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# Football and Geopolitics

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**Abstract:** The relationship between sport and politics is anything but a field on which moving easily, especially if you are not clear on what you want to focus your attention; but the football peculiarities in the process of defining its own geopolitics is widely comparable to that pure in the strict sense and even seems to be able to anticipate the latter in the process of defining the current international assets. This is because football is always one of the greatest expressions of the contact between sport, politics and reference civil society. The reflection of football in the geopolitics is a maze, it means to enter an intricate parallels system, because numerous are the points of contact and common elements between the two universes. This sport is one of the largest globally recognized phenomenon, is a huge empire: it is more widespread than democracy, the Internet and the market economy. An super ordinate institution to the standardized geopolitical system such as FIFA, has taken a leading role over the years and it has gone much further than the original powers conferred on it as a non-governmental institution. It has more members than the UN and within it there are federations such as Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan which have preserved their status of football autonomy despite the reunification with China and therefore not recognized by the UN as a state entity. Football allows to have great visibility and legitimize concretely the own international position. This sport enters, in fact, among the new criteria by which to evaluate an international power, like demography, technological development, economy and military power. The fact that a national football team or the recognition of a football federation by FIFA is so important in the affirmation of their own identity, is a symptom that football more of other elements can personifying the “real” state.

**Keywords:** football, geopolitics, conflict, power of sport, politics

*“Football is the art of compressing the entirety of history into 90 minutes.”  
(George Bernard Shaw, 26 July 1856 – 2 November 1950)*

## Introduction

The relationship between sport and politics is anything but a field on which moving easily, especially if you are not clear on what you want to focus your attention; but the football peculiarities in the process of defining its own geopolitics is widely comparable to that pure in the strict sense and even seems to be able to anticipate the latter in the process of defining the current international assets. This is because football is always one of the greatest expressions of the contact between sport, politics and reference civil society (Maguire, 1995; Giulianotti, 1999). Specimen is an aphorism uttered by William "Bill" Shankly, a former Scottish footballer and legendary Liverpool manager between 1959 and 1974: "Some people believe football is a matter of life and death, I am very disappointed with that attitude. I can assure you it is much, much more important than that". In fact Sport can be considered as reflection of social dynamics and a particular political historical context. For example football, the most popular sport in the world is born in a particular context which is that of "England Industrial" ongoing democratization, and this sport, reflects its dynamics and the salient features. Subsequently, its export throughout the West made it one of the most persistent global phenomena thanks to its dual nature as a source of aggregation for the masses and the political and economic tool with which to assert its power in society.

Since its institutionalization with creation of FIFA, football was organized by acquiring rules off the court, necessary to legitimize internationally as an proper political institution, an organizational structure, its own government and a its legal system. And that's how football becomes politics, incorporating features found in a very special geopolitical system, as the organization of the continental confederations, who have the power of spreading widely the FIFA's power and each of them with a different political weight and a different role (Marinău et al., 2016). A geopolitical system to considered for all effects the anticipatory of future political balance in the world. The reflection of football in the geopolitics is a maze, it means to enter an intricate parallels system, because numerous are the points of contact and common elements between the two universes.

## Definitions and methods

As defined in a standard way by numerous scholars, political scientists and sociologists, the geopolitical term it refers to a method of studying foreign policy to understand, explain and predict international political behavior through geographical variables; it focuses on political power in relation to geographic space (Ilieş et al., 2014; Ilieş et al., 2016). From this definition we can easily extrapolate all elements that are also found in the football phenomenon and which then give reason to exist to that which can be defined the football's geopolitical law. There are not in football strong relationships between land, human action, politics? Football is not affected by global phenomena such as the economy, culture and religion? Football is business, football is religion, football is a communication tool with an influence equal to that of politics worldwide.

This sport is one of the largest globally recognized phenomenon, is a huge empire: it is more widespread than democracy, the Internet and the market

economy. An super ordinate institution to the standardized geopolitical system such as FIFA, has taken a leading role over the years and it has gone much further than the original powers conferred on it as a non-governmental institution. It has more members than the UN and within it there are federations such as Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan which have preserved their status of football autonomy despite the reunification with China and therefore not recognized by the UN as a state entity. The same could say of Palestine, recognized by FIFA but not by the UN. This means that football has come to dominate politics: the national identity can be recognized also through a football national team, this step sometime can precede the recognition as a state in traditional terms (Giulianotti & Williams, 1994; Darnell, 2013).

