

The 2026 FIFA World Cup: Soft Power, Closed Borders, and a Tri-Host Fracture



Nation
Brand
Research

ABSTRACT

The 2026 FIFA World Cup represents the first mega-sporting event in which a host nation simultaneously generates unprecedented global demand while implementing immigration and security policies that actively constrain international participation. Although the tournament has produced record levels of interest, 77 matches reportedly receiving more than one million ticket requests each, the United States has, during the preparation phase, maintained restrictive visa regimes, heightened border scrutiny, and political rhetoric affecting travelers from dozens of countries. This creates a unique soft-power paradox: the same state seeking to maximize global attraction through sport is also producing deterrence through policy.

This brief argues that the tournament constitutes an unprecedented real-world test of whether soft power can be sustained when symbolic openness and operational accessibility diverge. Unlike previous mega-events that relied on narratives of hospitality, mobility, and international inclusion, the 2026 World Cup exposes tensions between national security, domestic political polarization, and global image management. We conceptualize this contradiction in the dynamics as “selective openness,” whereby states seek the economic and reputational benefits of globalization while restricting its human flows.

The brief further examines how this paradox reshapes the dynamics of the United 2026 partnership between the United States, Canada, and Mexico. While the original bid emphasized regional cooperation and collective gain, asymmetries in political stability, border governance, and international perception have transformed the tournament into a case of reputational redistribution. Canada and Mexico may benefit comparatively if they are perceived as more accessible, stable, or welcoming alternatives within the same event ecosystem.

Beyond host-country politics, the brief analyzes three structural transformations introduced by the 2026 tournament: (1) the expansion to 48 teams and its geopolitical implications for representation and football globalization; (2) Curaçao’s diaspora-driven qualification pathway as a model of transnational sporting identity; and (3) the potential United States–Iran encounter as a stress test for sports diplomacy and multilateral engagement under conditions of geopolitical hostility. The brief also evaluates the economic, cultural, and media visibility consequences of hosting the largest World Cup in history within an era of fragmented globalization.

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SECTION#1

THE HOSTING GAINS & SPORTS DIPLOMACY

Hosting gains, scope of multilateralism, and the complications of FIFA 2026.

- 1.1 Background
- 1.2 The Dual Returns of Hosting:
Tangible Gains, Intangible Impact

1.1 Background

Joseph Nye, an American political scientist, distinguishes between attraction and coercion as means of power. His famous framework categorizes a country's ability to attract and influence others on the basis of culture, values, occasions, and policies rather than through economic and military strength as soft power.

Sports, particularly the FIFA World Cup, attract greater interest and engagement than any other public or policy instrument. For instance, roughly **1.5 billion** people worldwide watched the 2022 FIFA World Cup final between France and Argentina. In contrast, a trade agreement between any two countries would be read by only a few specialists. Through this lens, we deduce that football's ability to generate massive demand and attention makes it a formidable instrument of soft power.

Historically, we have observed that sports can temporarily ease geopolitical tensions, project an image of the host or participants as capable of fair play and open-mindedness, and even create moments of peace amid hostility.

In 1992, the Cold War ended without a clean victory narrative for America. A decade of economic anxiety had dampened the US's sense of global standing. They decided to send their diplomatic team, which would include NBA superstars Michael Jordan, Magic Johnson, and Larry Bird, to deliver a memorable cultural statement. The Dream Team was dominant on the court, joyful to watch, accessible to fans outside the court, and demonstrated unforgettable showmanship. They imbued the world with American culture and (quietly) asserted post-Cold War supremacy. Contrarily, a diplomatic speech or foreign aid communiqué could not have matched the image of Michael Jordan shrugging at a global audience. It was an effortless display of soft power.

In 1995, Nelson Mandela handed the Rugby World Cup trophy to a white Afrikaner captain. He walked onto Ellis Park in a Springbok jersey one year after the regime had ended. This intentional act carried the language of white South Africa, which is Rugby, and showed the world what reconciliation looked like in practice.

In 2008, China hosted the Olympics. It spent an estimated **\$40 billion** on Beijing, and a major share of the investment went into the Bird's Nest, the venue of

the opening ceremony. China's investment and execution solidified its standing in the world and left a lasting impression.

