explored golf diplomacy directly, outlining the impact on foreign policy of different countries. The "Gimme Diplomacy" by Sean Chan and Mark Brooke examined the role of golf in smoothing Singapore-U.S. relations at the end of the 1990s [10]. David Envall, in his article on Japan-U.S. relations, focused on the use of golf in the policy of Prime Minister Abe towards President Donald Trump [11]. Youngsam Lim, Gwang Ok, and Chungbuk Lim explored the role of leisure and golf in the domestic and foreign policy of South Korea [12]. Lastly, the work of Deepak Nair [13] is crucial and offers a deep understanding of how golf diplomacy is an effective tool for ASEAN leaders in terms of socialization, negotiations, and cooperation of elites in the Asian region.



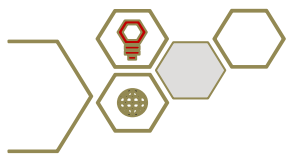
Taken together, the aforementioned articles prove that sports diplomacy is actively explored, where researchers focus on the soft power and role of strategic communication. Yet, it often ignores the role of sports, including golf, as a setting for personal and informal diplomacy, as background interaction can be crucial for negotiations and decision-making. In the end, several studies have successfully established that golf provides such an environment via examples of ASEAN and Asian countries.

Identification of previously unresolved parts. What the particular studies lack is a unified approach that explains the use of golf diplomacy for sociability across the world, not in one region, and defines whether other international actors, beyond the Asian context, can use it effectively. The literature remains geographically concentrated. Besides, a gap exists in regard to the conditions under which golf diplomacy produces foreign policy outcomes.

Despite the broad research by Ukrainian researchers on public diplomacy and the use of sports, sources do not focus on the role of informal settings around sports and their impact on executive-level diplomacy. This dimension seems underexamined in the European context. Such unresolved parts offer possibilities to fill the lack of knowledge and document important cases and practices when golf becomes a medium for socialization and policy making.

Formulating the article objectives. The article aims to close the gap and analyze golf diplomacy as a deliberate instrument of informal interaction and socialization of elites to meet diplomatic or broader foreign policy goals. The goal of the article is to develop the conceptual framework, explain conditions for the tool's application, and examine cases across ASEAN countries, Japan, Finland, Ukraine, and the United States.

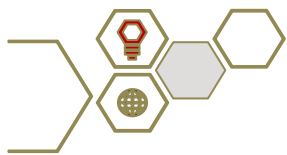
Presentation of the main materials. In this article, the explanation of the golf diplomacy and its application goes beyond a single lens and requires consideration of the three concepts: interpersonal relations and interaction, elite socialization, and sports diplomacy. The reason is that golf diplomacy is a



phenomenon, being a setting, a social process, and a communicative act at the same time. Breaking each part will allow a full comprehension of how and why it allows reaching foreign policy goals.

First of all, it is important to consider the role of interpersonal relations and informal interaction in diplomatic practice. By applying the dramaturgical framework developed by Goffman to diplomacy, one can say that most diplomatic interactions are normatively scripted, with defined roles, audiences, expectation. Regarding behavior, a researcher may define it as the front stage. It is problematic for a diplomat, as when a person performs there, in the presence of others, the “aspects of their activity” or performance “are suppressed” [9, p.53]. In a diplomatic encounter, such a formal setting may impede the development of trust or transmitting specific intentions that are important for negotiation and socialization. The golf allows answering this limitation, as it provides a different setting, even architecture. A round of 4 to 5 hours in a small group allows a relaxed atmosphere, while according to Goffman, where persons are more likely to talk as they feel more relaxed and “step out of character” [9, p.53]. As a result, it allows diplomats to practice face-to-face diplomacy and test positions without commitment. And such a face-to-face diplomacy allows “transmittal of specific intentions,” form bonding, and reduces negotiation costs [6, p.140]. Unlike golf, few settings that are available to heads of state that combine duration, small group size, co-presence, and no media space, so golf offers an effective backstage setting for diplomatic activity.

