Beyond the Pitch

7 JULY 2026

Kalum Rock and Said Ghneim



Photo by Fauzan Saari on Unsplash

When FIFA awarded the 2026 World Cup to a joint bid from the United States, Canada, and Mexico, the decision was widely celebrated as a testament to North American cooperation. The tournament would be the largest in football history, spanning three countries, sixteen host cities, and millions of spectators. More importantly, it would demonstrate how neighboring states could work together to host one of the world's most complex international events.

Eight years later, the political context surrounding the tournament looks very different. Relations between the United States and its two neighbors have become increasingly strained. Trade disputes have re-emerged. Migration remains a source of political conflict. Nationalist rhetoric has become more prominent across the continent. The return of Donald Trump to the White House has intensified many of these tensions, particularly in relations with Mexico and Canada.

Yet despite these divisions, the World Cup continues to rely on unprecedented levels of cross-border cooperation. Teams, officials, journalists, sponsors, and fans must move across national boundaries. Governments must coordinate security operations, transportation networks, and infra-

structure planning. Economic interests remain deeply intertwined. The result is a striking paradox: political relations between the United States, Canada, and Mexico have become increasingly contentious, yet their economic, social, and institutional interdependence has never been greater. This interdependence, however, is highly uneven. Because the United States hosts most matches, it also shapes much of the tournament's border access, security architecture, and media stage. Political choices made in Washington therefore reverberate across an event formally shared with Canada and Mexico. The 2026 FIFA World Cup offers a unique lens through which to examine this contradiction.

Tensions at the Border: Migration and the Politics of Mobility

No issue better illustrates the tension between political division and practical cooperation than migration. The World Cup depends fundamentally on mobility. International tournaments require the movement of players, referees, journalists, FIFA officials, and supporters across borders. Yet the 2026 tournament is taking place at a moment when migration has become one of the most politically contentious issues in North America, particularly in the United States.

Since returning to office, the Trump administration has pursued a more restrictive approach to immigration and border security. While these policies are primarily aimed at irregular migration, they have generated uncertainty for participants in one of the world's largest sporting events. The denial of entry to Somali referee Omar Artan despite his FIFA appointment became an early symbol of these tensions. After being detained at Miami International Airport, Artan was ultimately denied entry and forced to return home, raising questions about whether increasingly restrictive border policies are compatible with the logistical demands of a global tournament.

The controversy surrounding Iran's participation has brought these questions into even sharper focus. Iran qualified comfortably for the tournament and arrived in North America as one of Asia's strongest teams. Yet its presence has been overshadowed by geopolitics. The Iranian team ultimately arrived in Los Angeles amid extraordinary political circumstances, following months of military confrontation between Iran and the United States and significant uncertainty regarding travel arrangements and visa access. Reuters described the situation as unprecedented, with football once again becoming entangled in international politics.

For many Iranian supporters, participation proved far more complicated than simply purchasing a ticket. Visa restrictions, political tensions, and security concerns created barriers that highlighted a central contradiction of the modern World Cup. FIFA continues to promote football as a universal language capable of transcending political divisions. Yet the ability to participate in that supposedly universal event remains subject to national

immigration systems and geopolitical realities. The result is a tournament that simultaneously celebrates globalization while exposing its limits.

The resulting tension reflects a broader political reality. States increasingly emphasize sovereignty, security, and control over migration flows. At the same time, globalization continues to create demand for international mobility. The World Cup exposes the difficulty of reconciling these two objectives. Governments seek tighter borders, while global events depend on their permeability.

Ironically, the tournament highlights how deeply interconnected North America remains despite political disagreements. The United States cannot successfully host the World Cup in isolation. The movement of people between Canada, Mexico, and the United States is not a secondary feature of the tournament. It is a prerequisite for its success. In this sense, football reveals a broader truth about contemporary North America: even as political leaders emphasize national borders, many of the continent's most important activities continue to depend on crossing them.

A Profitable Partnership? FIFA, Trump, and the Commercialization of the World Cup

If migration exposes the political dimensions of the World Cup, economics reveals the growing influence of commercial interests within international sport. FIFA often presents the tournament as a celebration of cultural exchange and global unity. Yet the modern World Cup is also one of the most lucrative events in the world, generating billions of dollars through broadcasting rights, sponsorship agreements, hospitality packages, and ticket sales.

The 2026 tournament exemplifies this transformation. As FIFA expands the competition and seeks new revenue streams, critics increasingly question whether the interests of ordinary supporters remain a priority. Ticket prices have become a particular source of controversy. For many fans, attending the World Cup has become prohibitively expensive. Premium packages, dynamic pricing systems, and secondary market sales have created a situation in which access to the tournament is increasingly determined by purchasing power rather than passion for the sport.

The controversy also shows how the tournament's commercial model can collide with different legal and regulatory frameworks across the three host countries. In Ontario, new price-cap legislation directly affected FIFA's official resale system, prompting the organization to remove Toronto World Cup tickets from its resale marketplace until they could be relisted in line with local rules. This example illustrates that the economics of the World Cup are not governed by FIFA alone, but are shaped by national and subnational regulations that can challenge the organization's preferred commercial practices.

These debates cannot be separated from FIFA's broader relationship with political and economic elites. Under President Gianni Infantino, the organization has actively cultivated relationships with influential governments and business leaders. Nowhere is this more evident than in FIFA's engagement with the United States and the Trump administration.

