

Japan vs. Denmark, Thursday 20:30 [SAST]

Japan is essentially a group of islands within islands. This geography encouraged it to develop skill in trade and naval warfare. As a result, Japan was the first Asian state to become a peer of the Western world's global powers.

Following defeat in World War II, the Japanese focused their energy on trade, and built the world's second biggest economy. But the party ended abruptly in 1990 with a property market crash. Since then the country has drifted in uncertainty and stagnation, with deep economic troubles worsened by a shrinking population.

Japan's internal troubles have not prevented it from seeking a greater role in global affairs by expanding its military capabilities, participating in all the major international organizations, and promoting trade relations in the developing world through investment and aid. Tokyo's growing international involvement is reflected in the World Cup, where Tokyo competed in the tournament for the first time in 1998 and then co-hosted the games with South Korea in 2002.

Japan's public has been decidedly ambivalent about the new internationalism, and participating in international affairs is not the same as leading in that arena. In the 2002 soccer tournament, Japan lagged sorely behind its neighbor and historic rival South Korea, much as the smaller Korean economy has shown more dynamism over the past two decades. In sum, Japan's football team has yet to show that it can perform at a level that befits a country of its stature. This is not for lack of trying -- the Japanese players, like Japanese corporate workers, are well known for their hard work and long hours, and head coach Takeshi Okada boasts that his team statistically outruns its opponents in most games. While tenacity and stamina may not take Japan far in the World Cup, those attributes no doubt will enable Tokyo to continue to compete in international affairs.

Nigeria vs. South Korea, Tuesday 20:30 [SAST]

Nigeria is a country full of potential. With 150 million people, it is the most populous nation in sub-Saharan Africa, and with Nigeria's oil production of more than two million barrels per day, Angola is the only country in the region that comes close to matching its wealth in natural resources. Nigeria's GDP is topped in sub-Saharan Africa only by South Africa and yet Nigeria is widely viewed as somewhat of a disappointment geopolitically. The same applies to its national football team, the Super Eagles, one of the few symbols of unity in this fractious country. Nigeria is split between north and south: the north is Muslim and resource-poor, and the south is Christian and resource-rich. The two regions were held together for decades by a series of northern-based military dictatorships.

Nigerian football is an apt metaphor for the Nigerian state itself, which recently celebrated its 50th anniversary after achieving independence from Britain in 1960. Since then it has struggled

as a series of military coups and a brief civil war have jeopardized its stability.

Northern generals who used the military to keep the country unified throughout its most tumultuous period eventually made way for a nominally democratic government to assume power in 1999, at which point Nigeria began to be ruled by a different sort of cabal known as the People's Democratic Party (PDP). This group is also largely responsible for the activities of militant group Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) whose attacks against oil infrastructure in the Delta have hampered the country's daily production.

A telling indicator of Nigeria's state of affairs is probably evidenced by the fact that its football midfielder, Sani Kaita, has received more than 1,000 death threats after being booted from the match with a red card in the team's 2-1 loss to Greece. Nigerians know how to send a message, whether through militant pipeline attacks or on the pitch.

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