

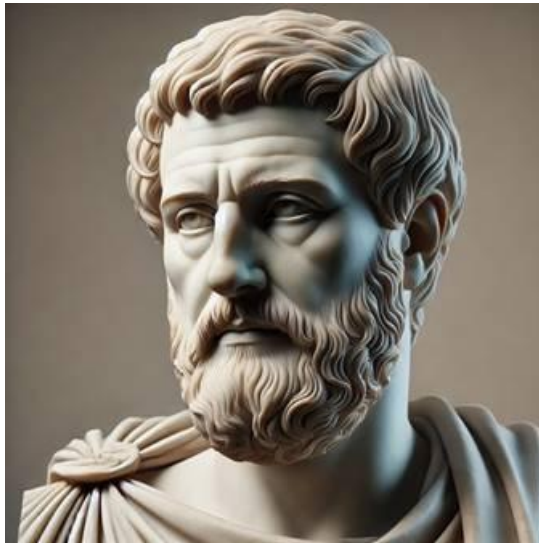
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Published by the Athens Institute

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Thucydides' contributions to politics and international affairs are significant. He may be considered the father of political realism in international relations. His work has inspired and influenced many political and international affairs scholars.

September 2026

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- Submission of Paper: **17 May 2027**

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- Submission of Paper: **22 February 2027**

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Legitimacy of UN Peacekeeping in Southern Lebanon: Expectation from Successful UN Peacekeeping Operations

*By Katsumi Ishizuka**

The United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) has been deployed in southern Lebanon for 48 years. Despite its consistent and significant contribution to peace in southern Lebanon, the UN Security Council decided to terminate UNIFIL at the end of 2026. The decision of the Council was considered mainly due to the political influence of Israel and the US. Meanwhile, the decision has encouraged research and review of UNIFIL, questioning its effectiveness and whether it has been positively evaluated for its deployment in southern Lebanon for nearly half a century. Therefore, the aim and scope of this article is to discuss the negative and positive aspects of UNIFIL, considering both visible and invisible effectiveness of the operations, and then assess the legitimacy (or illegitimacy) of UNIFIL's capability as a UN peacekeeper. The decision to withdrawal UNIFIL has had a huge impact on academics of UN studies and practitioners of UN peacekeeping operations, since UNIFIL has been one of the major and traditional UN operations. Therefore, one could conclude that the evaluation of UNIFIL would be equivalent to that of UN peacekeeping operations as a whole.

Keywords: *UNIFIL, UN peacekeeping operations, Lebanon, Israel, legitimacy*

Introduction

As generally said, “Lebanon was primarily a victim of other people’s war” (Skogmo 1989, p. 69), the origin of UNIFIL stems from the animosities among many factions in Lebanon. Lebanon in the 1970s had two separate but related conflicts: Israel vs. the PLO, and the Christian militia vs. Muslim factions, which compounded the intractable political situation¹. Moreover, the main three militias in Lebanon; the PLO, the Christian militia and Syrian forces have legitimacy for basing themselves in Lebanon. It was one of the main problems in establishing the mandate of UNIFIL. By the late 1970s when UNIFIL was established, the Lebanese government had already lost its authority to control almost all militias in the state.

The ultimate catalyst for UNIFIL happened when a PLO command raided an Israeli bus near Tel Aviv on 11 March 1978, and in the following shoot-out, 37 were killed and 76 wounded. In retaliation, the Israeli forces invaded Lebanon on the night

*Professor, Kyoei University, Japan.

¹As an article written in 1999 mentioned, “Lebanon became a land of death and unimaginable destruction, a country without a government, a fertile ground for the development of militant Shi’ite politics and Iranian influence, a background of Muslims and Christian militias, Israeli and Palestinian forces and a land of hijacking, kidnapping and attacks on Western embassies and personnel” (Nachmias 1999, p. 96).

of 14/15 March, and in a few days occupied the entire region south of the Litani River except for the PLO base of Tyre. In this situation, UNIFIL was established according to Security Council Resolution 425(1978), which, as the mandate, called for:

1. Confirming the withdrawal of Israeli forces.
2. Restoring international peace and security.
3. Assisting the government of Lebanon in ensuring the return of its effective authority in the area.

Since its establishment, the evaluations of UNIFIL have varied. However, international criticism of UNIFIL particularly intensified after the breakout of the exchange of fire between Israel and Hamas in October 2023. On 7 October 2023, the initial attack of Hamas led to the death of 1,200 Israeli and foreign nationals. The retaliatory attack by Israel resulted in the killing of 41,000 Palestinians in Gaza. On 8 October, a conflict between Israel and Hezbollah began which led to a prolonged exchange of bombardment and extensive displacement in southern Lebanon where UNIFIL has been deployed.

UNIFIL was incapable of preventing Israeli aggression and had done little to help the Lebanese authorities maintain control over their southern territory and protect the civilian population. This failure raised important questions about the presence of UNIFIL in southern Lebanon. UNIFIL has also been criticized for its incapability of implementing the mandate of disarming the militias in Lebanon, especially, Hezbollah. In particular, the US, Israel's ally, criticized UNIFIL for being both too expensive and ineffective, adding that UN peacekeeping operations on the whole offer little value for money. In June 2025, when the UN General Assembly approved the same budget for UNIFIL as was allocated in 2024, the US cast the dissenting vote (Wood 2025).

As a result, the US and its close ally Israel strongly demanded the withdrawal of UNIFIL from southern Lebanon. Finally, on 28 August 2025, the UN Security Council voted unanimously to terminate UNIFIL at the end of the next year. However, considering the maintenance of security for more than forty years in southern Lebanon, it should be debatable to argue that UN peacekeeping operations should be terminated and withdrawn simply because they failed to prevent major warfare.

This article will provide the historical analysis of UNIFIL, evaluating its negative and positive aspects. Finally, this article will ask a simple question of what one should expect from UN peacekeeping operations in general.

UNIFIL as a Failure? - A Historical Analysis of its Negative Aspects

Failure in Implementing the Mandate of UNIFIL in its Early Stages

UNIFIL failed to implement the mandate satisfactorily in its early years, especially, from 1978 to 1982. Most critics who claim that UNIFIL was a failure point out its poor performance as peacekeepers in its early stages. Each of the three mandates in Resolution 425 (1978) can be discussed regarding implementation.

a) Confirming the withdrawal of Israeli forces

The withdrawal of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) from southern Lebanon was to be completed in three phases. Its first withdrawal was completed on April 11, 1978, when the northeastern sector and part of the eastern sector were transferred to UNIFIL. Its second withdrawal was completed from southeast of the Litani River followed in April 1978.

However, when the IDF withdrew from its remaining positions in southern Lebanon as the final phase on June 13, 1978, it transferred them to the command of Major Saad Haddad of the Christian militias, which were called the De Facto Forces (DFF). The areas occupied by the DFF were 30% of the whole area in which UNIFIL was expected to operate. The Israeli invasion of southern Lebanon in March 1978 was aimed at establishing a 10-kilometer zone along the border. Therefore, Israel succeeded in the de facto establishment of the “security belt” in southern Lebanon by turning the area over to its subordinate militia. Israel’s security belt was to play a major part in preventing UNIFIL from carrying out its mandate fully in later years (Erskine 1989). UNIFIL managed to establish some positions there as an enclave. However, UNIFIL was not in control of the enclave and faced many problems, including restrictions on its freedom of movement during the next several years (James 1983, p. 620).

b) Restoring international peace and security

UNIFIL was established in southern Lebanon without either the PLO’s or Israel’s full consent. In the early years of operations, UNIFIL faced numerous operational difficulties, especially, harassment from the DFF. According to the report of the Secretary General to the Security Council in January 1979, incidents involving the DFF occurred almost daily at that time. UNIFIL installations had been harassed by firing including mortar fire. The DFF also threatened the inhabitants of the villages with further firing if they did not support them. These actions prompted a number of civilians to leave their homes for safer areas².

Meanwhile, a number of armed elements, especially the Palestinian guerrillas, continued their attempts at infiltration into the UNIFIL area of operation. During the period from June to December 1979, 110 infiltration attempts, involving 785 armed persons, were recorded by UNIFIL. In August 1979, Nigerian and Fijian patrols were ambushed by armed elements, resulting in the deaths of three Fijian soldiers. A Senegalese soldier was fired upon and wounded while on checkpoint duty in October 1979. Furthermore, there were frequent exchanges of fire across the UNIFIL area involving the DFF in the enclave. On a number of occasions, IDF personnel joined the DFF in the firing³.

The highly tense and volatile situation in the local area also caused UN casualties. The Secretary General reported to the Security Council on 10 June 1982 that since UNIFIL was established, 75 members of the Forces had died, 34 of them as a result of firing and mine explosions, 31 in accidents, and 10 from natural causes, and that

²UN Document S/13026, 12 January 1979, paras. 27-28.

³UN Document S/13691, 14 December 1979, paras. 36-37.

some 115 had been wounded in armed clashes, shelling and mine explosions (Skogmo 1989, p. 59).

- c) Assisting the government of Lebanon in ensuring the return of its effective authority in the area

This mandate was essentially difficult to implement due to the fact that the Lebanese state had not enjoyed sovereign rights over entire country since the late 1960s. A first step to implement this mandate was to re-establish some symbols of civilian authority in the UNIFIL area. This was achieved during June and July 1978 through the stationing of a civilian administrator in Tyre and approximately 100 gendarmes based at five different stations. The gendarmes gradually assumed some of the regular police functions in the area (Skogmo 1989, p. 63). A second step was the presence of the Lebanese army in southern Lebanon. Despite assurances from Israeli Defence Minister Weizman that the state would not interfere with the move, the advancing Lebanese battalion was bombarded by the DFF and was prevented from advancing any further when it reached the town of Kawkaba in the northwestern sector of the UNIFIL area in July 1978 (Kawkaba incident) (Weinburger 1983, p. 353).

Despite intense shelling by the DFF as hostile measures, a Lebanese army battalion of 500 men was deployed in the UNIFIL area in April 1979, and in June 1981, a second Lebanese battalion was brought to the operational area, which raised the total strength of the Lebanese army presence in southern Lebanon to 1,350 of all ranks. However, this achievement by the Lebanese government was insufficient to restore its authority over the local factions based in Lebanon, such as the PLO, the DFF, and over the presence of Syria. The deployment of the Lebanese Army was “little more than a token gesture, either in its own right or as a symbol of the existence of an authoritative government in Beirut.” (James 1983, p. 631).

On the whole, in its early years, UNIFIL could hardly implement its mandate given in Security Council Resolution 425 (1978). In his report on UNIFIL to the Security Council, the Secretary General Kurt Waldheim on 13 September 1978 accepted that “the present situation ... is unacceptable”⁴, or “... little further progress (in UNIFIL operation) has been achieved so far”⁵, and he continued making almost the same comments in his reports in the sequel.

Meanwhile, the general role of UN peacekeeping is to observe the peaceful situation after the parties concerned reach a suitable ceasefire. However, the role of UNIFIL was to observe the withdrawal of the military force of one state concerned without reaching any satisfactory ceasefire. Furthermore, one party (Israel) supplied its substitute force (DFF) upon its withdrawal. Therefore, UNIFIL was not able to win the confidence-building measures among the parties concerned, and obtain local consent. It would be the main reason why UNIFIL failed to implement the mandate in its early stages. The hasty establishment of UNIFIL by the UN Security Council without the basic principles of UN peacekeeping operations was due to a lack of political will by the

⁴UN Document S/12845, 13 September 1978, para. 60.

⁵UN Document S/13384, 8 June 1979, para. 20.

international community led by great powers. As a result, the operational failure of UNIFIL in its early stages was inevitable. It was rather a political failure.

Failure in Preventing Israeli Invasions of Lebanon?

One can witness Israeli invasions or large-scale of military offensives against southern Lebanon several times even after the establishment of UNIFIL in 1978. First, in June 1982, the IDF conducted a large military offensive, crossing the border of Lebanon to attack the military base of the PLO in eastern Beirut. It is called *Operation Peace for Galilee*. It aimed to prevent the rocket missiles from the PLO targeting northern Israel by demolishing the fortress of the PLO and establishing a safe zone. The invasion was a human tragedy, with some 18,000 people killed and about 30,000 injured (Nachmias 1999, p. 98). By 8 June 1982, UNIFIL became the first UN mission operating in a country occupied by a foreign army (Sitkowski 2006, p. 58). However, under the circumstances, UNIFIL had little choice but to stand back. In fact, not a single statement could be heard in the Security Council criticizing the order not to take active military measures against the Israelis as they pushed through UNIFIL lines.

In July 1993, Israel launched *Operation Accountability* against Hezbollah, resulting in the displacement of 300,000 civilians. Then the IDF again shelled the Hezbollah's position in southern Lebanon for three weeks in retaliation for the latter's rocket attacks on northern Israel (*Operation Grapes of Wrath*) in April 1996. Thousands of Lebanese left their homes. On 18 April, the IDF shelled UNIFIL's base at Qana, killing more than 100 civilians seeking shelter there ("Qana massacre") ((Nachmias 1999, p. 105).

In July 2006, the IDF launched large-scale air strikes on southern Lebanon, demolishing 30 public facilities including roads and bridges. The Israeli government announced that the state's military offensives and the subsequent ground battles against Lebanon were caused by the abduction of three Israeli soldiers by Hezbollah. The response of the UN to the newly emerged security crisis was to strengthen the size and capability of UNIFIL. In accordance with Security Council Resolution 1701(2006), the total strength of UNIFIL significantly increased from about 2,000 to 15,000.

Finally, in October 2023, Hezbollah fired rockets at Israeli garrisons, proclaiming solidarity with the Palestinian people, after Israel began its assault in Gaza. On 13 October 2024, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu called on the UN Secretary General to move the UNIFIL soldiers out of "harm's way" since he claimed UNIFIL had become "human shields" for Hezbollah. UNIFIL did not comply with the order, reaffirming their support for the mission. As a result, some UNIFIL troops were injured and damaged by the subsequent Israeli attacks on Hezbollah. UNIFIL's presence did not prevent Israel from pressing its advantage. For another two months, Israel continued to demolish Hezbollah and the community (Wood 2025).

On the whole, some academics and political figures did not regard the UNIFIL deployment in southern Lebanon as a successful case. They claimed that UNIFIL was not helpful as rocket fire from Palestinian camps rained over the heads of peacekeepers into Israel, followed by Israeli retaliatory raids (Diehl 2008, p. 124).

However, one should consider several arguments which have different or opposing views to the above critics. First, the above cases raise one the question of the

effectiveness of UNIFIL. On the one hand, the role of peacekeeping operations is “to keep the peace”. On the other hand, in the post-Cold War period, a more coercive peace operation, so-called “peace enforcement”, was innovated with the use of more robust force. However, UNIFIL maintained the status of traditional peacekeeping with the use of minimum force. Furthermore, peace enforcement had been adopted for internal conflicts, mainly, in Africa. Peace enforcement for inter-state conflicts in the Middle East, which include states with significant military powers, would intensify the conflicts, resulting in more humanitarian casualties in the region.

Second, the security issue of the Middle East involving Israel has been superpower-related, and if Israel made a decisive decision including launching major warfare, it would no longer be an issue which only local UN peacekeeping operations should be involved in. It would be beyond the control of UNIFIL. The missions of UNIFIL as a protector of security would focus on the areas of the Blue Line where UNIFIL would be in charge of minor incidents, which would play a role in preventing them from escalating into major incidents.

Third, currently, warfare that would result in major human tragedies has been seriously criticized by the international community as a breach of international laws. In fact, arrest warrants have been issued for several heads of state, even from major powers or permanent members of the UN Security Council, by the International Criminal Court (ICC)⁶. There should be a clear division of labor in the resolution of international conflicts according to the intensity of conflicts.

Inability to Disarm Hezbollah?

Many political figures in the international community criticized UNIFIL for its inability to disarm Hezbollah. For example, according to Sarit Zehavi, an ex-IDF officer and the founder of a research institute on Israeli security issues, UNIFIL was detrimental to the mission of disarming Hezbollah in southern Lebanon. He continued that UNIFIL’s mandate allowed it to patrol freely in open areas to search for weapons caches, but it had done nearly nothing to confiscate these weapons or eliminate Hezbollah’s military infrastructure (Helou et al. 2025). The US government has provided similar comments on this issue.

However, disarming Hezbollah and other militias in Lebanon is an international issue which the international community should tackle for the maintenance of peace in the Middle East. One should not regard it as merely an issue of UN peacekeeping operations.

In fact, a total of five international agreements and resolutions have been provided concerning the disarmament of Hezbollah. The first one is the Ta’if Agreement in 1989. This agreement was negotiated in Ta’if, Saudi Arabia, designed to end the civil war in Lebanon and demanded the disbanding of all Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias. However, Hezbollah was allowed to stay armed in its capacity as a resistance force rather than a militia for fighting Israel in southern Lebanon (Norton 2018, p. 71). In fact, in the early 1990s, most Lebanese militias were disarmed, except Hezbollah. Chen Kertcher argued that, in the 1990s, the UN Secretariat focused only on the

⁶In fact, the arrest warrant was issued to the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu by the ICC on 21 November 2024 as a war criminal and a criminal of human tragedies in Gaza since 2023.

strategic goal of Israel's withdrawal from southern Lebanon in the UNIFIL areas. Therefore, it negatively affected Lebanon's sovereignty, resulting in Syrian military dominance and the increase in Hezbollah activity in Lebanon (Kertcher 2025).

In 2004 and 2006, UN Security Council Resolutions 1559 and 1680 were authorized. They were the second and third international agreements or resolutions concerning this issue. They called upon all remaining foreign forces to withdraw from Lebanon, and also called for the disbanding and disarmament of all Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias.

The 2006 war led to the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1701 (2006), which was the fourth international agreement or resolution concerning this issue. The Resolution restricted Hezbollah's presence south of the Litani River and asserted the authority of the Lebanese army in South Lebanon. This resolution also asserted that there shall be no weapons in Lebanon without the consent of the Government of Lebanon.

The fifth international agreement or resolution concerning Hezbollah's disarmament was the Baabda Declaration in 2012. It was issued by the National Dialogue Committee on 11 June 2012. The agreement essentially demanded distancing Lebanon from the Syrian conflict across the borders in order to avoid the negative spillover of such tensions into the country. In addition, the agreement enforced and respected the Ta'if Agreement and Resolution 1701 (Naoum 2014, pp. 86–88).

On the whole, there are multiple legal frameworks for the disarmament of Hezbollah. However, in reality, the disarmament would be difficult. There are several reasons for it. First, Hezbollah has its status not only as a military but also as a political organization in Lebanon. Currently, Hezbollah has 13 seats in the state's 128-member Parliament. Hezbollah and its allies, including Amal and the Christian community, have nearly 60 seats in the parliament. It means that about half of a parliamentary figures have opposed the disarmament of Hezbollah.

Second, Hezbollah has won strong support from Shiite Muslim people in southern Lebanon. In fact, Hezbollah's social and humanitarian contributions to the south Lebanese community have played a significant role in gaining support in the state. For example, Hezbollah spent \$300 million on its construction sector to repair damaged or destroyed homes after the 2006 war. Hezbollah has contributed to all levels of Lebanon's educational system, as well as its youth camps and religious programs (Ishizuka 2020, p. 19).

The third reason is the immaturity of the military capability of the Lebanese Armed Force (LAF) and the virtual approval of the deployment of Hezbollah in southern Lebanon. From the viewpoint of UNIFIL, it is a traditional type of peacekeeping with the minimum use of force and therefore does not, essentially, possess the coercive measure of disarming Hezbollah.

In his official report to the Security Council on the situation of UNIFIL in July 2019, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres accepted that maintenance of arms by Hezbollah is outside the control of the state of Lebanon⁷. It is also outside the control of UNIFIL.

⁷UN Document S/2019/574 *Implementation of Security Council resolution 1701 (2006) during the period from 18 February to 24 June 2019, Report of the Secretary General*, 17 July 2019, para. 30.

UNIFIL Has Worked: The Positive Aspects of UNIFIL

Enhanced Effectiveness of UNIFIL in the Operational Areas

Major General Apurba Bardalai, retired from the Indian Army, conducted extensive research on the effectiveness of UNIFIL as a peacekeeping operation. In his article “United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon: Assessment and Way Forward,” he conducted extensive interviews and questionnaires with former military peacekeepers of officer ranks serving in UNIFIL. In the interview, a former senior French General and Chief of Staff at UNIFIL HQ stated that the absence of war is due to the enhanced efficacy of UNIFIL. Others attribute the current stability to the role of UNIFIL and its rapid response to crises. In the book, 41 UNIFIL officers answering the questionnaires indicated that there have been occasional incidents with the potential to trigger major conflicts since 2006. They agreed that the presence of UNIFIL prevented the escalation of violence. Furthermore, a majority of 29 respondents among them indicated the view that UNIFIL had been able to take effective control of such incidents in time. It is an invisible effect⁸.

Bardalai argued that preventing another war which could result from possible changes in the bilateral relationship between Israel and Iran will be beyond the control of UNIFIL. At the same time, he continued that preventing a conflict from recurring because of minor incidents near the Blue Line (BL)⁹ should be within the reach of UNIFIL. Such minor incidents include: BL violations because of accidental or deliberate land crossings, the firing of a rocket by armed elements from southern Lebanon into Israel, hunting by local Lebanese near the BL provoking IDF soldiers on duty, smuggling of arms and other arsenals into southern Lebanon, an attack on IDF posts near the BL by Hezbollah operatives, protests by Lebanese near the BL against the Israeli occupation of Palestine, throwing stones at IDF soldiers, and provocative actions by either side near disputed areas (Bardalai 2022, pp. 121–127). As Vanessa Newby pointed out, these minor issues result in significant risks to the region since “they are sparks that can light the fire of a larger existential conflict” (Newby 2018, p. 81). In other words, the lower frequency of trivial or minor issues indicates the effectiveness of the operations of UNIFIL as an invisible effect. The frequency of throwing stones, the pointing of weapons by the IDF and LAF, and the incidents of firing rockets by Lebanese armed groups, for example, had decreased in the 2010s. This was due to some strict control measures by UNIFIL (Bardalai 2022, pp. 130–131).

Lise Howard, in her book *Power in Peacekeeping*, supports the arguments of Bardalai and Newby. She concluded in the book that UNIFIL has been effective for the following reasons. First, the situation in southern Lebanon would be even worse without UNIFIL. In fact, UNIFIL has prevented accidental outbreaks of armed confrontation

⁸Major General Apurba Bardalai, “United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon: Assessment and Way Forward,” p. 166.

⁹The term “Blue Line” refers to the semi-defined border between Israel and Lebanon. It was published by the UN on 7 June 2000 for the purpose of determining whether Israel had fully withdrawn from Lebanon.

from escalating into war. Second, violence in southern Lebanon has arisen in areas where UNIFIL is not deployed, when there are changes in troop rotations, and/or when UNIFIL is low numbers. Therefore, UNIFIL has created a predictable security environment that has helped to create peace for local citizens. Third, UNIFIL has been deployed in southern Lebanon largely because the government of Lebanon does not appear capable of assuming responsibility from UNIFIL. Therefore, UNIFIL has been contributing to relative stability for the political, security, and economic aspects in southern Lebanon. For the above reasons, Howard argued that UNIFIL has proven effective at reducing violence and restoring peace and security in areas where it is deployed (Howard 2019, pp. 100–108).

UNIFIL has also been contributing to normality as well as stability in the society of southern Lebanon. In fact, resistance is necessary for political and security reasons in the minds of the people in southern Lebanon. Normality might be the opposite conception to resistance, although the people in southern Lebanon are striving for both simultaneously. The normal life in southern Lebanon can be created by “everyday peace” with routinized practices used by individuals living there. Episodic violence, trivial fighting and resistance have been frequently identified in the BL, and normality in the minds of the people in southern Lebanon has been disrupted by such events. However, since the frequency of the events has been reduced by the operations of UNIFIL personnel, and normality has been increasingly brought to southern Lebanon, one can conclude that UNIFIL has been effective. While the UNIFIL operation is unable to influence political actors to generate a peaceful solution to the ongoing conflict, it has created conditions conducive to normality (Newby 2018, p. 172). Newby argued that by getting to have a normal life for a protracted period, the local community will gradually lose interest in war and will be more difficult to mobilize in support of war. Therefore, the normalization of peace in everyday life will change normative ideas about the value of war versus a peaceful life (Newby 2018, p. 173).