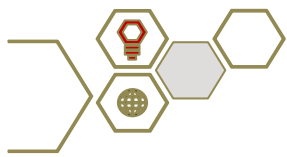
The second pillar affecting the application of golf diplomacy relates to the conditions for the socialization of elites. According to the constructivist view, the shared ideas determine structures of human association as well as identities and interests of actors [7, p. 1]. In this regard, the communication during the golf allows shaping the agenda and affecting the interests of its players. However, for it to be effective, the transmission requires that the socializer or representative of an elite is an authoritative member of the in-group, when interactions are repeated or prolonged, or happen in informal settings [14, p.5]. Golf diplomacy seems to answer



the majority of the requirements, being perceived as an elite sport or leisure, and taking 4 or 5 hours.

The third pillar lies within the concept of soft power that underpins the concept of sports diplomacy and explains the role of attraction. As Nye suggests, the countries may use soft power and achieve foreign policy goals by means of attraction rather than coercion [8]. In terms of sports diplomacy, it often refers to using strategic communication during public sports events. Regarding golf diplomacy, it works differently, as the latter appears to be effective in private settings. However, it still uses the sports environment and sportsmanship, the power of attraction and ideas, and relationship building instead of pressure. For a leader, the play of golf turns into an event that allows sharing ideas and values to influence the other leader, but on a personal level. As a result, when the particular three pillars are in place, interaction with no pressure, conditions for effective socialization, and prerequisites for persuasion, the golf brings the infrastructure for the effective diplomacy of the leaders and international actors.

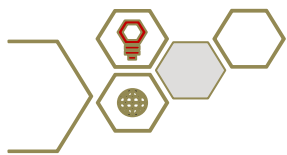
The analysis of the impact of such a framework requires the consideration of practical cases that demonstrate it in operation. The first one, on the founding of ASEAN, appears to be the most vivid example of golf diplomacy in action. In July 1967, the foreign ministers of Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines, who had conflicting interests, spent five days at the Bangsean resort where they combined golf, leisure, and informal discussion; afterwards, they wrote a draft of the Bangkok Declaration upon which the ASEAN organization was created [15]. In this case, the golf resort ensured no institutional constraints and public or media pressure, while five days of informal interactions and values sharing supported the creation of mutual identity. Yet, the strongest evidence of the impact of golf in the organization is the adoption of golf courses for senior officials by Vietnam government after accession to the organization. As the Vietnamese Vice Minister, Vu Khoan, failed to join a critical foreign policy discussion held on a golf course, due to not knowing how to play and the game having a “capitalist” label, his



government adopted official golf courses for senior officials right after [13, p.209]. Such a direct state-level recognition underlines the role of golf in negotiations within ASEAN. At the same time, the analysis of the events shows that it is also used for people-to-people and expert diplomacy in the region. For instance, the 2nd ASEAN Former Ambassadors Golf Tournament took place in 2025 in Vietnam, bringing 128 former diplomats and decision makers from the region [16]. Such an event underlines the golf traditions across elites and decision-makers today and proves that it may be crucial for the region.

If the ASEAN case shows that golf diplomacy can thrive as a regional framework for diplomacy, other cases indicate that the golf environment may offer solid ground for the development of direct and face-to-face interaction between leaders. The first case relates to the golf meetings between Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and U.S. President Trump in 2017 and 2019, demonstrating that the framework may work at the bilateral executive level. In January 2017, Japan had significant threats to its economy and security, as the U.S. withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnership and was about to start a trade war with China. However, the Japanese Prime Minister used subtle golf diplomacy as a tool to negotiate with Donald Trump. Previously, in 2016, Shinzo Abe already gifted a gold-decorated club to Donald Trump as a soft power act to signal personal regard, while in 2017, they had a golf round in Florida, where they covered Partnership withdrawal and regional security for five hours [11, p.2]. It proves that Abe Shinzo deliberately used golf diplomacy to socialize and build trust with Donald Trump. The next meeting happened in 2019, where Abe continued to avoid upsetting Trump's ego and allowed Trump to win. Even though such a policy brought poor results on TPP, the U.S. recognized Japan's control over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, making such a policy rather successful and making Europeans envy the Japanese [17, p.200].

