



Russian President Vladimir Putin kicking a football.

PHOTO: AFP

# World Cup and International Relations

**KAUTILYAN KRONICLES**  
IMTIAZ A HUSSAIN

As one of the most widely watched human activity, soccer's World Cup Championship unleashes raw competition between countries, raising emotions that cover almost every stripe we know and triggering nationalism of even a guttural kind. We have seen, over the years, how the four-year tournament has even branded itself far outside the soccer field: corporations compete intensely to grab prime advertising spots to maximise their own sales; host countries go on a tourist splurge, investing billions to show a better face; and hobnobbing the players has become a social "in-thing", the higher the fame of that player, the larger the stupefied audience becomes.

Reams of newsprint get churned out with every tournament, touching so many diverse facets. For example, we know Russia's sponsorship income has not quite equalled Brazil's in 2014; and that the Nigerian captain's father was supposedly held hostage for a ransom back home. Yet, not enough comes across about the tournament's impact on international relations. Given its constitution, interest, and purpose, *Kautilyan Kronicles* is keen to further explore.

Just for openers, since each game pits the intense nationalism competitively (both on and off the field), how might this peter out once the tournament is over? Will, for instance, Japan's team go back with excess nationalist baggage from doing well, or dilute it through exposure to so many other cultures and national sentiments, or even produce some hybrid? In an age when breath-taking technological breakthroughs have been smashing extant boundaries, such as artificial intelligence finding human substitutes to compete with humans, will World Cup participation take a country back into nationalism, or even blend both sets of sentiments? Particularly for first-time participants, will it instead blow internationalism far over and above any provincial makeup?

Beginning with the host country, Russia, we clearly see the Russian team going far beyond even Russian expectations, but also helping the recently reviled country upgrade its global reputation. In a panoply of global politics, Russia plunged to its nadir by conducting alleged criminal activities in other countries (Great Britain, for example), engaging in cyber-espionage (as in the United States), and doping Olympic athletes for which 43 were permanently banned. Yet, the tournament's ability to whitewash Russia globally clearly softens the grimaces Vladimir Putin might

otherwise receive in international conferences, particularly across Europe. For good or bad, international relations may be revamped because of a tournament affecting more people across the world than the heavily covered ping-pong diplomacy did from 1971.

Extending that, when we think of the many remote Russian soccer venues opened up for international viewing, reviewing, and interaction, the Russia to emerge from the tournament is expected to be hypothetically more internationalist than nationalist. That positive image contrasts with the racist streak running rampant across the country, and which now goes beyond targeting Chechnyan separatists and other minorities to harassing visitors from Africa and Asia.

Most importantly, the glaring absence of Russia's most formidable adversary outside the soccer-field, the United States, helps the country sow the seeds of camaraderie with other countries. Leaving aside a well-known cliché that begins "when the cat's away", amid a political square-off with any country in international negotiations, not only every *action* but also every *attitude* adds up, what the United States lost by not qualifying may mean more than Russia exploiting the circumstance. What we could speculate is how the ever transformative Putin can reinvent himself now that he has already depicted James Bond fishing in icy waters bare-chested.

If we kept our eyes and ears open over recent West European rumblings, we might notch more mileage exploring attitudinal changes within certain countries against the backdrop of the continent's populist outburst. Many hitherto free-flowing, globally-minded West European countries have been held hostages to, not just nationalistic interpretations, but also a vile form of nationalism brooking upon fascism. Britain, Belgium, France, and Germany, among others, have seen how major policy positions, especially related to migrant treatment, were particularly or completely overhauled/subverted. Do these homegrown attitudes travel to the tournament, or will players/spectators return with more cosmopolitan embraces?

Will England's performances enhance the Brexit impulse, or rekindle the European-mindedness that prevailed before the 2014 referendum? After all, *The Guardian* newspaper already calls it the *Remainder Team* representing the mere 48 percent who opposed the European Union exit vote in 2016? Together with Belgium and France, Britain has seen Islamic *jihadi* incidents first-hand. Yet, with Belgium's team showing many non-European faces and colour, and France's team being dubbed "the strongest African team" in Russia, will victories help soothe domestic racial tensions, thereby diluting populism, at least temporarily?

Or, on the flip side, did Germany's lacklustre performances in, and exit from, the tournament fan the flames of isolation, or more bluntly, nationalism? If so, would that rock the migrant boat Angela Merkel seeks to stabilise, both within the country through her possible CSU (Christian Socialist Union) accommodation through Interior Minister, Horst Seehofer, who bluntly opposes migrant concessions, and across Europe, for example, handling migrants through the "welcoming" centres agreed upon in June 2018? That CSU rapprochement is crucial for her continuity as Chancellor, while the migrant deal is imperative to prevent any European Union collapse. Would any future solution be somehow traced back to World Cup performances in Moscow, much like Adolf Hitler's future policy directions were to his 1936 Olympics treatment of non-white athletes?