What are the causal factors of the enhanced effectiveness of UNIFIL as peacekeepers? Virginia Page Fortna gave the key functions for traditional peacekeeping to be effective: i) serve as investigators to document and prevent unwanted escalations and resumptions of war, ii) serve as impartial referees to relay the intentions of parties to the other side, and iii) serve as an interposed physical barrier that can raise the cost of invasive activities (Fortna 2004, pp. 481–519). Zachary Myers and Walter Dorn argued that these functions successfully applied to the three traditional UN peacekeeping operations in the Middle East: United Nations Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO), United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF), and UNIFIL. In terms of UNIFIL, as this article stated before, UNIFIL could not prevent the major wars between Israel and the armed groups in Lebanon including Hezbollah. However, Myers and Dorn concluded their article on the UN peacekeeping operations, including UNIFIL as follows:

Certainly, the United Nations could do more to mitigate conflict and promote peace and security, but the current missions (including UNIFIL) have had success. The long-term view shows how war and conflict have not emerged for the majority of the time; the mere presence of these peacekeepers, with their ability to observe, report, inspect, mediate, and investigate, has served as a deterrent to many forms of spontaneous escalation (Myers and Walter 2022, p. 20).

“Perceived security” among people in southern Lebanon by the simple deployment of UNIFIL also has contributed to the total effectiveness of UNIFIL. People said, “I feel that UNIFIL is good to be here. That they give a sense of security” (Behne 2015, pp. 104–105). UNIFIL has been perceived by the Lebanese population as a positive security factor. For example, during the attack in 2006, UNIFIL itself suffered casualties during rescue missions for Lebanese civilians, which gave a basis of trust in UNIFIL among the population. It also recognizes the deterrent effect of the mission (Behne 2015).

Humanitarian Assistance

Essentially, humanitarian activities and personal outreach have been effective in UN peacekeeping. Jan Daniel and Marketa Wittichova conducted extensive research on civil-military cooperation (CIMIC) in UN peacekeeping and counter-insurgency operations. In their research, many interviewed CIMIC officers in their operations in Lebanon (UNIFIL), Afghanistan (International Security Assistance Force: ISAF) or Iraq (War on Terror) said that while many outreach projects serve humanitarian and development purposes, they are closely aligned with military priorities and contribute to achieving the goals of the operation. It means that such activities serve to enhance the effectiveness of military operations by engaging in a more people-oriented military practice (Daniel and Wittichova 2020, p. 608). Whether in peacekeeping or counter-insurgency operations, humanitarian actions are now considered standard army actions (Duran and Bueno 2024, p. 509).

As far as UNIFIL is concerned, it has traditionally provided humanitarian assistance to the local population in the area of operations. In fact, humanitarian missions have been consistently requested and demanded since the early periods of UNIFIL. According to Skogmo, the humanitarian tasks became even more important in the period between the second Israeli invasion on 6 June 1982 and the Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon in February-June 1985, when UNIFIL could do very little to implement any of the three parts¹⁰ of the original mandate. In this situation, it became essential to give UNIFIL meaningful tasks, both to justify its continued presence and to keep up the morale of UNIFIL’s troops (Skogmo 1989, p. 91). In the mid-1980s, UNIFIL cooperated with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in extending assistance to the local people. Humanitarian assistance was extended to refugees as well as local populations in Lebanon. For example, in 1985, a number of Christian refugees sought safety in UNIFIL, where they received shelter, food, and other provisions. The confidence-building value of these tasks became an important asset for UNIFIL (Skogmo 1989, p. 94).

¹⁰As mentioned in this article, the three parts of UNIFIL’s original mandates in Security Council Resolution 425 (1978) are: 1) to confirm an immediate Israeli cease-fire and withdrawal from Lebanese territory, 2) to restore international peace and security; and 3) to ensure the restoration of Lebanese governmental authority and its territorial integrity etc.

In the late 1990s, the advent of the norm of “protection of civilians”¹¹ in armed conflicts was broadly advocated in the international community. The newly advocated norm promoted the legitimacy of humanitarian assistance in UN peacekeeping operations. In fact, many troop-contributing states to UNIFIL have also valued a humanitarian aspect in their mission in UNIFIL.

It is to be noted that compared to original Resolution 425 (1978), Resolution 1701 for new UNIFIL (2006) has a mandate adding the humanitarian tasks, “extending its assistance to help ensure humanitarian access to civilian populations and the voluntary and safe return of displaced persons”¹².

Among the troop-contributing states, Ireland has a consistent and positive policy towards humanitarian assistance in UNIFIL. Despite the constraint of their location between the IDF and the South Lebanese Army (SLA) and the Islamic Resistance emerging from the north, Irish battalions maintained offering humanitarian aid to the local people. McDonald cites the example of the 64th battalion, which suffered the biggest number of casualties in Lebanon but provided various forms of humanitarian assistance: donating \$1,700 to buy diesel oil for the Tibnin hospital; setting up medical clinics in Ayta Az-Zutt, Brashit, and Tulin; buying glass for a damaged mosque in Quabrika, etc (Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs 2013, p. 17). In 2008, at the International Conference for Support to Lebanon, the Irish Minister for Education Affairs, Noel Treacy, announced that the Irish contribution would reach 5 million Euros in bilateral humanitarian and recovery assistance in the aftermath of the 2006 war, which displaced over one million people, and caused large-scale destruction (Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs 2013, p. 18).

During the author’s interviews at the Irish Headquarters in UNIFIL in August 2019, a number of Irish soldiers and officers referred to humanitarian missions as a core task in Lebanon. One officer stated that UNIFIL has been evolving its peacekeeping missions since his first deployment in the 1990s. When he was first deployed in the 1990s, UNIFIL was regarded as a purely operational mission that supervised peace in the BL between Israel and Lebanon. Currently, the officer stated that the first priority is to support local people, the second is to train the Lebanese Armed Forces, and the third priority is the operational mission. His statement might be rather exaggerated, although he implied that the evolution of UN operations means the enhancement of local peace and more focus on humanitarian activities¹³.

According to Vanessa Newby, most battalions in UNIFIL provide some form of medical and dental care for the local population living in their areas. Some have a hospital that local residents can visit twenty-four hours a day, and all medical services and medication provided by the battalion are free. In addition, many battalions also operate an outreach service whereby they visit the villages in their area on a rolling basis and set up a medical center to provide care locally (Newby

¹¹In February 1999, the first debate on the protection of civilians was held in the UN Security Council, which adopted a presidential statement expressing grave concern over the civilian toll of conflict casualties. Then the UN Secretary-General was requested by the Security Council to submit annual reports with recommendations on how it could improve both the physical and legal protection of civilians in situations of armed conflicts.

¹²UN Document S/RES/1701 (2006), 11 August 2006, para. 11.

¹³Interview with an Irish officer, Irish Battalion Headquarters, UNIFIL, 26 August 2019.

2018, p. 142). The Spanish and Indian contingents in UNIFIL uniquely offer veterinary care in Sector East. This service appears more popular than the medical services. Local shepherds said that the veterinary service is an incredible advantage in Lebanon, where there are few veterinarians, who charge high fees for their services. Newby described that the veterinary service by UNIFIL helps to improve the economic environment of the region, as it enables farmers to continue to function and produce goods for sale on the market (Newby 2018, p. 143).

After the 2006 war, UNIFIL innovated the new humanitarian project, the so-called “Quick Impact Project (QIP).” QIPs are funded by UNIFIL headquarters with a total annual budget of US\$500,000. Each battalion in UNIFIL is allowed to submit a proposal for spending the fund in order to meet local needs with a maximum of US\$25,000 for each project. The projects vary, from providing solar system lights to teaching computer skills or yoga (Newby 2018, pp. 145–146)¹⁴.

For example, Spain has attached great importance to QIPs. 53.8% of the Spanish troops interviewed in 2015 answered that they had engaged in humanitarian assistance in Lebanon. Between 2006 and 2016, Spain carried out a total of 645 QIPs, serving 54 villages and towns and a total population of 99,000. The social activities there included ones related to gender equality, children, and women, and ones in the field of cultural relations involving teaching the Spanish language to about 5,500 students in 10 years (Duran and Bueno 2024, p. 508).

One can also identify the research result from the National Defence University of Malaysia that there is a positive relationship between economic activities and local acceptance in UN peacekeeping operations. In other words, the results of the questionnaires to about 500 Lebanese citizens indicated that respondents, who enjoyed enhanced economic activities provided by the Malaysian peacekeepers, including QIPs, tend to enhance accepting their presence as the UN operation in southern Lebanon (Nordin et al. 2022).

The QIPs positively affected the economy of UNIFIL’s area of operations and led to economic growth. Most of the developmental projects were executed by Lebanese labor, which contributed to local employment. All the projects facilitated life by providing better roads for transportation, training farmers and ranchers to increase productivity, and improving the quality of education. Above all, it is estimated that UNIFIL annually contributes with approximately US\$ 40 million to the Lebanese economy (Saad 2021, pp. 17–18).

According to the Secretary-General’s report, from 21 October 2024 to 20 February 2025, UNIFIL coordinated 1,578 civilian or humanitarian activities, including the transportation of medical supplies, the notification of funerals, the repair of civilian infrastructure, the movement of civilian rescue and recovery operations, as well as the clearance of roads. During this period, UNIFIL approved 11 QIPs, 8 of which were in support of crisis response efforts, including support for the Lebanese Red Cross in Tyre and the provision of food parcels, blankets, hygiene kits and winter clothing¹⁵.

¹⁴For example, Taekwondo instruction was provided by the South Korean component, and Tai Chi tuition was provided by the Chinese contingent.

¹⁵UN Document S/2025/153, 12 March 2025, paras. 29-30.

Assistance of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF)

As mentioned before, Security Council Resolution 1701 (2006) was adopted following the heavy airstrikes by the IDF against Hezbollah and the citizens of southern Lebanon. The mandate required UNIFIL to assist the LAF in taking steps towards the establishment of the areas¹⁶. For example, UNIFIL has been expected to help the LAF disarm non-state actors in southern Lebanon, chiefly Hezbollah, and monitor ceasefire violations. The mandate would be necessary and appropriate due to the inevitable dependence of the Lebanese government on Hezbollah instead of the LAF in maintaining the security of southern Lebanon. It means that the LAF needs to enhance its military capability and ability to assert its authority and defend the security of the state on its own. At the time of writing, a total of 8,985 personnel of the LAF are deployed in the area south of the Litani River in southern Lebanon.

UNIFIL assists the LAF in building the latter's capability in two main ways: by supporting financial donations among the contributing states to UNIFIL and other states to improve its military equipment, and by helping make improvements at the operational level. More needs to be done in terms of financial support. There is a shortage of basic materials, fuel, and money to pay the LAF soldiers. In reality, the LAF soldiers have to do other jobs simultaneously to finance themselves, which means that many soldiers only work part-time (Behne 2025, p. 90).

Meanwhile, relations between UNIFIL and the LAF are good in terms of operational activities, according to interviews with the military officers of troop-contributing states (Bardalai 2022, p. 168). In the area of operations, the LAF and UNIFIL conduct daily joint patrols to prevent violations of the BL and to search for unexploded ordnance and unauthorized weapons. When some Lebanese violate the BL during joint patrols, UNIFIL plays the role of observers, and the LAF plays a key role in deciding what measures should be taken regarding Lebanese citizens. When some incidents happen between UNIFIL staff and Lebanese citizens, UNIFIL staff stand back, and the LAF defuses the situation (Newby 2018, p. 127). When unauthorized weapons are identified by UNIFIL, they are removed by the LAF. According to the report of the Secretary General on UNIFIL in November 2025, UNIFIL identified unauthorized weapons on 117 occasions, including 75 unguarded arms caches as well as individuals carrying rifles or pistols on 6 occasions during the reporting period. The LAF was successful in removing 96 percent of the caches referred to them by UNIFIL¹⁷.

UNIFIL also supports the LAF in strengthening diplomatic relations with the IDF. Since the war in 2006, UNIFIL has organized the monthly "tripartite meetings" among representatives of the LAF, IDF, and UNIFIL itself. In fact, UNIFIL has been the only forum through which the LAF and IDF officially meet. The meeting consists of the UNIFIL force commander, 14 senior UNIFIL staff, and 6 or 7 senior officials from the LAF and IDF each. According to the Secretary General's report in 2013:

¹⁶UN Document S/RES/1701 (2006), 11 August 2006, para. 11.

¹⁷UN Document S/2005/738 "Implementation of Security Council Resolution 1701(2006) during the period from 21 June to 20 October 2025: Report of the Secretary-General", 11 November 2025, para. 25.

These meetings are the most significant stabilizing factor within the framework of resolution 1701(2006), serving to build confidence between the parties and defuse tension in potential flash points, as well as providing a platform through which UNIFIL can facilitate practical arrangements on the ground between the LAF and IDF¹⁸.

Among the tripartite mechanism, a “hotline” was established between the UNIFIL Force Commander and the IDF to report BL violations and any other emergency issues, and a similar mechanism was also established with the LAF in Tyre and in the Defense Ministry headquarters (Novosseloff 2015, p. 773).

The tripartite meetings create several benefits for both sides. They are important as a confidence and mutual understanding mechanism in their daily life. In emergencies, both the LAF and IDF ensure that UNIFIL can keep the parties in communication to avoid a deterioration of relations. The meetings also provide the opportunity for UNIFIL to report the findings of its investigations into incidents on the BL (Newby 2018, pp. 96–97).

Conclusion

On the whole, this article discussed both the negative and positive aspects of UNIFIL. On the negative side, it was clearly pointed out that UNIFIL could not implement its mandate at all, especially, in its early days. UNIFIL failed to confirm the withdrawal of Israeli forces; to restore international peace and security; and to assist the government of Lebanon in ensuring the return of its effective authority in the area. UNIFIL failed to prevent several Israeli invasions of Lebanon. Furthermore, UNIFIL did not have the ability to disarm Hezbollah. On the positive side, UNIFIL has enhanced its effectiveness in maintaining peace in the area of operations, especially, in the post-2006 period. UNIFIL consistently had remarkable records in the field of humanitarian assistance since its establishment in 1978. Furthermore, UNIFIL has been successful in assisting the LAF which means that UNIFIL even partly implemented its mandate adopted by Security Council Resolution 1701 (2006).

Above all, it can be concluded that UNIFIL has been improving its missions as a “new UNIFIL” or “UNIFIL II” in the post-2006 period. In retrospect, Security Council Resolution 425 (1978) for an “old UNIFIL” or “the first UNIFIL” was so inappropriate and demanding for local security and therefore almost impossible to implement. In those days, there was no peace to keep in southern Lebanon, so UNIFIL as a peacekeeper could not have the minimum conditions to implement the mandate in the area of operations. Meanwhile, after the 2006 war, the new UNIFIL extended its functions and increased its military strength, and gradually enhanced its effectiveness and performance. Eventually, UNIFIL gradually helped calm high tensions in southern Lebanon. UNIFIL has prevented numerous flare-ups from spiraling into war.

Presumably, disarming Hezbollah, which would be included as part of the mandate of UNIFIL, and the disarmament of all armed groups in Lebanon, would

¹⁸UN Document S/2013/381, 26 July 2013, para. 7.

also be beyond the ability and capability of UNIFIL. Hezbollah currently has significant military and political power and influence in Lebanese society. The issue of disarming Hezbollah should continue to be solved within the framework of international law. On this issue, UNIFIL's presence was an imperfect but useful device for discouraging Hezbollah's re-emergence in the borderlands or a new surge of Israeli ground troops.

The current situation in southern Lebanon, where Israel and Hezbollah have exchanged fire and UNIFIL will have terminated its mission by the end of 2026, would be discouraging for those who work in and with the UN and specialize in the UN studies. In fact, in southern Lebanon, violations of Resolution 1701 (2006) continue, and the mandate has not been fulfilled completely. However, this does not mean that UNIFIL is ineffective or unimportant. UNIFIL would be the last stabilizing buffer in an increasingly fragile region.

Therefore, the UN decision to terminate UNIFIL at the end of 2026 was immature. Several specialists in UN peacekeeping argued that a sudden UNIFIL withdrawal would create multiple risks: the possibility of a surge in Hezbollah activity in the south, and increasing the prospect of another indirect conflict between Hezbollah and Israel, and another Israeli invasion of southern Lebanon. Some of the above scenarios have already happened even before the actual withdrawal of UNIFIL.

On the whole, what should we expect from UN peacekeeping operations? UN peacekeeping operations are one of the most useful instruments in conflict resolution. However, they are not panaceas. As the term suggests, we expect them to keep the peace. However, real peace can be brought about only by political settlement, and political settlement cannot be created by the presence of peacekeepers alone but by diplomatic efforts. As this article argued, UNIFIL has been contributing to fragile peace in southern Lebanon. However, concerning southern Lebanon, political and diplomatic efforts by host states and the international community have not been significant. Therefore, it would be unrealistic to assume that peacekeeping operations can apply to the type of intractable regional and international conflicts like the one in southern Lebanon.

Furthermore, one can conclude that peacekeeping operations should be expected properly when the mandates are suitable. Withdrawing the Israeli troops was among the mandates in Resolution 425 (1978) and 1701 (2006), although the IDF launched retaliatory campaigns several years after the withdrawal. The violations of UN resolutions by parties concerned were partly due to the unsuitability of the UN mandates, and partly due to the absence of the main principle of UN peacekeeping operations, namely, local consent.

The selective nature of UN peacekeeping would be inevitable. However, realistically, several peacekeeping operations, such as UNIFIL, have been inevitably established without proper conditions, including proper mandates, local consent, and political backing among great powers, for emergency purposes. In these situations, one should expect UN peacekeeping to maintain fragile peace, hopefully with humanitarian assistance, and then to calm the situation moderately.

Abbreviations

BL: Blue Line
 CIMIC: Civil-Military Cooperation
 DFF: De Facto Forces
 IDF: Israeli Defense Forces
 ICRC: International Committee of the Red Cross
 ISAF: International Security Assistance Force
 LAF: Lebanese Armed Forces
 PLO: Palestine Liberation Organization
 QIP: Quick Impact Project
 SLA: South Lebanese Army
 UN: United Nations
 UNDOF: United Nations Disengagement Observer Force
 UNICEF: United Nations Children's Fund
 UNIFIL: United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon
 UNRWA: United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in Near East
 UNTSO: United Nations Truce Supervision Organization

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The Indus Waters Treaty Arbitration between India and Pakistan

*By Ravindra Pratap**

A Court of Arbitration rejected all of India's objections to its jurisdiction and found that it has competence to decide all questions relating to its competence and that the matters referred to arbitration by Pakistan concern a dispute or disputes within the meaning of Article IX(2) of the Indus Waters Treaty 1960 (IWT). Later, the Court found that India's position on "abeyance" of the IWT does not limit its competence and that its award and a decision of the Neutral Expert within their respective domains of authority are binding. India seems determined on a modification of the IWT which would not be easy to politically accomplish under it even while expressly within its contemplation. Cooperation between India and Pakistan in terms of the IWT seems most important so that the IWT could accommodate necessary changes/updates and relevant technological developments and address climate change since it came into force more than six decades ago.

Keywords: *Indus Waters Treaty, India, Pakistan, arbitration, competence.*

Introduction

Water is indispensable for agriculture, hydropower generation and drinking water for India and Pakistan. Water is primarily shared by India and Pakistan through the Indus River basin. The Indus system of rivers and their tributaries rise mainly in the Himalayan, Hindu Kush, and Karakoram Mountains and flow through Afghanistan, China, India, and Pakistan. These rivers are increasingly affected by climate change as their waters depend mainly on Himalayan snow and glacier melts. The sharing of these waters is regulated by the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT). A Court of Arbitration has given an Award under the IWT and found that it has competence to decide all questions relating to its competence and that the matters referred to arbitration by Pakistan concern a dispute or disputes within the meaning of Article IX(2) of the IWT. Later, the Court found that India's position on "abeyance" of the IWT does not limit its competence¹ and that its award and a decision of the Neutral Expert are binding.² India did not participate in the arbitral proceedings and raised

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¹Permanent Court of Arbitration, *In the matter of an Arbitration before the Court of Arbitration Constituted in Accordance with the Indus Waters Treaty 1960 between Islamic Republic of Pakistan and the Republic of India, Supplemental Award on the Competence of the Court*, 27 June 2025, para. 76 (A) (hereafter the Supplemental Award on Competence).

²Permanent Court of Arbitration, *In the matter of an Arbitration before the Court of Arbitration Constituted in Accordance with the Indus Waters Treaty 1960 between Islamic Republic of Pakistan and the Republic of India, Award on the General Issues of Interpretation*, 08 August 2025, para. 811 (hereafter the Award on Interpretation).

six objections to the jurisdiction of the Court of Arbitration.³ Below we follow a normative-juridical approach with case analysis. Accordingly, the next parts are on India's objections to the arbitration, followed by a brief and relevant recount of the IWT, India's non-participation in the Court of Arbitration, some merits issues and finally conclusion.

India's Objections

In its first objection, India stated that the Court of Arbitration is not competent to decide its competence.⁴ India argued that applicability of the principle of *kompetenz-kompetenz* follows a proper constitution of the Court of Arbitration.⁵ India further submitted that it was its sovereign right to accept the validity of the tribunal.⁶ Pakistan replied that India's objection is based on a flawed interpretation of Annexure G and the role of the Court of Arbitration under the IWT.⁷ Pakistan submitted that the Court of Arbitration is competent to decide on its own competence and that India cannot invoke sovereignty for avoiding the IWT's compulsory dispute settlement system.⁸ Pakistan explained that *kompetenz-kompetenz* is a consequence of the validity of the constitution of the Court of Arbitration⁹ and that both India and Pakistan entered into the IWT in the exercise of their sovereignty.¹⁰ Pakistan further contended that the IWT, which provides for the tribunal, is binding also on India and is required to be performed in good faith.¹¹ The Court of Arbitration made no distinction between objections concerning its constitution and objections to its jurisdiction for the purposes of its inherent power to interpret its constituent instrument,¹² i.e. the IWT, and rejected India's first objection.

India's second objection relates to a non-existence of "dispute" referable to arbitration under Article IX(2) of the IWT. According to India, in the absence of agreement of both the Commissioners, a "dispute" referable to arbitration arises where a neutral expert determines that a "difference" is a "dispute".¹³ Pakistan replied that India's objection is based on its misreading of Article IX(2) of the IWT.¹⁴ Pakistan contended that a dispute has validly arisen under Article IX of the IWT. Pakistan explained that unless a Commissioner has identified a "difference" or requested the

³Permanent Court of Arbitration, *In the matter of an Arbitration before the Court of Arbitration Constituted in Accordance with the Indus Waters Treaty 1960 between Islamic Republic of Pakistan and the Republic of India*, Award of the Competence of the Court, 6 July 2023, at 50 (hereafter the Award on Competence).

⁴*Ibid.*, at 54 *et seq.*

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶*Ibid.*, at 55.

⁷Response of Pakistan, Preliminary Phase on the Competence of the Court and the Operation of Article IX of the Indus Waters Treaty, Vol. I, at 94 *et seq.* (hereafter Response of Pakistan, Preliminary Phase).

⁸*The Award on Competence, supra* note 3, at 56.

⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹*Ibid.*, at 57.

¹²*Ibid.*, at 58.

¹³*Ibid.*, at 60.

¹⁴Response of Pakistan, Preliminary Phase, *supra* note 7, at 69 *et seq.*

appointment of a neutral expert, a “dispute” has arisen under Article IX(2) of the IWT.¹⁵ Pakistan noted that its interpretation finds support in the reasoning of a prior arbitration between the parties and that India’s interpretation runs counter to the text and object and purpose of the IWT.¹⁶ Pakistan added that its 24 July 2015 request for the appointment of neutral expert was later revoked on 25 February 2017 and that India did not request for the appointment of a neutral expert on 11 August 2016.¹⁷ The Court of Arbitration noted that the Commission may direct any difference to a neutral expert or to a court of arbitration or settle the difference in any other way as agreed by it.¹⁸ It further noted that Pakistan invited India to join it in appointing a neutral expert to address those differences, India declined, and Pakistan then legally revoked that invitation. The differences therefore, the Court of Arbitration concluded, did not come within the jurisdiction of a neutral expert and qualified as disputes that could be settled through a court of arbitration.¹⁹

India’s third objection stated that the Court of Arbitration is not competent because the requirements of Article IX(3), (4) and (5) of the IWT were not met. India said that the parties never agreed to refer the matter to arbitration and never satisfied its procedural requirements.²⁰ Pakistan submitted that the relevant and applicable procedural requirements of the IWT have been met.²¹ Pakistan added that the IWT does not require a joint report for arbitration to settle a dispute.²² Relying on an ICJ judgment,²³ Pakistan argued that recourse to negotiations is not mandatory²⁴ and that it is the opinion of the requesting party which is required for recourse to arbitration.²⁵ Pakistan recalled that it informed India that the disputes are not likely to be resolved by further negotiations.²⁶ The Court of Arbitration noted that no agreement of the parties was required for referral of their dispute to arbitration.²⁷ Further, it stated that India’s participation in the negotiations was without waving its position of inadmissibility of the matter before arbitration.²⁸ Finally, the Court of Arbitration noted that the fact that the parties did not change their position during negotiations does not mean that negotiations were not held.²⁹ The Court of Arbitration therefore rejected India’s third objection.

