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Pan-Africanism and Soccer: How Africa Can Secure Its Next Diplomatic Win ^[1]

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Morocco's magical run at the 2022 World Cup, where it became the first African nation to reach the semifinal, was celebrated across the continent. What brought Morocco to that moment was not just talent, but also the Pan-African movement that opened doors for African nations' inclusion in global institutions like the Fédération Internationale De Football Association (FIFA).

Africa's advancement today is still tied to Pan-Africanism. And with the upcoming 2024 Paris Olympics and 2026 World Cup in North America, African nations have an opportunity to collectively lobby for permanent representation in institutions including the Group of Twenty (G20) and the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). They'll be able to combine the modern media spotlight of these global events with a model established nearly six decades

ago.

The 1966 strikers

The 1966 World Cup offers a clear example of Africa using smart power and bloc voting to push for greater representation, and it speaks to the potential of Pan-Africanism to shape the continent's integration in the global community today.

Nelson Mandela once said: "Sport has the power to change the world. It has the power to inspire. It has the power to unite people in a way that little else does." For Africans in the 1960s, soccer was a unifying vehicle that helped them advance a regional agenda in the new world order that followed a wave of African nations declaring independence.

FIFA, which was established in Paris in 1904 by soccer officials from seven European countries, did not envision Africa as integral to the sport—as shown by its decision to allocate fifteen of the sixteen team slots in the 1966 World Cup to countries in Europe and Latin America and the Caribbean. That left almost thirty countries across Africa and Asia competing for one slot, sparking great discontent, with some arguing an injustice was being placed on already disadvantaged countries. In response to FIFA's decision, Africa boycotted the tournament.

When Ghanaian President Kwame Nkrumah tapped Ohene Djan, Ghana's Football Association president, to lead the fifteen-nation African boycott, three things happened: It brought African soccer to the fore, laid the foundation for Sub-Saharan Africa and newly independent nations to flex global influence, and forced FIFA to open more qualifying spots for non-European countries. Ultimately, the boycott displayed the growing importance of the African regional bloc in the geopolitical sphere.

Tackling barriers with Black political power

One of the important factors that contributed to Africa's effectiveness in boycotting FIFA was Pan-Africanism, the movement to unite and mobilize everyone of African descent (including Black people in the United States, Europe, and Latin America and the Caribbean) in the pursuit of shared goals such as eliminating racism and colonialism. In the spirit of collaboration around a shared experience, Nkrumah, who is considered a founding father of Pan-Africanism, exercised grassroots soccer diplomacy and reinforced the idea among African thought leaders that solidarity would be the key to improving representation and inclusion.

Such thinking, heavily influenced by the African-American experience, defined the way in which Africa inserted itself into the Cold-War geopolitics of the time and asserted its claim to representation in global institutions. Specifically, Nkrumah's engagement with African Americans during his formative years in the United States was critical. In his pursuit for African sovereignty—and while a student at historically Black Lincoln University in Pennsylvania—Nkrumah sought not only to understand the common struggle among Black people but also to identify global solutions for addressing structural racism. Later on, his interactions with African American civil-society leaders including W.E.B. Du Bois, Martin Luther King Jr., and Malcom X transformed diaspora relations.

The US civil rights movement inspired an identity shift among Black people from colonized to

citizen, informing Nkrumah's perspective. Using his platform as the leader of the first independent African nation south of the Sahara, he helped shape the thinking on African citizenship and its connection to a larger struggle rooted in a shared Black experience. Such a framework integrated common cultural experiences, values, and interpretations shared among people of African descent. Nkrumah's concept for African citizenship also encouraged Africans of newly independent countries to see themselves as global actors, ultimately influencing Africa's conduct of international affairs—including the continent's participation in the World Cup.

The combination of Africa's wealth of natural resources and its burgeoning youth population gives the continent strength that, with the support of the African diaspora, could potentially reshape power dynamics in favor of Africa's development.

Nkrumah saw the need to push for change in soccer, a sport heavily tied to politics. His solution to address FIFA's barriers drew from the African American experience as well: Boycotts throughout the civil rights movement became synonymous with the fight against exclusionary institutions. In taking a page from the African American liberation struggle playbook, members of the boycott during the World Cup saw themselves as confronting similar barriers that inhibited integration.

All players on the pitch

Since FIFA's inception, countries have used World Cup diplomacy to advance nation branding (or convey a particular image of their national identities), political protest, and grassroots diplomacy. For example, at the 2014 World Cup in Brazil, the host country promoted a specific image of itself as a strong and newly emerging international market player in an attempt to expand its soft power: Recall the theme "all in one rhythm," which promoted collaboration. In another example of how countries have used World Cup diplomacy, players, countries, and international institutions against apartheid boycotted South Africa, and in response FIFA suspended South Africa in 1961.

Following the 1966 boycott, Nkrumah leveraged his platform to engage and persuade FIFA to make the World Cup more inclusive. He showcased smart power in a way that did more than change soccer; it influenced how Africans saw themselves in the global community. In particular, Ghana's leadership around the boycott helped change perceptions about Africa and its international profile.

The collective front of boycotting countries highlighted Africans' abilities to think for themselves and navigate Western institutions. And, with the boycott, Africans demonstrated that they, too, could play the game of global politics, using Western platforms and tactics such as regional bloc voting, collective bargaining, and political mobilization to compel change from FIFA. In doing so, African leadership challenged the idea that Africans lacked intellectual savviness to advance their causes. The act of taking on established institutions such as FIFA

brought to light the importance of representation, which enabled African nations, through nation branding, to enhance their soft power.

Pan-Africanism, as it was in the 1960s, remains an increasingly critical tool for African nations searching for ways to assert themselves in the era of great-power competition and looking to change the course of development across the continent.

In the next three years, African nations will have two venues—the 2024 Paris Olympics and 2026 World Cup spread across the United States, Canada, and Mexico—at which they can unite with the diaspora, mobilize their diplomatic corps, and propel their regional organizations to lobby for permanent representation in the G20 and UNSC. A renewed approach to African bloc engagement—in which African nations and the diaspora exert influence to direct their advancement on their terms and engage in public diplomacy with other leaders in attendance at international convenings—would acknowledge Africa’s pivotal role in forging global peace and prosperity.

A renewed approach to African bloc engagement would also unlock new avenues for addressing the toughest challenges facing the international community. Intellectual, financial, and entrepreneurial collaboration between Africans and the diaspora through knowledge sharing and partnerships could address global challenges such as climate change, social injustice, and economic exclusion. The combination of Africa’s wealth of natural resources and its burgeoning youth population gives the continent strength that, with the support of the African diaspora, could potentially reshape power dynamics in favor of Africa’s development. The 1966 World Cup boycott showed that when an international intervention gets a dose of Pan-Africanism, change on a global scale is possible.
