

COMMENTARY

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Soccer Unites China and UAE in Pursuing Global Ambitions

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A US\$ 400 million sale by a senior member of the UAE ruling family of a 13 percent stake in Manchester City FC to China Media Capital (CMC), a subsidiary of China Media Group Corporation (CMG), a state-backed investment conglomerate, highlights the importance of soccer in the two countries' ambitions to project themselves on the international stage.

The sale, which values Manchester City at US\$ 3 billion, puts to bed any suggestion that Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed al Nahayan's original US\$ 400 million acquisition in 2008 of the then troubled English club was an act of vanity. It further underscores the UAE's development from what Bloomberg news called the Switzerland of the Gulf to its military and diplomatic Sparta.

The sale is part of a bid to employ the UAE's financial muscle to project the Gulf state despite its small population and loose federal structure as a major military, political and diplomatic power capable of marshalling its armed forces, foreign service and ruling family to shape politics and policies far beyond its borders. The sale also signals UAE intentions to further expand into China and cement relations with a global behemoth.

City Football Group (CFG), which owns clubs in New York and Melbourne alongside Manchester City, said in a statement that "the deal will create an unprecedented platform for the growth of City Football Group clubs and companies in China and internationally, borne out of CFG's ability to provide a wealth of industry expertise and resources to the rapidly developing Chinese football industry."

The deal puts into perspective Manchester City's earlier decision to appoint its former player, Sun Jihai, as its ambassador to China and to include him in the hall of fame at Manchester's

National Football Museum, a move that initially raised eyebrows in the British soccer community.

China last year stressed the importance it attributes to soccer domestically as well as internationally with the unveiling of a 50-point plan to turn the country into a football giant. In a first step, Guangzhou Evergrande Taobao FC won the Asian Football Championship.

The plan made soccer a mandatory part of China's school curriculum, pledged to establish 50,000 soccer schools and multiple academies over the next decade, and to set up a soccer lottery that would help fund the sport's development. The plan also envisions professionalization of the Chinese Football Association (CFA), by separating it from China's sports bureaucracy but not from Chinese politics.

Taiwanese soccer scholar Tien-Chin Tan argues that Chinese leaders see their country's poor soccer performance as a "slap in its leader's face" against the backdrop on China being a top scorer in Olympic competitions.

The Chinese emphasis on soccer, alongside the hosting of mega events like various Olympic games, further reflects President Xi Jinping's personal passion first expressed in 2011 during a meeting with South Korean officials even before he became his country's leader. Xi said that his three personal ambitions were for China to qualify for the World Cup, host the event and, ultimately win it.

The Manchester City deal follows the adding of Le Sports, a subsidiary of China's largest online video company, LeTV, to the list of Dutch club AFC Ajax's Chinese sponsors, which includes Huawei, Sengled, and CST. The agreement calls for the establishment of an Ajax training camp in China.

"Football is now at a fascinating and critical stage of development in China. We see unprecedented growth opportunities in both its development as an industry, being China's most watched sport, and its inspirational role bringing people of all ages together with a shared passion," said CMG chairperson Li Ruigang. "We and our consortium partner CITIC Capital also see this investment as a prime opportunity for furthering the contribution of China to the global football family."

The sale has significant economic benefits, including opening up to the UAE what is likely to become the world's foremost soccer market involving opportunities to market its Manchester City and other brands in China, capitalize on opportunities arising from the country's soccer development plan, and the English Premier League's increasing popularity in China.

The degree to which soccer allows the UAE, which packages its repression of dissent at home and fierce opposition to any expression of political Islam that translates into pressuring other countries into adopting its hard line views, to exert leverage and project itself as a force of enlightenment is obvious in public statements by its representatives as well as media reports on its diplomatic moves.

The Guardian reported that Manchester City chairperson Khaldoon Al-Mubarak, a close business associate of UAE Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, had warned the UK that his country would block multi-billion dollar arms deals, halt investment in Britain and suspend intelligence cooperation if Prime Minister David Cameron failed to crack down on the Muslim Brotherhood.

“Success on the battlefield may be the easy part,” the UAE’s ambassador to the United States, Yousef Al Otaiba, said in an article in Foreign Policy, entitled ‘A Vision for a Moderate, Modern Muslim World. Al Otaiba was referring to the UAE’s military engagements, first and foremost among which Yemen in which some 50 Emirati soldiers have so far died. “

We know that to win, we must not only defeat what we are against, but we must also define what we as Muslims and Arabs are for,” Al Otaiba added.

He said that the UAE was “testing a new vision for the region — an alternative, future-oriented ideology. It is a path guided by the true tenets of Islam: respect, inclusion, and peace. It empowers women, embraces diversity, encourages innovation, and welcomes global engagement.”

In many respects, the UAE’s social and economic achievements as well as the projection of its military prowess in countries like Yemen and Libya is beyond doubt. Nonetheless, the UAE’s achievements are also geared to cementing autocratic family rule.

Soccer with Manchester City in the lead, alongside high expenditure on public relations, has allowed the ambitious Gulf state to project itself as a modern, enlightened state rather than a repressive, autocratic regime that understands that economic and social development coupled with the ability to punch internationally above its weight is key to the survival of its regime.

The sale to China of a stake in Manchester City strengthens the UAE’s strategy and adds an arrow to its quiver. It aligns the UAE’s global ambitions with those of China and strengthens perceptions of the UAE as a global player.

Ian Smith of Sports Integrity Matters underlined soccer’s importance to the UAE and other Gulf states when he noted that “nothing happens without there being a political overtone to it because of the nature in which these countries are governed.” Harnessing soccer for political interests,

Smith said, stems both from the sport's utility as well as a "pervasiveness (in the Gulf) that there is no matter that the government should not be involved in."

Note: This article was originally published in the blog, **The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer** and has been reproduced under arrangement. Web link: <http://mideastsoccer.blogspot.in/2015/12/soccer-unites-china-and-uae-in-pursuing.html>

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