



November 2022

From Global South Eyes
**The geopolitics
of the 2022
FIFA World Cup**

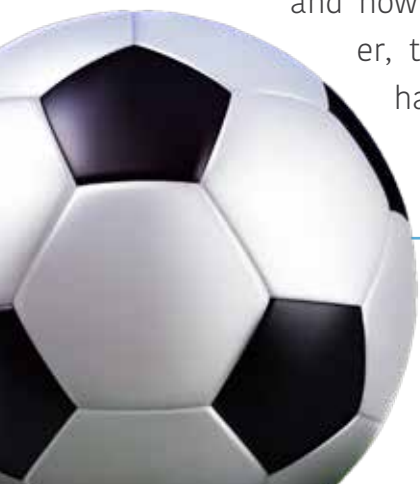


First, the fun stuff

It is often said that sports and politics do not mix, but history and current events have shown that nothing could be further from the truth. The 2022 FIFA World Cup begins in a few days in Qatar. It is the first major global sporting event in the Middle East. Since the turn of the century, the tournament has been hosted outside the non-traditional Europe/Latin America dichotomy a total of three times: Korea/Japan in 2002, South Africa in 2010, and now Qatar in 2022. However, the winners' geography has been less diverse, as

only South Americans and Europeans have lifted the trophy. More recently, the Europeans have dominated, as European teams won the last four editions—France in 2018, Germany in 2014, Spain in 2010, and Italy in 2006 – Brazil being the last non-European team to win the Mundial in 2002.

The 1972 Olympic Games are mostly remembered for a terrorist attack on Israeli Olympic team members at the 1972 Summer Games in Munich, orchestrated by affiliates of the Palestinian militant group Black September. This year's World Cup



takes place nine months into Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and the conflict has unsurprisingly infiltrated the sports. On 28 February, FIFA and UEFA, under recommendations from the International Olympic Committee, suspended Russia and Russian clubs from participating in their competitions, including the 2022 World Cup¹. Russia appealed the decision at the Court of Arbitration for Sport, but it was

turned down on 18 March². In late October, Ukraine, which failed to qualify, requested the global governing body, FIFA, to kick Iran out of the tournament³ over what it described as the country's "systematic human rights violations" and "the possible involvement of Iran in the military aggression of Russia against Ukraine." Iran has been accused of assisting Russia's war efforts by providing it with kamikaze drones.



GROUP A	GROUP B	GROUP C	GROUP D
Qatar	England	Argentina	France
Ecuador	Iran	Saudi Arabia	Australia
Senegal	USA	Mexico	Denmark
Netherlands	Wales	Poland	Tunisia
GROUP E	GROUP F	GROUP G	GROUP H
Spain	Belgium	Brazil	Portugal
Costa Rica	Canada	Serbia	Ghana
Germany	Morocco	Switzerland	Uruguay
Japan	Croatia	Cameroon	South Korea

¹FIFA (2022). FIFA/UEFA suspend Russian clubs and national teams from all competitions. Available online: <https://fifa.fans/3g6zHtf>

²Orme-Claye, T. (2022) Russia's appeals against UEFA and FIFA bans rejected by CAS. Available online: <https://bit.ly/3gbAIA5>

³Winehouse, A. (2022) Ukraine FA appeal to FIFA over Iran's inclusion in World Cup. Available online: <https://bit.ly/3AkLknk>



As the teams file out to battle in an unusual tournament held in the winter, there are some interesting matchups from a geopolitical perspective. The 32 qualified countries have been drawn into eight groups of four countries each. Group A usually has the host nation as well as three other countries. For this tournament, the host nation, Qatar, will meet Ecuador, African champions Senegal, and then the Netherlands, the 2010 runner-up. African champions Senegal in particular, had condemned Qatar⁴ for its “propagation of extremist ideas” and actions that would probably “harm the cohesion of states in the [Gulf] region and peace in the world” in the context of the Qatar diplomatic crisis that started on June 5, 2017, which resulted in the rift between Qatar and Saudi Arabia over the accusations against Qatar supporting terrorism and having strong ties with Shia-led Iran.