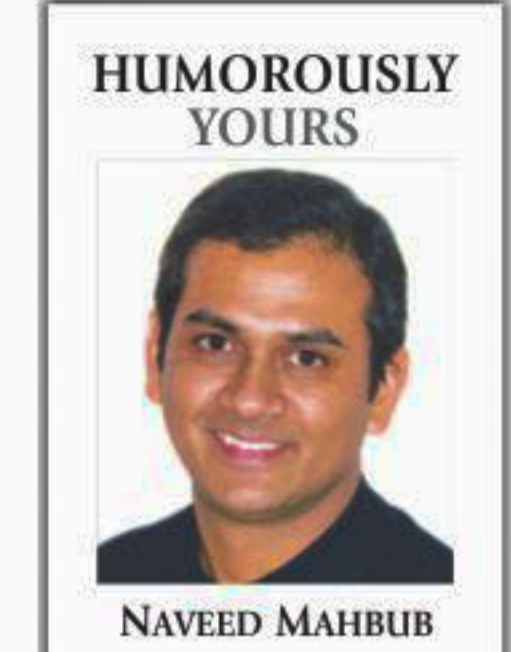
Moving beyond Europe to Africa and Latin America, might the recruitment of players from within these continents by European clubs actually be feeding nationalism, and thereby populism, or in fact be promoting internationalism? The socialisation of African recruits in European cities, for example, is usually less talked about than their soccer-field performances, but are they as pivotal in their European community's profile as in their European team profile? After all, the whistling at, and aping, African players in European stadia is no longer occasional: it is too common to ignore. Shifting to the national team, do European communities offer the same off-field treatment to their World Cup African recruits as their teams do on-field?

Likewise for Latin America, hitherto home of soccer excellence. Has the wide European recruitment of Latin players over a long period of time eventually subdue their home-country performances, as we saw with Argentina's Lionel Andrés Messi Cuccitini? Broader still, are Latin countries performing less well in world cup tournaments these days because their players have too many loyalties, or become too well-known entities, than when their loyalty was singular (to their Latin club and country), and they were less well known? Transplanting that question to African countries, where national soccer leagues and tournaments are far too new and still too undeveloped, can their soccer "exports" today propel those countries to greater soccer salience a generation down the road? In other words, will future World Cup winners emanate as much from Africa as they do from Europe or Latin America today?

Much like the 2018 tournament's progress thus far, too much lie intriguingly up in the air. Yet, as teachers always tell their students, don't come back without exploring all options.

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# Kia > Mercedes



NAVEED MAHBUB

**HUMOROUSLY YOURS**

PERHAPS it is no coincidence that World Cup Football is not on a leap year. For this is the time when our hearts, especially those in Bangladesh, leap not only a beat, but beat in beats to see the favourites beat the favourites of the opponents. Even on December 16, do we not see so many flags as we see during this time—not those of Bangladesh's. The whole of Bangladesh turns into consulates of Brazil and Argentina as all that are on everyone's minds are Argentina, Brazil and Nusrat Faria's *Pataka*. The only way you know it is NOT the ambassador of one of these two countries in the car with a flag is when the car is a Toyota Corolla.

This is the time when Brazilian fans stab those of Argentina in Cox's Bazaar, a place of which many a Brazilian nor an Argentinean has ever heard of. This is a country, where the safest way to walk around now is to wear an Argentinean jersey sporting "10" and "Neymar". But the games warrant talking about those who nobody otherwise talks about.

Let's start with Saudi Arabia. The games kick off with the kingdom playing against host Russia. After swallowing 5 goals, I wonder if Prince Salman had the urge to tell Putin sitting next to him: "There goes our deal to buy 400 of your S-400 air defence missiles!"

But it is "only" 1 goal to nil with which Uruguay beats Saudi Arabia in the next game. Perhaps there was an underlying warning

Heavens World Cup 1986 was not held in Saudi Arabia, for, over there, it is always, "an eye for an eye... a hand for a hand"...

So, the Argentines are careful, perhaps a little too careful as it kicks off with a draw against Iceland, a country with a population of less than 350,000. Factoring in the players, reserves, manager, coaches, medics, the Icelandic team consisting of two percent of the country's population, beats the giant Russia.

And then the crushing defeat of Argentina against Croatia which turns the game against Nigeria a game of do, or die. Nigeria has Musa and Moses, but Argentina rules with its Messi—only to be *baguette-d* by France. Hello new landmarks—in Paris it is *Arg de Triomphe* and in Buenos Aires it is *I Fail Tower*.

That evens out—Brazil had to gulp down 7 *Up* and now Argentina swallows a *four pack*.

And didn't Messi say he would not retire till Argentina wins the World Cup? His opponents say he is merely on LPR (Leave Preparatory to Retirement) while his supporters chant that in the world of soccer, he is the Mahathir Mohamad.

There goes all the flags and jerseys of Argentina in Bangladesh making their way to becoming the subsidised uniforms of Viqarunnisa Noon School.