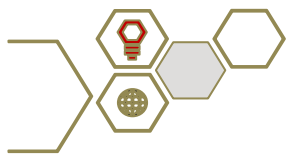
Another case refers to the different actor configuration. In March 2025, Finnish President Alexander Stubb visited Florida to have breakfast, a golf round, and lunch with Donald Trump and discuss bilateral relations, Arctic security, and



the war in Ukraine [18]. That way, a state like Finland managed to access a leader of a great power and get extended one-on-one time that the formal channels often fail to provide. Importantly, it was even described as a close relationship by many European leaders [19]. After the meeting, there were no immediate results, but in October, the countries signed a \$6.1 billion memorandum on the production of eleven US icebreakers [20]. It provides evidence that the informal meeting laid the ground for building trust and developing conditions for cooperation, and such an agreement is rather a documentation of a tangible outcome of the golf diplomacy.

Other than that, there is another case, in particular, when the Australian government resorted to a professional golfer to lobby for Australia's economic interests and support the relations between Australian and U.S. leaders. In 2018, golf professional Greg Norman served a diplomatic role because he had a relationship developed with Trump on the basis of golf. In particular, the Australian government asked the golf professional to lobby for exemption from steel and aluminium tariffs [21] and became a bridge that supported relations between the newly elected prime minister, Malcolm Turnbull, at that time [22]. This case is not so evident; however, it underlines that golf diplomacy can operate via non-state intermediaries with social or sports capital in the golfing world. It extends the framework beyond the face-to-face or leader-to-leader meeting.

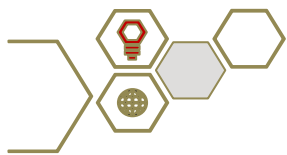
Another case shows that South Korea has been leveraging golf and using it as a soft power for decades. During different periods, the main goal for South Korea was different, from consolidating elites to satisfying diplomatic means or developing a setting that can host foreign decision-makers and business delegations. According to Chen, golf was first the priority for the government to create physical spaces for informal diplomacy and then transformed into a tool of symbolic performance, a signal of understanding the norms and cultural affinity [23]. In the 1960s, golf was crucial to President Park's diplomatic hosting, implying rounds with Lyndon Johnson and foreign prime ministers; at the same time, the government issued free golf courses to US servicemen and high-ranking foreign diplomats who were



stationed in Korea at that time [12]. As a result, this case illustrates that the country took the concept of golf in Asian diplomacy and tried to scale it by using the soft power concept, attracting decision makers and hosting regional policy-making in the country. Today, golf diplomacy is still important in South Korea. In 2024, the administration of the Korean President Yoon Suk admitted that he started to practice golf before President Trump's second term, preparing to conduct golf diplomacy [24]. Such developments are clear in illustrating that governments, especially in Asia, take golf diplomacy as a practical strategy for lobbying and diplomacy. As they have resources, infrastructure, and understanding of its necessity shaped by the application and perception of golf by elites in Asia for centuries, they leverage it to pursue foreign goals. The same goes for Australia, where golf is popular and has infrastructure.

Nevertheless, the question arises whether the same can be used by countries worldwide. When analyzing the visits of European leaders to Trump, the actions of the Finnish president seem to be an exception. For example, British Prime Minister Keir Starmer and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen visited Trump in 2025 to talk on tariffs and energy, but their visit involved no playing joint rounds of golf [25]. It brings the idea that proximity to golf settings does not mean effective activation of golf diplomacy. That can be explained by the fact that the leaders decided to ignore it as a means of face-to-face diplomacy. The application of golf diplomacy depends on the resources, skills, and desire of leaders, but it does not always involve high officials. In this regard, it would be wrong to say that golf diplomacy is not practiced at all; it is not just performed at the highest level.