The biggest showdowns are in Group B, nicknamed “the group of death,” not for sporting reasons but for the geopolitical imperatives that define the group⁵. The group includes England, the Islamic Republic of Iran, the United States and Wales. The US gained independence from the British Empire in 1776 (or 1783, depending on



what side of the Atlantic you live on) after a series of battles on the American continent. The two foes continued their rivalry for North America’s control when the Anglo-French rivalry spillover led to British attacks on American shipping, culminating in the War of 1812 and subsequently leading to the destruction of the White House and Capitol Hill. In the current dispensation, the US and Britain (or England, in this case) are the best of friends, with relations that have seen both battle

⁴Tesfa News. (2017) African Diplomatic Alignments in the Qatar Crisis. Available online: <https://bit.ly/3tTCPvT>

⁵Leizerowitz, J. (2022) Qatar 2022 Group B Preview: Political tension underlies the ‘Group of Death’. Available online: <https://bit.ly/3gcXVlm>





England National Football Team

against common foes since World War I. However, the English will not want a repeat of their stunning loss to the US in the 1950 edition of the world cup, dubbed the biggest upset in world cup history.

Iran and the US remain adversaries, though. The 1979 Iranian Revolution overthrew the American-supported Shah and ushered in an Islamic theocracy detrimental to America's Middle East ambitions. American-led western sanctions

on Iran's nuclear ambitions have battered its economy and limited its ability to export oil. Although they signed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) under Barack Obama in 2015, the Republicans under Donald Trump took control of the White House and tore it up three years later, against advice from America's Western allies, including Britain. Biden's attempts to renegotiate the deal have been met with brick walls from both sides.

Also, in group B, we will see a rehash of the Battle of the Home Nations when England and Wales go head-to-head. Although the Welsh demand for independence is not as strong as Scotland's or as militant as Ireland's, this tie will get the British press in a frenzy, especially if England loses. Fun fact: the Scottish press supported Italy during last year's Euros final between England and Italy⁶.

Not all is rosy between Iran and England, though. In 2016, British-Iranian woman Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe was jailed on espionage charges while visiting Iran with her daughter Gabriella. Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe was eventually released in March of this year. Still, her continued detention worsened relations (which have historically been ones of mutual mistrust) between both countries, which are yet to improve.

⁶James, L. (2021) 'Save us Roberto': Scottish newspaper causes stir with front-page support for Italy in Euro 2020 final. Available online: <https://bit.ly/3X6Z8vh>



Argentina, the 2014 runners-up, will face Middle Eastern powerhouse Saudi Arabia, American heavyweight Mexico, and Poland, led by the in-form Robert Lewandowski. There is not much to be said or written about geopolitically in this group, but the focus will be on Argentina for sporting reasons. Lionel Messi, 35, will captain Argentina in what will almost certainly be his final World Cup. The seven-time Ballon d'Or

winner has won every silverware possible, with the World Cup missing from his trophy cabinet. Unfortunately, Nigeria is absent from this year's competition because the Super Eagles may have ended up in this group, having been paired with the Albiceleste in every World Cup Nigeria has taken part in except the 1998 edition. In all these games, Argentina has always gotten the better of Nigeria by the odd goal.

Argentina v Nigeria at the World Cup



Group D is another geopolitical talking point. The group houses defending, two-time champions France square off against Australia, Denmark and Tunisia. France is the magnet against the other three teams for sporting and geopolitical reasons. Franco-Danish relations have an interesting history to it. On 31 October 1807, Denmark joined Napoleon's continental alliance against Britain. In response, Britain blockaded the sea route connecting Denmark and Norway. Grain shipments from Denmark to Norway stopped, and Norwegian exports could not get out. Britain somewhat relaxed its blockade after 1810, but the years of isolation, economic crisis, and hunger in Norway convinced

leading groups of their folly. The eventual defeat of Napoleon led to the break-up of the Denmark-Norway union. The next major combat was over control of Schleswig in the First and Second Schleswig Wars. Between France and Australia, the battle will be fought for respect. In September 2021, there was a major rupture to Western military camaraderie when the US, the UK and Australia announced a new defence treaty. AUKUS, as it was called, caused a major ruckus. The treaty came with the US and UK getting billions of dollars in deals to build nuclear submarines for the Australian military. The problem was that that deal was originally awarded to the French defence big boys Na-

