

After extra time on Sunday night, Spain beat The Netherlands 1-0.

Spain

Spain's win over Germany in the semi-finals of the FIFA World Cup was doubly satisfying to many. Not only did Spain reach the finals of the most prestigious sporting competition in the world, but it gave a boost of confidence to the beleaguered Mediterranean region. Spain is one of the headliners of what is known as the "Club Med," a group of Mediterranean countries facing a severe economic crisis due to high budget deficits and growing government debt. The year 2010 has been harsh for the Club, with Greece facing a severe sovereign debt crisis that has threatened the financial stability of Europe as a whole, and then with Portugal, Spain and Italy identified as the next dominoes to fall.

Spain, Portugal and Italy have nowhere near the poor economic fundamentals of Greece, but their sheer proximity and association with southern European economies has made them vulnerable. The rest of the European Union, led by Germany, therefore has imposed harsh budget austerity measures on all four countries. The measures cut deep into the social fabric of each, with likely resistance by their citizens to come into sharp focus for the rest of the year in the form of strikes, protests, a high degree of political instability and potentially violence.

On the football pitch the Mediterranean countries have had little success in the World Cup. Greece and Italy made ceremonial exits early on, while Portugal lost in the second round. But Spain now has not only the glory of being crowned champion, but also to do it by beating another northern European country (the Netherlands) after dismantling Germany in the semi-final. The end result may not help Spain overcome its economic crisis, but the satisfaction of knowing that Germany and the Netherlands were bested on the football pitch allows the Spanish a rare celebration.

The Netherlands

The Netherlands is flat - very flat and 26% of it is below sea level. It also is in the unenviable position of being nestled between several of Europe's most powerful countries. The combination of its geography (flatness) and political geography (being in close proximity to global power centers) has meant that the Netherlands has been easily invaded and conquered many times by powerful neighbors. The Dutch have therefore learned to make their country indispensable to their neighbors as an independent nation rather than as an occupied one. To achieve this they have built a transportation and business infrastructure, which they excel at managing, that is interconnected to their neighbours and essential to wider European trade.

Geopolitics presents the Netherlands with two broad and related strategies to pursue: being a proactive balancer and being a tough pragmatist. Maintaining the alliance structure that ensures Dutch independence is a delicate balancing act, but when they are confronted with

outside threats, the Dutch must be pragmatic. Within alliance structures such as NATO and the European Union, the Dutch try to make sure that everyone's interests are aligned and moving in the same direction.

It's no different when it comes to football. With a population of only 17 million people, the Dutch have had to become balancers and pragmatists in football in order to compete with competition from larger leagues next door. The Dutch play a style of football, which they have dubbed "Total Football," that emphasizes tactical precision and physical ability by forcing every player to be able to play any position on the pitch. It is a style that looks to align and move the team in the same direction as a coherent unit, often at a frantic pace that exhausts the competition. The Dutch players are therefore known for their crisp passing, physical prowess and supreme technique, attributes that have helped the Netherlands remain globally competitive despite its size and lack of top flight league.