For FIFA, maintaining a strong relationship with Washington is strategically important. The United States hosts the majority of tournament matches, possesses enormous commercial value, and represents one of the most important markets for the future growth of football. As a result, cooperation between FIFA and the White House has become a central component of tournament preparations.

Critics argue that this relationship occasionally extends beyond pragmatic cooperation into political symbolism. Public appearances, ceremonial events, and highly visible interactions between FIFA officials and political leaders have generated debate about the organization's neutrality. Some observers view FIFA's engagement with Trump as an example of strategic diplomacy. Others see it as evidence of an organization increasingly willing to align itself with political power in pursuit of commercial objectives.

The close relationship between FIFA and the Trump administration has also taken on symbolic dimensions. Ahead of the tournament, FIFA President Gianni Infantino presented President Trump with FIFA's newly established Peace Prize, a move widely criticized as an attempt to strengthen ties with the host nation's political leadership. Commercial interests have similarly shaped the tournament itself. While mandatory cooling breaks are officially intended to protect players during matches in extreme heat, critics argue that they also provide broadcasters with additional advertising opportunities and unnecessarily disrupt the flow of the game. Together, these developments illustrate how political symbolism and commercial considerations increasingly influence decisions surrounding the modern World Cup.

The controversy reflects a broader trend in global governance. Major international organizations increasingly operate within a world where political influence and economic interests are deeply intertwined. The World Cup is no longer merely a sporting event. It is a major economic enterprise whose success depends on cooperation between governments, corporations, and international institutions. The relationship between FIFA and political leaders therefore raises important questions about accountability, legitimacy, and the commercialization of global sport.

At the same time, the economic significance of the tournament demonstrates another aspect of North American interdependence. Businesses, investors, tourism sectors, and local governments across all three host countries stand to benefit from the event. Economic incentives create powerful reasons for cooperation even when political disagreements per-

sist. Once again, the World Cup reveals how commercial integration often survives political conflict.

More Than Neighbours: Cooperation Amid Political Conflict

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the 2026 World Cup is that it continues to function as a cooperative project despite growing tensions between its hosts. Over the past decade, relations between the United States, Canada, and Mexico have frequently been characterized by disagreement. Trade negotiations have become contentious. Migration disputes have strained diplomatic relations. Political rhetoric has often emphasized national interests at the expense of regional cooperation.

President Trump has played a significant role in this dynamic. His criticism of Canadian trade practices, repeated attacks on Mexican border policies, and broader skepticism toward multilateral cooperation have created friction with both neighboring countries. Such tensions might have been expected to undermine a project that depends so heavily on collaboration.

Instead, the opposite has occurred. The practical demands of hosting the World Cup have forced governments, local authorities, and sporting organizations to work together. Security planning requires coordination across borders. Transportation systems must accommodate international travel. Emergency response mechanisms need to be integrated. Teams and supporters routinely move between host countries throughout the tournament. None of this can be achieved through unilateral action.

This coordination also extends beyond traditional understandings of security. In Mexico City, authorities moved to expand public viewing screens and curb street alcohol sales after more than 700,000 people gathered to celebrate Mexico's progress in the tournament. The episode shows that World Cup security is not only about terrorism, border control, or organized crime, but also about sanitation, crowd density, alcohol regulation, and urban order.

From a political science perspective, this dynamic reflects a classic insight of liberal theories of international relations. While states may disagree on specific issues, institutions and interdependence often create incentives for continued cooperation. Shared interests can survive even when political trust declines. The World Cup serves as a vivid example of this principle in practice.

Importantly, the tournament does not eliminate underlying political conflicts. Disputes over migration, trade, and sovereignty remain very real. However, the World Cup demonstrates that cooperation and conflict are not mutually exclusive. Countries can compete politically while collaborating operationally. They can disagree publicly while coordinating behind the scenes.

This reality may offer a broader lesson for North America. Public debate often presents relations between the United States, Canada, and Mexico as increasingly fractured. Yet beneath the political rhetoric lies an extensive network of economic ties, institutional arrangements, and shared interests that continue to bind the continent together. The World Cup makes these connections visible in a way few other events can.

Conclusion

The 2026 FIFA World Cup will ultimately be remembered for dramatic matches, memorable goals, and the crowning of a world champion. Yet its significance extends far beyond the football pitch. The tournament offers a revealing snapshot of contemporary North America and the contradictions that define it.

Borders are becoming more politically contested even as international mobility remains essential. Economic nationalism is gaining ground even as commercial integration deepens. Political leaders increasingly emphasize division while governments continue to cooperate in practice. These developments are not unique to football, but the World Cup makes them impossible to ignore.

The tournament therefore reveals a fundamental paradox of twenty-first-century North America. Political relations between the United States, Canada, and Mexico have become more contentious, yet the practical realities of geography, economics, and institutional cooperation continue to draw them together. Far from existing outside politics, the World Cup demonstrates how deeply sport is embedded within it.

In this sense, the 2026 World Cup is more than a global sporting event. It is a reflection of a continent struggling to reconcile political fragmentation with enduring interdependence. If the 2026 World Cup depends on ever-deeper practical cooperation even as North American politics becomes more protectionist, punitive, and nationally segmented, the tournament leaves one final question: does it still symbolize regional unity, or does it mainly expose the fragile and unequal terms on which that unity survives?