The 2026 FIFA World Cup will be the first tournament in history in which one of the hosts' immigration policy, internal political instability, and a threat to visitors' safety from its own regulatory body (ICE) will sabotage its soft-power gains. These circumstances pose a contradiction within Nye's framework: **on the one hand, the US is creating record demand, while on the other hand, it's inhibiting access and fostering an atmosphere of deterrence and risk.**

Canada is co-hosting the World Cup for the first time and is not seen as an exuberant football nation, nor as one that fills stadiums to meet football fandom's expectations. For Mexico, addressing security concerns is critical to staying on par with the co-hosts and sustaining its legacy as a three-time host (a remarkable achievement). These individual challenges further complicate tri-host coordination, which is already strained by territorial provocations and the economic pressures the US has been putting on Canada and Mexico, respectively.

Addressing their own challenges would not only enable Canada and Mexico to host the tournament to its full potential but also to capture the low-hanging soft-power dividends the US has left open to them (due to its policy, access, and safety issues).



The tournament is further complicated by the ongoing US-Iran war, whose tensions will be visible in the stadiums. FIFA itself is structurally different: 48 teams instead of 32; 10 African nations up from 5; 8 Arab nations qualifying; Curaçao reaching the World Cup through a diaspora recruitment model; and the tournament calendar colliding with the USMCA review.

The tri-hosts' actions in the face of their individual challenges, their coordination – or lack of it – with each other, as well as the tournament's outcome and fans' experience, would serve as precedents for the future. Co-hosting under political fracture, sports diplomacy between adversaries, diaspora recruitment as national strategy – 2026 is testing all three at once.

Perhaps sports, especially football, is one of the sharpest soft-power tools a country has.

1.2 The Dual Returns of Hosting: Tangible Gains, Intangible Impact

By hosting the World Cup, a host receives tangible returns (infrastructure development, increased tourism, job creation, potential investments, advertising spend, etc.) as well as intangible benefits such as reputational uplift, investor confidence, and global exposure. Historically, intangible returns have flowed when policy, narrative, and fan experience have aligned and met expectations. The 2026 FIFA World Cup is a test of what transpires if these elements fail to align and deliver.

| | | TANGIBLE | INTANGIBLE |
|---|---|---|---|
|  | 1966  ENGLAND | Reached an estimated 400m global TV viewers through the final. | Reinforced England's identity as football's historic home. |
|  | 1974  WEST GERMANY | Leveraged Olympic-era infrastructure to demonstrate large-scale event capability. | Reinforced its post-war image as stable, modern, and rehabilitated. |
|  | 1994  UNITED STATES | Directly triggered MLS and set a 3.6m attendance record. | Legitimized soccer as a long-term American sports market. |
|  | 1998  FRANCE | Used the Stade de France as a driver of Saint-Denis regeneration. | "Black, Blanc, Beur" briefly projected a multicultural national identity. |
|  | 2002  SOUTH KOREA / JAPAN | Expanded football and event infrastructure across Asia's first co-hosted World Cup. | Created a temporary cooperation platform between two historically strained neighbors. |
|  | 2006  GERMANY | Added 700,000 overnight stays and about US\$900m in net tourism income. | Rebranded Germany as warmer, open, and welcoming. |
|  | 2010  SOUTH AFRICA | Delivered over R33bn in World Cup-linked infrastructure and preparation. | The First African World Cup projected continental pride and hosting capability. |
|  | 2022  QATAR | Visitor numbers rose 157% year-on-year by August 2023, reaching 2.56m. | Raised Qatar's global visibility. |

(National Science and Media Museum, 2021; FIFA, n.d.; National Soccer Hall of Fame, 2026; Le Monde, 2024; Horne & Manzenreiter, 2004; Sakaedani, 2005; Allmers & Maennig, 2009; South African Government, 2010; South African National Treasury, 2010; Qatar Tourism Authority, 2023)

SECTION#2 THE TRI-HOST FRACTURE

Can the US, Canada, and Mexico Build a Shared World Cup Identity?

