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How the Socceroos can help Albo boost Australia-China relations



Vince Rugari

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The Socceroos have landed a coveted rematch with world champions Argentina next month in Beijing, which Football Australia boss James Johnson says is not only a chance for improved relations between the Australian and Chinese governments, but a sign of Australia's increasing prominence in world football politics.

[Six months on from their memorable round-of-16 clash in Qatar](#), in which the Socceroos pushed the eventual World Cup winners all the way, Australia will face Lionel Messi's men again on June 15 at the Beijing Workers' Stadium.

It will be the first time since early 2020 that a senior Australian national sporting team has played in China and represents - as Johnson put it - a flexing of football's "competitive advantage" over rival codes through the sport's global reach.

The match has the support of the Australian government, and dovetails with Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's ambitions to stabilise diplomatic ties with China. Johnson said FA's primary motivations were sporting and commercial, but that being able to facilitate high-level talks between governments was "additive to what we're trying to do", and could also enhance football's status in the eyes of the federal government as the federation seeks increased funding for high-performance and grassroots facilities.

"We've seen our [trade] minister, Don Farrell, who's been over in China recently, we've seen our prime minister who's started to try to open up channels with the highest level officials in China. We've seen Penny Wong, obviously, try to do the same. There certainly is interest from the federal government," Johnson said.

"I think there will be government officials at the game in some shape or form. That's the competitive advantage that we have against the AFL and the NRL because, like government, we exist locally but also globally - and through football, we can open up some channels and dialogue for our governments."



Harry Souttar tangles with Lionel Messi during the Socceroos' round-of-16 loss to eventual champions Argentina in Qatar. AP

Argentina [has been in huge demand for friendly matches since winning the World Cup](#), but FA's discussions began before the tournament, based on an "inkling" that the Socceroos would finish second in their group and meet them in the first knockout round. The round-of-16 clash, which Argentina coach Lionel Scaloni later described as their most difficult of the tournament, also sparked a widespread fascination in South America at the prospect of a rematch with the Socceroos.

After FA's attempts to bring Argentina to Australia for a friendly fell through, and a separate plan for them to meet in the United States also did not come to fruition, FA were approached by China Rainbow International Investment Co, a promotional company which Johnson said had picked up those failed negotiations and proposed for the match to be played in Beijing instead, threading in the diplomatic element.

"The word was on the street ... we had people in different parts of the world trying to get the match against Argentina," Johnson said.

"We hunted them hard post-World Cup. Of course, everyone's talking, and it was quite well known that we would do anything we could to play Argentina, and I think [the promoters] heard that on the grapevine and thought about a vision and opportunity to bring a match to Beijing. It's as simple as that."



Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese meets Chinese President Xi Jinping at the 2022 G20 summit in Bali, Indonesia. JAMES BRICKWOOD

The process of gaining all the necessary approvals in China was gruelling and had stretched out longer than FA had anticipated, Johnson said: “It’s felt like we’ve been in the 89th minute for 90 minutes, so to speak.”

While the Socceroos will receive an appearance fee, Johnson downplayed the size of it, and said the biggest financial benefit for FA was that the match would be played in a friendly timezone, with kick-off at 10pm in the eastern states and 8pm in Perth, and on free-to-air television. “It’s not like we’re sitting there going, ‘Wow, let’s take this deal.’ Of course there’s a little bit of cash, but it’s not something that we’re popping open bottles of champagne about,” he said.

[Human rights groups criticised the plan when it first emerged earlier this month](#), calling it a “slap in the face” for Uyghurs and others targeted by the Chinese government, but Johnson sees differently. “I would see it as, if anything, a way to create awareness around some of the issues,” he said.



Football Australia chief executive James Johnson and Socceroos boss Graham Arnold. GETTY

“Look, China are a world power, and it’s of interest to any government around the world, Australia or otherwise, to foster good relationships with China. I think it’ll be taken in the spirit in which it’s meant to, and that’s for it to be a positive thing for Australia and for the Australian government to be able to enhance its relations and just make that dialogue, which perhaps hasn’t existed too much over the past few years a little bit easier for this new government.”

More than anything, Johnson said, Australia’s ability to beat other nations to secure a match against the world champions shows that the country’s standing in global terms has improved, perhaps to a level not yet understood at home.

“If you want a seat at the world football table, these are the things you’ve got to do,” he said.

“You’ve got to host big competitions like the Women’s World Cup. You’ve got to play big opposition like Argentina, [you’ve got to play at Wembley](#). On the women’s side, you’ve got to play the best in the world, you’ve got to play the United States.

“If you look at all these examples in isolation, you might not see the strategy. If you bring it all together, though, there is an undertone, which is, ‘We’re Australia, we’re here, we’ve got a seat now and we want to stay at the world table.’

“What I’m hoping we’re seen as now is sort of like a United States or Japan in world football where, perhaps in the past, we’ve been in the passenger seat, but right now we’re able to drive issues. And I do think that that is the perception outside of Australia, and I hope that we can build that perception within Australia because I think we’re a rising power in world football and that’s where we should be.”

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