For instance, similar to the approach used by South Korea, the Ukrainian business community has organized the "Golf for Good" event that brought high-level diplomats to play, aiming to "develop business relations and develop projects" and support Ukraine's image [26]. It is evident that Ukraine's engagement with golf diplomacy is at the preliminary stage, and the diplomatic results are uncertain. Yet, it can send messages and work on a different level, a level of symbolism and public

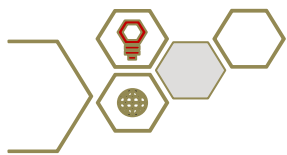


diplomacy. When President Volodymyr Zelensky visited President Trump in 2025, he handed him the putter engraved on behalf of a wounded veteran, Kostyantyn Kartavtsev [27]. Such a gesture combined a call for peace and a deliberate appeal to President Trump that fit into the purpose of the diplomatic visit and emphasized the role the U.S. may play in the resolution of the conflict. Even though Trump acknowledged the gesture publicly, it seems that such a gesture had only a complimentary effect during the visit and had a low public diplomacy effect.

The cases examined demonstrate that golf diplomacy is a deliberate instrument used by different governments to conduct or support diplomacy. Based on the consistent pattern, it can be effective and bring solid outcomes if the conditions are met at the same time: 1) relational investment, not a single encounter, 2) genuine backstage access to the decision maker, and 3) shared disposition toward the sport, making it effective for bonding and building trust. The ASEAN case is vivid in showing how all three have operated at the institutional level for decades; the Abe-Trump relationship shows that it can work great at the bilateral executive level, and the Stubb-Trump case supports it, bringing substantial results even to smaller actors, like Finland. However, when conditions are partially met, in the case of visits of European leaders, it will not be as effective, producing acknowledgement and symbolic support.

At the same time, the different outcomes, from the Bangkok Declaration to the simple acknowledgement, suggest that golf is neither universally applicable nor culturally specific to a certain region. The same approach works in Southeast Asian cooperation, Indo-Pacific security relationships, and European-American relations. Thus, this is a conditional instrument that works when the backstage setting, the golf course, is accessible; when parties are invested; when elites voluntarily choose golf, and the actors see value in it, whether heads of state, non-state intermediaries, or diplomatic corps.

The actors that recognize these conditions and invest in them, including Vietnam, South Korea, Finland, and Japan, have better positions to turn such

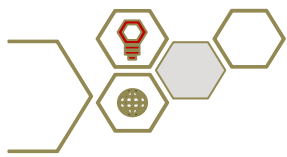


informal encounters around golf into foreign policy outcomes compared to other countries. It also implies that resources to conduct sports, the sports culture and perception, and the popularity of sports play a significant role in its application to pursue foreign policy.

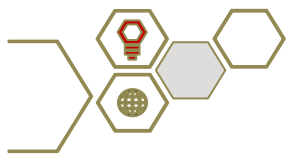
Conclusions. The article examined golf diplomacy as a deliberate instrument of informal interaction and diplomacy across the cases that involve different countries and actor configurations. The evidence from analysis of using the golf for ASEAN's founding and operation, Japan's alliance and security management, Finland's Arctic partnership, Australia's tariff negotiations, Korea's image development, and Ukraine's negotiating and relationship-building efforts underlines that golf settings create structural, social, and communicative conditions that formal diplomatic channels fail to. There, the developed framework, using the backstage interaction concept, the constructivist view on elite socialization, and the role of soft power, explains when and why golf brings foreign policy results. The evidence underlines that the effectiveness of this approach is conditional rather than automatic. It depends on the continuing investment by the actors, access to the backstage (genuinely informal setting with no pressure), and shared cultural views on the sports. They are the prerequisites that determine whether the golf diplomacy would result in tangible or symbolic outcomes. For the scholars and practitioners, this study points toward a strategic value of the sport environment and setting around, as well as the development of certain sports skills as a component of diplomatic preparation. Future research should focus on golf diplomacy beyond the executive level and examine whether cultural differences and social meaning affect the application of golf for diplomacy, and how the conditions identified here apply to other informal sporting settings for negotiation.

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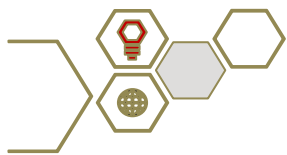
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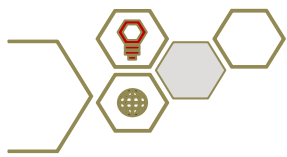
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