- 2.1 How is FIFA 2026 Unique?
- 2.2 Tri-host Fracture
- 2.3 The US and Soft Power Paradox
- 2.4 Canada, A Loud Challenge for the Quiet Nation
- 2.5 Mexico, Torn between Legacy and Security

2.1 How is FIFA 2026 Unique?

No previous World Cup has operated under this combination of conditions

The Tri-Host is politically divided. The relations are strained by territorial provocations and economic pressures.

The trade review of the USMCA (the US, Canada, and Mexico - tri-host) takes place during the World Cup.

The US has barred fans from 39 nations, including Iran and Haiti, from entering the US.



Iran will play on US soil while under tensions. Along with the ongoing sanctions, nuclear diplomacy, and a visa ban.

48 teams will play in 2026. 10 from Africa, 8 from Arab, Uzbekistan (the first Central Asian qualifier), and Curaçao (with a population of 156,000).

2.2 Tri-host Fracture

The FIFA World Cup will be hosted by three nations in 2026. In this section, we dive deeper into the socio-political challenges each country faces and the tensions that complicate coordination among them.

In 2018, the tri-host won the bid under the banner of **United 2026**. Since then, we have witnessed US President Donald J. Trump suggesting that Canada join the US as the **51st State** in 2024 and 2025, during his second term. President Trump also **threatened tariffs** against Mexico and Canada, whose trade with the US accounts for 73% and 67% of their GDP, respectively, on account of illegal immigration and drug control. Particularly with Mexico, the tensions intensified between the two neighbouring nations over drug trafficking.

The Canadian Prime Minister, Mark Carney, stated in Davos in 2026 that Canada and middle powers have the capacity to help build a **"new order"**. It was a pointed remark, made while Canada was negotiating tariffs with its World Cup partner.

The three hosts enter the World Cup with tensions in the backdrop. We discuss the sporting world challenge of each country individually next.

2.3 The US and Soft Power Paradox

The US, due to its policies and ongoing internal political instability, is likely to face challenges from within and backlash from fans and the international community.

The World Cup's major host has seen record demand, with **77 matches** receiving over **1 million ticket** requests each. At the same time, **39 nations** are barred from entry. The other nations do not have easy access to visas either. The cost of the application and, in some cases, the requirement to post a bond, potentially filter out most fans. The waiting window is even longer than the tournament window in some cases (considering form mid-May). This makes access, despite the resources, infeasible.

Also, the Visa does not guarantee a smooth immigration process. International agencies have warned fans of the risks of detention, deportation, and mishandling. Finally, once the fans are inside, they would face the continued psychological pressure of ICE enforcement.

Internally, we see the US polarising around the administration, particularly after the Middle East war. The risk of potential boycotts and protests poses a security threat to fans and complicates the administration's efforts to project an inclusive and hospitable image.

Despite the massive appeal the US has generated, it may not fully capture the soft-power gains from the paradox of attraction and restriction it has created. And the benefits may flow to Canada and Mexico without them needing to campaign.

The question becomes: who feels truly welcome and secure enough to relish the World Cup experience?



2.4 Canada, A Loud Challenge for the Quiet Nation

Canada is not known for having a loud and rich football culture. This year, it will co-host one of the world's loudest, politically fractured, and diplomatically charged events. For an observer, this tension makes Canada's role very interesting to monitor. For fans, Canada's ability to deliver will play a key part in their tournament experience.

Culturally, Canada is rich in Hockey. Filling the BMO Field in Toronto and BC Place in Vancouver with authentic football intensity may be difficult for the host nation. Especially since Canada has a limited history of hosting mega tournaments, it will be learning at a high-stakes and large-scale level for the first time in 2026.

In the tri-host situation, Canada faces a quieter risk: irrelevance. The United States is hosting 78 matches, and Mexico is carrying 6 decades of World Cup heritage and legacy. Canada's 13 games could be displaced by the noise generated by fans' experiences in the other two countries. If that happens, Canada's contribution to United 2026 will be remembered mainly as logistics.

But unlike the US, Canada offers fans access and has negligible challenges with entry, immigration, or visas. In the tri-host situation, the US's restriction has become an important story, and Canada's openness serves as its differentiator without Canada needing to project it. Canadian cities are also among the most ethnically diverse in the world. Toronto, Vancouver, and Montreal are already home to fans of the many nationalities competing in the World Cup.