By its fourth objection, India stated that, even if a dispute has arisen, the Court of Arbitration has not been constituted as per Annexure G to the IWT.³⁰ Pakistan

¹⁵*The Award on Competence*, note 3, at 64.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, at 65.

¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁸*Ibid.*, at 79.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, at 85.

²⁰*Ibid.*

²¹*Ibid.*, at 87.

²²*Ibid.*

²³*Certain Questions of Mutual Assistance in Criminal Matters (Djibouti v. France)*, Judgment [2008] ICJ Rep 177, para. 145

²⁴*The Award on Competence*, *supra* note 3, at 89.

²⁵*Ibid.*, at 90.

²⁶*Ibid.*, at 91.

²⁷*Ibid.*, at 95.

²⁸*Ibid.*, at 96.

²⁹*Ibid.*, at 97.

³⁰*Ibid.*, at 99.

replied that India's position is legally and factually inaccurate.³¹ Pakistan submitted that the Court of Arbitration has been properly constituted despite India's refusal to participate in the constitution of the Court of Arbitration and to appoint its arbitrators.³² Pakistan added that failure by India to appoint two arbitrators did not prevent the Court of Arbitration from being constituted and competent.³³ In Pakistan's view, any other interpretation of the IWT would be contrary to the text of the IWT and its object and purpose.³⁴ The Court of Arbitration noted that India failed to appoint its arbitrators within 30 days of Pakistan's request for arbitration. It added that it recognized India's right to appoint two arbitrators up to seven days of an affirmative decision on its competence. The Court of Arbitration therefore rejected India's fourth objection.³⁵

In its fifth objection, India claimed that the Court of Arbitration is not competent because the neutral expert is dealing with the question.³⁶ Pakistan termed that India's objection is based on "assumptions".³⁷ Pakistan countered that no neutral expert is dealing with any points of difference as it had been neither appointed nor identified when the proceedings of the Court of Arbitration commenced in August 2016.³⁸ According to Pakistan, a mere indication of intention to request the appointment of a neutral expert is not enough.³⁹ Pakistan added that even if a neutral expert is appointed after the constitution of a Court of Arbitration it would not prevent from continuing with arbitral proceedings.⁴⁰ The Court of Arbitration noted that India's intention to request the appointment of a neutral expert⁴¹ and that the World Bank thereafter appointed a neutral expert⁴² were not conclusive that a neutral expert was "dealing with" the questions which are before the Court of Arbitration. The Court of Arbitration therefore rejected India's fifth objection.⁴³

India's sixth and final objection stated that the Court of Arbitration is not necessary.⁴⁴ Pakistan contended that the necessity for arbitration has arisen as it had met the prerequisites to establish a court of arbitration.⁴⁵ Pakistan explained that the necessity to establish a court of arbitration arises once a request to establish it has been filed and to determine the question of its competence.⁴⁶ Further, according to Pakistan, the necessity to establish a Court of Arbitration arose because its request for arbitration specifies questions which cannot be answered by a neutral expert.⁴⁷ Pakistan finally added that the necessity to establish a Court of Arbitration has arisen even if it is not

³¹Response of Pakistan, Preliminary Phase, *supra* note 7, at 89 *et seq.*

³²*The Award on Competence*, *supra* note 3, at 100.

³³*Ibid.*

³⁴*Ibid.*

³⁵*Id.*, at 104.

³⁶*Id.*, at 106.

³⁷Response of Pakistan, Preliminary Phase, *supra* note 7, at 64 *et seq.*

³⁸*The Award on Competence*, *supra* note 3, at 108.

³⁹*Id.*, at 109.

⁴⁰*Id.*

⁴¹*Id.*, at 113.

⁴²*Id.*, at 116.

⁴³*Ibid.*

⁴⁴*Id.*, at 117.

⁴⁵*Id.*, at 118–19.

⁴⁶*Id.*, at 119.

⁴⁷*Id.*, at 119–20.

indispensable.⁴⁸ The Court of Arbitration found that the requirements of Article IX of the IWT have been met and therefore it is necessary.⁴⁹ It added that Article IX of the IWT does not require a substantive review of whether the Court of Arbitration is needed⁵⁰ and, even if a neutral expert had been dealing with any difference, it would not bar the necessity of the Court of Arbitration unless the questions before it were the same as before the neutral expert.⁵¹ Further, according to the Court of Arbitration, the question of parallel proceeding is to be resolved by the respective bodies and not by a party. The Court of Arbitration therefore rejected India's sixth objection.⁵² We now briefly recall the relevant provisions of the IWT in the next section.

The Indus Waters Treaty

The IWT stems from a common desire of India and Pakistan of "attaining a most complete and satisfactory utilization of the waters of the Indus system of rivers... and of making provision for the settlement, in a cooperative spirit, of all such questions"⁵³ concerning its interpretation and application. While all the waters of the Sutlej, Beas and Ravi (Eastern) rivers have been made available to India,⁵⁴ those of the Indus, Jhelum and Chenab (Western) rivers have been given to Pakistan.⁵⁵ The IWT has been characterized as "the world's most generous water-sharing pact"⁵⁶ However, India can make a restricted use of the Western rivers for domestic use, non-consumptive use, agriculture use and generation of hydroelectric power.⁵⁷ The IWT has established a Commission comprising of one representative each from India and Pakistan to "make every effort to settle promptly, in accordance with the provisions of Article IX(1), any question arising thereunder."⁵⁸ The IWT provides that any "question"⁵⁹ arising between the parties shall be "first"⁶⁰ examined by the "Commission".⁶¹ A "question" unresolved by the commission is considered a "difference"⁶² by the IWT and a "difference" may become a "dispute"⁶³ to be resolved by the Commission⁶⁴ or a Court of Arbitration.⁶⁵

⁴⁸*Id.*, at 122. Further, see Response of Pakistan, Preliminary Phase, *supra* note 7, at 74 *et seq.*

⁴⁹*Id.*, at 123.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*

⁵¹*Ibid.*

⁵²*Id.*, at 127.

⁵³Preamble to the IWT, (December 1960), online: <https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTs/Volume%20419/volume-419-I-6032-English.pdf>.

⁵⁴Article II of the IWT.

⁵⁵Article III of the IWT. Further, see Memorial of Pakistan, First Phase on Merits, Vol. II, at 6 *et seq.*

⁵⁶Brahma Chellaney, 'Rivers of Conflict between India and Pakistan' (2016), Nikkei Asian Review, online: <https://chellaney.net/2016/08/19/rivers-of-conflict-between-india-and-pakistan/>

⁵⁷Article III (2) of the IWT.

⁵⁸Article VIII (b) of the IWT.

⁵⁹Article IX (1) of the IWT.

⁶⁰Article IX (1) of the IWT.

⁶¹Article IX (1) of the IWT.

⁶²Article IX (2) of the IWT.

⁶³Article IX (2) (b) of the IWT.

⁶⁴Article IX (3) (4) of the IWT.

⁶⁵Article IX (5) of the IWT.

The importance of the IWT may be measured by the fact that the ILA used it “as context for its Helsinki Rules...”⁶⁶ The next section discusses India’s non-participation in the Court of Arbitration from the standpoints of jurisdiction and dispute before it.

India’s Non-Participation

India’s non-participation involved the question of jurisdiction of the Court of Arbitration and whether a “dispute” under the IWT existed between India and Pakistan. Each will be discussed below.

(a) *Jurisdiction*

On the issue of India’s non-participation in the arbitral proceedings, it may be recalled that non-participation of a disputant cannot affect the validity of the outcome of adjudicatory proceedings.⁶⁷ However, when a disputant fails to appear before the adjudicatory body, the body, before making its finding on the merits of the case, must establish its jurisdiction over the matter before it.⁶⁸ In the *Nuclear Tests* case, France did not appear before the Court,⁶⁹ but the Court proceeded and reached a conclusion.⁷⁰ In the *Ageing Sea Continental Shelf* case, Turkey failed to appear before the Court and the Court reiterated that, “before finding upon the merits, [it] must satisfy itself that it has jurisdiction.”⁷¹ Later, Iran did not appear before the Court and the Court had to take up “any preliminary question,... which might constitute a bar to any further examination of the merits...”⁷² The Court therefore consistently affirmed that a non-appearing party remains a party to the proceedings.⁷³ More recently, the South China Sea Arbitration held that “[d]espite its non-appearance, China remains a Party to these proceedings...”⁷⁴ It is therefore difficult to contest the finding of the Court of Arbitration on India’s non-participation before it. India’s stance therefore seems in contrast with its stance in the

⁶⁶Mary Miner et al., ‘Water Sharing between India and Pakistan: A Critical Evaluation of the Indus Waters Treaty’ (2009) 34 *Water International* 204, at 206. Further, see generally A A Michel (1967) *The Indus Rivers: A Study of the Effects of Partition* (Yale: Yale University Press); N D Gulhati (1973) *Indus Waters Treaty: An Exercise in International Mediation* (New Delhi: Allied Publishers); A K Biswas, ‘Indus Waters Treaty: The Negotiating Process’ (1992) 17 *Water International* 201; Salman M A Salman and Kishore Uprety (2002) *Conflict and Cooperation on South Asia’s International Rivers* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank).

⁶⁷*Military and Paramilitary Activities in und against Nicaragua (Nicaragua v United States of America)*, Judgment [1986] ICJ Rep. 14 at 23–24.

⁶⁸*Fisheries Jurisdiction (United Kingdom v Iceland)*, Judgment [1973] ICJ Rep 3 at 7–8.

⁶⁹*Nuclear Tests (Australia v France)*, Judgment [1974] ICJ Rep 253 at 257.

⁷⁰*Id.*

⁷¹*Aegean Sea Continental Shelf*, Judgment [1978] ICJ Rep. 3 at 7–8.

⁷²*United States Diplomatic and Consular Staff in Tehran*, Judgment [1980] ICJ Rep. 3 at 18 [hereafter *Nicaragua Case*].

⁷³*The “Arctic Sunrise” case (Kingdom of the Netherlands v Russian Federation, Provisional Measures)*, Judgment [2013] International Tribunals for the Law of the Sea, Order of 22 November 2013, at 242.

⁷⁴*A Court of Arbitration Constituted Under Annex VII to the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea between the Republic of the Philippines and the People’s Republic of China, Award on Jurisdiction and Admissibility*, Judgment, 29 October 2015, at 39 (hereafter the *South China Sea Arbitration*).

Kishanganga Arbitration in which it participated while retaining objections to its jurisdiction.⁷⁵

(b) “Dispute”

While Pakistan requested for the appointment of umpires for the Court of Arbitration in accordance with Annexure G of the IWT, India requested for the appointment of a neutral expert in accordance with Annexure F of the IWT.⁷⁶ The judicial understanding of the concept of dispute is no less fairly settled. In response to the contention of the Russian Federation that there was no “dispute”, the Court did not “consider that the words “matter”, “complaint”, “dispute” and “issue” are used in Articles 11 to 16 in such a systematic way that requires that a narrower interpretation than usual be given to the word “dispute”.”⁷⁷ And, relevant to the nature of the IWT, the Court found “that the content of the 1977 Treaty indicates that it must be regarded as establishing a territorial régime...”⁷⁸ Hence, the IWT continues to govern the Indus waters relationship between India and Pakistan. This “relationship is also determined by the rules of other relevant conventions to which the two States are party, by the rules of general international law and, in this particular case, by the rules of State responsibility...”⁷⁹ Clearly, the legal relationship founded between India and Pakistan by the IWT “is preserved.”⁸⁰ The Court underscored that “[w]hat is required in the present case by the rule *pacta sunt servanda*, as reflected in Article 26 of the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties, 1969 (VCLT), is that the Parties find an agreed solution within the cooperative context of the Treaty.”⁸¹ Later, the Court underscored it *qua* customary international law embodied in Article 26 of the VCLT⁸² and which also applies to “procedural obligations which are essential to co-operation between States...”⁸³ Later, in its Supplemental Award on Competence, the Court found that India’s position on “abeyance”⁸⁴ of the IWT does not limit its competence⁸⁵ and that

⁷⁵The Award on Competence, *supra* note 3, at 50. Further, see *infra* note 86.

⁷⁶The Award on Interpretation, *supra* note 2, para. 218.

⁷⁷Case Concerning Application of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (*Georgia v Russian Federation*), [2011] ICJ Rep. 70 at 84.

⁷⁸*Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros Project (Hungary/Slovakia)*, Judgment [1997] ICJ Rep 7 at 71 (hereafter the *Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros Project Case*).

⁷⁹*Ibid.*, at 76.

⁸⁰*Ibid.*

⁸¹*Ibid.*, at 78.

⁸²*Pulp Mills on the River Uruguay (Argentina v Uruguay)*, Judgment [2010] ICJ Rep. 14 at 67 (hereafter *Pulp Mills on the River Uruguay Case*).

⁸³*Id.*

⁸⁴See *infra* section V (b). See also *infra* note 108, statement of the Foreign Secretary dated 23 April 2025.

⁸⁵The Supplemental Award on Competence, *supra* note 1. Further, see *infra* sub-section V(b) on operation of the IWT. In reaching its decision, the Court also relied on *Alleged Violations of Sovereign Rights and Maritime Spaces in the Caribbean Sea (Nicaragua v Colombia)*, Preliminary Objections [2016] ICJ Rep 3, para. 33; *Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (Croatia v Serbia)*, Preliminary Objections, Judgment [2008] ICJ Rep 412, para. 80; *Compañía de Aguas del Aconquija SA (formerly Aguas del Aconquija) and Vivendi Universal SA (formerly Compagnie Générale des Eaux) v Argentine Republic (I)*, ICSID Case No. ARB/97/3, Decision on Jurisdiction, 14 November 2005, para. 60. The Court also reasoned that “[t]he rule of customary international law that unilateral acts post-dating the filing of a dispute have no effect on

India's non-participation in the proceedings does not prevent such proceedings from moving forward."⁸⁶ Clearly, the finding of the Court of Arbitration on the existence of dispute does not appear to suffer from any legal infirmity. We now turn to some merits issues in the next section.

Some Merits Issues

The key issues of merits concerned the project's design and water flow, the operation of the IWT, interpretation of the IWT and the suspension of the Permanent Indus Commission (PIC) talks. Each invites some discussion.

(a) *Project's design and water flow*

Since the Court of Arbitration has unanimously rejected each of India's six objections to its competence, the stage is now set for consideration of the merits of the matter relating to Pakistan's concerns about India's hydroelectric project's design and operation. While Pakistan believes that the designs of India's project allow it more control over the waters and to the detriment of Pakistan, India considers that it is allowed to construct its projects in accordance with the contemporary scientific knowledge than the technology existed at the time of conclusion of the IWT. Accordingly, on 25 January 2023, India issued to Pakistan its "notification for modification"⁸⁷ and followed its long-running disputes with Pakistan over the construction of its hydroelectric power projects over the Western rivers Chenab and Jhelum's tributary Kishanganga (known as Neelum in Pakistan). Article XII(3) of the IWT provides for its modification.⁸⁸ While India believes that its projects are of run-of-the-river nature and hence do not violate the reservoir provisions of the IWT, Pakistan alleges that the designs of the Indian dams constrict the flow of the rivers to Pakistan.⁸⁹ It is believed that cooperation between India and Pakistan is to be preferred to a third-party dispute resolution which "can undermine future cooperation"⁹⁰ on the Indus water sharing between India and Pakistan.

The Indus basin covers nearly 71 per cent of Pakistan's territory.⁹¹ Therefore, Pakistan is heavily dependent on the Indus waters.⁹² However, for Pakistan, it is stated

competence typically arises in the context of an international court or tribunal." *The Supplemental Award on Competence*, *supra* note 1, para. 73.

⁸⁶*The Award on Interpretation*, *supra* note 2, para. 238. In reaching its decision, the Court relied on *Arbitral Award of 3 October 1899 (Guyana v Venezuela)*, *Jurisdiction of the Court*, Judgment, [2020] ICJ Rep 455, paras. 26–27; *Nicaragua Case*, *supra* note 72; the *South China Sea Arbitration*, *supra* note 74; *Arctic Sunrise (Kingdom of the Netherlands v Russian Federation)*, PCA Case No. 2014-02, Award on Jurisdiction, 26 November 2014.

⁸⁷Rezaul H Laskar, 'India Issues Notice to Pakistan to Modify Indus Waters Treaty', (January 2023), online: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-issues-notice-to-pakistan-to-modify-indus-waters-treaty-101674839706437.html>.

⁸⁸The provision states: "The provisions of this Treaty may from time to time be modified by a duly ratified treaty concluded for that purpose between the two Governments."

⁸⁹Further, see Memorial of Pakistan, First Phase on Merits, Vol. I, at 83 *et seq.*

⁹⁰Miner et al., *supra* note 66, at 211.

⁹¹Khurshed Ahmad Wani and P Moorthy, 'Indus Waters Treaty: An Emerging Flashpoint between India and Pakistan' (2014) 67 *Pakistan Horizon* 41, at 48

that “run-of-the-river dams arrest silt, depriving Pakistani fields of vital nutrients and lowering their productivity.”⁹³ Pakistan believes that, “[b]y demanding its revision, India is rendering the well-functioning Indus Waters Treaty dysfunctional.”⁹⁴ Pakistan asserts that India’s “attempts to gain control over the three western rivers allocated to Pakistan [is] in violation of the IWT.”⁹⁵ It is claimed that “[c]utting water to Pakistan would result in widespread famine and drought...”⁹⁶ It is argued that “any intention to modify [the] IWT by India, may threaten Pakistan’s national security.”⁹⁷ In India’s view, Pakistan from time to time objected to India’s hydroelectric projects ever since it started building them in 1970s.⁹⁸ Pakistan’s persistent allegations of violations of the IWT are “entrenched distrust and compulsions of domestic politics”.⁹⁹ Pakistan “has repeatedly used the Treaty provisions to block projects by India.”¹⁰⁰ It is argued that rather than “solving the issues around these projects in a constructive and cooperative manner, Pakistan’s objective was to kill the projects by rendering them unworkable.”¹⁰¹ Further, climate change has the potential to complicate life along the Indus River¹⁰² and on

⁹²About 70% of irrigated agriculture of Pakistan is provided by Pakistan’s Indus Basin irrigation system.

⁹³John Joseph Vater, ‘The Indus Waters Treaty: Prospects for India-Pakistan Peace’ (2021) at 6, online: <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/the-indus-waters-treaty-prospects-for-india-pakistan-peace/>.

⁹⁴Ali Tauqeer Sheikh, ‘India’s Myopic Bid to Renegotiate Indus Waters Treaty will Hurt all of South Asia’, (April 2023), online: <https://scroll.in/article/1046934/opinion-indias-myopic-bid-to-renegotiate-indus-water-treaty-will-hurt-all-of-south-asia>.

⁹⁵Institute of Policy Studies, ‘Indus Water Treaty Arbitration—Battle over Water Sharing’ (2023), online: <https://www.ips.org.pk/indus-water-treaty-arbitration-battle-over-water-sharing/>; Waseem Ahmad Qureshi, ‘Indus Waters Treaty: An Impediment to the Indian Hydro-Hegemony’ (2017) 46 *Denver Journal of International Law and Policy* 45, online: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2449&context=djilp>.

⁹⁶Evan D Gumas, ‘The Use of Water as a Weapon against Public Health in Palestine and Kashmir’ (2021), Online: https://research.library.fordham.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1051&context=international_senior.

⁹⁷Nazia Sheikh, ‘Indian Overture to Alter Indus Water Treaty’ (2023), online: <https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2023/02/19/indian-overture-to-alter-indus-water-treaty/>.

⁹⁸Further, see Zubair Ahmad Dar, ‘Power Projects in Jammu and Kashmir: Controversy, Law and Justice (2011–2012), LIDS Working Paper, Harvard University, at 6.

⁹⁹Bharat H Desai, ‘Sixty Years of the Indus Waters Treaty in the Era of Climate Change: A Look Ahead in Hydro-Diplomacy and Treaty Law’ (2021) 51 *Environmental Policy and Law* 175, at 179.

¹⁰⁰Pankaj Saran and P K Saxena, ‘The Indus Waters Treaty: Time to Move Ahead’ (2023), online: <https://www.natstrat.org/articledetail/publications/the-indus-waters-treaty-time-to-move-ahead-78.html#>.

¹⁰¹Sushant Sareen, ‘Indus Waters Treaty: Opening the Water Front’ (2023), online: <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/indus-waters-treaty>.

¹⁰²Natalie A Nax (2016) *Looking to the Future: The Indus Waters Treaty and Climate Change*, Thesis, University of Oregon, https://transboundarywaters.ceoas.oregonstate.edu/sites/transboundary_waters.ceoas.oregonstate.edu/files/Publications/Nax%20-%2020216%20-%20Indus%20Treaty%20and%20Climate%20Change%20-%20Thesis.pdf; Kate Diamond, ‘Adil Nazam: Pakistan’s Security Problems Distract from Climate Vulnerabilities’, *New securitybeat*, online <https://www.newsecuritybeat.org/2014/06/adil-najam-pakistans-security-problems-distract-climate-vulnerabilities/> Further, see A Khan and M H Idrees, ‘The Impact of Climate Change on the Indus Basin: Challenges and Constraints’ in Mahmood Ahmad (ed.) (2023) *Water Policy in Pakistan* (Berlin: Springer) 231; Veronika Stolbova et al., ‘Tipping Elements of the Indian Monsoon: Prediction of Onset and Withdrawal’ (2016) *Geographical Research Letters*, online: <https://agupubs.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1002/2016GL068392>; Aparna Roy and Radhey Wadhwa, ‘The Indus Waters Treaty in a Warming World’ (2026), Observer Research Foundation, online: <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/the-indus-waters-treaty-in-a-warming-world>; Mohammad Khizar et al., ‘Climate Change Impacts on the Indus River Basin: Hydrology, Water Quality, and Treaty Implications’ (2025) 6 *Journal of Energy and Environment* 112, online: <https://journals.internationalrsd.o>

which both India and Pakistan must engage¹⁰³ as the IWT lacks mechanism to address this critical and growing challenge.¹⁰⁴

Water is not without giving India some leverage over Pakistan as the Indus system rivers that originate in the Himalayas pass through India and before entering Pakistan. And it was not without and before stoppage of water by India flowing across Pakistan on 1 April 1948 that the IWT was signed on 19 September 1960.¹⁰⁵ Evidently, India and Pakistan did not fight a war but negotiated a treaty over water. India's relations with Pakistan have been anything but good for decades. Both countries have witnessed a troubled past and an acrimonious present mainly over the issues of terrorism and self-determination raised by them, respectively, relative to a geographical reality.¹⁰⁶ It is argued for India and Pakistan, respectively, that the spirit of the IWT would require "rethinking the use of terrorism as an instrument of state policy"¹⁰⁷ and that "water has been central to the Kashmir dispute..."¹⁰⁸ It is in this context that we briefly discuss the operation of the IWT in the next subsection.

rg/index.php/jee/article/view/2848/1880; Rameez Mohammad Bhat, 'The Indus Waters Treaty: Climate Change and Its Growing Threat' (2020) 24 *World Affairs* 70, online: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48622908>; Bushra Bibi et al., 'Melting Glaciers and the Indus Waters Treaty: A Looming Crisis' (2023) VIII *Global Legal Studies Review*, online: <https://www.humapub.com/admin/alljoumals/glsr/papers/M29q7W2AQC.pdf>; Ghulam Sarwar and Armaghan Farid, 'The Indus Under Pressure: Hydro-Politics, Climate Change, and Strategic Anxiety in South Asia' (2025) 3 *Journal of Political Stability Archive*, online: <https://journalpsa.com.pk/index.php/JPSA/article/view/192/205>.

¹⁰³Dhanasree Jayaram 'Why India and Pakistan need to review the Indus Waters Treaty', online: <https://climate-diplomacy.org/magazine/cooperation/why-india-and-pakistan-need-review-indus-waters-treaty> <https://agupubs.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/2016GL068392>; Pintu Kumar Mahla, 'Breaking the Flow: Ecological Risks of the Indus Waters Treaty in Abeyance', online: <https://snu.edu.in/centres/centre-of-excellence-for-himalayan-studies/research/breaking-the-flow-ecological-risks-of-the-indus-waters-treaty-in-abeyance/en/>.

¹⁰⁴Muthukumara Mani (2021) *Glaciers of the Himalayas: Climate Change, Black Carbon, and Regional Resilience*, online: [https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/976841622778070962/pdf/Glacier s-of-the-Himalayas-Climate-Change-Black-Carbon-and-Regional-Resilience.pdf](https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/976841622778070962/pdf/Glacier%20s-of-the-Himalayas-Climate-Change-Black-Carbon-and-Regional-Resilience.pdf).

¹⁰⁵Further, see Ijaz Hussain (2018) *Indus Waters Treaty: Political and Legal Dimensions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) Chapter 2.