The problem of the relationship of football and geopolitics requires on the one hand a simple research approach, mostly in the paradigm of classical descriptive. On the other hand, recognition of complex linkages geopolitical issues presented is possible by analysis of the relationship and inference based on such classic concepts geopolitical strength, impact zone, power (in this case, sports) or a sense of national identity. It is necessary in this case to take account of difficult-defined notion of what a globalized world - the national interest (Wendt, 2001)

Resort to the creation of an independent national football team from that of the state where this “land” it is included, is a sign of diversity: This community want at all costs publicize on the international level the desire for independence.

### **FIFA, World CUP and politics**

FIFA, in this purview, has been and is still today, the first step that countries desirous of exist as independent states, and also desirous to be recognized by UN, they have to do. Probably because it is a simpler and less twisted road and with a “cost-benefit” ratio potentially very positive.

It’s true that the FIFA statute recognizes only one federation per country, but there are cases such as that of the United Kingdom, that were able to keep its own football’s specificity despite the common political, language and its traditions that unite in the British state. In contrast to the national team, Spain represents only one national team, despite the existing differences between exposed and teams of Castile and Catalonia, Real Madrid in FC Barcelona (Shobe, 2008).

This thanks to the distinction that has managed to maintain between State and Nation: England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland are both unitary state, and separate nations.

Conversely there are also States Party to the UN but they are not represented in football as the Principality of Monk: the Principality has a club team, A.S. Monaco, it participating in the first French division and the most important continental competitions, but not a national team.

In the Marshall Palau Tuvalu’s Islands. In addition to logistical and geographic reasons there are reasons attributable to a lack of national identity. For this there is little interest to want to expose through football. It can be said that football is a strong catalyst in the definition of national identity processes within the international political arena and the most important event for to express this big potential, is the football World Cup.

The World Cup is the main tool to assert own hegemony over the others, it is an instrument capable of concentrating attention and interest on it, and on the host country. From birth, the World Cup, has lent itself to meet the needs of purely political nature. In every World Cup it is possible recognize political and social elements that reflect more complex and diffuse dynamics in the organizing country: Uruguay 1930, to celebrate the centenary of independence; Italy in 1934 and Argentina in 1978, to promote the image of an authoritarian regime; USA in 1994, where soccer try to colonization a country where US football, basketball and baseball have a monopoly on the sporting passion of Americans; Japan-South Korea in 2002, first time in the tournament in Asia organized by alliance of two historical former enemies; South Africa 2010, to bring to the fore one of the countries and the continent most afflicted by social and economic problems.

Football has been so successful because, like so many others sports team, it is a symbol of equal opportunity and change and it combines perfectly with the main characteristics of modern Western industrial society: teamwork and competition. In addition to these characteristics, the soccer keeps that "religious fervor" represented by salient features of his rite collective: the stadium is the place of worship, with its liturgical areas prohibited to the faithful (the playing field), the proclamation of one's identity through songs and colors to be identified. From the socially and politically point of view, all this helps to reinvigorate an own identity in an increasingly globalized world (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2007; Jackson & Haigh, 2009). However the relationship between football and politics is also linked to conflict and episodes of unprecedented violence (Kelly, 2010; Cha, 2013; Kelly & Mangan, 2014).

### **Geopolitics and football**

In fact a geopolitical element like that of war, is also present in football both on a symbolic level, just think of the language used to describe a game, its technical and athletic gestures, the camaraderie within a team, the division of tasks to prevail in the battle on the field, both in real and concrete terms, such as violence in stadiums and political balances degenerates with the football such amplifier the negative effects. An example is the terror attack occurred on 8<sup>th</sup> January 2010 against the Togolese national football team in border between Congo and Angola. They were direct in Angola to play in the African Nations Cup but, a contingent of guerrillas opened fire against the Togolese bus wounding to death three elements of the team's technical staff.

This tragic event has broken the image of an Africa apparently pacified whom in the years had found in football a source of international legitimacy and social-political development, showing its bottom and conflict still unresolved. In this case the connotation of such an attack fits perfectly in a geopolitical chessboard. Football has become a powerful symbolic weapon for the demands of the local counter powers and warring factions against the government, in this case in Angola, where there is an authoritarian regime. The latter episode confirms, once again, the existence of the close link between football and geopolitics.

Soccer follows closely the developments, or even it anticipates, the geopolitics force, accelerating the key processes: it can help them assert their national identity in the process of recognition by the UN or it can improve relations between two or more countries in conflict. Contrariwise it can be tool with which to expose themselves, sometimes using violence, to claim own political positions by exploiting the huge media power of football.

As already mentioned earlier is the FIFA World Cup one of the most important events in the world of football. In fact, this great sporting event, in the course of history not only assumed political, economic and social significance. Its features have led him to be one of the moments that, together in the Olympics games, It can to attract the attention of all humanity almost it can hypnotizing them. It is thanks to this incredible media power, that the volume of interest around its assignment has soared.