*Don't Cry for Me Argentina...*

Then comes Brazil which chugs along (till the time of writing) as for all of Bangladeshis, the World Cup is now about Brazil versus the Rest... Interesting, (food) hotels in Bangladesh see hair on noodles while hotels in Russia see noodles on hair, thanks to Neymar!

Portugal loses to Uruguay though with a spectacular display of sportsmanship as Ronaldo helps the limping Cavani exit the field



FIFA Football World Cup 2018: GERMANY lost 0-2 to South Korea in their final Group F match.

message to Suarez: "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth."

The broad spectrum threat has its effects on the next game for Uruguay as it restrains itself to beating Egypt with "just" 1 goal, thus tempting Sisi to rename its famed canal to Suarez Canal.

In the spirit of sports, Iran takes after its arch rival Saudi Arabia and issues its own threat, Don Corleone style: "You know what happened to Salman Rushdie, eh?" Thus, once again, a "mere" 1-0 victory of Spain against Iran.

Iran continues to be on the FIFA map as its Alireza Faghani is voted the best referee thus far. Makes sense—in real life, he is an employee of Tehran Municipality Authority where he's adept in resolving the fights between felines and canines on the streets of Tehran.

Speaking of the hygiene of streets, we witness the exemplary civic actions of Japanese fans cleaning up the stadium after a match. I will surely throw in my full support for Mr Takiyona Jharu Mari as the mayoral candidate of Dhaka North City Corporation.

Host Russia has done well, fuelled perhaps by Vladimir Putin's pep talk to team Russia: "Goal, else Gulag!" Especially before the tie breaker against Spain: "Remember, if the game goes to sudden death, then there may be 'sudden death'!" A sigh of relief, as Russia wins against Spain through a game of Russian Roulette.

But now, we go to the behemoths, and in alphabetical order, for, I value my life.

First, Argentina. All eyes are still on the stands as Maradona, after the 1986 "Hand of God", displays the "finger" of evil. Thank

while in the end, Cavani helps the limping Portugal to exit the World Cup.

Finally Germany starts off with getting *Blaupunkt* by Mexico. Mexico has so many in Mexico jumping in joy that seismic activities are supposedly detected by sensors. Considering such a dire seismic outcome, Bangladesh continues to refrain from playing in the World Cup. The only damage to this "quake"—the collapse of the roof of the German Football Association.

But in the end, Germany gets *Whooped Gangnam Style* by underdog (South) Korea. Even 2 Germanys together can't survive against 2 goals from a single Korea. To add insult to injury, the ride for the German team to the airport for their flight back home on a Hyundai bus...

But if anything, this World Cup has proved to be tournament of surprises, making it all the more interesting even to someone like me, who watches 45 matches of soccer by way of two-minute highlights in the time that the diehard fan watches one game, minus injury time. This World Cup has given us the chance to rave about the newbies and the underdogs, to stay up late and to go to work late and then come home early for the 8:00 pm game. This World Cup, which has shown that this is ABSOLUTELY possible:

Kia > Mercedes

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**QUOTABLE Quote**

**JULIAN ASSANGE (b. 1971)**  
Australian Computer Programmer and Editor of Wikileaks

*If you have principles, you have to live by those principles, otherwise they are not really principles.*

**CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH**

**ACROSS**

- 1 AI who created Abner
- 5 Deadens
- 10 Cupid's missile
- 12 Isolated
- 13 Stradivari, for one
- 15 Sixth sense, briefly
- 16 Last letter
- 17 Water, in France
- 18 Play-ground sight
- 20 Lascivious desire
- 21 Talks drunkenly
- 22 Makes a choice
- 23 Jingle writers
- 25 Tel-
- 28 Uneasy state
- 31 painter Magritte

**DOWN**

- 1 Grottos
- 2 Comes up
- 3 Drive
- 4 Campaign pro
- 5 Moniker
- 6-tree
- 7 Movie studio
- 8 Fried chicken
- 9 Walks proudly
- 11 Harry Potter, for one
- 14 Name in the headlines
- 19 Urbane
- 20 Has yearnings
- 24 Puzzle
- 25 Fit for farming
- 26 Upholstery fabric
- 27 Queued up
- 29 Ashtray user
- 30 Principles
- 33 Not wordy
- 35 Sassy
- 38 Lancelot du-
- 39 Justice Fortas

department  
piece  
beer chaser  
Moon-based  
Aids in crime  
Put up  
Gaelic language

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**BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER**

**BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT**

**YESTERDAY'S ANSWER**

SLAW STRIP  
PULO PHYLLUM  
AUTO AIELLO  
TIEDOWN ESS  
SERLING GAS  
ALS DATE  
CLANS COLES  
LIND BOW  
END YOUNGER  
ASA EXPLODE  
RENAME ODDS  
SETTER ALIT  
DEANS DYES

**BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER**

**BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT**