

9 June 2015

Football or Atolls? Why Football Matters More than Chinese Island Construction for World Politics

Are the recent arrests of FIFA officials an empty distraction from more pressing geopolitical problems? Sunil Dasgupta doesn't think so. He also thinks the arrests illustrate a key feature of American soft power — i.e., the legal and diplomatic leverage the country enjoys is attributable to its status as a major marketplace.

By Sunil Dasgupta for ISN

A few weeks ago, the United States and China were on a collision course over Beijing's atoll construction in the South China Sea. Washington has contested the reclamation projects in the name of open seas and with support from China's neighbors, who dispute Beijing's assertion of ownership of the South China Sea. Amazingly, this building conflict, which has portents of a new cold war, was pushed out of the headlines and from public attention by football, when the United States indicted nine FIFA officials and five business executives on corruption charges May 27. Seven of the officials were arrested in Switzerland, where they had gathered for the organization's quadrennial elections.

How did the arrests of sporting officials overshadow a budding military-territorial dispute between the world's two biggest powers? And why does the United States, where football is a marginal sport, feel compelled to act against corruption that primarily affects others? Most of those indicted are not U.S. citizens or residents, and although the charges include crimes committed in the United States, FIFA is an international body and conducts most of its business outside the United States.

Rather than blaming the media or the public for paying more attention to a sporting controversy than to developments in the South China Sea, this unlikely legal move by the U.S. Department of Justice should be taken as evidence of the symbolic nature of power in contemporary international politics. On the symbolic terrain of soft power, the governance of football may indeed be more important than the geopolitics of Chinese island construction projects. If so, the FIFA arrests may indicate that the United States is more capable of shaping certain elements of the international system than reports of its decline have suggested.

Power and interdependence

Power has been traditionally viewed as a function of material capacities, particularly economic and military strength. Most wars between 1815 and 2000 have occurred over territory. When faced with

symbolic conflict, the conventional approach has been to seek out the “real” underlying causes. The so-called Football War between El Salvador and Honduras in 1969, for example, is believed to have been only nominally about the sport, while disputes over immigration and land reform are what really fueled the fighting.

Clearly, China’s island construction projects in the South China Sea harken back to nineteenth century power politics; they raise old fears of military ascendancy and trigger balancing reactions from China’s neighbors and from the United States. Since the nineteenth century, however, international politics has changed—to the point that a sporting controversy may now be just as significant as a geopolitically explosive territorial dispute.

As Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye wrote in 1977, power in an interdependent world is less fungible and more fragmented. The uses of military power are increasingly limited, and economic power need not translate into military power, as the cases of Germany and Japan demonstrate.

Likewise, the economic power of the United States is quite distinct from its military power. The former is grounded in the U.S. Dollar’s status as the international reserve currency, whereby Washington accepted a considerable loss in the efficacy of its monetary policy. Belatedly, the United States has benefited from the status of the U.S. Dollar by being able to borrow cheaply in international markets. Interdependence means that the ambit of all kinds of power has narrowed, and that different forms of power are no longer interchangeable. Being powerful in one aspect of international relations does not lead to power in other areas.

Indeed, in the decades since the end of World War II, changing norms, institutional reordering, decolonization, and the legitimacy of ideas of development and human rights have undermined the view that power in international politics has an exclusively material basis. These developments suggest that power ultimately lies in what people collectively believe is important. Sport is big business—generating almost a trillion dollars annually—because it powerfully affects the emotional lives of billions of people.

The reality today is that sports such as football may affect people more deeply than conventional forms of geopolitics and geopolitical representation, even when the nationalistic symbolism of moves like China’s island-building endeavor are taken into account. It is apt, therefore, that football has become a locus of power and a venue for contested legitimacy in international politics.

This is why it is significant that the U.S. government, which is widely seen within the country as beholden to domestic interest groups, still appears to retain sufficient autonomy to go after a rich and powerful interest group on behalf of a global constituency: football fans, most of whom are not American citizens. In this regard, it was telling that FBI director James Comey justified the FIFA indictments not simply in legal terms but in terms of the values of that constituency—, i.e., on the basis of fair play—alleging that, “The defendants fostered a culture of corruption and greed that created an uneven playing field for the biggest sport in the world.”

The long arm of the law?