¹⁰⁶Further, see more recently Amit Ranjan, 'Indus Waters Treaty Negotiations: Geopolitics, Disputes and Cooperation' (2024) 45 *South Asia Research* 1, 13 *et seq.*; Hamir K Sahni, 'The Politics of Water in South Asia: The Case of the Indus Waters Treaty' (2006) 26 *SAIS Review of International Affairs* 153.

¹⁰⁷Brahma Chellaney, 'South Asia's Looming Water War', (February 2023), online: <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/india-pakistan-indus-waters-treaty-renegotiation-by-brahma-chellaney-2023-02>.

¹⁰⁸Roberts J Wirsing & Christopher Jasparro (2005) *River Rivalry: Water Disputes, Resource Insecurity, & Diplomatic Deadlock in South Asia* (Honolulu: Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies) at 59; Muhammad Nasrullah Mirza (2016) *Indus Waters Disputes and India-Pakistan Relations* (Heidelberg: Heidelberg University) 1.

(b) *The IWT operation*

The IWT does not expressly provide for its suspension or “abeyance”.¹⁰⁹ The VCLT, which greatly reflects customary international law, contemplates treaty suspension by provision or consent,¹¹⁰ impliedly by conclusion of a new treaty,¹¹¹ as a consequence of its breach,¹¹² and for a fundamental change of circumstances.¹¹³ India has not yet expressly or clearly claimed that Pakistan has violated a provision essential to the accomplishment of the object or purpose of the IWT¹¹⁴ while Pakistan has alleged that India has failed to fulfil its IWT obligation with respect to information-sharing.¹¹⁵ No express provision in the IWT seems applicable in the event of its breach. An unforeseen terrorism may hardly be claimed as a fundamental change of circumstances unless it is proved that it constituted an essential basis of the consent of the parties to the IWT, which India has not yet expressly or clearly claimed even while holding the IWT in “abeyance until Pakistan credibly and irrevocably abjures its support for cross-border terrorism”.¹¹⁶ Lauterpacht held the view that the doctrine *rebus sic stantibus* is “not a talisman for revising treaties...”¹¹⁷ The ICJ has equated a fundamental change to “a radical transformation”¹¹⁸ and “of the extent of the obligations still to be performed”.¹¹⁹ Later, the Court stated that “the stability of treaty relations requires that the plea of fundamental change of circumstances be applied only in exceptional cases.”¹²⁰ Fitzmaurice was quite realistic when he noted that “in international life, circumstances are constantly changing. But these changes are not, generally speaking, of a kind that

¹⁰⁹Statement by Foreign Secretary on the decision of the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS), dated 23 April 2025 (hereafter the “Statement by the Foreign Secretary”), https://www.mea.gov.in/speech_hes-statements?dtl/39442/statement+by+foreign+secretary+on+the+decision+of+the+cabinet+committee+on+security+ccs; *The Supplemental Award on Competence*, *supra* note 1, footnote 27; Kallol Bhattacharjee, Vijaita Singh and Nistula Hebbar, ‘Pahalgam terror attack: Indus Treaty with Pakistan put on hold’, *The Hindu*, 24 April 2025, online: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/pahalgam-terror-attack-india-decides-to-keep-indus-water-treaty-in-abeyance-close-attari-border-post/article69483916.ece>; *The Supplemental Award on Competence*, *supra* note 1, para. 54.

¹¹⁰VCLT, Article 57. This provision does not in principle foreclose the possibility of an implicit provision for suspension. See Olivier Corten and Pierre Klein (2011) *The Vienna Conventions on the Law of Treaties: A Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) vol. II, 1285.

¹¹¹*Id.*, Article 59.

¹¹²*Id.*, Article 60. Further, see Bruno Simma and Christian Tams (2011) *The Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties: A Commentary* (London: Oxford University Press) 1351.

¹¹³*Id.*, Article 62(3). India stated that there have been “fundamental changes in the circumstances that have taken place since the Treaty was executed that require a re-assessment of obligations under the various Articles of the Treaty read with its Annexures.” Statement by the Foreign Secretary, *supra* note 109.

¹¹⁴On 08 May 2025, India however stated, “Pakistan is the one that has been acting in violation of the treaty...” *The Supplemental Award*, *supra* note 1, para. 47.

¹¹⁵Further, see Memorial of Pakistan, First Phase on Merits, Vol. I, at 169 *et seq.*

¹¹⁶Statement by the Foreign Secretary, *supra* note 109.

¹¹⁷Hersch Lauterpacht (1982) *The Development of International Law by the International Court* (Cambridge: Grotius Society) at 85.

¹¹⁸*Fisheries Jurisdiction (Federal Republic of Germany v Iceland)*, Judgment [1973] ICJ Rep. 49 at 63.

¹¹⁹*Id.*, at 65.

¹²⁰*Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros Project Case*, *supra* note 78, at 64.

can or should affect the continued operation of treaties.”¹²¹ Further, the International Law Commission (ILC) and the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in the 1997 *Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros Project Case*¹²² clarify that suspension of the operation of a treaty and suspension of performance of obligations are not the same as a countermeasure for an internationally wrongful act.¹²³ In other words, it is the applicable international law which is determinative of wrongfulness, such as the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1373 adopted expressly under Chapter VII of the UN Charter.¹²⁴ Any terrorist acts instructed, directed or controlled by Pakistan would also be attributable to Pakistan.¹²⁵ Non-conformity of a Pakistan’s act with its international obligation may be constitutive of its breach of that obligation.¹²⁶ India’s suspension of the PIC¹²⁷ talks is evidently till terror comes to an end and is therefore taken apparently or presumably as a countermeasure against Pakistan’s apparent or presumed breach of its international obligations, including those apparently or presumably arising under the Security Council Resolution 1373.¹²⁸ If India’s suspension of the PIC talks is a countermeasure, then it is permitted to only induce Pakistan to comply with its international obligations and without prejudice to India’s obligations to compensate Pakistan for any material loss caused,¹²⁹ to refrain from the threat or use of force for the protection of fundamental human rights of a humanitarian character prohibiting reprisals, under peremptory norms of general international law¹³⁰ under any dispute settlement procedures applicable between India and Pakistan,¹³¹ including under the IWT, to respect the inviolability of diplomatic or consular agents, premises, archives and documents of Pakistan,¹³² to fulfil any obligation embodied in the IWT to which India would be subject under international law independently of the IWT,¹³³ without prejudice to any applicable international customary law¹³⁴ and qua the 1997 Watercourses Convention¹³⁵ and the *Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros Project Case* ICJ

¹²¹Second Report on the Law of Treaties by Gerald G Fitzmaurice, Special Rapporteur, A/CN.4/107, Yearbook of International Law Commission (1957), vol. II, at 56–7 (italics in the original).

¹²²*Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros Project Case*, *supra* note 78.

¹²³International Law Commission, Articles on the Responsibility of States for Internationally Wrongful Acts, Chapter II, Article 49 *et seq.* and the *Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros Project Case*, *supra* note 78, at 39 and 65.

¹²⁴United Nations Security Council Resolution 1373 (28 September 2001).

¹²⁵International Law Commission, Articles on the Responsibility of States for Internationally Wrongful Acts, Article 8.

¹²⁶*Id.*, Article 12.

¹²⁷Article VIII of the IWT.

¹²⁸International Law Commission, Articles on the Responsibility of States for Internationally Wrongful Acts, Article 49 and its preceding commentary.

¹²⁹*Id.*, Article 27.

¹³⁰See in particular Articles 53 and 64 of the VCLT; International Law Commission, Third Report on peremptory norms of general international law (*jus cogens*), 12 February 2018.

¹³¹Further, see *Appeal Relating to the Jurisdiction of the ICAO Council (India v Pakistan)*, Judgment [1972] ICJ Rep. 46.

¹³²International Law Commission, Articles on the Responsibility of States for Internationally Wrongful Acts, Articles 27 and 50.

¹³³VCLT, Article 43.

¹³⁴*Id.*, Article 34–38.

¹³⁵Convention on the Law of the Non-navigational Uses of International Watercourses, 1997, https://legal.un.org/ilc/texts/instruments/english/conventions/8_3_1997.pdf (hereafter Watercourses Convention).

Judgment,¹³⁶ equitable and reasonable use of waters by India and no significant harm to Pakistan to the extent that it is reflective of customary international law.¹³⁷ It is in this light that it would be appropriate to briefly address the question of the legality of and/or justification(s) for the appointment of a Neutral Expert and the establishment of a Court of Arbitration in the next subsection and which turn on the relevant interpretation of the IWT.

(c) *The IWT interpretation*

Contrary to India's consistent position, that a prior appointment of a Neutral Expert bars a subsequent establishment of a Court of Arbitration and pending disposal of the matter by the Neutral Expert, the Court of Arbitration pointed out that there is no such bar unless the question to be considered by the Court of Arbitration is the same as before the Neutral Expert. As in the *Kishanganga Arbitration*,¹³⁸ the parties' arguments bring to the fore the importance of treaty interpretation¹³⁹ and consideration in it of the principles of international environmental law.¹⁴⁰ While India stated that the "[t]reaty does not provide for parallel proceedings on the same set of issues"¹⁴¹ and while the Court of Arbitration did not find it to be the case,¹⁴² that India "cannot remain a permanent victim of Pak sponsored terrorism and yet live with a treaty which the Indian public regards as unfair and inequitable"¹⁴³ takes the matter to a different plane and invites some reflection in the next subsection on the legality of and/or justification for its suspension of the PIC talks upon serving a notice¹⁴⁴ on Pakistan and until India and Pakistan and until India and Pakistan "meet and discuss renegotiation of the Indus Waters Treaty".¹⁴⁵

(d) *Suspension of the PIC Talks*

¹³⁶ *Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros Project Case*, *supra* note 78.

¹³⁷ See, in particular, Stephen C McCaffrey, 'Convention on the Law of the Non-navigational Uses of International Watercourses' (2008), online: https://legal.un.org/avl/pdf/ha/clnuiw/clnuiw_e.pdf.

¹³⁸ John R Cook, "In re Indus Waters Kishenganga Arbitration (Pakistan v. India), Final Award" (2014) 108 *American Journal of International Law* 308, 314.

¹³⁹ See Articles 31 and 32 of the VLCT, which reflect customary international law. Further, see Memorial of Pakistan, First Phase on Merits, Vol. I, at 209 *et seq.*

¹⁴⁰ *Indus Waters Kishenganga Arbitration (Pakistan v India)*, *Partial Award*, PCA Case Repository Case No. 2011-01, para. 452 (18 February 2013).

¹⁴¹ 'Matters Pertaining to the Indus Waters Treaty' (July 2023), online: <https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/36761/Matters+pertaining+to+the+Indus+Waters+Treaty>.

¹⁴² The Court of Arbitration found that its award and a decision of the Neutral Expert are binding in their respective domains of authority and that the object and purpose of the IWT is to delimit the rights and obligations of Pakistan when utilizing the Indus systems of rivers in conjunctions with mutual cooperation between the Parties and effective dispute resolution procedures. *The Award on Interpretation*, *supra* note 2.

¹⁴³ Arvind Gupta, 'Time to Reconsider 1960 Pact', (September 2020), online: <https://www.vifindia.org/article/2020/september/19/the-indus-water-treaty-60-precariouly-poised>.

¹⁴⁴ Suhasini Haider and Kallol Bhattacharjee, 'India sends notice to Pakistan to amend 1960 Indus Waters Treaty' (27 January 2024), online: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-notifies-pakistan-on-modification-of-indus-waters-treaty/article66438780.ece>.

¹⁴⁵ Suhasini Haider and Jacob Koshy, 'No more Indus Commission meetings till Treaty negotiated' (18 September 2024), online: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-serves-notice-to-pakis-tan-seeking-review-of-indus-water-treaty/article68655577.ece>.

The PIC under the IWT is required to meet at least once every year.¹⁴⁶ The PIC last met on 30 and 31 May 2022.¹⁴⁷ The PIC is to first examine and endeavour to resolve by agreement between the parties¹⁴⁸ any question of interpretation or application of the IWT and the existence of any fact which, if established, would constitute a breach of the IWT. A difference is deemed to have arisen between the parties¹⁴⁹ which shall be dealt with by a Neutral Expert at the request of either commissioner¹⁵⁰ and which shall be treated as a dispute if not within the provision on Neutral Expert¹⁵¹ and shall be settled by Fact-finding by the PIC,¹⁵² direct negotiations between India and Pakistan,¹⁵³ mediation between India and Pakistan,¹⁵⁴ and a court of arbitration upon agreement between India and Pakistan or at the request of India or Pakistan.¹⁵⁵ We recall that the issue between the Neutral Expert and the Court of Arbitration was found by the Court of Arbitration to be different and not the same and that there seems therefore nothing in the IWT that precludes the appointment of a Neutral Expert and the establishment of a Court of Arbitration.¹⁵⁶ On the other hand, India held its 6th meeting of the Steering Committee on matters related to the IWT on 17 April 2023 and “took stock of the on-going modification process of the Indus Waters Treaty.”¹⁵⁷ It thus seems clear that India is determined on a modification of the IWT which would not be easy to politically accomplish under it even while expressly within its contemplation.¹⁵⁸ But, given the relevant international practice,¹⁵⁹ the potential role of the PIC cannot be underestimated in addressing such an important issue as climate change appropriately by reference to the international law considerations of reasonable and equitable use¹⁶⁰ and no harm.¹⁶¹

¹⁴⁶Art. VIII:5 of the IWT.

¹⁴⁷“118th Meeting of the India-Pakistan Permanent Indus Commission”, (May 2022), online: <https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/35375/118th+meeting+of+the+IndiaPakistan+Permanent+Indus+Commission>.

¹⁴⁸Article IX:1 of the IWT.

¹⁴⁹Article IX:2 of the IWT.

¹⁵⁰Article IX:2:a of the IWT.

¹⁵¹Article IX:2:b of the IWT.

¹⁵²Article IX:3 of the IWT.

¹⁵³Article IX:4 of the IWT.

¹⁵⁴Article IX:5 of the IWT.

¹⁵⁵*Id.*

¹⁵⁶*The Award on Competence*, *supra* note 3, at 309.

¹⁵⁷“6th Meeting of the Steering Committee on Matters Related to the Indus Waters Treaty” (April 2023), online: <https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/36495/6th+meeting+of+the+steering+committee+on+matters+related+to+the+indus+waters+treaty>.

¹⁵⁸The IWT states in Article XII(3): “The provisions of this Treaty may from time to time be modified by a duly ratified treaty concluded for that purpose between the two Governments.” Further, see Anuttama Banerji, ‘A Shared Interest: Why India and Pakistan Should Strengthen the Indus Waters Treaty’ (2024), online: <https://www.stimson.org/2024/a-shared-interest-why-india-and-pakistan-should-strengthen-the-indus-waters-treaty/>.

¹⁵⁹Agreement on the Establishment of the Zambezi Watercourse Commission, 2004, online: <https://africanlii.org/en/akn/aa-sadc/act/agreement/2004/establishment-of-the-zambezi-watercourse-commission/eng@2004-07-13>; International Commission for the Protection of the Rhine, 1976, online: <https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%201840/volume-1840-I-23469-English.pdf>.

¹⁶⁰Article 5, Watercourses Convention, *supra* note 135; *Territorial Jurisdiction of the International Commission of the River Oder, Judgment*, 1929 PCIJ (Series A) No. 23, at 27 (10 September 1929).

¹⁶¹Article 5, Watercourses Convention, *supra* note 135; *Pulp Mills on the River Uruguay Case*, *supra* note 82. Further, see Sahana Rao, ‘Governance of Water Resources Shared by India and Pakistan under

Conclusion

It is not that the IWT was never tested before by India and Pakistan for the settlement of their disputes.¹⁶² India's non-participation in the Court of Arbitration has not changed its status relative to Pakistan.¹⁶³ The Court of Arbitration found that India's position on "abeyance" of the IWT does not limit its competence and that its award and a decision of the Neutral Expert are binding. However, it is important to note that it was the Neutral Expert, not India, which first pointed out that the IWT uses the technology of 1950s.¹⁶⁴ It is therefore not unreasonable to suppose that the Indus waters sharing would become more challenging in future¹⁶⁵ and that the IWT would have to become more cooperative.¹⁶⁶ India and Pakistan would be called upon to devise necessary means consistent with the IWT¹⁶⁷ whose unilateral modification or denunciation is hardly acceptable or practicable.¹⁶⁸ This however is not to undermine the importance of considerations that may suggest revision of the IWT¹⁶⁹ following an appropriate reassessment of its suitability.¹⁷⁰ Among the many suggestions to this end¹⁷¹ cooperation between India and Pakistan in terms of the IWT seems indispensable so that it could accommodate necessary changes and relevant technological developments and address climate change since it came into force more than six decades ago.

the Indus Waters Treaty: Successful Elements and Room for Improvement' (2017) 25 New York University Environmental Law Journal 108, 136; Tejal S Shirsat et al., 'Past present and future of the indus waters treaty: Implications for transboundary governance challenges and modernization prospects' (2026) 28 Water Security, online: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S2468312426000040>.

¹⁶²See *In the Matter of the Indus Waters Kishanganga Arbitration between The Islamic Republic of Pakistan and The Republic of India, Final Award, Permanent Court of Arbitration*, 20 December 2013; Salman M A Salman, "The Baglihar difference and its resolution process – a triumph for the Indus Waters Treaty?" (2008) 10 Water Policy 105.

¹⁶³hafqat Kakakhel, 'Indus Waters Treaty under Threat: Part I' (March 2023), online: https://sdpi.org/indus-waters-treaty-under-threat-part-i/news_detail.

¹⁶⁴Further, see Dar, *supra* note 98, at 6.

¹⁶⁵Further, see Miner et al., *supra* note 66, at 214.

¹⁶⁶Further, see Dar, *supra* note 98, at 6; Undala Z Alam, 'Questioning the waters war rationale: A case study of the Indus Waters Treaty (2002) 168 Geographical Journal, online: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3451476>.

¹⁶⁷Further, see Miner et al., *supra* note 66, at 213.

¹⁶⁸Further, see Anurag Jyoti and Raj Kamal Kapur, 'Analysing the Indus Waters Treaty 1960: Beyond the Hype, Hoopla and the Hyperbole' (2023) USI Occasional Paper, at 9.

¹⁶⁹Further, see Tahira Mumtaz et al., 'Indus Waters Treaty and Water Scarcity in India: Implications for Pakistan' (2023) 11 Journal of South Asian Studies 11, at 17.

¹⁷⁰Further, see S K Singh, 'India's Approach to Indus Waters Treaty: National Security Perspective', (January 2024), online: <https://cenjows.in/indias-approach-to-indus-water-treaty-national-security-perspective/>.

¹⁷¹See, for instance, Wani and Moorthy', *supra* note 91, at 59.

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Foreign Policy of Japan under Shinzo Abe: A Conceptual Framework

By Raj Kumar Kothari & Budh Bahadur Lama[±]*

This article examines the transformation of Japan's foreign and security policy under Shinzo Abe through the theoretical lens of neo-realism. It asks three interrelated questions: what factors compelled Abe to revisit Japan's defence and security framework, what outcomes emerged from his foreign policy initiatives, and to what extent his leadership constituted a major transformation in Japan's post-war foreign policy orientation. The study argues that Abe's strategic transformation was driven primarily by structural changes in the regional distribution of power, particularly the rise of China, North Korea's nuclear and missile capabilities, and increasing geopolitical competition in the Indo-Pacific. Within this changing environment, Abe accelerated and institutionalised Japan's strategic adjustment through the establishment of the National Security Council, adoption of the National Security Strategy, reinterpretation of collective self-defence, defence modernisation, and strengthened alliance cooperation. His promotion of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision and revitalisation of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue further expanded Japan's regional partnerships and diplomatic influence. The article finds that Abe's contribution lay less in initiating these changes than in consolidating and embedding them within Japan's foreign and security policy framework. While neo-realism effectively explains the structural pressures shaping Japan's strategic behaviour, the analysis also demonstrates the importance of political leadership in translating systemic pressures into concrete policy outcomes. The article concludes that Abe significantly reshaped Japan's strategic identity and strengthened its role as a proactive middle power and important architect of the emerging Indo-Pacific order.

Keywords: *Shinzo Abe, Japanese foreign policy, neo-realism, free and open Indo-Pacific, Indo-Pacific regionalism*

Introduction

Shinzo Abe occupies a unique position in contemporary Japanese political history. On 24 August 2020, he became the longest-serving Prime Minister of Japan since the establishment of the modern cabinet system (Liff & Lipsy 2022, pp. 1–2). His leadership, spanning from 2006-2007 and again from 2012-2020, represented an unprecedented period of political stability and policy continuity under the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). During an era marked by rapid geopolitical transformations, shifting power balances, and growing security uncertainties in the Asia-Pacific region, Abe emerged as a leader determined to redefine Japan's role in international affairs. Although his administration is often associated with ambitious economic reforms popularly known as “Abenomics,” his most enduring legacy lies in the sphere of foreign and security policy

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(Hughes 2021, pp. 3–5). Through a series of institutional reforms, diplomatic initiatives, and strategic partnerships, Abe sought to transform Japan from a passive participant in international politics into a proactive and influential actor capable of shaping regional and global developments.

The significance of Abe's foreign policy agenda can only be understood within the broader historical context of post-war Japan. Since the end of the Second World War, Japanese foreign policy had largely been guided by a security framework rooted in pacifism, economic reconstruction, and dependence on the United States for national defence (Pyle 2018, pp. 15–18). The adoption of the Constitution of Japan in 1947, particularly Article 9, imposed significant restrictions on the country's military capabilities and renounced war as a sovereign right (The Constitution of Japan 1947). Consequently, Japan pursued a foreign policy strategy that prioritised economic growth while relying on the United States-Japan alliance as the cornerstone of national security (Samuels 2007, pp. 29–31). This arrangement enabled Japan to emerge as an economic powerhouse but simultaneously constrained its ability to play a more assertive role in regional and global security affairs.

By the beginning of the twenty-first century, however, the strategic environment surrounding Japan had undergone profound changes. The rapid rise of China as an economic and military power fundamentally altered the balance of power in East Asia (Mearsheimer 2014, pp. 360–365). Beijing's growing maritime presence and increasing assertiveness in the East and South China Seas generated concerns among neighbouring states, including Japan (Smith 2019, pp. 112–115). Simultaneously, North Korea's nuclear weapons programme and repeated ballistic missile tests posed direct security challenges to Japanese territory and regional stability (Hughes 2021, pp. 87–90). These developments raised serious questions regarding the adequacy of Japan's traditional security framework and the continued relevance of the post-war constraints that had shaped its foreign policy for decades.

It was within this changing geopolitical context that Abe sought to reposition Japan as a more active and responsible stakeholder in international affairs. Unlike many of his predecessors who remained largely committed to the existing post-war framework, Abe advocated a strategic vision that emphasised national resilience, diplomatic activism, and enhanced security capabilities (Liff & Lipsky 2022, pp. 145–148). His leadership represented what many observers described as a restoration of Japanese confidence, self-esteem, and strategic autonomy (Pyle 2018, pp. 278–280). Abe believed that Japan's status as the world's third-largest economy should be matched by greater diplomatic influence and a stronger role in maintaining regional and global order.

According to Liff and Lipsky (2022, pp. 150–152), Abe consistently promoted a foreign policy agenda that was both bold and transformative. Shortly after returning to power in 2012, he famously declared that “Japan is back,” signalling his determination to restore the country's international influence and strategic relevance (Abe, 2013, para. 1). Under his leadership, Japan adopted a more proactive diplomatic posture, expanded its security partnerships, and played an increasingly prominent role in multilateral forums. Abe also championed the concept of a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP), which sought to promote freedom of navigation, respect for international law, maritime security, and regional connectivity (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan [MOFA] 2017,

para. 3). This vision subsequently became one of the defining strategic frameworks of the contemporary Indo-Pacific region.

Abe's foreign policy was characterised not only by ambitious diplomatic initiatives but also by substantial institutional and legal reforms. His administration established Japan's National Security Council, introduced the country's first National Security Strategy, strengthened defence capabilities, and reinterpreted constitutional restrictions to allow for the exercise of collective self-defence under specific circumstances (Government of Japan 2013, pp. 1–4). These measures reflected a significant departure from Japan's traditional security posture and demonstrated a willingness to adapt national policy to emerging geopolitical realities. Furthermore, Abe actively strengthened strategic partnerships with countries such as the United States, India, and Australia while supporting the revival of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), thereby contributing to the formation of a broader regional security architecture (Smith 2019, pp. 201–205). Taken together, these initiatives demonstrate that Abe's foreign policy was not limited to strengthening Japan's individual security capabilities; rather, it sought to reshape Japan's position within the evolving regional order by combining domestic security reforms with alliance-building, minilateral cooperation, and a broader Indo-Pacific strategy.