2.5 Mexico, Torn between Legacy and Security Issues

Mexico hosts the FIFA World Cup 2026 as the tournament's most experienced host, with the Estadio Azteca set to make history as the only stadium to host matches at three separate World Cup tournaments. Unlike its co-hosts, Mexico has a proven record of delivering authentic tournament atmospheres. The key challenge surrounding Mexico is not its capacity or football culture, but rather its security perceptions.

These security narratives overshadow the safety of host cities like Mexico City, Guadalajara, and Monterrey. As a result, international fans may hesitate or stay away because of perception rather than actual risk. This creates a reputational gap that may not reflect Mexico's true hosting capability.

Politically, Mexico is co-hosting alongside a partner that has imposed tariffs, questioned its sovereignty, and thrust bilateral tensions into the spotlight. With the USMCA review scheduled for mid-tournament, Mexico must navigate complex diplomatic dynamics while maintaining coordination and unity on the world stage.

It goes without saying that Mexico's passion for football, stadium infrastructure, and historic legacy remain unmatched among the hosts. The country's ability to manage perceptions and navigate political complexities will determine how well it can convert its football assets into soft-power gains during the World Cup.



SECTION#3

WHAT THE US STANDS TO GAIN (OR LOSE)

The Economic, Cultural, and Reputational Milestones for the US

- 3.1** A Clear Economic Case, Undermined by Policy
- 3.2** Super Bowl Style Halftime Show
- 3.3** America's 250th, a Celebration with the World

3.1 A Clear Economic Case, Undermined by Policy

The economic promise of the World Cup would be easy to gauge, unlike the reputational gain, as we discussed in the previous section.

However, the data shows that the economic outlook is currently gloomy. As of May 2026, **80%** of hotels in US host cities are reporting occupancy well below projections, with hoteliers consistently citing visa restrictions as the primary barrier to bookings.

