

South Korea vs. Uruguay, last 16, Saturday 16:00 [SAST]

In both football and geopolitics, South Korea has exceeded the world's expectations. Stuck between China and Japan, the giants of Northeast Asia, the Koreans learned early in their history that speed, flexibility and smarts were critical to survival. Once freed from Japanese rule following World War II, Seoul benefitted from US military and economic support, which allowed its assets to blossom.

The result was a remarkable evolution. A nation of rice farmers in the far corner of a craggy peninsula became a sophisticated industrial and technological powerhouse in a matter of decades. Flexibility, resourcefulness and a national sense of mission enabled South Korea to bounce back from both the Asian financial crisis of the late 90's and the recent global economic crisis in a relatively short time. Enmeshed in global trade, Korea has a wide range of trading partners and continues to compete with its bigger and stronger neighbors in everything from shipbuilding to electronics.

This vitality is also reflected in South Korea's football playing, where it has emerged as the leading Asian team. South Korea made it to the semi-finals in the 2002 World Cup, which it hosted along with Japan, and it has competed in the past seven tournaments. In the 2010 World Cup, South Korea recovered from a drubbing by Argentina to advance to the knock-out phase, where it stands a chance of moving past Uruguay. Ultimately the challenge for South Korean football is the same as the nation's strategic challenge: using its wits and speed to outmaneuver bigger and more established opponents.

North Korea

North Korea is the most mysterious of all the teams to compete in the 2010 World Cup. As in soccer, so it is in geopolitics. Before the tournament started, no one outside North Korea knew what to expect of the team. There is little reliable intelligence on what goes on inside the country whether it's soccer or anything else. The secretive communist state keeps its doors closed tight and maintains total control of news media. Paid actors, not real North Korean fans, have made up the team's audience in South Africa. The one reliable way to gauge the North is to expect the unexpected: last time the DPRK participated in the World Cup -- in 1966 - it surprised everyone by blasting through to the quarterfinals.

The first match in 2010, against Brazil, exemplified North Korea's geopolitical strategy and tactics. Few would have guessed that North Korea was capable of competing with Brazil, the team that has won the most World Cup championships. But for decades the same combination of uncompromising loyalty to the group and the

element of surprise have enabled Pyongyang to maintain power despite being surrounded by the likes of greater powers - the United States, Russia, Japan, China and South Korea.

This is not to exaggerate North Korea's strengths - its economy is a shambles, and despite its military's size, its capabilities are limited. Fear of defeat by foreign competition is why the North rarely ventures abroad, earning the nickname the "Hermit Kingdom." Pyongyang knows that public humiliation could weaken the group morale that is essential for the regime to survive. But as with its array of missile tests, it is at least able to use the team's participation on the global stage as domestic propaganda.