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Xi Jinping's 2050 World Cup soccer dream: where China has got it wrong

Mark Dixon says China's ambition to win the most important game in the world may just come true, but it should stop focusing on buying the big-name soccer clubs and instead invest in the smaller ones on a massive scale

PUBLISHED : Sunday, 09 July, 2017, 2:03pm
UPDATED : Sunday, 09 July, 2017, 7:03pm

COMMENTS:



Mark Dixon

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President Xi Jinping (习近平) has a very Chinese, years-in-advance ambition for the nation: to qualify, host and win the World Cup by 2050.

Few people from a country that has yet to qualify for a World Cup would seriously dream about actually winning the most important game in the world. But China isn't an ordinary country, 23 years isn't an ordinary time frame, and Xi isn't an ordinary person.

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He might actually pull it off. Indeed, there is probably no one in the world more powerful than Xi, if power is measured by the potential impact of a person's whim – a leader's power is the country's strength multiplied by the degree to which his will is heeded.

One man's hobby has become a nation's goal – and a corporate sector's duty.

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My firm has just released statistics showing that, in the past three years, China has invested more foreign exchange buying soccer teams than all other countries put together. Total Chinese soccer investment between 2014 and 2016 amounted to €2.15 billion (HK\$19 billion), vs €1.94 billion from the 40 other countries combined.

[Xi Jinping's fandom helps fuel China's world-beating splurge on soccer M&A](#)

Let's leave aside whether winning the World Cup should be a national objective, whether countries should really be using economic resources to beat each other at sports, and indeed ignore the philosophical question of whether winning should be so important anyway. Let's instead accept the premise that the president's dream should be China's goal.

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To that end, my China 2050 plan is this: China should acquire many small football clubs around the world, rather than spend its resources on a small number of big-brand premier league clubs, which is exactly what it has done.

The transfer of know-how in club management, and at training and playing levels, is what is going to make the difference in 2050. Spend the next €2 billion on 100 €20 million investments rather than 20 €100 million ones. Chinese investors, if they want to deliver the World Cup to their president by 2050, have got the strategy the wrong way around. The slogan should be "small is beautiful on a massive scale".

Giant deals like AC Milan, Inter Milan, West Bromwich Albion and Manchester City may grab the headlines but osmosis from a multitude of small ones, paired with Chinese clubs like twin cities, would be like planting 100 seeds in fertile ground.

My China 2050 plan calls for a change in strategic direction, in which China resists its belief that bigger is better and famous brands are better. What's important is that China itself wins, rather than owning the winners.

Mark Dixon is chief thinking officer at investment banking firm ThinkingLinking

This article appeared in the South China Morning Post print edition as:

Winning World Cup strategy