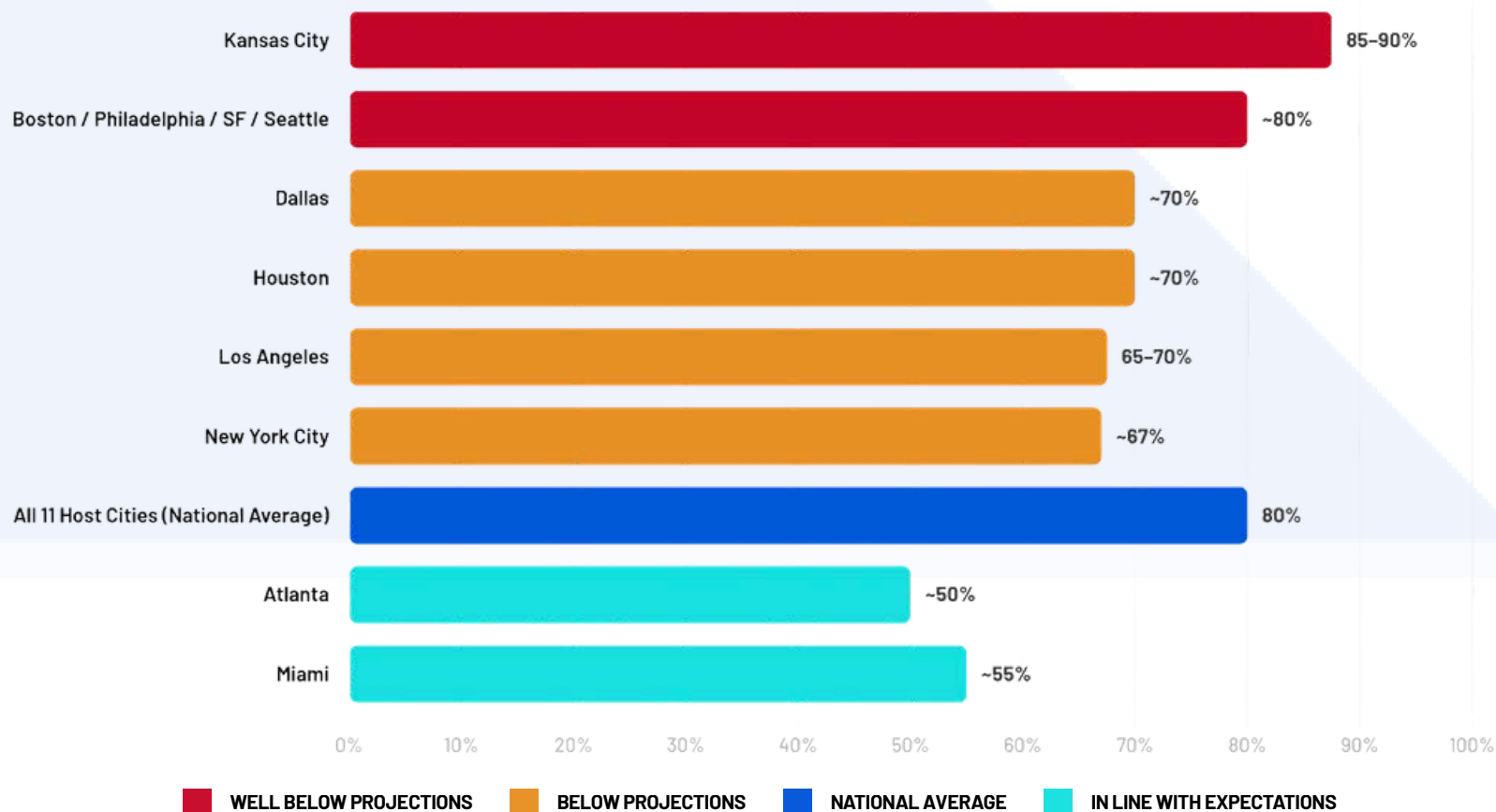
Tourism and hospitality, sectors that account for the largest share of the projected **185,000** tournament-related jobs, are especially vulnerable, with **72,000** positions in accommodation and food services directly reliant on international visitors. Hollywood and Beverly Hills hotels are also expected to operate at **28%** occupancy during the World Cup, which is below their summer rates. Only Miami and Atlanta stand out, with about half of hoteliers reporting above-average bookings, underscoring that the shortfall is uneven but widespread.

Moreover, most stadium seats are now expected to be filled by locals, whose shorter stays and potentially lower spending would yield less economic gain than international fans.

These stats show that fan access, safety, and the perception of an enjoyable experience are not just diplomatic or soft-power issues; they underpin the event's economic model. Without significant international footfall, the anticipated economic benefits risk falling short of the business's expectations.

Furthermore, if these stats do not improve (within a month), they can expose the US to criticism from disappointed industry leaders and the global community. And set a negative precedent for the country's hosting capabilities in the long run.