France National Football Team





Spain National Football Team

val Group. Australia's decision to bring the Anglo-Saxons in was hinged on France's delay in meeting deadlines as China's Peoples Liberation Navy (PLN)'s capability in the Pacific continues to grow. It caused a huge outrage in France, with French public officials discarding diplomatic protocols and using unsavoury words to describe both Anglo-Saxon nations. A compromise was eventually reached, but the mistrust remains under the surface.

Both countries will face their past in the tie between France and Tunisia. Tunisia gained independence from French colonisation in 1956. While France-Tuni-

sia relations are not as historically toxic as France-Algeria relations, there is some animosity. As a result of the Algerian War of Independence, France cut \$34 million of financial aid to Tunisia in 1957⁷. From a modern Tunisian point of view, the French were too cosy with the government of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, who was Tunisia's strong man between 1987 and 2011. He was removed from office during the Arab Spring uprising.

In Group E, the 2010 champions Spain are matched against Costa Rica, 2014 champions Germany, and Asian powerhouse Japan. The geopolitical talking point in this potential group of death is between Germany and Ja-

⁷Mecklin, J. (1957) Close Up of a patriot. Life Magazine, Vol 43, No. 2, pp 65.



pan, two World War II allies who eventually lost the war. Although both countries have recovered over the past eight decades and put the war's ruins behind them, the pacifist approach to military issues and geopolitics has remained. There is a history of colonialism between Spain and Costa Rica. Costa Rica joined the rest of Central America in breaking free from Spanish colonialism in 1821.

Historically, there has been “brotherly love” between the four countries in Group F. Moroccan miners helped keep the Belgian economy afloat from the late fifties to the early seventies. Josip Tito, the strong man of Yugoslavia from which Croatia was chaotically born, refused to acknowledge the independence of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic from Morocco until he died in 1980. The Canadian government promoted the migration of Belgians to New France from 1759 onward.



When Morocco and Belgium meet in Qatar on Sunday, 27 November, those ties will be taken to the stance. Two of the players in the Arab kingdom's squad: midfielder Selim Amallah of Belgian club Standard liege and Queens Park Ranger's tricky forward Ilias Chair, were born in Belgium. In Moscow four years ago, former Tottenham Hotspur winger Nacer Chadli, another Belgian with Moroccan roots, turned up for the Red Devils after playing one game for the Moroccan senior team.

On the pitch, Belgium and Croatia are the countries expected to stay longer in Qatar. Both countries went all the way to the semis last time around. Belgium's gold dust is drying up, and they are yet to win a tournament together. This will be the last time for Luka Modric, one of the best central midfielders of the last decade. It would not be a chasmic leap to say Croatia would win the tournament. Only eight years out of its amniotic sac, legendary striker, Davor Shuker, led Croatia to third place in its first-ever World Cup tournament in 1998. Old



wine, Modric, took them two goals away from winning in temperate Moscow in 2018. They could go one place better in the Qatari desert, who knows?

Take out Brazil, and Group G is an even group. The countries are as diverse as their chances of qualifying are hard to predict. While Brazil comes to the tournament with an astonishing nine forwards, that is if you exclude Paquetá, an attacking midfielder, Cameroon and Serbia have their hopes anchored on the potency of their double-pronged strike force. On the other hand, Switzerland relies on a solid, well-drilled unit. That engine will be driven partly by their Albanian imports, Granit Xhaka and Xherdan Shaqiri. The Swiss would hope that the country's anchor man in the last few years, Haris Seferovic, would find the route goal easier to locate at this tournament.

