The recently concluded FIFA World Cup in Russia provided Russian President Vladimir Putin with a platform to engage in a fruitful bout of ‘sport diplomacy’. Through hosting the World Cup, Putin helped to enhanced Russia’s place on the international stage, positioning himself as orchestrator of a geopolitical contest for the duration of the tournament, while a quality sporting spectacle played out on the pitch.

The image of Russian President Vladimir Putin presenting FIFA World Cup medals to the successful French team on 15 July 2018, at a venue formerly known as the Lenin Stadium, will be an indelible one; not least for how he was protected from the Moscow summer rain by an umbrella while his fellow dignitaries were drenched. It may well be the vindication Putin sought for investing millions of roubles over a 10-year period for a diplomatic platform to address a global audience, while barely uttering a word. The final costs may be as high as $14.2 billion. The image of Putin on the winner’s platform will linger long after the players are back at their respective clubs playing out dramas on a variety of international stages.

The audience for the World Cup likely amounted to half of the planet’s population; well over 3 billion people watched some part of the tournament. The income to FIFA will be over $6 billion; and many more millions of roubles were spent in Russia by overseas fans, broadcasters and media, allowing for ‘people to people diplomacy’, as Simon Kuper, a columnist for the Financial Times, notes in his contribution to the SOAS Global Sports Conversations podcast series. Alongside these social and economic connections was the increased domestic spending from Russians buoyed by the unexpectedly strong performance of the national team, which, with the contribution from overseas visitors, is estimated to add 0.1–0.2 percentage points to Russia’s GDP this year, according to Russian news agency TASS. Throughout the tournament, Putin said nothing about Russia’s political challenges domestically, international concerns over Syria, Sergei Skripal, or allegations of interference in US elections. Neither did he have to share the stage with US President Donald Trump or China’s leader Xi Jinping, only appearing to concede the international spotlight to the former once the tournament had finished, at the Helsinki summit (seemingly another Russian ‘win’).

The focus, as it always is once a Sporting Mega Event (SME) is underway, was on the sporting activity on the field of play, with Putin appearing only at the first and last match of the tournament. It was Russian Prime Minister Dimitry Medvedev who attended Russia’s games, while a parade of world leaders sat with FIFA President Gianni Infantino as their teams played football below the president’s executive box; the choreography was expertly stage-managed. Even when faced with political challenges during the tournament, Putin was not derailed. These arose under various guises: from the perhaps frivolous but heart-warming case of the red and white checkerboard-adorned Croatian President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović, who paid out of pocket to attend her country’s matches in the latter stages; to a potentially divisive matter that arose out of the Switzerland versus Serbia contest.

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This match saw the Swiss win 2–1 with a last-minute goal from Xherdan Shaqiri. Like his fellow goal-scorer Granit Xhaka, Shaqiri is of Kosovar descent and upon scoring made a hand gesture of a double headed eagle akin to the image on the Albanian flag. To Serbia, who fought a war over Kosovo and were subject to NATO bombing in 1999, the gesture was
highly provocative. The Swiss pair were sanctioned by FIFA with a fine of 10,000 Swiss francs, but were allowed to continue to play in the tournament (to minimal effect: the Swiss exited in the next round after losing 1–0 to Sweden). At the same time, three English players, Deli Ali, Eric Dier and Raheem Sterling, were fined 70,000 Swiss francs for wearing unauthorised branded ankle support socks during their win over Sweden in the quarter-finals. The outcome of FIFA’s judgement on the Swiss pair drew little attention, and despite Serbian kinship with Russia, the incident did not detract from the master narrative of a football-focused event where international politics was minimised. As such, the capacity of the Russia 2018 World Cup to focus attention on football was staggering if unremarkable. What is perhaps remarkable is the enduring mark Putin made on the tournament in the decade preceding its opening match: a 5–0 triumph for the hosts against Saudi Arabia. Putin’s role, to use a footballing analogy, was of a deep-lying midfielder, shielding his defence and providing a platform for creative star teammates to perform without being centre stage himself – more N’Golo Kante than Paul Pogba, to borrow from the line-up of the winners. So Putin’s World Cup will not be remembered for his central role during the tournament, but for efficient logistics, welcoming hosts, happy fans, and high-quality football; none of which were assured beforehand.