The World Cup Shortfall: Widespread Booking Lags Across US Host Cities



SOURCE: American Hotel & Lodging Association, 2026

3.2 Super Bowl Style Halftime Show

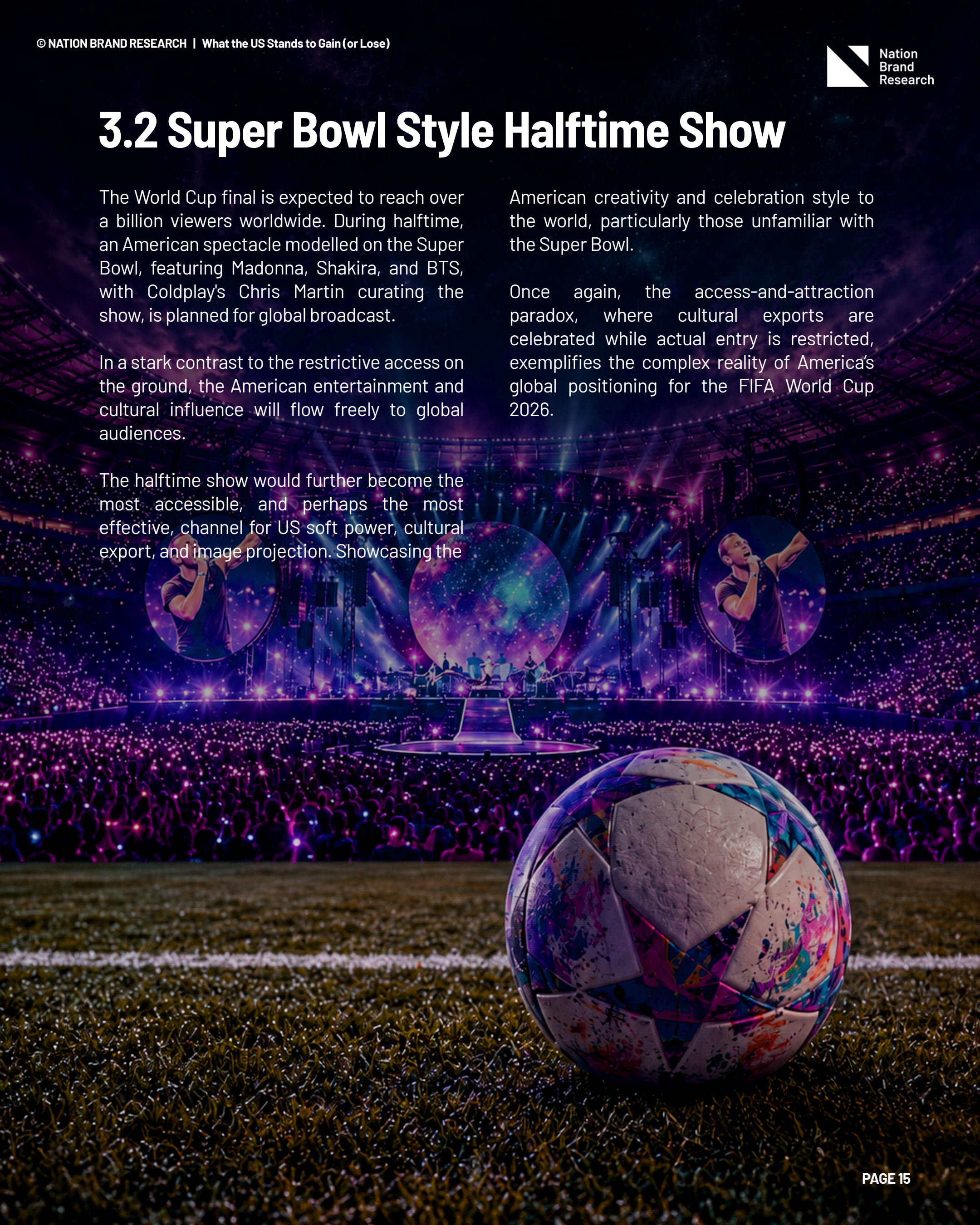
The World Cup final is expected to reach over a billion viewers worldwide. During halftime, an American spectacle modelled on the Super Bowl, featuring Madonna, Shakira, and BTS, with Coldplay's Chris Martin curating the show, is planned for global broadcast.

In a stark contrast to the restrictive access on the ground, the American entertainment and cultural influence will flow freely to global audiences.

The halftime show would further become the most accessible, and perhaps the most effective, channel for US soft power, cultural export, and image projection. Showcasing the

American creativity and celebration style to the world, particularly those unfamiliar with the Super Bowl.

Once again, the access-and-attraction paradox, where cultural exports are celebrated while actual entry is restricted, exemplifies the complex reality of America's global positioning for the FIFA World Cup 2026.



3.3 America's 250th, a Celebration with the World

In the quarterfinals, the world would arrive in the stadiums or turn on their TVs to witness the football spectacle. At the same time, they would also witness America's 250th birthday celebration. The quarterfinal is scheduled for July 4 at **Lincoln Financial Field** in Philadelphia, the city of the Signing of the **Declaration of Independence**. The same Declaration reads, 'all men are created equal.' At the same time, the American access policy regarding who gets to experience global sports in their live spirit may be at odds with the ideals of the Declaration today.



SECTION#4

UNPRECEDENTED CHANGES IN FIFA

Expansion from 32 to 48 Teams Rewrote the Map. Curaçao Has Rewrote the Model.

- 4.1 Africa's Representation Doubles
- 4.2 Curaçao's Diaspora Model
- 4.3 Eight Arab Nations Now Compete
- 4.4 Uzbekistan, First Central Asian Qualifier

4.1 Africa's Representation Doubles

The number of African teams expanded in the FIFA World Cup 2026 from 5 to 10. This expansion mirrors the continent's football strength and a long-overdue recognition of its capabilities. DR Congo's return means that more than 100 million people are now represented on the world stage, marking a significant milestone for Africa. With 10 teams playing in the tournament, Africa's institutional influence, and by extension, the balance in FIFA governance and football politics, will also grow. Morocco's (a country in Africa and the Arab world) position as a 2030 co-host is already shifting the locus towards Africa, regarding it as an emerging destination and potential powerhouse in the sport's global landscape.

Expanding by 16 teams does more than change the bracket.

It redistributes soft power, reshapes governance, and makes qualification a tool of foreign policy.

4.2 Curaçao's Diaspora Model

Curaçao's qualification is a unique phenomenon, marked by the country's size and its player recruitment strategy. Curaçao, with only **156,000 people**, still managed to secure a place on the world stage. The micro-state used targeted diaspora recruitment, systematically bringing in Dutch-raised players to build its national football team. Now, its flag will be seen in packed stadiums and its name broadcast to a global audience. The visibility and soft-power impact are tremendous. Moreover, as the international spotlight turns to Curaçao, other nations facing similar demographic or competitive constraints are likely to adopt a diaspora-driven strategy, potentially reshaping how (smaller) football nations compete globally.

4.3 Eight Arab Nations Now Compete

Football's institutional (and perhaps fan following) center of gravity is shifting. In 2022, Morocco led the way as the first Arab nation to reach a World Cup semi-final. In 2026, **8 Arab** nations have qualified on merit for unprecedented regional representation. This trajectory continues in 2030, when **Morocco is set to co-host**, and continues even further in 2034, when **Saudi Arabia will take the helm**. In the coming decade, the Arab world will no longer be viewed as peripheral or unrelated to global football; instead, it will have emerged as a central force shaping the sport's future.

4.4 Uzbekistan, First Central Asian Qualifier

Uzbekistan's qualification for the World Cup as the first Central Asian nation is a significant achievement for the region. Perhaps it was previously constrained by the 32-team format, with repeated close calls. Uzbekistan has produced talented players like captain Eldor Shomurodov, a veteran of Serie A, and now has the opportunity to showcase its football talent on the global stage. The country's qualification signals a broadening of the tournament's reach and an increased chance for promising nations to qualify.

SECTION#5
LOOKING AHEAD

What does the FIFA 2026 WORLD CUP answer? And What It Leaves Open.

- 5.1** Key questions the tournament will help answer
- 5.2** Expected trajectories and dynamics

5.1 Key questions the tournament will help answer

Can a co-hosted mega-event actually share soft power, or does one country dominate the narrative?

With the United States, Mexico and Canada jointly hosting, 2026 will test whether co-hosting creates a genuinely “distributed” image effect or simply amplifies the already dominant cultural power of the U.S. in global media and sponsorship landscapes.

Does “bigger” (48 teams, 104 matches) translate into “broader” influence or just more clutter?

The expanded format will show whether adding more teams and games deepens engagement in new markets or dilutes the prestige and clarity of the event, raising questions about attention, competitive integrity and narrative coherence.

Can sports mega-events still generate positive nation branding in a polarized, mediatized political climate?

Research projects around 2026 are already probing how political conflict, populism and media framing in North America shape audience perceptions of the hosts, testing whether the classic “feel-good” soft-power model still holds.

Will athlete and fan cultures out-brand official state narratives?

Emerging work on the “athlete brand economy” suggests star players’ personal brands and fan-driven digital cultures may command more attention than official host imagery or governmental messaging, raising questions about who really wields soft power in 2026.

Can the World Cup function as a credible platform for climate and social diplomacy, or will it be seen as greenwashing?

