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Comrades on and off the pitch

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For the past few months devotees of football have been boring their non-round ball mates senseless, heralding next year's admission of Australia into the Asian Football Confederation. Mostly this draws an indifferent shrug from non-enthusiasts, but it shouldn't. AFC membership will be as significant as the Colombo Plan and APEC for Australia's engagement with Asia — provided the opportunities are understood and grasped.

Australian football fans see AFC membership as the cure for all that has afflicted the development of the game in this country. It certainly brings an eminently more scalable path to the World Cup, while regular Asian club championship games will inject sponsorship cash, media profile and Asian players into the newly revived national league.

The significance of the move goes beyond football, however. Australians don't need to be told that the impact of sport is often felt beyond the pitch or the park. But you don't have to be a football fan to comprehend how radically AFC membership will, over the long term, transform our relationship with Asia.

The basic numbers are startling. Beginning next January, each year Australian national and club teams will play dozens of home and away games against counterparts in a sporting confederation that incorporates more than half the world's population, stretches from the Persian Gulf to Southeast and North Asia and contains three of the world's top five economies: Japan, China and India (measured on purchasing power).

The commercial potential of this new sporting relationship is obvious. Sponsors of Australian teams will gain exposure to a massive new audience: some 250 million Chinese were, for example, estimated to have watched the 2004 Asian Cup final between China and Japan. And there will undoubtedly be spin-offs in the tourism and travel sectors. But it is the less quantifiable implications that make the prospect of AFC membership really interesting.

One of the enduring critiques of Australia's relationship with Asia has been the inability to translate contacts between government and business leaders into engagement at a more popular level. Certainly, there is a long history of interaction by backpackers, students and exporters. In all cases, however, something was being pursued — an exotic holiday, a Western education, a market for a good or service. In other words, the relationship has typically been that between a buyer and a seller, emphasising the differences between societies rather than their common elements.

Football is different because no matter how passionately individuals follow their teams, they tend to share an appreciation for the game and its players. In effect it becomes a common language and frame of reference, something which has long been absent in the torturous effort to place Australia in an Asian regional context. If in the past "Asian values" has been a cipher for divergent political interests, "football values" could well become a bridge.

Football is also unique in that it achieves the seemingly impossible in international politics. It reconciles nationalism — or parochialism, at club level — with globalisation. Nationalism means I want the best coach possible for my team; globalisation means that I can have him, whatever his nationality. So a Swede ends up coaching the English and a Dutchman coaches South Koreans (and latterly, Australians).

Consider too that the football world, like the present international system, is also unipolar. But its hyper power, Brazil, draws far more admiration for the skill and verve of its play than its Realpolitik counterpart. AFC membership may well see Australian footballers being idolised in Asia in the same way that Adam Gilchrist and Steve Waugh are admired on the subcontinent. It will certainly help Australians to understand that a passion for sport is not unique to their country.

Of course, there are limits to the ways in which sport can be used as an instrument of policy. No one, for example, should expect football to eradicate all popular misconceptions and grievances; it may even contribute a few. As cultural ambassadors football fans make, well, great football fans. And you don't have to travel to New Zealand to understand that playing sport is not always relationship-enhancing.

None of this detracts from the fact that a significant new grassroots layer is about to be added to Australia's engagement with Asia which, given a bit of lateral thinking, government and business should be able to capitalise on (something the Lowy Institute will be exploring next month in a seminar on the role of sport in international policy). But regardless of whether they do or not, it is certain that Australia's perceptions of the region — and the region's view of Australia — are set to change in dramatic ways.

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