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No. 9/2011 dated 1 February 2011

Diplomacy by Other Means: ASEAN, next World Cup Host?

By Eric Frécon

Synopsis

ASEAN foreign ministers have discussed the possibility of hosting the FIFA World Cup. This initiative underlines the need for both academics and practitioners to include sports issues in international relations.

Commentary

IN LOMBOK, Indonesia, just recently, ASEAN foreign ministers discussed for the first time the possibility of a joint bid to host the FIFA (Fédération Internationale de Football Association) World Cup in 2030. This idea echoes a quotation of the former French Prime Minister Clemenceau; what he said about war and soldiers can be adapted to this context: “[sports] is much too serious a matter to be entrusted to [only the sportsmen]”. It has to be studied not only from the pitches or from the stands but also by ministries within a broader perspective.

Before it was popularised through Clint Eastwood’s movie *Invictus* on Mandela’s involvement in the 1994 Rugby World Cup, the weight of sports in international politics and society was already being felt. Brazil (1950), West Germany (1954), Spain (1982) and South Korea (1988) used world sports events as diplomatic tools, either to engage the international community or to signal political conversions. By hosting the Grand Prix of Formula 1 and the Youth Olympic Games, Singapore also chose to invest in this marketing strategy. India tried to follow the trend with the last Commonwealth Games. For these countries, sports is becoming one of the vectors of post-Cold War soft power. Like the army, economy or culture, sports is part of the nation-building process and it can contribute to the good name of states.

Sports and International Relations

In this regard, for example, French and Belgian universities have already set up seminars on sports and political science. European think-tanks housed ‘Sports & International Relations Programmes’. The French Lagardère conglomerate, which has shares in EADS (Airbus, Eurocopter), media, and publishing, has a big sports branch. Some scholars have written books on the geopolitics of football and on the Tour de France (how it contributed to strengthening the 3rd and 4th French Republics).

There are three reasons why sports should be included in the new academic agenda: Firstly, to decipher national sports strategies. Secondly, to increase awareness – and understanding – of sports issues and opportunities among people, officials and the business community. Thirdly, to contribute, through feedbacks and analyses, in the implementation of national, foreign, educational, social policies based on sports.

As case studies, many events can be set up or created like an annual rugby game between the winner of the Tri-Nations (Australia, New-Zealand, and South-Africa) tournament and of the West-European 6 Nations tournament. Singapore could also host the annual Road World Cycling Championship; there could be a Southeast version of the Dakar Rally Raid with cars, motorbikes, and trucks competing on the equatorial tracks, or an adaptation of La Solitaire (annual Solo Sailing Race in West-Europe) in the South China Sea to promote peace; etc.

The Lombok Idea certainly makes sense, especially after the nominations of Russia and Qatar to host the Football World Cups in 2018 and 2022. The FIFA is exploring new ground-breaking fronts. Why not in Southeast Asia?

ASEAN Has a Dream

Southeast Asia is smaller than Russia and the United States which hosted the World Cup in 1994. Southeast Asia's climate cannot be more difficult for football than playing in summer in Mexico at high altitudes, like in 1986. In 1978, the temperature for a game in Argentina was about zero. Moreover, because of the different time zones, games could be played in the morning or at night, when it is cooler. Can security be an obstacle? No more than in South Africa last year or in Brazil in 2016. In Southeast Asia, most of the law enforcement agencies have already shown their ability to secure big international events with many delegations like International Monetary Fund (IMF), APEC or ASEAN meetings.

But the tricky issue in the way of ASEAN's ambition to host the World Cup could come from Myanmar. Maybe Myanmar could host just friendly games before the event, with whatever teams that are agreeable. Finally, co-hostings are most of the time not welcomed, although Japan and South Korea did co-host the Cup in 2002. Nevertheless, the FIFA could be flexible.

Southeast Asia is a huge market with about 600 million inhabitants. Fans watch European games on television and support local teams in stadiums. International and modern airports are available in the region: Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur, Jakarta, and Singapore. In fact, Singapore is known as a media hub. The main cities have high standard hotels. Furthermore, the region is a crossroads between India and China as well as Europe and the Pacific: it will be easy to reach the venues.

To choose the venues and the stadiums for the preliminary pools, one could use these pairs of cities, which are less than an hour apart by plane: Bangkok (65,000 seats before possible renovations) and Singapore (55,000), Kuala Lumpur (100,000) and Phnom Penh (50,000) Shah Alam (69,000) and Palembang (40,000), Hanoi (40,000) and Manila (30,000), Jakarta (88,000) and Brunei (30,000).

Sporting events have brought benefit to nation-building and inter-state relations. Hence, ASEAN's consideration of hosting the World Cup is a step in the right direction. At least, this project promotes the need for more interconnectivity within ASEAN for transport and visas. It can bring Southeast Asian peoples, ministries and agencies together.

It also points out some urgent issues which have to be addressed, such as the problem of transboundary haze, and human rights. This is critical to the region's credibility in realising the ASEAN Community by 2015. Eventually, as Singapore's Foreign Minister George Yeo said, it will galvanise and unify the region.

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