Policy briefs treat 2026 as a potential “game changer” for climate diplomacy and sustainable business, but the tournament will test whether audiences and partners perceive these initiatives as genuine or purely instrumental

5.2 Expected trajectories and dynamics

From one-off spectacle to continuous “event ecosystems”

The 2026 tournament spans 16 cities and complex digital environments, pointing to a future where mega-events are less 30-day spectacles and more multi-year ecosystems blending qualifiers, fan festivals, esports, and streaming-led storytelling that continuously shape national images.

Expanding Formats & Mega-Bids: The move to a 48-team format makes hosting prohibitively expensive for single countries, forcing multinational co-hosting, as seen with the United States, Canada, and Mexico, as well as the transcontinental bid between Morocco, Spain, and Portugal. These joint ventures disperse the financial risk while spreading the geopolitical spotlight across multiple borders.

Hybrid geopolitical branding: Joint hosting in North America prefigures a world where more events are shared across regions, using sport to express geopolitical alliances or economic blocs, and where soft power is negotiated between “center” and “periphery” hosts with unequal resources.

The Rise of Gulf Sports Diplomacy:

Countries in the Middle East have transformed how soft power operates by leveraging capital-intensive sports strategies. Following the 2022 tournament, nations like Saudi Arabia (hosts of the 2034 tournament) view the World Cup as an anchor for long-term domestic development, economic diversification, and international prestige

Athletes and fans as primary soft-power agents

With the attention economy shifting toward athlete-driven platforms and creator content, nation branding will increasingly depend on how well hosts enable players and fan communities to tell authentic stories, not just on official ceremonies or government campaigns.

“Smart sports”: data-rich, locally embedded, and hyper-segmented brand strategies

Analysts describe 2026 as a prototype for “smart sports,” where data, connectivity and local cultural insights allow brands and host cities to run highly targeted, community-specific activations, making soft power more granular and less centrally controlled.

Public and local sentiment

The cost-revenue mismatch is also rapidly turning the World Cup into a significant political and reputational liability, as local taxpayers bear the immense fiscal burden of stadium upgrades and security while FIFA monopolises the profits. This financial imbalance is driving intense domestic backlash and anti-mega-event activism, transforming what was once a source of civic pride into a catalyst for public protests and charges of economic exploitation. Ultimately, this growing public hostility in democratic nations risks triggering “soft disempowerment” by replacing positive global PR with images of civil unrest, while

simultaneously shrinking the pool of future hosts and shifting the tournament's soft power leverage primarily toward authoritarian states that face no taxpayer accountability.

Research on sports mega-events shows that while they are still used as soft-power tools, they can easily backfire and produce “soft disempowerment” when local communities experience costs like displacement, surveillance or inequality more clearly than benefits. Studies of past World Cups suggest residents’ support now depends heavily on perceived concrete gains, trust in institutions, and meaningful participation in decision-making. In the run-up to 2026, city-level officials and grassroots groups in North American host cities are already framing the tournament as a test of transparency on housing, policing, and human rights, signaling that public sentiment will be a critical constraint on soft-power narratives.

Rebuffing Western Centrism: The legacy of the 2022 tournament in Qatar fundamentally altered the cultural dynamics of sports diplomacy. It demonstrated that non-Western hosts can actively use the tournament to defend local religious, cultural, and societal values on the world stage, reframing Western criticism as “orientalism” or cultural imperialism.

Future Middle Eastern and African co-hosts (such as Saudi Arabia 2034 or Morocco 2030) are positioning their tournaments to consciously prove the compatibility of local traditions, Islamic culture, and cutting-edge global modernity, rejecting the idea that a nation must fully Westernize to be a successful global host.

The Weaponization of Content Creation:

The cultural narrative of the World Cup is no longer controlled by major television networks; it is dictated by thousands of individual influencers, TikTokers, and independent creators traveling to the

games. Host nations now actively court international travel and lifestyle influencers, providing them with unprecedented access to curated cultural experiences. The goal is to bypass critical traditional media outlets and broadcast a polished, highly aesthetic version of the host country's lifestyle directly to the algorithms of millions of young viewers. Conversely, this decentralized media environment allows citizen journalists and traveling fans to instantly document logistical failures, local protests, or heavy-handed policing. A single viral video can completely dismantle a host nation's multimillion-dollar public relations campaign in a matter of hours.

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