The limbs on which Serbia's dreams stand, Dušan Vlahović and Alexander Mitrovic, are injured. The injuries do not appear serious enough to have prevented Coach Dragan Stojković from naming them in his squad. As for Cameroon, Vincent Aboubakar claims to be as good as Mo Salah, the second-highest goal scorer in the English Premier League last season, and free-scoring

Eric Choupo-Moting, would hope that Cameroon's defence would be robust enough to protect their goalpost. It would be tough for any of these three teams to dominate a Brazilian midfield with Bruno Guimarães, Fred, Lucas Paqueta and Casemiro. Brazil's problems may be goals, as Richarlison and Gabriel Jesus are not on good scoring form in their respective English Premiership clubs. Where were you on Friday, 2 July 2010, when then Ajax striker, Luis Suarez, used his hand to keep out a goal-bound header from Ghanaian forward Dominic Adiyiah? That illegal save prevented Ghana from becoming the first African country to qualify for the final four. Ghana's talisman, Asamoah Gyan, struck the ensuing spot kick against the bar, drawing wild celebrations from the unrepentant Suarez, who would be at this year's tournament. Uruguay won the subsequent penalty shoot-out to reach the semi-finals. Uruguay and Cristiano Ronaldo's Portugal are the favourites to come out of the group but do not ignore the brilliance of South Korea's poster boy – besides from BTS, Heung-Min Son, and the no-nonsense defending of Kim Min-Jae. In plotting revenge against Suarez and Co, Ghana has the experience of Inaki Williams, the Basque-born player conceived in the Sahara Desert, to call on. After waiting interminably to become a regular





Portugal National Football Team

part of the Spanish set-up, he has now chosen to play for the country his parents left in search of a better life. We are going to be seeing more of such over the coming years as the descendants of migrants are increas-

ingly likely to opt for their ancestral homelands, especially keeping in mind England's decision to pick an out-of-form Harry Maguire over an in-form Fikayo Tomori⁸.

⁸Parsons, T. (2022) England fans fume as Tomori snubbed but Maguire included in World Cup squad - 'A joke'. Available online: <https://bit.ly/3X0FWzc>



Now for the serious stuff

FIFA President, Gianni Infantino

There has been a lot of furore⁹ over moves to address corruption in FIFA, especially after this World Cup was awarded, for the first time, at the same time as the preceding tournament. Awarding two tournaments together was unprecedented, and is unlikely to happen ever again. The move to address corrupt practices in the FIFA administration is correct. Still, football lovers must be alert enough to forestall any attempts to use this as an excuse to install an American hegemony from people who may not like foot-

ball but love the business of football. Fans of various English Premiership clubs can testify to this, given the travails of Premier League superclubs Liverpool and Manchester United.

During 2015's G7 Summit in Germany, US President Barack Obama said the quiet part out loud: "The United States, by the way, since we keep on getting better and better at each World Cup, we want to make sure that a sport that's gaining popularity is conducted in an upright manner."

⁹Al Jazeera (2022) Qatar official slams 'hypocrisy' of World Cup criticism. Available online: <https://bit.ly/3EDf9Sr>

On the surface, Mr Obama's comments, which came on the heels of the FBI's investigation into Blatter's FIFA, look like a nudge for transparent practices. However, at a closer look, it reveals America's design for FIFA – an international state capture of some sort which ultimately benefits no one but the American sports business elites.

But there are a lot of other issues, such as human rights issues which have been routinely brought up since the World Cup was awarded to Qatar. In May 2019, the UK's Daily Mirror newspaper reported that some of the 28,000 workers on the stadiums were being paid the equivalent of £190 per month¹⁰. In February 2021, The Guardian estimated a death toll of 6500 migrant workers since the World Cup was awarded to Qatar¹¹. In March 2021, Hendriks Graszoden, the turf supplier for the 2006 World Cup and the European Championships in 2008 and 2016, refused to supply Qatar with World Cup turf. London-based labour rights body Equidem said most were sent home¹². In September 2022, Danish sportswear company Hummel unveiled Denmark's "toned down" kits for the tournament in protest of Qatar's human rights record¹³. Also in September 2022,

Amnesty International published the results of a YouGov poll of over 17,000 football fans from 15 mostly Western countries showing 73% supported FIFA compensating migrant workers in Qatar for human rights violations¹⁴. The only non-Western countries polled were Kenya and Morocco, and therein lies the rub. For many countries in the Global South, there is fatigue over the West, making their cultural norms be those of everyone else and trying to enforce them.