We can see a competition between emerging states and football's super-powers present on the particular geopolitical map of football. Each country hopes to be chosen as the host country of the event because enticed by economic returns and a positive impact on the welfare of their country.

The assignment of a World Cup greatly consequences on the geopolitical borders of football, just think about the next two edition of the event. The exhibition in 2018 was assigned to Russia, which crushed the competition of a giant like England, and that of 2022 to Qatar, which has prevailed on Australia, USA and the former duo Japan-Korea, for the occasion loose, with the hope to reorganize a whole edition within national borders. Both editions have a clean break with the past, for years the award criteria were the same: from edition to edition, there were an alternation between an traditionally "football fans" country, to another an "football developing" country.

Not this time, from the Brazil's World cup in 2014, the "rotary criterion" was not more used, thus giving the green light to a discretionary choice for the following host countries. To what extent these decisions are revolutionary? For years now, we are witnessing a gradually political and economic shifting about the gravity center of the international football movement towards new horizons at the expense of the Euro-American duopoly.

Basically, the change reflects the geopolitics needs imposed by the new world order: with the new millennium there was the consolidation of Asian leadership from the economic point of view, thanks to the China and other realities in the growing rise as India and the UAE. The African continent, with South African World Cup has taken the opportunity to assert its presence on the political, economics and sports internationally. Russia in 2018 is, or should be, an opportunity to show a new image and a new political era in this country; shaking off the prejudices and limitations that always accompany it. Qatar 2022, it means organizing an event to promote the image of the Islamic world and make it more close to our West. From these examples it is clear that talk about new football frontiers means talking, no more no less, of how have changed and are changing the political and economic assets whom see Europe and all West lose gradually authority towards these new areas of the world.

Consequently, differ the new football assets: the growing popularity of football, the international movement of players around the world and the presence of substantial sources of financing are the three elements that most of all are favoring this process. These developments indicate that it came the end of the hegemony of European and South American power? Asia and Africa will be the new frontiers of international football? Mistaken! Everything was called into question again, the new configurations of power were again challenged by the events of recent months, just like a military conflict redraws the boundaries of nation states, the surveys on corruption, which involved the former FIFA President Sepp Blatter and his former “dolphin” Michel Platini, have had the effect of reshaping the geopolitics of the ball. It is a new turnaround in football world.

With the election of Gianni Infantino as the new FIFA President, it seems that Europe is back the most important continent for relationship in to the football world. This is because from Europe came the major impulses for a radical change in the governance board of football’s world: new development programs to introduce football in life for dozens of children in countries such as Hungary, Moldova, Poland and San Marino; the expansion of new models of governance for the football company; until the widening of the electoral base for the new FIFA governance, for states such as Andorra and Liechtenstein (which eventually have weighed in terms of votes to elect Gianni Infantino new president).

Not to mention the measures to the financial sustainability of clubs, or rather financial fair play. The UEFA idea was the same as the most important European institutions (Commission and ECB), have wanted to give some rules in terms of public finance governments.

However if Europe turned out to be the model to follow, the American confederations have been the most affected by corruption inquiries, fact were the federations with the highest number of arrests.

From this earthquake, even the World Cup was hit. The ex FIFA president, J. Blatter, in last December was clear: “If the World Cup (in 2022) had been assigned to the USA, all this would never have happened”. During the press conference after the disqualification of eight years by the FIFA Ethics Commission, the Swiss identifies very clearly his rivals and confirms the conspiracy against him started from Washington. Blatter’s faults are clear at all, but even in this case was a geopolitical case to trigger the whole. Retracing the main stages of this work, we may give a reason of how football is really a parallel world able to reflect, as if it were a body of water, the reality around it, while maintaining its specificity.

### **Conclusion**

Geopolitics and football have become a universe now inseparable, which finds its celebration every time there is an international event will bind different cultures and it will compare these in a stadium. In addition to this, football allows to have great visibility and legitimize concretely the own international position. This sport enters, in fact, among the new criteria by which to evaluate an international power, like demography, technological development, economy and military power.

The fact that a national football team or the recognition of a football federation by FIFA is so important in the affirmation of their own identity, is a symptom that football more of other elements can personifying the “real” state.

From this framework just described, what are the dynamics for the future? The new football markets coincide with the new global economy forces, or with the developing countries that are increasingly present in the race for to host the main football event: the World Cup. Asia seems the real continent on the rise, China for some years now has become the favorite destination of world-class players or coaches. If Asia or Africa will be the new frontiers of international football we can't know yet for sure, but surely it can be said that football reflects more than we can imagine, the international geopolitics.

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