France, the tournament’s eventual winners, gave prominence to the issue of identity in sport and diplomacy. As with France’s previous victory in the World Cup in 1998, much has been made of the multiracial, multicultural background of the team in English language media. In 1998, Zinedine Zidane’s Algerian ancestry, Patrick Vieira’s Senegalese background and Marcel Desailly’s Ghanaian heritage were given particular prominence in the aftermath of victory. Likewise, the 2018 team were spearheaded by Kylian Mbappé, Paul Pogba and N’Golo Kante, who have Cameroonian, Guinean and Malian backgrounds respectively. Cutting across race, religion and age while revealing France’s colonial heritage but also the dynamism of its 21st Century guise under Emmanuel Macron, its youngest-ever president, France’s win highlights a mixing up of France’s bleu-blanc-rouge identity with a black-blanc-beur identity. Former US President Barack Obama stated of the French team that ‘Not all of those folks looked like Gauls

FIFA President Gianni Infantino, French President Emmanuel Macron, and Croatian President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarovic are drenched while presenting medals to the victorious French national football team. Russian President Vladimir Putin remains dry. Courtesy of Valerie Sharifulin/ Tass/PA Images.
to me. But they’re French! They’re French’.

It is this collective identity, a unified France, that the French media and the players themselves have focused upon. Equally, Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff, author of *The Making of Les Blues: Sport in France, 1958-2010*, writes that for the French republic, sport has become a symbol of national status in ways that few other countries can match. She notes that France’s investment in sport – and it comes at considerable expense, the fabled Clairefontaine, France’s national football training centre, costs almost €10 million annually – carries with it diplomatic opportunities. Engaging in high-level sport provides opportunities for exchange in ways not immediately evident in national sport. The French talent production line has provided players to many other countries: 52 players at the World Cup were born in France, many in Paris and its suburbs, thus multiplying the points of connectivity across national boundaries.

The nexus of sport and diplomacy is therefore not just a national preserve, and at the SMEs of 2018 has been very evident. The Winter Olympics in PyeongChang refocused attention on the opportunity for sport occasions to be a platform for diplomatic reconciliation. While the meeting in Singapore on 12 June 2018 between President Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un may not in itself resolve the tensions between the US and North Korea over the latter’s nuclear programme, the conversation would not have taken place without the opportunity provided by the smiling appearance of Kim’s sister, Kim Yo-jong, just four months before. There will need to be much more diplomacy to denuclearise the Korean peninsula, but the platform provided by the Winter Olympics as a ‘site’ of diplomacy, along with the International Olympic Committee’s brokering of that space, illustrates the importance that sport can have in the diplomatic realm. It is often time-specific, but the cycle of sport – that there is an agreed ‘fixture list’ – means that the opportunity will come around again. In short, while the nexus of sport and diplomacy – the sport diplomatique – is at its most visible in the midst of a SME, there is a less visible dimension that is equally worthy of consideration in exploring the role of sport in international affairs.

Away from the field of play, there is much diplomacy involved in hosting a SME. The interrelation between diplomacy’s three components: negotiation, communication and representation, impact on the basics.
of sport. The ‘rules of the game’ – whatever the sport, are an outcome of negotiation: how long is the race? How many players are involved? How will the contest be scored? Equally, the route to hosting a sporting event is a challenging one involving a full panoply of diplomatic traits.