The extraterritorial application of U.S. law in a case about a sport that Americans traditionally care little about is bound to upset the status quo, and has angered powerful actors. Two days after the arrests, FIFA members showed their defiance by reelecting its president, Joseph “Sepp” Blatter, the former Swiss business executive who has run the organization since 1998 under a continuous cloud of suspicion.

The FIFA controversy has also quickly moved from sport to politics. Russian President Vladimir Putin

has been a scathing critic of the indictments, saying that even if FIFA officials did something wrong, they are not U.S. citizens, the crimes were not committed on U.S. territory, and the corruption should not be a matter of U.S. concern. In a statement, the Russian Foreign Ministry said, "...that this is clearly yet another example of arbitrary extraterritorial enforcement of US law. Time and again, we call on Washington to cease its attempts to initiate court proceedings far beyond its borders with its own legal standards, and to follow universally accepted international legal procedures."

The extraterritorial application of U.S. national law is hardly new, but it is always controversial. In the past, the Departments of Justice and State have tried to extend economic sanctions against Cuba, Libya, Iran, and North Korea to non-American firms in similar fashion. The U.S. Congress and the Department of Justice have sought to reform international finance using similar means. Russia has been especially vulnerable to U.S. extraterritorial action as Western states seek to sanction the country for its attempted grab of Ukraine.

George Washington University law professor Jessica Tillipman explained to the *Washington Post* that extraterritorial application of U.S. statutes require a "jurisdictional hook" that involves the United States—for example, a phone call, email, or bank transaction that touches U.S. territory in some way. In this instance, CONCACAF, the football federation for the Caribbean and the Americas, which is based in Miami, is central to the U.S. case. CONCACAF chief Jeffrey Webb, who was arrested in Switzerland, is a FIFA vice president and a close associate of Sepp Blatter.

The United States has international support from government and some football authorities as well. The Swiss authorities both cooperated in the arrests and have announced their own investigation into FIFA irregularities. The Brazilian Football governing body has also welcomed the FIFA probe, and some Brazilians are loudly wondering why its own government did not take the lead against FIFA's corrupt practices. Most European states and the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA)—and especially its president, Michel Platini—have come out strongly against the ruling clique within FIFA. England has long called for investigations into FIFA after losing the bid to host the 2018 World Cup. Certainly, many football fans around the world are ecstatic at the possibility of a cleanup of FIFA and the prospect of what they see as restoring the "beautiful game" to its true owners—the players and the spectators.

FIFA and American soft power

No one expects the U.S. indictments to lead to serious conflict, notwithstanding the controversial expansion of U.S. law outside its territory. Rather, there is the opposite expectation—that the U.S. Department of Justice will be able to bring FIFA to heel. On June 2, Blatter resigned under the pressure.

However, it is worthwhile to note that while the Department of Justice can bring indictments that might topple the FIFA regime, it does not have the power, let alone the authority, to reconstruct FIFA as a democratic and transparent governing body. Real change will have to come from within the organization. To usher in a new era, the Department of Justice will need allies inside FIFA.

This is where the indictments bring into focus a key feature of American soft power in the post-war era. The most dependable ally of the Department of Justice is not any reform-minded FIFA official, but the growing U.S. football market, where demographic and sociological shifts predict untold riches for FIFA. Like the global banks that accepted massive settlements with the U.S. Department of Justice in return for being able to operate in the U.S. market, FIFA, too, might be tempted to clean house.

If the most effective element of U.S. power is not the indictments, or the trials that might follow, but the promise of doing business with the US in the future, then what does this say about the nature of power? China recognizes the reality and the potential of a good business relationship with the United

States; the U.S. market, of course, has also been central to China's export-led growth strategy. Today, China is interdependent in another way, as a creditor of United States.

If China ultimately challenges American power, interdependence means that any aggressive action will come at a significant cost. Nor is a Sino-American confrontation simply the logical extension of China's growing economic rise; on the contrary, challenging the United States would require real sacrifices from the Chinese government and nation. Of course, China and the United States may descend into a new cold war anyway, but both governments will have to make hard choices to get there. And if they do, they are unlikely to resolve pressing global problems, such as the need for more energy exploration and for ensuring free ocean navigation, which are the key issues in contention in the South China Sea.

In contrast, the football controversy promises to define new rules for governing non-state international organizations—a type of entity left outside the post-World War II institutional order. It also offers a new methodology for solving problems: state action on behalf of a global, rather than a national, public, which is a novel and potentially exciting model for reorganizing the international system.

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