Some workers at the construction site



¹⁰Armstrong, J. (2019) Qatar World Cup stadium migrant workers being paid as little as 82p-AN-HOUR. Available online: <https://bit.ly/3GjHMoT>

¹¹Pattison, P., McIntyre, N., Mukhtar, J., et al. (2021) Revealed: 6,500 migrant workers have died in Qatar since World Cup awarded. Available online: <https://bit.ly/3tHdapl>

¹²Lopes, M. (2022) Qatar deports migrant workers protesting alleged abuse before World Cup. Available online: <https://wapo.st/3tyvLEH>

¹³Garrick, O., Whitehead, J. (2022) Denmark to wear 'toned down' kits in Qatar protest. Available online: <https://bit.ly/309ECWQ>

¹⁴Amnesty International (2022). Qatar: Global survey shows overwhelming demand for FIFA to compensate World Cup migrant workers. Available online: <https://bit.ly/3EhLo6>

Football is the world's most accessible sport, which explains why it is so popular in poorer countries with limited capacity to invest in high-end facilities. You only need a round object, a patch of dirt and stones to make a simple goalpost. It is one of the fewest sports in which any country can produce world-class talent. Unfortunately, local and global administrators need to do more to ensure the sport is lifted to the next level in the poorer nations.

On every other continent, things are done differently. Europe has a population of 750 million people, and the countries have 37 professional football leagues representing more than 1,000 clubs in 31 countries across Europe, with semi-amateur and amateur clubs still having the opportunity to play in

national cup competitions and play for promotion to the highest levels of local and continental competition.

The interaction that this accessibility provides is what has made football the most popular sport in the world, and the World Cup that is its pinnacle, should be tweaked to become even more accessible to be host-

So Much for Boycotts: Almost 3 Million World Cup Tickets Sold

Number of matches/spectators at FIFA World Cups



* Tickets sold as of mid-October 2022

Sources: FIFA, Wikipedia



statista



ed by its less wealthy members instead of being re-engineered to be dominated by a US that doesn't really care about the sport and even refuses to call it "Football" but have chosen to give the name to a sport that has the ball carried mainly by hand.

Qatar's success in acquiring the World Cup hosting rights is tainted. That process should be condemned with serious efforts to ensure that the wrongdoings that characterised the process 12 years ago are not repeated. It is essential, however, to recognise that the bidding process was initially warped in favour of a select group of wealthy established countries that looked to be the only ones reaping the benefits of World Cup hostings that significantly boost national development and prestige.

One can argue that emerging countries should be prioritised in the hosting bid process. The provision of motive for investment in construction, real estate, and hospitality that brings in millions of visitors, boosts the host country's profile and enhances its capacity to attract trade and foreign investment is a fantastic way to help the development of these countries. A World Cup can be something other than the epitome of luxury.

This is Sport, not a Vogue Fashion Show in Monaco or St Tropez. This is for everyone, rich and poor, big and small, illustrious and unknown, civilised and uncivilised.

The same can be said about the cultural issues around LGBTQ+ people, human rights and alcohol. The world needs more of these spaces where people can feel like they are part of humanity instead of being constantly reminded that they matter a lot less because they earn a lot less than others who don't even care about what's being done, or perhaps just as importantly, are "socially backward" in the eyes of others because they do not conform to the same standards. The constant heckling will end up having the opposite effect to what is intended, and the countries of the Global South are more likely to double down on what they consider to be their cultural identity. That outcome is the opposite of what a global sporting event is set up to achieve.



About SBM

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