**With Qatar having been subject to a Saudi-led blockade since June 2017, the country’s geopolitical relationships will be woven into the narrative of the 2022 World Cup**

In the past 30 years, both the International Olympic Committee and football’s governing body FIFA have infamously fallen foul of corruption, whether legal or moral. The process of being selected to host an Olympics or a World Cup is a long and costly one. While the first decade of the 21st Century will come to be seen as a high point in terms of the number of states and cities seeking to host, the subsequent period has seen numerous hosts step back from the prospect, leaving only one city in the running for the 2024 and 2028 Olympics, namely Paris and Los Angeles respectively, and the 2026 World Cup being co-hosted by Canada, Mexico and the US.

Before then the focus of the footballing world will be on the next host of the month-long jamboree in Qatar in 2020. With the tournament having been moved to November and December to avoid the heat of the Gulf summer, and the bid process having been scrutinised from a variety of sources, not least the British press, it is noteworthy that Hassan Al-Thawadi, Secretary General of the Supreme Committee for Delivery and Legacy, was quick to comment on the success of Russia 2018. ‘Everybody said the Russia World Cup wouldn’t be great’, however ‘It blew people’s minds’, Thawadi noted. Seeking to build upon Putin’s achievements, he continued: ‘by the same token, we’re confident of what 2022 is going to show – and it will be a fantastic World Cup’. He ended: ‘we’ll build upon Russia’s success’. With Qatar having been subject to a Saudi-led blockade since June 2017, the country’s geopolitical relationships will be woven into the narrative of the 2022 World Cup. As the sole host, a small but well-resourced country, deeply vested in its public diplomacy, Qatar has a notable opportunity to lead in developments in sport and diplomacy and SMEs.

The subsequent triumvirate approach to hosting the 2026 World Cup is a first, and while the US will host the majority of the matches in 2026 (60, compared to 10 each in both Canada and Mexico), the United 2026 bid runs counter to the narrative of inter-American relations since the election of President Trump in 2016. His campaign rhetoric of ‘building ‘walls’, and of torpedoing the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), has come closer to reality with an immigration policy on the southern border that has seen families forcibly separated, and the US seeking substantial restructuring of NAFTA while pursuing a protectionist trade policy that has seen tariffs rise with the US’s major trading partners in Europe and Asia. The 2018 G7 summit hosted by Canada in Charlevoix, Quebec saw Trump stand alone – in a ‘G6+1’ formation as described by French commentators – and post disparaging remarks about Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau as he departed, palpably early. His contribution to the United 2026 bid was similarly contested. A tweet prior to the 68th FIFA Congress in Moscow in June 2016, which was held to decide the successful bid, was barred in seeking endorsement for the bid from ‘countries that we always support’ but who might be tempted to ‘lobby against the US bid’. The extent to which Trump’s tweet had any effect is debatable, but on 13 June the FIFA Congress endorsed the United 2026 bid over that proposed by Morocco by 134 votes to 65. At a time when Trump has talked down and walked away from many facets of the international system, and many have questioned its ongoing relevance, the success of the tripartite United 2026 bid illustrates once more that sport has the capacity to run counter, as a back eddy, to the trend of international politics. It is perhaps the distance that sport can offer from political strife that allows the three countries to host the world’s greatest footballing extravaganza while the US leader trades blows on Twitter. The symbiotic relationship of sport and diplomacy is a dynamic one.

**The Helsinki Summit saw Putin acting as the masterful midfielder, directing play even once the tournament had finished**

So, while sports aficionados will always be able to console themselves by looking out for the next fixture on the never ending merry-go-round of sporting contests, Vladimir Putin’s next destination after leaving the platform in Moscow was Helsinki, where he met with President Trump for a summit complete with the trappings of the Cold War. This meeting saw Putin present Trump with an official match ball from the tournament, acting as the masterful midfielder, directing play even once the tournament had finished to carry forward the influence of the World Cup to bilateral relations with the US. The summit has been extensively debated over the past month, and will continue to be studied in the year ahead, but what cannot be ignored is that by passing the ball to Trump, Putin reinforced the notion that sport and politics are indelibly mixed.

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