The transformation of Japan's foreign policy under Abe can be effectively analysed through the theoretical lens of neo-realism. Neo-realist scholars argue that state behaviour is shaped primarily by the structure of the international system and the distribution of power among states (Waltz 1979, pp. 88–93). In an anarchic international environment, states seek to maximise security and respond to perceived threats through balancing strategies, alliance formation, and military preparedness. Japan's strategic adjustments during Abe's tenure can therefore be understood as a response to changing regional power dynamics and emerging security challenges (Mearsheimer 2014, pp. 368–372). Building on this perspective, this article makes three principal contributions to the existing literature. First, it brings together Abe's institutional reforms, defence policies, alliance strengthening, FOIP, and the Quad within the neo-realist framework of Japan's strategic transformation. Second, it demonstrates how Abe's initiatives extended Japan's traditional Pacific strategy beyond the US–Japan bilateral framework to a wider network of strategic partnerships and Indo-Pacific cooperation. Third, it distinguishes between the structural pressures that encouraged Japan's strategic adjustment and Abe's leadership in accelerating and consolidating that process. The article therefore argues that Abe's contributions are not simply confined to domestic policy reforms, but to linking Japan's domestic security transformation with a broader security agenda of reshaping the regional order.

Against this backdrop, the present article seeks to analyse the political and security implications of the fundamental shift in Japan's foreign policy during Shinzo Abe's tenure within a neo-realist framework. The study explores the domestic and international factors that encouraged Abe to revisit Japan's defence and security policies, assesses the outcomes of his major foreign policy initiatives, and evaluates the extent to which his tenure represents a decisive turning point in the trajectory of post-war Japanese foreign policy. Specifically, the article addresses three key questions:

- (a) What factors compelled Abe to revisit Japan's defence and security policy framework?
- (b) What outcomes emerged from the new foreign policy initiatives undertaken during his tenure?
- (c) To what extent does Abe's leadership constitute a major transformation in Japan's post-war foreign policy orientation?

By addressing these questions, the article seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of Japan's evolving strategic identity and its growing role in shaping the contemporary Indo-Pacific order.

Shinzo Abe's Vision of a New Japan

The foreign policy transformation that occurred during Shinzo Abe's tenure cannot be fully understood without examining his broader vision for Japan's national future and its changing position within the regional order of the Asia-Pacific and Indo-Pacific. Long before he became the longest-serving Prime Minister in Japanese history, Abe articulated a comprehensive ideological and political agenda aimed at revitalising Japan's domestic institutions, strengthening national identity, and enhancing the country's international standing. His vision was shaped by conservative political thought, concerns about Japan's declining global influence, and a belief that the post-war order had imposed unnecessary constraints on the country's strategic potential (Edstrom 2007, pp. 7–8). Consequently, Abe sought not merely to introduce policy reforms but to redefine Japan's national purpose in the twenty-first century.

However, Abe's ambitions were also shaped by Japan's distinctive position as a major economic power and middle power whose regional influence remained closely connected to its alliance with the United States. Japan's post-war international role was therefore characterised by a dual strategic orientation: reliance on the US security alliance for national defence while simultaneously seeking greater diplomatic and economic influence across the Pacific. Within this regional setting, Abe sought to expand Japan's role from that of a largely economically oriented US ally to a more proactive middle power capable of contributing to regional order and security. His approach did not imply abandoning the US–Japan alliance; rather, the alliance remained the central pillar of Japan's security strategy while providing the foundation for broader regional partnerships. Abe consequently promoted closer relations with India, Australia, and Southeast Asian states and advanced regional frameworks that connected the Pacific and Indian Ocean spaces. His advocacy of the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" reflected this broader conception of regionalism, linking maritime security, connectivity, freedom of navigation, and a rules-based international order.

This regional perspective is crucial for understanding Abe's foreign policy because his objective was not simply to enhance Japan's autonomous capabilities but to strengthen its capacity to shape the regional balance through alliances, partnerships, and multilateral and minilateral institutions. In this sense, Abe's foreign policy represented an attempt to reconcile Japan's middle-power identity with its status as a key US ally in the Pacific. Consequently, Abe sought not merely to introduce domestic and security

reforms but to redefine Japan's national purpose as an active contributor to the evolving regional order in the twenty-first century.

Abe's vision became particularly evident during his campaign for the presidency of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in 2006. According to Edstrom (2007), Abe presented a broad roadmap for Japan's future development, identifying four major national goals that would guide his political agenda (Edstrom 2007, pp. 8–9). These goals reflected a combination of cultural conservatism, economic modernisation, political reform, and international activism. Together, they formed the foundation of what can be described as Abe's project of national renewal.

The first goal was the creation of a country that values culture, tradition, history, and nature. Abe argued that post-war Japan had gradually lost confidence in its cultural heritage and historical identity. He maintained that a strong sense of national consciousness was essential for social cohesion and international respect. In his view, Japan's traditions, historical experiences, and cultural values should be regarded as sources of national strength rather than obstacles to modernisation (Edstrom 2007, p. 8). This emphasis on cultural continuity reflected his broader commitment to restoring national pride and cultivating a stronger sense of collective identity among Japanese citizens.

The second goal focused on building a country based on freedom and discipline. Abe maintained that democratic freedoms must be accompanied by social responsibility and civic duty. While supporting market-oriented reforms and individual liberties, he also stressed the importance of discipline, public order, and national responsibility. According to Edstrom (2007), Abe viewed freedom and discipline as complementary principles necessary for sustaining both economic prosperity and social stability. This notion became an important component of his governance philosophy and informed many of his domestic policy initiatives.

The third goal envisioned Japan as a country driven by innovation. Abe recognised that Japan's future prosperity depended on its ability to adapt to global economic transformations and technological advancements. During the early twenty-first century, Japan faced numerous challenges, including economic stagnation, demographic decline, and increasing international competition. Abe therefore emphasised innovation, scientific advancement, and technological development as essential instruments for national revitalisation (Edstrom 2007, p. 9). By encouraging creativity, entrepreneurship, and research, he sought to position Japan as a leading knowledge-based economy capable of competing effectively in an increasingly globalised world.

The fourth and perhaps most significant goal from a foreign policy perspective was the aspiration to transform Japan into a country capable of exercising leadership in international affairs. Abe believed that Japan's economic power should be accompanied by greater diplomatic influence and strategic responsibility. He was critical of what he perceived as Japan's excessive dependence on the United States and its reluctance to assume a more active role in addressing regional and global challenges. Accordingly, he advocated a foreign policy that would enable Japan to contribute more effectively to international peace, security, and economic cooperation (Edstrom 2007, p. 9). This vision represented a significant departure from the cautious and reactive diplomatic posture that had characterised much of Japan's post-war foreign policy.

To realise these broad national objectives, Abe proposed six key policy priorities that together constituted a practical roadmap for national transformation. The first

priority was the establishment of strong political leadership. Abe argued that effective governance required decisive leadership capable of overcoming bureaucratic inertia and implementing long-term strategic objectives. Strengthening executive authority therefore became an important aspect of his political agenda (Edstrom 2007, p. 9).

The second priority involved promoting an open and competitive economy. Abe recognised that economic vitality was essential for sustaining Japan's national power and international influence. Consequently, he supported policies aimed at enhancing economic competitiveness, encouraging investment, and expanding Japan's engagement with global markets (Edstrom 2007, p. 9).

The third priority focused on creating a safe and secure society. This objective encompassed both domestic and external dimensions of security. Abe argued that the government had a fundamental responsibility to protect citizens from emerging threats, including terrorism, regional instability, and military challenges posed by neighbouring states. This emphasis on security later became a defining feature of his foreign and defence policies (Edstrom 2007, p. 9).

The fourth priority was the pursuit of assertive diplomacy. Unlike the relatively restrained diplomatic approaches adopted by many previous Japanese leaders, Abe advocated a more proactive foreign policy capable of advancing Japan's interests and values on the global stage. He sought to deepen strategic partnerships with democratic nations while strengthening Japan's role in international institutions and regional security frameworks (Edstrom 2007, p. 9).

The fifth priority emphasised political responsibility and accountability. Abe believed that political parties and elected representatives should play a more active role in governance and policy implementation. This objective reflected his broader commitment to enhancing political effectiveness and strengthening democratic institutions (Edstrom 2007, p. 9).

Finally, Abe called for moving beyond the constraints of the post-war regime. This objective represented one of the most controversial aspects of his political vision. Abe argued that many of Japan's post-war institutions and policies were products of a unique historical context that no longer reflected contemporary realities. In particular, he questioned whether constitutional restrictions and existing security arrangements remained adequate in light of evolving geopolitical challenges. His efforts to reinterpret aspects of Japan's security policy and expand the role of the Self-Defence Forces were closely linked to this broader objective (Edstrom 2007, pp. 9–10).

Central to Abe's vision was the conviction that Japan should become a more confident, proactive, and influential actor in international affairs. He believed that economic strength alone was insufficient to secure Japan's long-term interests and that greater diplomatic activism, strategic capability, and political leadership were necessary for maintaining national security and international relevance (Edstrom, 2007, p. 10). This vision ultimately laid the intellectual and ideological foundation for the far-reaching foreign and security policy reforms that characterised his tenure as Prime Minister. Through his emphasis on national renewal, strategic autonomy, and international engagement, Abe sought to redefine Japan's role in the emerging geopolitical landscape of the twenty-first century.

Japan's Post-War Foreign Policy Framework

An understanding of Shinzo Abe's foreign and security policy reforms requires a careful examination of the foundations of Japan's post-war foreign policy framework. The strategic transformation initiated by Abe did not emerge in a vacuum; rather, it represented a significant departure from principles that had guided Japanese diplomacy and security policy since the end of the Second World War. For more than six decades, Japan's foreign policy was shaped by a unique combination of constitutional pacifism, reliance on the United States for security, and a strong emphasis on economic development. This framework enabled Japan to achieve remarkable economic success while maintaining a relatively limited role in international security affairs. However, changing geopolitical realities in the twenty-first century gradually exposed the limitations of this approach and created conditions for strategic reassessment.

The origins of Japan's post-war foreign policy can be traced to the country's defeat in World War II and the subsequent occupation by Allied forces under the leadership of the United States. Following Japan's surrender in 1945, the country underwent a comprehensive process of political, economic, and institutional reconstruction. One of the most significant outcomes of this process was the adoption of a new constitution in 1947, which fundamentally altered Japan's approach to national security and international relations (Pyle 2018, p. 18). The constitution was designed to prevent the re-emergence of militarism and establish Japan as a peaceful democratic state committed to international cooperation.

A central feature of the post-war settlement was the establishment of a security arrangement that rested on three interrelated principles. First, Japan would rely on the United States as the primary guarantor of its national security. Second, Japan would maintain only minimal military capabilities and avoid becoming a major military power. Third, the country would concentrate its resources on economic reconstruction and development rather than defence expenditure. According to Edstrom (2007), these principles emerged through negotiations between Japan and the United States during the late 1940s and early 1950s and subsequently became the foundation of Japan's post-war foreign policy orientation (Edstrom 2007, pp. 14–15).

The first principle that is reliance on the United States for national security became institutionalised through the US-Japan Security Treaty of 1951 and its revised version in 1960. Under this arrangement, the United States committed itself to defending Japan against external aggression while maintaining military bases on Japanese territory (Samuels 2007, p. 31). This alliance provided Japan with a security umbrella that enabled it to avoid extensive military spending while benefiting from American strategic protection. Consequently, the alliance became the cornerstone of Japan's foreign and security policy throughout the Cold War and beyond.

The second principle involved maintaining minimal military capabilities. This aspect of Japan's post-war framework was closely linked to Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution, often referred to as the "Peace Clause." Article 9 states that the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and reject the threat or use of force as a means of settling international disputes (The Constitution of Japan 1947). Furthermore, the article declared that land, sea, and air forces would not be maintained. Although the subsequent creation of the Self-Defence Forces (SDF) in 1954 introduced

some flexibility in the interpretation of Article 9, the constitutional commitment to pacifism remained a defining characteristic of Japanese foreign policy (Hughes 2021, pp. 21–24).

The third principle emphasised economic growth and development. By reducing defence expenditures and relying on the United States for security, Japan was able to allocate substantial resources to industrialisation, technological innovation, and economic modernisation. This strategy proved remarkably successful. During the post-war decades, Japan experienced rapid economic growth and emerged as one of the world's leading industrial and technological powers (Pyle 2018, pp. 89–94). The prioritisation of economic development over military expansion became a central feature of what later came to be known as the “Yoshida Doctrine,” named after Prime Minister Shigeru Yoshida, who played a pivotal role in shaping Japan's post-war strategic orientation.

The Yoshida Doctrine profoundly influenced Japan's international behaviour. Rather than seeking influence through military power, Japan pursued economic diplomacy, trade expansion, development assistance, and multilateral cooperation. Its foreign policy was characterised by caution, restraint, and a preference for non-military contributions to international affairs (Samuels 2007, pp. 34–38). This approach enabled Japan to cultivate an international image as a peaceful and responsible economic power while avoiding many of the security burdens associated with great-power competition.

Despite its successes, however, the post-war framework was not without limitations. Critics argued that excessive dependence on the United States constrained Japan's strategic autonomy and limited its ability to respond independently to emerging security challenges. Furthermore, constitutional restrictions on military activity often complicated Japan's participation in international peacekeeping operations and collective security arrangements (Hughes 2021, pp. 45–48). As Japan's economic influence expanded, questions increasingly emerged regarding whether the country's diplomatic and security role adequately reflected its status as a major global power.

The end of the Cold War further intensified debates concerning Japan's foreign policy orientation. New security challenges, including regional conflicts, terrorism, nuclear proliferation, and maritime disputes, exposed shortcomings in existing security arrangements. The rise of China as a regional power and the growing threat posed by North Korea's nuclear and missile programmes generated concerns regarding the adequacy of Japan's traditional security posture (Smith 2019, p. 115). These developments prompted policymakers and strategic thinkers to reconsider the assumptions underlying Japan's post-war foreign policy.

By the beginning of the twenty-first century, many observers believed that the strategic environment surrounding Japan had changed so fundamentally that the post-war framework required significant adaptation. It was within this context that Shinzo Abe emerged as a leading advocate of reform. He argued that while the post-war framework had served Japan well during earlier decades, evolving geopolitical realities demanded a more proactive, flexible, and strategically autonomous foreign policy. Abe's subsequent reforms in defence, security, and diplomacy can therefore be understood as efforts to address the limitations of the traditional framework while preserving its most valuable elements, particularly the alliance with the United States.

In this sense, Japan's post-war foreign policy framework served both as the foundation upon which modern Japanese diplomacy was built and as the principal target

of Abe's reform agenda. Understanding its origins, achievements, and limitations is therefore essential for analysing the profound transformation that occurred in Japanese foreign and security policy during Abe's tenure.

Geopolitical Shifts and Emerging Security Challenges

The strategic environment confronting Japan in the early twenty-first century differed significantly from the relatively stable circumstances that characterised much of the post-war era. For decades, Japan's security policy had been based upon the assumptions of American strategic predominance in the Asia-Pacific region, limited external military threats, and the effectiveness of the post-war security framework. However, as Hughes (2021) observes, Japan's security environment gradually became "increasingly severe" as the country confronted a combination of conventional, nuclear, maritime, and territorial challenges (Hughes 2021, pp. 80–82).

The emergence of new geopolitical realities fundamentally altered the regional balance of power and challenged many of the assumptions that had guided Japanese foreign and security policy since 1945. The rise of China, North Korea's advancing nuclear capabilities, evolving patterns of great-power competition, and increasing uncertainty regarding the regional security order collectively compelled Japanese policymakers to reassess the country's strategic posture. Taken together, these developments did not simply create new threats; they altered the strategic context within which Japan had traditionally balanced economic interdependence, constitutional pacifism, and dependence on the United States. These developments ultimately provided the context within which Shinzo Abe pursued far-reaching reforms in foreign and security policy.

Among the various challenges confronting Japan, the rise of China represented the most significant and enduring strategic concern. Since the initiation of economic reforms under Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s, China had experienced unprecedented economic growth, transforming itself into the world's second-largest economy. Economic expansion was accompanied by substantial military modernisation and increasing investments in advanced defence capabilities. According to Mearsheimer (2014), the rise of a major power inevitably alters existing regional balances and generates strategic anxieties among neighbouring states (Mearsheimer 2014, p. 365). From this perspective, China's rise represented more than a bilateral challenge to Japan; it constituted a structural transformation of the East Asian balance of power. In East Asia, China's growing economic and military capabilities increasingly challenged the regional order that had long been dominated by the United States and its allies.

For Japan, China's growing influence was particularly concerning because of its geographical proximity and its expanding military presence in surrounding maritime areas. The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) significantly increased its operational capabilities, while Beijing adopted a more assertive posture in territorial disputes throughout the East and South China Seas. One of the most contentious issues concerned the Senkaku Islands, known in China as the Diaoyu Islands, which are administered by Japan but claimed by China. Repeated incursions by Chinese coast

guard and maritime vessels into waters surrounding the islands heightened tensions and raised concerns regarding the possibility of military confrontation (Smith 2019, p. 113).

The significance of the dispute extended beyond the territorial question itself. As Smith (2019) suggests, the Senkaku issue became closely connected to Japan's wider concern that China was attempting to alter the regional status quo and expand its strategic influence (Smith 2019, pp. 112–115).

The historical significance of this development lies in the fact that Japan's post-war security system had been constructed during a period when the United States enjoyed overwhelming strategic predominance in the region. China's emergence as a peer competitor therefore challenged an important assumption underlying Japan's post-war strategic posture. Rather than facing an environment in which the US alliance could largely compensate for Japan's military limitations, Japanese policymakers increasingly confronted a regional order in which the distribution of power was becoming more contested.

The territorial dispute over the Senkaku Islands became symbolic of broader concerns regarding China's strategic ambitions. Japanese policymakers increasingly viewed Beijing's actions as attempts to alter the regional status quo and expand Chinese influence through coercive means. From a neo-realist perspective, these developments reflected a classic shift in the regional balance of power, where the rise of a new power generated insecurity among established actors. Consequently, concerns regarding China's military modernisation and maritime activities became central factors influencing Japan's evolving security strategy during Abe's tenure (Mearsheimer 2014, pp. 367–372).

In addition to China's rise, North Korea emerged as a direct and immediate security threat to Japan. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, Pyongyang accelerated its efforts to develop nuclear weapons and ballistic missile capabilities. These developments culminated in a series of nuclear tests and missile launches that significantly heightened tensions in Northeast Asia. Several North Korean missiles either flew over Japanese territory or landed within Japan's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), creating widespread concern among policymakers and the broader public (Hughes 2021, pp. 87–90). North Korea therefore transformed the perception of security threats from an abstract regional concern into a more immediate vulnerability for the Japanese state.

North Korea's advancing military capabilities exposed important vulnerabilities within Japan's existing security framework. While the US-Japan alliance remained a critical pillar of national defence, questions emerged regarding whether traditional security arrangements were sufficient to address new forms of strategic threats. The possibility of nuclear coercion, missile attacks, and regional instability prompted calls for enhanced defence preparedness and more effective crisis-response mechanisms. As a result, North Korea's actions strengthened domestic support for security reforms and contributed to growing recognition that Japan needed to assume greater responsibility for its own defence.

Beyond the challenges posed by China and North Korea, broader transformations in the international system also influenced Japanese strategic thinking. The post-Cold War optimism that had characterised the 1990s gradually gave way to renewed geopolitical competition among major powers. The emergence of multipolarity, the diffusion of military technologies, and increasing competition over maritime spaces

created a more uncertain and contested regional environment (Waltz 1979, pp. 118–122). In this context, Japanese policymakers increasingly recognised that economic power alone was insufficient to safeguard national interests.

These developments encouraged a reassessment of long-standing assumptions regarding national security. For decades, Japan's constitutional pacifism and limited military role had been regarded as appropriate responses to the post-war environment. However, the growing complexity of regional security challenges led many policymakers to question whether these constraints remained compatible with contemporary realities. Critics argued that Article 9 of the Constitution, while symbolically important, limited Japan's ability to contribute effectively to collective security arrangements and respond flexibly to emerging threats (Samuels 2007, pp. 146–150).

The debate over Article 9 became particularly significant during Abe's tenure. Supporters of reform contended that constitutional restrictions reflected historical circumstances that no longer existed and that Japan required greater strategic flexibility in an increasingly competitive regional environment. Opponents, however, feared that revising long-standing security principles could undermine Japan's pacifist identity and increase regional tensions. Nevertheless, the growing perception of external threats contributed to a gradual shift in public and political attitudes regarding defence and security policy.

It was within this evolving strategic environment that Shinzo Abe articulated the need for a more proactive and comprehensive approach to national security. Abe argued that Japan could no longer afford to remain a passive observer of regional developments and that the country must actively shape the security environment in which it operated. He believed that the challenges posed by China's rise, North Korea's military provocations, and broader geopolitical transformations required a reassessment of existing policies and institutions (Liff & Lipsy 2022, p. 148).

Abe therefore promoted a vision of Japan as a "Proactive Contributor to Peace," emphasising greater international engagement, enhanced defence capabilities, and stronger cooperation with like-minded democratic partners. His strategic thinking reflected the belief that national security could no longer be guaranteed solely through economic strength or dependence on the United States. Instead, Japan needed to develop its own institutional capacities while simultaneously strengthening alliances and strategic partnerships throughout the Indo-Pacific region.

The changing regional balance of power thus served as the principal catalyst for Japan's foreign and security policy transformation. The rise of China, North Korea's nuclear ambitions, and the broader evolution of the international system collectively exposed the limitations of the traditional post-war framework. These challenges encouraged Japanese leaders to reconsider established assumptions regarding security and sovereignty and created the conditions necessary for Abe's ambitious reform agenda. Consequently, understanding these geopolitical shifts is essential for explaining the emergence of Japan's more assertive and proactive foreign policy during the Abe era.

Revised National Security Policy under Abe

One of the most significant aspects of Shinzo Abe's political legacy was the comprehensive transformation of Japan's national security architecture. While previous governments had gradually adapted Japan's security policies to changing international conditions, Abe pursued reforms with unprecedented determination and strategic coherence. His administration sought to overcome institutional limitations, strengthen national defence capabilities, and enhance Japan's ability to respond to increasingly complex security challenges. These reforms reflected Abe's conviction that the post-war security framework required substantial revision to address the realities of the twenty-first-century geopolitical environment. According to Liff (2018), Abe's security initiatives represented the most ambitious effort to reshape Japan's defence and strategic posture since the end of World War II (Liff 2018, pp. 5–7).

The reforms undertaken during Abe's tenure were motivated by concerns regarding China's military rise, North Korea's nuclear and missile programmes, emerging non-traditional security threats, and uncertainties surrounding the future of the regional security order. Through institutional innovation, legal reinterpretation, military modernisation, and enhanced alliance cooperation, Abe sought to create a more proactive and resilient security framework capable of safeguarding Japan's national interests. These initiatives collectively reflected the principle of "Proactive Contribution to Peace," which became a defining feature of Japan's security policy under his leadership (Government of Japan 2013).

Establishment of the National Security Council

One of Abe's earliest and most consequential reforms was the establishment of the National Security Council (NSC) in 2013. Prior to its creation, Japan's national security decision-making process was often criticised for being fragmented, bureaucratically cumbersome, and lacking effective coordination among relevant ministries and agencies (Liff 2018, pp. 8-10). Security decisions frequently involved lengthy consultations among multiple institutions, limiting the government's capacity to respond rapidly to crises.

The establishment of the NSC sought to address these shortcomings by centralising strategic decision-making within the executive branch. Modelled in part on the United States National Security Council, the Japanese NSC brought together key policymakers, including the Prime Minister, Chief Cabinet Secretary, Minister of Foreign Affairs, and Minister of Defence. This institutional arrangement enhanced coordination among government agencies and strengthened the Prime Minister's ability to direct national security policy.

The creation of the NSC represented a significant shift in Japan's governance structure. It enabled more coherent strategic planning, facilitated information sharing, and improved crisis management capabilities. Importantly, it also reflected Abe's broader objective of strengthening political leadership and reducing bureaucratic obstacles to effective policy implementation (Samuels 2007, pp. 189–192).

National Security Strategy

A second major reform was the adoption of Japan's first comprehensive National Security Strategy (NSS) in December 2013. Prior to this development, Japan lacked a unified strategic document that articulated national security priorities and long-term objectives. Security policies were often formulated through separate defence guidelines and policy statements without an overarching strategic framework.

The National Security Strategy filled this gap by providing a comprehensive assessment of the security environment and establishing a coherent framework for future policy development (Government of Japan 2013, pp. 1–5). The document identified major challenges confronting Japan, including the shifting global balance of power, China's military modernisation, North Korea's nuclear ambitions, maritime disputes, terrorism, cyber threats, and threats to the international rules-based order.

A central concept of the NSS was the idea of Japan as a "Proactive Contributor to Peace." This doctrine emphasised Japan's responsibility to contribute more actively to regional and global security while remaining committed to peaceful principles. Rather than abandoning pacifism, Abe sought to reinterpret it in a manner that would permit greater international engagement and security cooperation.

The NSS also highlighted the importance of strengthening the US-Japan alliance, deepening partnerships with democratic states, and promoting a rules-based international order. By articulating these priorities within a formal strategic document, Abe institutionalised a long-term security vision that continues to influence Japanese policy today (Liff & Lipsy 2022, pp. 170–173).

Collective Self-Defence

Perhaps the most controversial reform undertaken during Abe's tenure concerned the reinterpretation of constitutional restrictions relating to collective self-defence. Since the adoption of Article 9 of the Constitution, successive Japanese governments had maintained that Japan possessed the inherent right of collective self-defence under international law but could not exercise that right because of constitutional constraints.

Abe challenged this long-standing interpretation. He argued that evolving security threats required Japan to cooperate more closely with allies and partners in order to ensure national security. In July 2014, his government approved a reinterpretation of Article 9 permitting the limited exercise of collective self-defence under specific circumstances (Hughes 2021, pp. 118–123).

Under the revised interpretation, Japan could use force when three conditions were met: first, when an armed attack against Japan or a closely related country threatened Japan's survival; second, when no other means existed to protect the Japanese people; and third, when the use of force was limited to the minimum necessary extent. These principles were subsequently incorporated into the 2015 security legislation.

Supporters argued that the reform enhanced deterrence, strengthened alliance cooperation, and improved Japan's ability to respond to regional crises. Critics, however, contended that the reinterpretation undermined constitutional pacifism and

circumvented formal constitutional amendment procedures. Despite intense political debate, the reform marked a historic shift in Japan's post-war security policy and significantly expanded the operational scope of the Self-Defence Forces.

Strengthening Defence Capabilities

Alongside institutional and legal reforms, Abe's administration undertook substantial efforts to strengthen Japan's defence capabilities. Recognising the growing complexity of regional security challenges, the government increased defence expenditures and invested in military modernisation programmes.

Particular emphasis was placed on enhancing maritime and air defence capabilities in response to increasing Chinese activities in the East China Sea. Japan expanded surveillance operations, improved intelligence-gathering systems, and strengthened its capacity to defend remote islands (Smith 2019, pp. 198–203).

New military equipment and capabilities were introduced or strengthened during Abe's tenure, including F-35A stealth fighter aircraft, Aegis-equipped destroyers, Patriot Advanced Capability-3 (PAC-3) missile-defence systems, and enhanced maritime surveillance and reconnaissance assets. Japan's *National Defense Program Guidelines* identified the need to strengthen "information gathering, warning and surveillance" and ballistic-missile defence capabilities (Government of Japan 2013, pp. 5–6). The acquisition of F-35A fighters and the enhancement of Aegis and PAC-3 systems were particularly significant because they strengthened Japan's air superiority, missile defence, and maritime surveillance capabilities. These measures reflected Abe's broader objective of developing a more credible and flexible defence posture in response to China's military modernisation and North Korea's missile and nuclear programmes.

The government also prioritised emerging security domains such as cyberspace and outer space. Dedicated cyber defence units were established, and greater resources were allocated to protecting critical infrastructure against cyber threats. Similarly, space-based technologies were increasingly integrated into defence planning and intelligence operations.

These measures reflected a broader recognition that national security in the twenty-first century extended beyond traditional military threats. By investing in advanced capabilities and emerging technologies, Abe sought to ensure that Japan remained capable of addressing both conventional and non-conventional security challenges (Hughes 2021, pp. 126–130).

Institutional Reforms

In addition to the establishment of the NSC and adoption of the NSS, Abe introduced several institutional reforms designed to improve the efficiency and responsiveness of national security decision-making. These reforms sought to overcome the fragmentation that had historically characterised Japan's security governance system.

One important initiative involved strengthening coordination between the Ministry of Defence, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, intelligence agencies, and the Prime Minister's Office. Enhanced inter-agency cooperation improved information sharing and reduced delays in policy implementation. Decision-making processes were streamlined to facilitate more rapid responses to emerging crises and unexpected security developments (Liff 2018, pp. 10–12).

The government also revised defence planning procedures and improved mechanisms for alliance coordination with the United States. Updated defence cooperation guidelines enhanced interoperability between Japanese and American forces and facilitated joint responses to regional contingencies. These reforms reinforced the alliance while simultaneously enabling Japan to assume a more active role in shared security responsibilities.

Collectively, these institutional innovations strengthened the strategic coherence of Japan's national security apparatus and improved its capacity to address complex challenges in an increasingly uncertain regional environment.

In brief, Abe's reforms fundamentally transformed Japan's national security architecture. Through the establishment of the NSC, adoption of the NSS, reinterpretation of collective self-defence, strengthening of defence capabilities, and implementation of wide-ranging institutional reforms, Abe reshaped Japan's approach to security and defence. While maintaining the alliance with the United States and preserving key elements of Japan's post-war identity, these initiatives expanded the country's strategic options and enhanced its ability to respond to contemporary security challenges. Consequently, the reforms undertaken during Abe's tenure represent the most significant transformation of Japanese security policy since the end of World War II and constitute a central pillar of his broader foreign policy legacy.

The Free and Open Indo-Pacific Vision and Strategic Partnerships

One of the most influential and enduring aspects of Shinzo Abe's foreign policy was the formulation and promotion of the concept of a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP). While Abe's domestic security reforms transformed Japan's strategic capabilities, the FOIP vision represented the external dimension of his broader foreign policy agenda. It provided a comprehensive geopolitical framework through which Japan sought to address changing regional power dynamics, strengthen cooperation with like-minded countries, and preserve a rules-based international order. Over time, the FOIP concept evolved into one of the most influential strategic ideas shaping contemporary Indo-Pacific geopolitics and significantly enhanced Japan's diplomatic profile on the global stage.

The intellectual origins of FOIP can be traced to Abe's earlier strategic thinking regarding the growing interconnectedness of the Indian and Pacific Oceans. In his 2007 address to the Indian Parliament entitled "Confluence of the Two Seas," Abe argued that the Pacific and Indian Oceans constituted a single strategic space linked by commerce, security, and shared political values (Abe 2007). This vision reflected his recognition that geopolitical developments in East Asia, South Asia, and the broader maritime region were becoming increasingly interconnected. Rather than viewing Asia through narrow regional divisions, Abe proposed a wider strategic perspective centred on maritime cooperation and democratic partnerships.

The FOIP vision was formally articulated during Abe's second tenure as Prime Minister and became a central pillar of Japanese foreign policy. At its core, FOIP sought to promote an international order based upon five key principles: freedom of navigation, respect for the rule of law, maritime security, regional connectivity, and open trade (Government of Japan 2017). These principles reflected Japan's commitment to preserving stability, transparency, and openness in an increasingly competitive geopolitical environment.

Freedom of navigation occupied a particularly important place within the FOIP framework. As a trading nation heavily dependent on maritime commerce, Japan regarded secure sea lanes as essential to its economic prosperity and national security. Consequently, FOIP emphasised the importance of ensuring unrestricted access to international waters and preventing attempts by any state to alter maritime boundaries through coercion or force. This principle acquired particular significance in the context of growing tensions in the East and South China Seas.

Closely related to freedom of navigation was the emphasis on the rule of law. Abe consistently argued that international disputes should be resolved through legal mechanisms and adherence to established international norms rather than through unilateral actions or military coercion. By promoting a rules-based order, Japan sought to strengthen international institutions and discourage behaviour that could undermine regional stability (Liff & Lipsy 2022, pp. 180–183).

Maritime security constituted another important pillar of FOIP. Given the increasing strategic importance of the Indo-Pacific region and the growing presence of naval forces, Abe viewed maritime security as essential for maintaining regional peace and economic prosperity. Japan therefore expanded maritime cooperation with partner countries, enhanced capacity-building programmes, and supported initiatives aimed at improving maritime domain awareness throughout the region (Smith 2019, pp. 210–214).

Regional connectivity and open trade formed the economic foundations of FOIP. Abe believed that economic integration, infrastructure development, and trade cooperation could contribute significantly to regional stability. Consequently, Japan actively promoted high-quality infrastructure projects, economic partnerships, and free trade agreements designed to strengthen regional connectivity while providing alternatives to competing geopolitical initiatives. This approach reflected Abe's broader belief that economic diplomacy and strategic engagement should reinforce one another.

Abe viewed the Indo-Pacific as the primary arena of twenty-first-century geopolitics. The region contained some of the world's most dynamic economies, critical maritime routes, and emerging centres of political influence. At the same time, it was

increasingly characterised by strategic competition, particularly as China's economic and military capabilities expanded. Abe therefore sought to strengthen cooperation among democratic and like-minded states that shared common interests in preserving regional stability and an open international order (Miller 2021, pp. 97–100).

A central component of this strategy involved deepening Japan's alliance with the United States. While Abe sought to enhance Japan's strategic autonomy, he regarded the US–Japan alliance as the cornerstone of regional security. Throughout his tenure, he worked closely with successive American administrations to strengthen defence cooperation, improve alliance coordination, and promote shared strategic objectives. The alliance remained the foundation upon which broader Indo-Pacific partnerships were constructed (Liff & Lipsky 2022, pp. 175–178).

Abe also attached particular importance to strengthening relations with India. He viewed India as a crucial partner in maintaining regional stability and promoting democratic values. Under his leadership, Japan and India expanded cooperation in areas including infrastructure development, maritime security, defence exchanges, and economic investment. The relationship evolved into a Special Strategic and Global Partnership, reflecting the growing convergence of interests between the two countries (Pant & Joshi 2017, pp. 42–45).

Similarly, Australia emerged as one of Japan's closest strategic partners during Abe's tenure. Shared concerns regarding regional security, commitment to democratic governance, and support for a rules-based order encouraged closer cooperation between the two countries. Defence collaboration, intelligence sharing, and joint military exercises increased substantially, contributing to the development of a robust strategic partnership (Medcalf 2020, pp. 146–149).

Beyond the Indo-Pacific region, Abe also sought to strengthen relations with European partners. Japan expanded security dialogues and strategic cooperation with countries such as the United Kingdom, France, and Germany, while simultaneously deepening engagement with the European Union. These partnerships reflected Abe's recognition that maintaining a rules-based international order required cooperation among democratic states across different regions.

Perhaps the most visible manifestation of Abe's strategic vision was the revival of the Quad, comprising Japan, the United States, India, and Australia. Originally proposed during Abe's first term in office, the Quad was revitalised in 2017 amid growing concerns regarding regional security and the future balance of power in the Indo-Pacific. Although the Quad was not established as a formal military alliance, it provided a platform for strategic consultation, security cooperation, and coordination among four major democratic powers (Miller 2021, pp. 102–105).

From a neo-realist perspective, the Quad can be interpreted as a form of external balancing designed to maintain a favourable balance of power in the Indo-Pacific region. By fostering cooperation among like-minded states, Japan sought to contribute to regional stability while discouraging unilateral attempts to alter the existing order. The Quad also reflected Abe's belief that collective action among democratic partners was essential for addressing emerging security challenges.

In other words, the Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision represented one of Shinzo Abe's most important contributions to contemporary international relations. Through its emphasis on freedom of navigation, the rule of law, maritime security, regional

connectivity, and open trade, FOIP provided a comprehensive strategic framework for responding to evolving geopolitical realities. By strengthening partnerships with the United States, India, Australia, and European countries while revitalising the Quad, Abe positioned Japan as a central architect of the emerging Indo-Pacific order. Consequently, FOIP not only transformed Japan's foreign policy orientation but also established a lasting strategic legacy that continues to shape regional geopolitics in the twenty-first century.

Outcomes and Implications of Abe's Foreign Policy Initiatives

The foreign policy initiatives pursued by Shinzo Abe during his tenure produced significant and lasting consequences for Japan's strategic orientation, diplomatic engagement, and international standing. Through a combination of institutional reforms, security policy adjustments, alliance strengthening, and proactive diplomacy, Abe fundamentally reshaped Japan's role in regional and global affairs. Although debates continue regarding the extent and permanence of these changes, there is broad scholarly consensus that Abe's leadership marked one of the most transformative periods in Japan's post-war foreign policy evolution. The outcomes of these initiatives can be observed in several interconnected dimensions.

First, Japan emerged as a more proactive participant in regional security affairs. For much of the post-war era, Japan maintained a cautious security posture characterised by constitutional constraints, limited military responsibilities, and heavy reliance on the United States. Under Abe, however, Japan adopted a more active role in addressing regional security challenges. The establishment of the National Security Council, the adoption of the National Security Strategy, and the reinterpretation of collective self-defence collectively enhanced Japan's capacity to contribute to regional stability and security cooperation (Liff 2018, pp. 55–58). The country increasingly participated in joint military exercises, maritime security initiatives, peacekeeping operations, and strategic dialogues with partner nations. Consequently, Japan transitioned from being primarily a security consumer to becoming a more significant contributor to regional security governance.

Second, Abe's foreign policy considerably expanded Japan's diplomatic influence through strategic partnerships and multilateral engagement. Recognising the growing complexity of regional geopolitics, Abe actively cultivated relations with countries that shared Japan's commitment to democratic governance, the rule of law, and a rules-based international order. Strategic partnerships with India, Australia, Southeast Asian countries, and European powers strengthened Japan's diplomatic reach and enhanced its ability to shape regional developments (Smith 2019, pp. 214–217). Abe also demonstrated strong commitment to multilateral institutions and forums, viewing them as important mechanisms for promoting cooperation and stability. Through active diplomacy, Japan assumed a more visible leadership role in regional and international affairs, thereby increasing its influence beyond the traditional confines of East Asia.

A third major outcome was the strengthening and modernisation of the United States-Japan alliance. Although the alliance had remained the cornerstone of Japan's security policy since the early post-war period, Abe sought to adapt it to emerging

security realities. Defence cooperation guidelines were revised, interoperability between military forces was enhanced, and mechanisms for strategic coordination were strengthened (Hughes 2021, pp. 130–134). The reinterpretation of collective self-defence further enabled Japan to cooperate more effectively with the United States in addressing shared security challenges. As a result, the alliance evolved from a predominantly asymmetric security arrangement into a more flexible and integrated partnership capable of responding to a wider range of regional contingencies. This strengthened alliance not only enhanced deterrence but also reinforced Japan's strategic importance within the broader Indo-Pacific region.

Fourth, Abe's reforms provided Japan with greater flexibility in responding to international crises and emerging security threats. Prior to these reforms, constitutional and institutional constraints often limited Japan's ability to react swiftly and effectively to rapidly changing security situations. The establishment of the National Security Council improved policy coordination, while revised legal frameworks expanded the operational scope of the Self-Defence Forces. These changes enhanced the government's capacity to address challenges ranging from military contingencies and maritime disputes to humanitarian crises and non-traditional security threats such as cyberattacks and terrorism (Government of Japan 2013). By increasing strategic flexibility, Abe's reforms enabled Japan to adapt more effectively to an increasingly uncertain and complex international environment.

A fifth and perhaps most enduring outcome was the emergence of the FOIP vision as a widely recognised strategic framework. Initially promoted by Abe as a Japanese foreign policy initiative, FOIP gradually gained acceptance among numerous countries and international organisations. The concept's emphasis on freedom of navigation, respect for international law, maritime security, regional connectivity, and open trade resonated with states concerned about preserving a stable and rules-based regional order (Medcalf 2020, pp. 162–165). Over time, the FOIP framework was incorporated into the strategic discourse of countries including the United States, Australia, India, and several European nations (Government of Japan, 2017). The widespread adoption of this concept significantly enhanced Japan's intellectual and diplomatic influence in shaping contemporary Indo-Pacific geopolitics. Diplomatically, Abe's advocacy of a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" and his efforts to revitalise the Quad contributed to Japan's emergence as an important actor in Indo-Pacific regionalism.

Beyond these specific outcomes, Abe's foreign policy initiatives also contributed to a broader transformation of Japan's international identity. Traditionally viewed as an economic power with limited strategic influence, Japan increasingly came to be regarded as an important security actor and diplomatic leader. The combination of proactive diplomacy, enhanced security capabilities, and strategic partnerships elevated Japan's profile in global affairs and reinforced its reputation as a defender of the rules-based international order (Liff & Lipsky 2022, pp. 188–190).

To sum up, the outcomes of Abe's foreign policy initiatives extended far beyond immediate policy adjustments. They reshaped Japan's strategic posture, expanded its diplomatic influence, strengthened key alliances, improved crisis-response capabilities, and introduced a geopolitical vision that continues to influence regional politics. Collectively, these developments enhanced Japan's international standing and reinforced its role as a major actor in the Indo-Pacific region. Consequently, Abe's

foreign policy legacy remains a defining feature of contemporary Japanese statecraft and continues to shape the country's engagement with an evolving international order. The 2013 National Security Strategy marked an important institutional shift by declaring that Japan would make a "Proactive Contribution to Peace," while identifying China's increasingly assertive activities and North Korea's nuclear and missile programmes as major security concerns (Government of Japan 2013, pp. 1–3).

Critical Assessment of Abe's Legacy

This article asked to what extent Shinzo Abe transformed Japan's post-war foreign and security policy and whether neo-realism adequately explains this transformation. The findings suggest that Abe did not initiate Japan's strategic shift from the post-war security posture, but significantly accelerated, consolidated, and institutionalised an evolution already driven by changes in the regional distribution of power. China's rise and North Korea's nuclear and missile programmes created structural pressures, while Abe translated these pressures into institutional and strategic reforms. As Abe himself stated, "it is no longer possible for any one country...to safeguard its own peace and security acting entirely by itself" (Abe 2013). His National Security Strategy, reinterpretation of collective self-defence, stronger US alliance, FOIP, and regional partnerships therefore represented an effort to make Japan a more proactive regional actor. Abe explicitly envisioned Japan as a "Proactive Contributor to Peace" (Abe 2013). His legacy consequently confirms neo-realism's emphasis on structural pressures while demonstrating that political leadership mediates how states respond to systemic change (Hughes 2015).

The transformation of Japan's foreign and security policy under Shinzo Abe has generated extensive scholarly debate. While many observers regard Abe as the architect of a new Japanese strategic posture, others caution against attributing all policy changes exclusively to his leadership. Critics argue that several reforms associated with the Abe era were rooted in longer-term trends that predated his administration. The gradual expansion of the Self-Defence Forces' role, growing concerns regarding China's rise, debates over constitutional reinterpretation, and efforts to strengthen alliance cooperation had already emerged under previous governments (Samuels 2007, Hughes 2021). Consequently, some scholars contend that the trajectory of Japanese foreign policy reform reflected broader structural forces rather than the actions of a single political leader.

From this perspective, the changing regional security environment would likely have compelled any Japanese government to reconsider traditional security assumptions. The rise of China, North Korea's nuclear and missile programmes, increasing maritime competition, and uncertainties surrounding the regional balance of power created pressures that demanded policy adaptation. Neo-realist scholars, in particular, emphasise that states respond to systemic constraints and security threats regardless of the preferences of individual leaders (Waltz 1979). Therefore, some argue that many of the reforms implemented during Abe's tenure represented logical responses to evolving geopolitical realities rather than uniquely personal initiatives.

Nevertheless, focusing exclusively on structural factors risks underestimating Abe's political significance. While external pressures created opportunities for reform, it was Abe's leadership that translated these pressures into concrete policy outcomes. His longevity in office provided an unusual degree of political stability, enabling him to pursue long-term strategic objectives that had eluded many of his predecessors. Moreover, Abe demonstrated considerable political skill in building consensus within the Liberal Democratic Party, managing bureaucratic resistance, and securing public support for controversial security reforms (Liff & Lipsy 2022).

Abe's contribution therefore lies not merely in initiating change but in consolidating and institutionalising it. Through the establishment of the National Security Council, adoption of the National Security Strategy, reinterpretation of collective self-defence, and promotion of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision, he embedded strategic reforms within Japan's policy framework. As a result, many of these initiatives have continued beyond his tenure and remain central to Japan's contemporary foreign and security policy. His legacy thus reflects both the influence of structural geopolitical forces and the decisive role of political leadership in shaping national strategy. AUKUS, announced in 2021 after Abe's tenure, also broadly reflected the strategic environment he had anticipated, particularly the growing importance of advanced defence cooperation among US allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific. Abe welcomed the strengthening of cooperation among like-minded states as essential to maintaining a free and open regional order (Abe 2021).

Otto Federico von Feigenblatt has conducted a very interesting study on the foreign policy of Japan, where he applies the theory of harmony through holistic engagement. He highlights the limitations of realist or liberal frameworks and focuses on the importance of emic model based on data collected from Greater East Asian region. In brief, the author opines that the Model of Harmony through Holistic Engagement is the most suitable approach in interpreting the changing dynamics of Japan's foreign policy during Abe's tenure (Feigenblatt 2016, pp. 17–26).

Conclusion

Shinzo Abe fundamentally transformed Japan's foreign and security policy and left an enduring imprint on the country's strategic trajectory. Through a combination of institutional reforms, enhanced defence capabilities, strategic partnerships, and proactive diplomacy, he moved Japan beyond many of the limitations associated with its traditional post-war foreign policy framework. His administration sought to adapt Japan's security posture to an increasingly complex and competitive regional environment marked by the rise of China, North Korea's nuclear ambitions, and shifting balances of power in the Indo-Pacific. The findings largely confirm earlier scholarship that Abe accelerated Japan's strategic shift, but qualify the claim that he fundamentally transformed Japanese foreign policy, since several reforms predated his tenure and reflected broader structural changes. The paper contributes by linking Abe's domestic security reforms with Japan's alliance strategy, strategic partnerships, and Indo-Pacific regionalism, thereby locating his policies within wider regional power shifts.

Viewed through a neo-realist perspective, Abe's policies represented rational responses to changing geopolitical realities. The establishment of the National Security Council, adoption of the National Security Strategy, reinterpretation of collective self-defence, and strengthening of strategic partnerships reflected efforts to enhance Japan's capacity to safeguard its national interests and contribute to regional stability. Equally significant was his promotion of the FOIP vision and his role in revitalising the Quad, both of which elevated Japan's diplomatic influence and strategic relevance.

Although some elements of these reforms originated before his administration, Abe's leadership was decisive in implementing, consolidating, and institutionalising them. His ability to translate structural pressures into coherent policy initiatives distinguishes his tenure from that of many predecessors. Consequently, the legacy of Abe's foreign policy continues to shape Japan's strategic outlook and remains essential for understanding contemporary Indo-Pacific geopolitics and the evolving role of Japan in international affairs.

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The Use of Sport in Global Politics: An Emerging Instrument of Soft Power¹

By Gokhan Acar & Kayhan Serin[±]*

This study examines how sport contributes to soft-power outcomes through a qualitative meta-synthesis of 16 empirical studies published between 2005 and 2025. Rather than reaffirming that sport functions as an instrument of soft power, the study develops an explanatory perspective on the political, communicative and institutional conditions under which sport generates, constrains or undermines soft-power outcomes. Drawing upon research concerning mega-sport events, nation branding, sports diplomacy and international image construction, the dataset was compiled through systematic searches of the Web of Science, Scopus, Google Scholar and SPORTDiscus databases and analysed using thematic content analysis supported by NVivo 12 software. The findings indicate that sport-related soft power emerges through interconnected communicative processes involving nation branding, media representation, audience interpretation and political credibility rather than through sporting events alone. The analysis further demonstrates that international visibility functions as an enabling condition rather than a sufficient determinant of soft-power success, helping explain why similar sport-related strategies generate divergent reputational outcomes across different political contexts. The study contributes to the literature by proposing an integrative explanatory framework that clarifies the analytical relationships among soft power, sports diplomacy, nation branding and sportswashing while specifying the causal mechanisms linking sport, strategic communication and international influence.

Keywords: *soft power; sports diplomacy; nation branding; sport mega-events; international relations*

Introduction

The contemporary international system is characterised by increasingly complex forms of interaction in which influence is exercised not only through military capabilities or economic coercion but also through attraction, legitimacy and the capacity to shape international preferences. Within this context, Joseph Nye's concept of soft power has become a central framework for explaining how states pursue foreign-policy objectives by influencing rather than compelling others (Nye, 2004b). However, Nye's understanding of soft power has evolved considerably over time. Accordingly, contemporary understandings conceptualise soft power as a relational

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and context-dependent process rather than the mere possession of attractive resources. While his earlier work situated attraction within the broader transformations associated with globalisation and the information age (Nye, 2004a), his subsequent studies increasingly emphasised contextual intelligence and leadership (Nye, 2008), the diffusion of power through technological change and transnational networks (Nye, 2011), and, more recently, the continuing significance of attraction and credibility within an era of renewed great-power competition (Nye, 2023). Consequently, the effectiveness of soft power depends not simply on the possession of attractive cultural resources but on credibility, audience reception and political legitimacy.

Despite its widespread adoption, the concept remains theoretically contested. Scholars continue to debate the distinction between soft-power resources and soft-power outcomes, the difficulty of measuring attraction empirically, and the extent to which governments can intentionally generate favourable international perceptions. Critics further argue that the concept frequently lacks causal precision because attraction is mediated by political context, communication processes and audience interpretation rather than automatically resulting from cultural or diplomatic assets. These debates suggest that merely demonstrating the existence of soft-power resources is insufficient, as it does not explain the mechanisms through which such resources generate or fail to generate international influence.

Sport has become one of the most visible arenas through which these debates unfold. Beyond its athletic dimension, sport functions as a cultural, political and communicative resource capable of enhancing international visibility and facilitating diplomatic engagement (Postlethwaite et al., 2022). Mega-events such as the Olympic Games and the FIFA World Cup increasingly serve as platforms through which governments project national narratives, communicate foreign-policy ambitions and seek to enhance their international standing (Næss, 2023). Nevertheless, sporting visibility does not automatically translate into attraction or reputational gains. Whether sport contributes to soft-power outcomes depends upon how sporting initiatives are interpreted within particular political and communicative environments, making it essential to distinguish between sport as a potential resource and soft power as an outcome of international perception.

The growing prominence of sport has also intensified its intersection with sports diplomacy, nation branding and sportswashing. Although these concepts are frequently used together, they represent analytically distinct phenomena. Sports diplomacy concerns the use of sporting actors, institutions and exchanges to facilitate diplomatic engagement (Postlethwaite et al., 2022), whereas soft power refers to the broader capacity to generate attraction and influence. Nation branding, by contrast, involves the strategic management and communication of national identity and reputation within competitive international environments (Anholt, 2007; Dinnie, 2016). Anholt's concept of competitive identity emphasises that favourable international reputations cannot be sustained through promotional campaigns alone but must be supported by credible policies, institutions and political behaviour. Similarly, Dinnie conceptualises nation branding as a multidimensional process integrating identity, stakeholder coordination and international positioning. These perspectives suggest that nation branding may provide communicative mechanisms

through which soft-power resources are projected, but successful image promotion should not be equated with genuine attraction or political influence.

The distinction becomes particularly important when considering the growing literature on sportswashing. Unlike nation branding, which refers to a broader process of reputation management, sportswashing represents a critical interpretation suggesting that sporting investments may be used to divert international attention from domestic political controversies or human-rights concerns. Whether a sporting initiative is interpreted as legitimate nation branding or as sportswashing therefore depends less on the event itself than on broader political context, media framing and audience evaluation. Consequently, sport should not be viewed as an inherently positive source of soft power but as a contested communicative arena in which strategic projection, political credibility and public interpretation interact to produce divergent reputational outcomes, including attraction, scepticism or what has recently been described as soft disempowerment.

Although previous research has convincingly demonstrated that states employ sport to pursue diplomatic, branding and soft-power objectives, significant conceptual and explanatory gaps remain. Existing studies frequently treat soft power, sports diplomacy, nation branding and sportswashing as interchangeable concepts without systematically distinguishing whether they refer to resources, strategies, communicative practices or outcomes. Consequently, limited attention has been devoted to explaining how sport-related visibility is transformed into international attraction, why similar sporting strategies produce different reputational consequences, and under which political, institutional and communicative conditions sport contributes to soft-power accumulation rather than reputational contestation.

Addressing these shortcomings, the present study employs a qualitative meta-synthesis of empirical research to clarify the conceptual relationships among soft power, sports diplomacy, nation branding and sportswashing. Rather than reaffirming the widely accepted proposition that sport constitutes a soft-power resource, the study develops an integrative explanatory framework identifying the causal mechanisms through which sport-related initiatives are strategically projected, mediated through international communication environments and translated into divergent reputational outcomes. Accordingly, the article shifts the debate from asking whether sport functions as an instrument of soft power towards explaining how, why and under which political, institutional and communicative conditions sport generates, constrains or undermines soft-power outcomes across different political contexts.

The Position of Sport in International Relations

Although sport had long occupied a marginal and culturally peripheral position within the study of modern international relations, the shifting dynamics of the global political environment have gradually recast it as a sphere of diplomatic, economic and cultural significance. This shift demonstrates the extent to which sport has moved beyond its conventional association with competitive performance, assuming instead a series of strategic functions linked to international visibility, image cultivation, public diplomacy and cultural engagement (Grix and Brannagan, 2016; Dubinsky, 2019).

A central factor in explaining sport's growing salience within international relations is its considerable capacity to generate symbolic and material capital. Mega sporting events increasingly operate as key instruments through which states engage in identity construction, reframing historical narratives and communicating strategic messages to global audiences (Kramareva, 2018). The Olympic Games, the FIFA World Cup and Formula 1 among other high-profile events serve as diplomatic platforms through which states articulate cultural values, signal modernisation agendas and promote economic visions on a global stage (Al-marri et al., 2025). In this respect, sport provides an influential "display arena" that reinforces national identity at the domestic level while simultaneously repositioning it within the international sphere (Boykoff, 2016; Giulianotti, 2015).

Sport's relationship with public diplomacy mechanisms forms another critical dimension. Because sport tends to carry a relatively ideology-light character and communicates through a broadly accessible cultural idiom, it has become a valuable component of states' attraction-based foreign-policy strategies (Young, 2024). The visibility of athletes, sporting teams and international competitions offers states opportunities to exert influence at societal and cultural levels beyond the confines of formal diplomacy. Hence, sport is operationalised as a subcomponent of soft power, utilised in tandem with cultural diplomacy initiatives, international exchange programmes, media communication strategies and global branding efforts (Nye, 2004; Postlethwaite et al., 2022).

A further structural feature underpinning sport's rising prominence in international relations is its transformation into a stage for geopolitical competition. Emerging and resource-rich powers including China, Qatar, Russia and the United Arab Emirates have deployed sports-related investments in line with their broader foreign-policy objectives (Dousti et al., 2024). Through costly mega-event hosting, acquisition of international sports clubs, sponsorship diplomacy and large-scale infrastructure development, these states seek to enhance their visibility and claim symbolic space within global political discourse. In the literature, such practices have been conceptualised through notions such as the "geopoliticisation of sport" and "sportswashing," highlighting sport's dual potential for legitimacy-building and legitimacy contestation (Brannagan and Giulianotti, 2018; Grix and Brannagan, 2024).

Sport's position in international relations is also shaped by the rise of multi-actor diplomacy. Rather than constituting an exclusively state-led field, sport forms a complex arena that involves international organisations (IOC, UNESCO, UN), civil-society networks (Peace Players, Right to Play), global sports federations, transnational media outlets and multinational brands (Adidas, Nike, Qatar Airways) (Ubaidulloev, 2018). This multi-actor architecture enables sport to play important indirect roles in norm-setting, agenda-building and global governance processes (UNESCO, 2021; United Nations, 2016).

Finally, understanding sport's contemporary relevance requires acknowledging its capacity for emotional and cultural mobilisation (Cha, 2009). The emotional connectivity generated through sport extending far beyond the field of play facilitates societal bonding, reinforces international representations of national belonging and enhances cultural interaction. For these reasons, sport is widely regarded as a "high-

impact soft power resource” operating at both symbolic and cultural levels within international communication (Dubinsky, 2019).

The Historical Evolution of Sports Diplomacy

The historical development of sports diplomacy is deeply intertwined with the modernisation of sport and the fluctuating power dynamics of the international system (Akhmetkarimov and Aminova, 2021). Early Olympic events and international competitions emerging in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries functioned as cultural platforms that enhanced the visibility of nation-states; however, during this early phase, sport was largely framed through ideals of international friendship, physical cultivation and peaceful interaction. Although the foundational ethos of the modern Olympic movement foregrounded peace, fraternity and cross-cultural understanding thereby embedding sport with symbolic diplomatic value from the outset the systematic conceptualisation of sports diplomacy as a deliberate foreign-policy instrument belongs to a much later era (Cha, 2009; Murray, 2012).

The Cold War era represents a decisive turning point during which the diplomatic role of sport became markedly visible (Vonnard and Quin, 2017). Ideological rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union permeated international sporting arenas: medal counts, record-breaking achievements and Olympic success functioned as propaganda tools used to showcase the superiority of competing political systems. The boycotts of the 1980 Moscow and 1984 Los Angeles Olympics made clear that sport was far from an apolitical activity; instead, it became a prominent stage on which geopolitical tensions were projected. At the same time, sport demonstrated its potential to operate as a symbolic instrument for de-escalation, dialogue and confidence-building, as demonstrated by the 1971 “Ping-Pong diplomacy” between the United States and China (Cha, 2009). This duality highlights the paradoxical nature of sports diplomacy, which carries the capacity to both intensify political conflict and mitigate it (Murray, 2012).

With the end of the Cold War and the acceleration of globalisation, sports diplomacy adopted a more institutionalised and multi-actor configuration. During the 1990s and 2000s, international organisations including the United Nations, UNESCO and the IOC began to integrate sport into frameworks concerned with development, peacebuilding and social inclusion, developing programmes under the broader rubric of “Sport for Development and Peace” (UNESCO, 2021; United Nations, 2016). In this period, sport served not only as a field of prestige competition but also as a conduit for development aims, social-transformation initiatives and normative agendas. Consequently, sports diplomacy evolved from a relatively narrow, state-centred practice into a multi-layered and interdisciplinary policy domain (Zhang, 2025).

The 2000s constitute a phase in which mega-sport events were explicitly aligned with soft power strategies. China’s hosting of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, Brazil’s organisation of the 2014 FIFA World Cup and the 2016 Rio Olympics, Russia’s 2014 Sochi Winter Games and Qatar’s 2022 FIFA World Cup exemplify cases in which sports investments were deliberately connected to broader foreign-policy visions (Boykoff, 2016; Grix and Brannagan, 2016; Næss, 2023). During this period,

concepts such as “sportswashing” and “soft disempowerment” gained prominence, underscoring that sports diplomacy was being conceptualised not only as a positive soft-power asset but also as a contested and potentially fragile domain (Brannagan and Giulianotti, 2018; Dubinsky, 2019). Critiques that authoritarian-leaning states or those with problematic human-rights records might use mega-sport events to sanitise their image or suppress external criticism brought the normative dimension of sports diplomacy into sharper focus. Thus, the historical evolution of sports diplomacy reflects a dual process: the expansion of soft power capacity on one hand and its entanglement with ethical, political and governance-related debates on the other (Jirouchova, 2022).

A further milestone in the historical progression of sports diplomacy is its gradual recognition as a formalised diplomatic field. Publications documenting the IOC’s work on Olympic diplomacy and UN reports addressing sport’s contributions to peace and development have aimed to situate sport within the system of global governance (International Olympic Committee, 2025; United Nations, 2016). UNESCO’s policy frameworks promoting inclusion, equality and peacebuilding through sport further reinforce the normative foundations of contemporary sports diplomacy (UNESCO, 2021). This move towards institutionalisation reflects an effort to transform sports diplomacy from sporadic, event-driven initiatives into a strategically aligned, measurable and policy-grounded domain (Abdi et al., 2018; Murray and Pigman, 2013).

In summary, the historical development of sports diplomacy may be understood along three principal axes: (i) the shift from early cultural encounters and Olympic ideals to the ideological rivalries of the Cold War (Cary, 2011); (ii) its incorporation into development, peace and multi-actor governance agendas in the post-Cold War environment (Baroncelli and Irrera, 2024); and (iii) its transformation in the 2000s and thereafter into a strategic soft-power instrument articulated through mega-events, branding initiatives and global media networks (Alshikhy et al., 2025). This layered historical trajectory indicates that contemporary sports diplomacy is no longer confined to symbolic gestures; rather, it has become a complex foreign-policy instrument shaped by geopolitical competition, normative contestation and multi-actor collaborations.

The Theoretical Development of the Soft Power Concept

The notion of soft power constitutes a major conceptual departure within international relations theory, challenging long-standing assumptions that power can be reduced to military capability or economic leverage alone (Ding, 2010). Since the early 1990s, Nye who introduced the term into scholarly discourse has redirected debates by asserting that the capacity of an actor to “get others to do what it wants” relies not only on coercion or material inducements but also on the ability to attract and persuade (Armitage and Nye, 2007). Soft power, in this sense, denotes a state’s capability to shape the preferences of others indirectly through cultural appeal, political values and foreign-policy conduct that is perceived as legitimate (Nye, 2004).

In Nye’s formulation, soft power rests upon three principal categories of resources: (i) cultural assets such as popular culture, the arts, linguistic influence and lifestyle imagery (Lovric, 2016); (ii) political values and institutions, including

democratic norms, human rights principles and commitments to the rule of law (Berger and Lake, 2018); and (iii) perceptions of legitimacy within foreign policy, encompassing adherence to international law, support for multilateralism and consistency in normative commitments (Chong, 2017). The sharp distinction Nye draws between hard power defined by military capacity and economic coercion and soft power subsequently provided the conceptual foundation for “smart power”, a framework advocating the strategic integration of coercion and attraction as the optimal foreign-policy orientation (Biscop, 2021).

The advancement of soft power theory has evolved in close tandem with the expanding scholarship on public diplomacy and cultural diplomacy (Zamorano, 2016). Government-led communication strategies targeting international publics, cultural-exchange programmes, scholarship schemes, international broadcasting platforms and nation-branding campaigns have all been identified as operational mechanisms for the production of soft power (Rosenbaum-Elliott et al., 2018). As such, soft power extends beyond an abstract potential for attraction and emerges as a policy tool that is institutionally governed, strategically coordinated and actively managed. It intersects with the logic of “new public diplomacy”, which emphasises multilayered communication systems spanning state–society, state–state and society–society spheres. Consequently, soft power has increasingly been conceptualised as a broad communicative space that transcends traditional diplomacy while incorporating pronounced cultural and media dimensions (Dodds and Khatib, 2009).

Ultimately, the theoretical evolution of soft power challenges realist traditions centred predominantly on hard material capabilities by elevating elements such as culture, values and legitimacy often dismissed as peripheral into central analytical categories (Shalaby, 2008). Nonetheless, the concept’s normative weight, coupled with the inherent difficulty of empirical measurement, renders it both analytically illuminating and simultaneously contested. This conceptual foundation provides an essential framework for understanding why highly visible and culturally resonant domains such as sport play an increasingly prominent role within state-level soft power strategies (Kang and Houlihan, 2021).

The Role of Sport in the Use of Soft Power

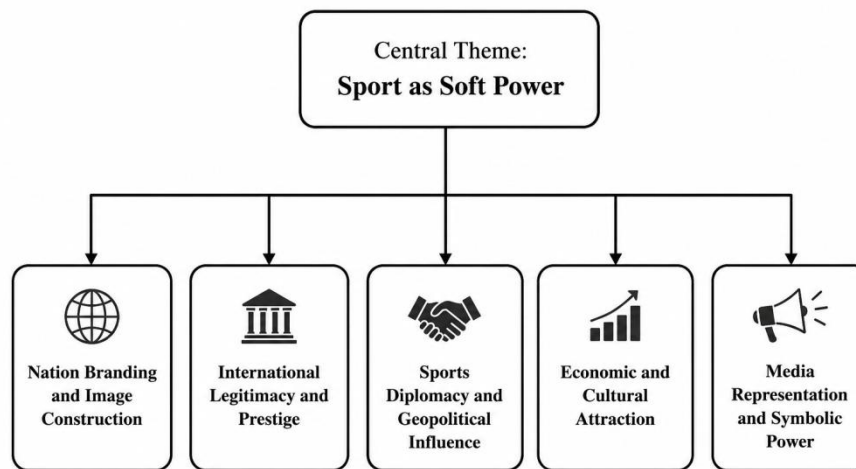
One of the most prominent contributions of sport to soft-power production lies in its capacity to enhance international recognition and project national image (Dubinsky, 2019). Mega sporting events most notably the Olympic Games, the FIFA World Cup and the Formula 1 Grand Prix offer host states opportunities to showcase modernity, economic dynamism, technological innovation and cultural diversity before global audiences (Gruneau and Horne, 2015). Grix and Brannagan (2024) illustrate that such events are deliberately employed as instruments of “image engineering,” emphasising their ability to influence international perceptions positively. Boykoff (2016) similarly argues that mega-events do more than generate prestige; they enable states to shape narrative constructions within the global political arena.

Sport also represents a significant dimension of states' cultural diplomacy strategies. Cultural exchange facilitated through athletes, coaching teams and international clubs strengthens the capacity to build societal connections across borders. In this regard, sport fuses with the symbolic capital created through culture, nurturing positive sentiments among foreign publics (Maguire, 2002). Dubinsky (2019) conceptualises sport's cultural-diplomacy function as a form of "high-visibility cultural representation," identifying elite athletes and global sporting icons as influential carriers of international appeal. Moreover, the cultural transmission embedded in sponsorship initiatives by multinational brands such as Nike and Adidas further enhances sport's value as a transnational soft-power resource that extends beyond the confines of national boundaries (Giulianotti, 2015).

Another crucial contribution of sports diplomacy to soft-power dynamics concerns its potential for diplomatic communication and peacebuilding. Given its universal idiom, sport offers a powerful medium for reducing hostility symbolically and creating alternative channels of interaction (Nygård and Gates, 2013). Historical episodes including Ping-Pong diplomacy, inter-Korean joint sporting initiatives and various forms of intercultural engagement during international competitions demonstrate how sport can operate as a "confidence-building diplomatic tool" during periods of heightened political tension (Mangan, 2014). Murray (2012) frames this sphere as one of "dual impact", noting that sport can simultaneously reinforce national identity and contribute to conflict-mitigation processes.

The economic dimension of sport functions as an additional component of soft-power generation. The global growth of the sports industry contributes to economic diplomacy through sponsorship arrangements, broadcasting revenues and increased tourism flows (Chadwick et al., 2020). Emerging powers such as Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and China deploy sports-related investments not only for economic return but also to extend their political influence. Brannagan and Giulianotti (2018), who link Qatar's sports investments to "soft power and the pursuit of legitimacy," highlight the strategic integration between economic ambition and foreign-policy objectives.

However, sport's role in producing soft power does not invariably lead to positive outcomes. Escalating event costs, human-rights criticisms, environmental concerns and allegations of media restriction may all erode the soft-power benefits states seek to attain. Boykoff (2016) and Grix and Brannagan (2024) describe this dynamic as "soft disempowerment," noting that the mismanagement or politicisation of sport may result in trust deficits and reputational decline. Consequently, the strategic coherence, ethical consistency and transparency of sports-related initiatives are essential conditions for ensuring sport's effectiveness as a soft-power instrument (Chadwick et al., 2020).

Figure 1. *Thematic Structure of Sport as a Soft-Power Instrument*

Note. Developed by the authors based on thematic synthesis findings.

The thematic synthesis demonstrated that these dimensions operate interdependently rather than independently. The analysed studies collectively suggest that sport-related soft power emerges through the interaction of symbolic visibility, diplomatic communication, global media circulation and cultural consumption processes. Rather than functioning as isolated mechanisms, these dimensions appear to reinforce one another within broader state-led public diplomacy strategies.

Materials and Methods

This study employed a qualitative meta-synthesis design to examine the role of sport as an emerging instrument of soft power in global politics. Unlike conventional statistical reviews based on aggregated effect sizes, qualitative meta-synthesis enables the systematic integration of conceptually related empirical studies in order to identify recurring patterns, interpretive frameworks and thematic relationships across different geopolitical contexts (Cooper, 2017; Borenstein et al., 2021). The approach was considered appropriate because the existing scholarship on sport and soft power is methodologically heterogeneous and predominantly composed of qualitative case studies, discourse analyses and mixed-method research rather than standardised experimental datasets.

The analytical focus of the study centred on how sport functions as a diplomatic, symbolic and reputational resource within international relations, particularly through mega-sport events, nation-branding initiatives and transnational image-construction processes.

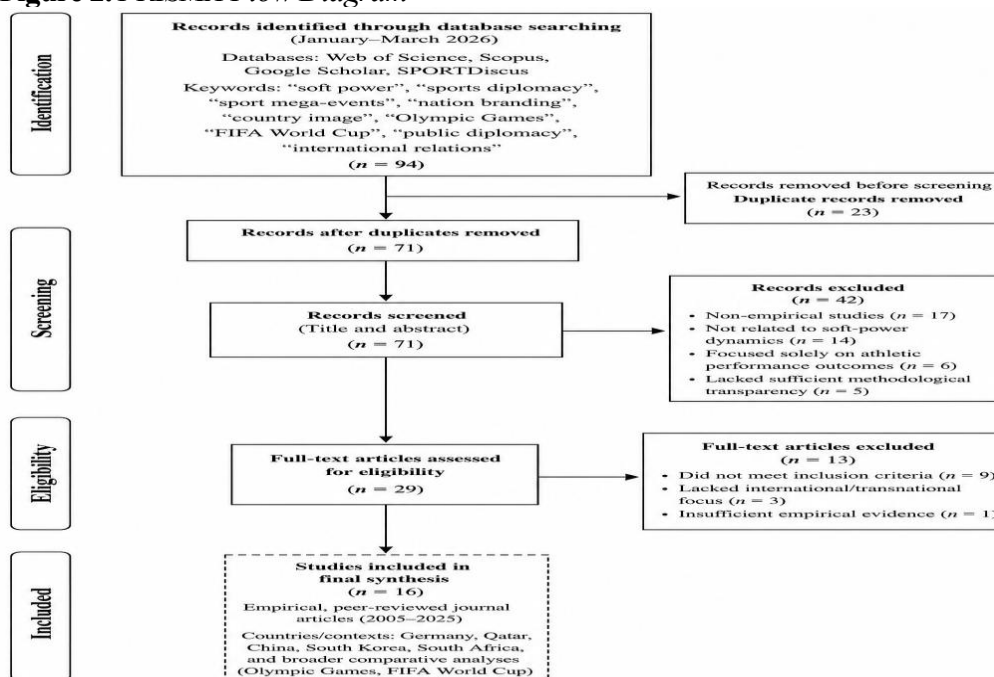
Selection of Studies

The dataset consisted exclusively of peer-reviewed empirical journal articles published between 2005 and 2025. To enhance methodological consistency and analytical transparency, books, book chapters, editorials, conceptual essays and policy commentaries were excluded from the analysis. The literature search was conducted between January and March 2026 using four major academic databases: Web of Science, Scopus, Google Scholar and SPORTDiscus.

The search strategy employed combinations of the following keywords: “soft power”, “sports diplomacy”, “sport mega-events”, “nation branding”, “country image”, “Olympic Games”, “FIFA World Cup”, “public diplomacy” and “international relations”. Boolean operators (“AND”, “OR”) were used to refine the search strings. Only English-language studies published in indexed academic journals were considered eligible.

The initial database search identified 94 records. After duplicate removal, 71 studies remained for title and abstract screening. Subsequently, 42 studies were excluded because they were either non-empirical, unrelated to soft-power dynamics, focused solely on athletic performance outcomes, or lacked sufficient methodological transparency. Full-text assessment was then conducted for the remaining 29 studies. Following eligibility evaluation, 16 studies satisfied all inclusion criteria and were retained for final synthesis.

Figure 2. PRISMA Flow Diagram



Note. Adapted from Page et al. (2021).

The inclusion criteria were as follows: (i) The study had to examine sport within the framework of soft power, public diplomacy, nation branding or international image construction. (ii) The study had to contain empirical material (e.g., surveys,

interviews, discourse analysis, social media data, policy analysis or comparative case studies). (iii) The publication had to be peer-reviewed and indexed in recognised academic databases. (iv) The study had to focus on international or transnational dimensions of sport-related political influence.

The final sample included studies addressing Germany, Qatar, China, South Korea and South Africa, as well as broader comparative analyses concerning Olympic Games and FIFA World Cup events.

Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions: (i) How is sport conceptualised as an instrument of soft power within contemporary international relations? (ii) Through which mechanisms do mega-sport events contribute to nation branding and international image construction? (iii) In what ways do states utilise sport diplomacy to pursue foreign-policy and reputational objectives? (iv) Which recurring thematic dimensions emerge across empirical studies examining sport and soft power?

Characteristics of the Included Studies

Table 1. *Methodological Distribution of the Studies Included in the Meta-Synthesis*

Type of Study	Number (n)	Percentage (%)
Qualitative case study / discourse analysis	8	50.0
Quantitative survey-based study	5	31.3
Mixed-method research	2	12.5
Social media / digital data analysis	1	6.2
Total	16	100

Note. Compiled by the authors.

Table 1 demonstrates that qualitative case-study and discourse-analysis approaches constituted the dominant methodological orientation within the analysed literature, accounting for 50% of the included studies. Quantitative survey-based research represented the second-largest methodological category, while mixed-method and social media-based analyses appeared less frequently. This distribution indicates that the literature on sport and soft power remains predominantly interpretive and context-oriented in methodological character.

Table 2. *Characteristics and Main Findings of the Studies Included in the Meta-Synthesis*

Author(s)	Focus / Case	Methodological Orientation	Main Soft-Power Finding
Brannagan & Rookwood (2016)	Qatar 2022 FIFA World Cup	Qualitative interviews	Mega-events increased visibility but also generated “soft disempowerment” through international criticism.
Dun et al. (2022)	Qatar 2022 / Twitter discourse	Social media analysis	Digital media narratives significantly shaped international perceptions of Qatar.
El-Dabt et al. (2025)	Nation branding through sport	Conceptual-empirical analysis	Sustainable sport strategies strengthened long-term nation-branding capacity.
Grix (2012)	Germany 2006 FIFA World Cup	Qualitative case study	Germany used the World Cup to reconstruct its international image positively.
Grix & Brannagan (2016)	Soft power strategies through sport	Comparative conceptual analysis	Sport diplomacy operates through attraction, legitimacy and symbolic projection.
Grix & Lee (2013)	Emerging states and mega-events	Comparative qualitative analysis	Emerging powers use mega-events to enhance prestige and geopolitical visibility.
Gripsrud et al. (2010)	Mega-events and country image	Quantitative survey	Hosting mega-events positively influenced national image perceptions.
Hahm et al. (2018)	Olympic Games and destination image	Quantitative tourism analysis	Olympic image significantly influenced destination and country perceptions.
Jeong et al. (2024)	China’s soft-power strategy	Qualitative policy analysis	China integrated mega-events into broader state-led soft-power strategies.
Kim & Morrison (2005)	South Korea 2002 FIFA World Cup	Survey-based research	The World Cup improved foreign tourists’ perceptions of South Korea.
Kim et al. (2014)	Destination and country image	Quantitative analysis	Mega-events positively affected destination attractiveness and symbolic image.
Knott et al. (2015)	South Africa 2010 FIFA World Cup	Qualitative case study	Mega-events created opportunities for nation branding and international visibility.
Knott et al. (2017)	South Africa and nation branding	Hospitality-oriented qualitative analysis	Sport mega-events reinforced symbolic positioning and global recognition.
Kobierecki & Strożek (2017)	Sport and nation branding	Quantitative analysis	Sport functioned as a measurable contributor to nation-branding processes.

Author(s)	Focus / Case	Methodological Orientation	Main Soft-Power Finding
Lee & Chappelet (2012)	Olympic host-city selection	Policy-oriented analysis	Soft-power considerations influenced Olympic host-city decisions.
Manzenreiter (2010)	Beijing Olympics	Critical discourse analysis	International media narratives limited China's soft-power effectiveness.

Note. Developed by the authors through qualitative meta-synthesis.

Table 2 provides a systematic overview of the empirical focus, methodological orientation and principal findings of the studies included in the qualitative meta-synthesis. Although the methodological orientations of the analysed studies varied considerably, ranging from qualitative case studies and discourse analyses to quantitative surveys and digital media analysis, a substantial degree of conceptual convergence emerged across the literature. The findings consistently suggested that sport functions as a multidimensional soft-power resource through which states attempt to enhance international visibility, symbolic legitimacy and geopolitical influence.

Overall, the reviewed studies collectively demonstrate that sport-related soft power is not produced automatically through event hosting itself, but rather through broader processes involving diplomatic communication, global media visibility, symbolic representation and strategic nation-branding practices.

Data Analysis

The analytical stage employed thematic content analysis following the procedures proposed by Thomas and Harden (2008). All selected studies were systematically coded in order to identify recurring conceptual and empirical patterns regarding the use of sport within soft-power strategies.

The coding process proceeded in three stages: (i) open coding, (ii) thematic categorisation and (iii) interpretive synthesis. Through iterative comparison across the dataset, five overarching thematic domains were identified: (i) Nation branding and image construction (ii) International legitimacy and reputational enhancement (iii) Sports diplomacy and geopolitical influence (iv) Economic and cultural attraction (v) Media representation and symbolic power

To improve analytical transparency and consistency, NVivo 12 software was utilised for qualitative coding and thematic clustering. Coding reliability was assessed through independent coding by two researchers. Inter-coder agreement was calculated using Cohen's Kappa coefficient, yielding $\kappa = 0.81$, which indicates a strong level of reliability according to the interpretive thresholds proposed by Landis and Koch (1977).

Reliability and Validity

Several procedures were employed to enhance methodological rigour. First, a transparent inclusion–exclusion protocol was established prior to data collection in order to minimise selection bias. Second, the use of multiple academic databases improved source diversity and reduced database dependency. Third, independent coding and cross-checking procedures strengthened thematic consistency and interpretive reliability.

Construct validity was reinforced through interdisciplinary triangulation, as the selected studies originated from the fields of international relations, sport management, tourism studies, communication and diplomacy research. This interdisciplinary structure enabled a multidimensional interpretation of sport as a soft-power instrument.

Limitations

The study contains several limitations. First, the literature on sport and soft power remains heavily concentrated in Western and English-language academic publishing, which may restrict the geographical representativeness of the findings. Second, because the analysis relied on qualitative synthesis rather than quantitative aggregation, the study does not provide direct measurements of causal impact. Third, the methodological heterogeneity of the included studies limited the possibility of generating directly comparable empirical outcomes across all cases.

Nevertheless, the qualitative meta-synthesis design provided substantial interpretive depth by enabling cross-contextual comparison of how sport functions as a diplomatic and symbolic resource in global politics.

Results

The qualitative meta-synthesis of the 16 empirical studies indicated that sport functions as a multidimensional soft-power instrument operating simultaneously across diplomatic, symbolic, cultural and reputational domains. Despite methodological heterogeneity among the analysed studies, a substantial degree of thematic convergence emerged concerning the strategic use of mega-sport events for international image construction, legitimacy enhancement and geopolitical visibility. The reviewed literature generally suggests that sport has increasingly evolved beyond entertainment and competition into a strategic mechanism through which states attempt to cultivate attraction, recognition and international influence.

Distribution of Empirical Focus Areas

The first analytical stage examined the primary substantive focus of the included studies. As shown in Table 3, the majority of the literature concentrated on nation branding and international image construction through mega-sport events, particularly the FIFA World Cup and Olympic Games. Since several studies contained

overlapping conceptual dimensions, each study was classified according to its dominant analytical emphasis.

Table 3. *Primary Empirical Focus of the Included Studies*

Empirical Focus Area	Number (n)	Percentage (%)
Nation branding and country image	6	37.5
Sports diplomacy and soft power strategy	5	31.3
Mega-event legacy and international prestige	3	18.7
Media representation and digital perception	2	12.5
Total	16	100

Note. Compiled by the authors.

As demonstrated in Table 3, nation branding and country image emerged as the dominant analytical focus within the examined literature, accounting for 37.5% of the included studies. The reviewed studies generally indicate that nation branding constitutes the central analytical concern across the literature. Research focusing on Germany, South Africa, Qatar and South Korea consistently suggested that mega-events are strategically utilised to reshape international perceptions and improve national reputation. In particular, Kim and Morrison (2005), Knott et al. (2015) and Hahm et al. (2018) demonstrated that positive destination-image and country-image outcomes were frequently associated with successful event hosting and extensive international media visibility.

Geographical Distribution of Cases

A second analytical dimension concerned the geographical concentration of the empirical evidence. The distribution of cases is presented in Table 3.

Table 4. *Geographical Distribution of Examined Cases*

Country / Region	Number of Studies (n)
Qatar	4
South Africa	2
China	2
Germany	1
South Korea	1
Comparative / Multi-country analyses	6
Total	16

Note. Compiled by the authors.

As presented in Table 4, the geographical distribution of the examined studies demonstrates that scholarship on sport-related soft power is heavily concentrated around emerging or strategically image-sensitive states seeking increased international

visibility. Qatar emerged as the most frequently analysed case, reflecting the country's extensive investment in sport diplomacy and mega-event hosting strategies associated with the 2022 FIFA World Cup. Similarly, studies concerning China and South Africa frequently interpreted mega-events as instruments for repositioning national identity, enhancing symbolic legitimacy and increasing international recognition.

Nation Branding and International Image Construction

One of the most consistent findings across the analysed studies concerns the role of sport in nation branding and international image reconstruction. Mega-sport events were repeatedly conceptualised as platforms through which states seek to generate favourable international perceptions and strengthen symbolic legitimacy.

Kim and Morrison (2005) demonstrated that the 2002 FIFA World Cup positively altered foreign tourists' perceptions of South Korea, particularly regarding modernity, hospitality and cultural attractiveness. Similarly, Grix (2012) argued that Germany strategically leveraged the 2006 FIFA World Cup to reconstruct its international image through narratives of openness, friendliness and democratic normalisation.

Knott et al. (2015; 2017) further suggested that South Africa used the 2010 FIFA World Cup to position itself as both a regional leader and a globally integrated destination. Collectively, these studies indicate that mega-events function not merely as sporting spectacles but also as strategic communication mechanisms designed to enhance international reputation and diplomatic visibility.

Table 5. *Major Nation-Branding Outcomes Identified in the Literature*

Country / Event	Major Soft-Power Outcome
Germany – FIFA 2006	Image normalisation and friendliness
South Korea – FIFA 2002	Improved tourist perceptions
South Africa – FIFA 2010	Increased international visibility
Qatar – FIFA 2022	Strategic global positioning
China – Olympics	International prestige and legitimacy

Note. Compiled by the authors.

The findings presented in Table 5 demonstrate that mega-sport events have frequently been utilised as strategic instruments for the reconstruction, enhancement and international projection of national image. Across the examined cases, states employed globally visible sporting events not merely as entertainment platforms, but as mechanisms for symbolic communication, diplomatic signalling and reputational management within the international system.

The German case associated with the 2006 FIFA World Cup particularly illustrated how sport may contribute to the normalisation of national identity and the promotion of positive emotional narratives such as openness, hospitality and democratic modernity. Similarly, the South Korean experience following the 2002 FIFA World Cup suggested that mega-events may significantly improve external

perceptions among international visitors, especially regarding cultural attractiveness, tourism appeal and global recognition.

The findings concerning South Africa and Qatar further indicate that emerging or strategically repositioning states frequently utilise mega-events to strengthen international visibility and reinforce geopolitical relevance. In these contexts, sport appears to function not only as a cultural resource but also as a form of symbolic capital capable of enhancing international legitimacy and soft-power capacity. The Chinese case likewise demonstrated that Olympic hosting strategies may serve broader state-led efforts aimed at consolidating prestige, projecting modernity and strengthening global influence.

More broadly, the comparative synthesis suggests that nation branding through sport becomes more effective when accompanied by extensive international media visibility, coherent diplomatic messaging, institutional coordination and long-term strategic planning. The analysed studies collectively indicate that positive soft-power outcomes rarely emerge automatically from event hosting itself; rather, they depend upon the ability of states to integrate sporting spectacles into wider public-diplomacy and communication strategies. At the same time, several studies implied that reputational gains remain highly contingent upon international political context and media interpretation, meaning that mega-events may simultaneously generate visibility, scrutiny and geopolitical contestation.

Sports Diplomacy and Geopolitical Influence

Another major finding concerns the increasing institutionalisation of sports diplomacy within foreign-policy strategies. Several studies conceptualised mega-events as tools of geopolitical attraction designed to strengthen diplomatic influence through symbolic and reputational mechanisms rather than coercive power.

Grix and Lee (2013) argued that emerging states increasingly rely on mega-events to enhance international status and symbolic recognition. Similarly, Grix and Brannagan (2016) demonstrated that sport diplomacy frequently operates through indirect mechanisms of attraction, legitimacy and reputational projection rather than immediate political outcomes.

The Qatar-focused studies were particularly illustrative in this regard. Brannagan and Rookwood (2016) identified both “soft power” and “soft disempowerment” dynamics, arguing that while Qatar successfully increased international visibility, the country simultaneously became more vulnerable to criticism concerning labour rights, governance and political legitimacy.

Jeong et al. (2024) similarly demonstrated that China strategically integrates mega-events into broader state-led soft-power initiatives aimed at enhancing global influence while reinforcing domestic legitimacy.

Media Representation and Symbolic Power

The qualitative meta-synthesis also highlighted the growing importance of digital communication and media representation in shaping sport-related soft power. Dun et al. (2022), through Twitter/X data analysis, demonstrated that online discourse significantly influenced global perceptions of Qatar during the 2022 FIFA World Cup period.

Similarly, Manzenreiter (2010) argued that the Beijing Olympics illustrated the limitations of soft power when international media narratives remain shaped by ideological or geopolitical tensions. The reviewed studies therefore suggest that sport alone cannot fully control international perception; rather, soft-power outcomes are mediated through global media ecosystems and transnational public discourse.

This pattern further indicates that symbolic power in sport increasingly operates within digital communication environments where state narratives compete with alternative interpretations produced by journalists, activists and global audiences.

Table 6. *Dominant Thematic Codes Identified in the Nvivo Analysis*

Thematic Code	Frequency
Nation branding	14
International prestige	13
Soft power strategy	12
Media visibility	10
Diplomatic influence	9
Cultural attraction	8
Global legitimacy	7

Note. Frequencies represent the number of studies in which each thematic code appeared at least once.

The thematic coding frequencies presented in Table 6 provide further evidence that nation branding, symbolic reputation and international prestige constitute the dominant conceptual foundations of the analysed literature. Among the identified themes, “nation branding” emerged as the most frequently recurring code, appearing in 14 of the 16 studies, followed closely by “international prestige” and “soft power strategy.” This distribution suggests that the existing scholarship predominantly conceptualises sport as a strategic instrument for enhancing state visibility, legitimacy and international attractiveness rather than merely as a cultural or recreational activity.

The prominence of media visibility and diplomatic influence further indicates that soft power in sport is largely mediated through global communication processes and transnational audience engagement. In this regard, the reviewed literature consistently emphasises that mega-sport events derive political value not solely from the events themselves, but from their capacity to generate international narratives, symbolic recognition and global public attention. Similarly, the recurring emphasis on cultural attraction highlights the role of sport in facilitating cross-cultural communication and emotional connectivity between states and international audiences.

At the same time, the comparatively lower frequency associated with “global legitimacy” suggests that although legitimacy remains an important dimension of sports diplomacy, it is often discussed indirectly through broader concepts such as

prestige, image construction and reputational management. Overall, the thematic distribution identified through NVivo analysis reveals a strong degree of conceptual convergence across the literature, indicating that sport-based soft power is primarily understood as a process of symbolic projection, international positioning and strategic image management within contemporary global politics.

Interpretation of the Results

Overall, the qualitative meta-synthesis demonstrates that sport has become an increasingly institutionalised instrument of soft power within contemporary international relations. Across different geopolitical contexts, mega-sport events were generally associated with efforts to generate international visibility, strengthen diplomatic legitimacy and reshape national reputation.

However, the findings also reveal several important limitations and contradictions. Soft-power outcomes appear unstable, context-dependent and highly vulnerable to external political narratives. Several studies particularly emphasised that reputational gains may coexist with intensified international scrutiny, criticism and geopolitical contestation.

Consequently, the reviewed literature suggests that sport should not be understood as an autonomous source of soft power, but rather as a strategic platform whose effectiveness depends upon broader political credibility, media representation and international legitimacy structures.

Discussion

The present qualitative meta-synthesis moves beyond simply confirming that sport functions as an instrument of soft power and instead identifies a recurring explanatory process through which sport-related initiatives may generate, constrain or even undermine soft-power outcomes across different political contexts. Across the analysed studies, sport itself rarely emerged as the direct source of international attraction. Rather, attraction appeared to result from a sequence of interconnected mechanisms involving strategic nation branding, media representation, audience interpretation and the perceived credibility of state behaviour. This finding shifts analytical attention from viewing sport merely as a soft-power resource towards understanding the communicative processes through which sporting initiatives are translated into international influence.

This explanatory perspective also clarifies the analytical relationship between soft power, sports diplomacy, nation branding and sportswashing. The synthesis suggests that these concepts should not be treated as interchangeable. Rather, they occupy different positions within the same causal process. Sports diplomacy functions primarily as a policy instrument through which states employ sporting activities to communicate internationally. Nation branding represents the strategic communication process through which preferred national narratives are projected, whereas sportswashing constitutes a competing interpretive frame that may challenge those

narratives. Soft power, by contrast, represents the outcome of this broader communicative process, emerging only when international audiences perceive those narratives as credible, legitimate and attractive. By distinguishing these concepts analytically, the study addresses an important source of conceptual ambiguity identified in previous scholarship.

The synthesis further demonstrates that the effectiveness of sport-based soft power is neither automatic nor politically neutral. Although mega-events frequently generate substantial international visibility, visibility alone does not necessarily produce legitimacy or attraction. The Qatar case illustrates this point particularly clearly. While the 2022 FIFA World Cup significantly enhanced Qatar's global recognition and diplomatic visibility, several studies simultaneously highlighted increased scrutiny concerning labour rights, governance and political legitimacy. This duality supports Brannagan and Giulianotti's (2018) concept of the "soft power–soft disempowerment nexus." More importantly, it suggests that sporting visibility constitutes an enabling condition rather than a causal determinant of soft-power accumulation. Reputational outcomes remain contingent upon political credibility, media framing and audience evaluation, helping explain why similar sport-related strategies generate divergent soft-power outcomes across different political contexts.

Another important implication concerns the process-oriented nature of sports diplomacy. The reviewed studies collectively indicate that sport-related diplomatic influence emerges gradually through cumulative communicative mechanisms involving media visibility, symbolic recognition and audience engagement rather than through immediate foreign-policy outcomes. This observation aligns with Murray's (2012) understanding of sports diplomacy as a long-term communicative process operating through indirect cultural and symbolic channels. The findings further demonstrate that mega-events derive diplomatic value not solely from the events themselves but from the narratives, emotional associations and media representations surrounding them. Sport therefore functions less as an isolated diplomatic instrument than as a communicative platform through which states seek to embed themselves within favourable international narratives.

The findings also contribute to ongoing debates concerning the relationship between soft power and geopolitical competition. The geographical concentration of the analysed literature around states such as Qatar, China and South Africa suggests that sport-based soft-power strategies are particularly prominent among emerging or strategically repositioning powers seeking enhanced visibility within the international system. This pattern reflects broader transformations in global politics in which symbolic legitimacy and international reputation increasingly complement traditional forms of material power. As Grix and Lee (2013) argue, emerging states frequently utilise mega-events not only to demonstrate economic capacity but also to signal geopolitical relevance and international ambition. The present synthesis extends this interpretation by suggesting that geopolitical influence depends not only on hosting events but also on the credibility of the political narratives communicated through them.

Moreover, the synthesis highlights the growing importance of digital communication environments in shaping soft-power outcomes. The inclusion of social media-based research, particularly Dun et al. (2022), indicates that contemporary sports diplomacy is increasingly mediated through transnational digital

networks in which states no longer exercise exclusive control over international narratives. Instead, symbolic power is continuously negotiated among governments, journalists, activists, audiences and global media platforms. This finding reinforces public diplomacy scholarship emphasising the decentralised and interactive nature of international communication in the digital era (Dodds and Khatib, 2009). Consequently, sport-related soft power should be understood as an interactive process of communication rather than a state-controlled projection of influence.

The findings additionally reveal an important normative tension within contemporary sports diplomacy. While many studies highlighted sport's capacity to facilitate intercultural dialogue, international recognition and symbolic cooperation, others simultaneously identified concerns regarding sportswashing, reputational manipulation and governance deficits. This contradiction reflects the increasingly politicised nature of global sport governance. Similar concerns have been discussed in relation to the "3S" (soft power, sportswashing and sports diplomacy) framework developed in the context of the BRICS countries and the Qatar World Cup (Bettine de Almeida and Özdemir, 2023). These findings challenge overly optimistic interpretations of sports diplomacy by demonstrating that sport does not inherently generate legitimacy or peace-building outcomes. Rather, political effects remain conditional upon institutional credibility, ethical consistency and international media interpretation.

From a theoretical perspective, the principal contribution of this study is not to argue that sport constitutes a soft-power resource, since this proposition is already well established in the literature. Rather, the contribution lies in developing an integrative explanatory framework specifying the causal mechanisms linking sport, strategic communication and international influence. The synthesis suggests that sport generates soft-power outcomes only when three conditions operate simultaneously: coherent strategic projection, credible political behaviour, and favourable audience interpretation. When one or more of these conditions is absent, sport may instead reinforce scepticism, reputational contestation or soft disempowerment. This framework therefore shifts analytical attention from asking whether sport functions as soft power towards explaining how, why and under which conditions sport produces divergent reputational outcomes.

Nevertheless, several limitations warrant further consideration. First, the analysed literature remains heavily concentrated in English-language and Western academic contexts, potentially limiting the representativeness of alternative regional perspectives. Second, because the study employed qualitative meta-synthesis rather than statistical effect-size aggregation, the findings should be interpreted primarily as conceptual and interpretive tendencies rather than universally generalisable causal relationships. Third, the methodological heterogeneity of the included studies, particularly the coexistence of discourse analyses, surveys, policy analyses and social media studies, complicates direct cross-case comparability.

Future research may therefore benefit from adopting mixed-method comparative frameworks capable of integrating qualitative interpretation with longitudinal quantitative indicators of reputation, diplomatic influence and international perception. Comparative studies examining the long-term reputational effects of mega-events across different political systems could substantially deepen understanding of the causal conditions under which sport-based soft power succeeds, fails or produces

unintended reputational consequences. Additionally, the growing influence of digital communication environments suggests the importance of incorporating computational communication analysis and transnational audience studies into future sports diplomacy research.

Overall, the findings suggest that sport has become an increasingly central communicative arena through which states seek to negotiate visibility, legitimacy and influence within the contemporary international system. However, sport should not be understood as an autonomous producer of soft power. Rather, its effectiveness depends upon the interaction between strategic communication, political credibility and audience interpretation. Accordingly, soft power emerges not from sport itself but from the communicative and political processes through which sporting initiatives are interpreted within broader international contexts.

Conclusion

This study examined the role of sport in contemporary soft-power strategies through a qualitative meta-synthesis of 16 empirical studies published between 2005 and 2025. Rather than reaffirming the widely accepted proposition that sport constitutes an instrument of soft power, the study sought to explain how, why and under which political, communicative and institutional conditions sport contributes to divergent soft-power outcomes. The findings demonstrate that sport should be understood not as a direct source of international attraction but as a strategic communicative resource whose effectiveness depends upon broader processes of political credibility, media representation and audience interpretation.

The synthesis indicates that sport-related soft power is generated through an interconnected communicative process rather than through sporting events alone. Nation branding provides the strategic projection of national narratives, sports diplomacy facilitates international engagement, and sportswashing represents a competing interpretive frame capable of undermining those narratives. Soft power therefore emerges not from sport itself but from the extent to which international audiences perceive these narratives as credible, legitimate and attractive. This analytical distinction contributes to clarifying the conceptual relationships among soft power, sports diplomacy, nation branding and sportswashing, which have frequently been treated as interchangeable within previous scholarship.

A central conclusion of the study is that international visibility should not be interpreted as a sufficient indicator of soft-power success. Although mega-events frequently increase global attention, reputational outcomes remain contingent upon political credibility, ethical consistency, media framing and audience evaluation. Consequently, sporting visibility functions as an enabling condition rather than a causal determinant of attraction. This finding helps explain why similar sport-related strategies may generate markedly different reputational consequences across different political and institutional contexts.

The study further demonstrates that sports diplomacy operates as a cumulative communicative process rather than producing immediate diplomatic outcomes. Diplomatic influence develops gradually through symbolic recognition, media

narratives, public engagement and sustained international communication. The growing importance of digital media environments further reinforces that soft power is continuously negotiated among governments, media organisations, civil-society actors and international audiences rather than being controlled exclusively by states.

From a theoretical perspective, the principal contribution of this study lies in developing an integrative explanatory framework specifying the causal mechanisms linking sport, strategic communication and international influence. The findings suggest that sport generates soft-power outcomes only when three interrelated conditions operate simultaneously: coherent strategic projection, credible political behaviour and favourable audience interpretation. When one or more of these conditions is absent, sport may instead reinforce reputational contestation, scepticism or soft disempowerment. By shifting analytical attention from asking whether sport functions as an instrument of soft power towards explaining how, why and under which conditions sport produces divergent reputational outcomes, the study extends existing scholarship beyond predominantly descriptive accounts.

Nevertheless, several limitations should be acknowledged. The analysed literature remains geographically concentrated around a relatively small number of high-profile host states and predominantly reflects English-language scholarship. Furthermore, because the study employed qualitative meta-synthesis rather than statistical aggregation, the findings should be interpreted as explanatory conceptual patterns rather than universally generalisable causal laws.

Future research would benefit from comparative mixed-method designs capable of integrating qualitative interpretation with longitudinal quantitative indicators of international reputation, diplomatic influence and audience perception. Greater attention should also be devoted to examining how different political systems, communication environments and media ecologies condition the effectiveness of sport-based soft-power strategies over time.

Overall, the findings suggest that sport should not be regarded as an autonomous producer of soft power. Rather, its diplomatic value depends upon the interaction between strategic communication, political credibility and audience interpretation. Accordingly, soft power emerges not from sport itself but from the communicative and political processes through which sporting initiatives are interpreted within broader international contexts.

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