

England v China turf war to strain the diplomatic footwork of UK delegation

The Foreign Ministry's information supremo Shen Guofang (沈國放) assured Beijing's scribes a couple of weeks ago that the dispute between the English and Chinese Football Associations over the quality of the pitch at Beijing's Workers' Stadium would not affect overall Sino-British relations.

But as Britain's Deputy Prime Minister Michael Heseltine settles down for talks with top Chinese leaders this morning, the dispute continues and threatens to cast a shadow over what was hoped to be a celebration of Sino-British economic and trade co-operation.

Of course, the deals and agreements lined up during Mr Heseltine's visit will not be cancelled if the England-China match does not go ahead as scheduled on Thursday.

But the dispute has raised the hackles of many soccer-mad Chinese who feel insulted that the English FA, personified by the evil England team manager Terry Venables, should look upon their turf with such disdain.

As Mr Shen himself remarked: "If the English don't think our turf is good enough for them, why don't they airlift some of their own turf out for us?"

Officials at the Workers' Stadium have described the pitch as "the best bit of grass in China" but Mr Venables and his staff have been less than happy with what they have seen so far.

The dispute reached a high point last Thursday when English FA official Ted Buxton was initially refused permission to inspect the pitch during half-time in the match between the Chi-

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nese national team and Italian club Lazio.

"I've had a little bit of a showdown with them.

"They did not want me to go down there on the pitch at first.

"I told them that if I did not see the pitch, there wouldn't be a game," Mr Buxton said.

His assessment, after finally having been given the all clear to walk on the hallowed turf, was that patches of ground were still bare and that a lot more watering and rolling was needed if the pitch was to be ready in time.

A final decision on the pitch will only be made this week after the English team have had a chance to inspect it.

Chinese officials have responded to what they perceive as the patronising behaviour on the part of Mr Venables and his crew by taking it out on the English hooligans (sorry, that should read fans) when they descend on the Chinese capital this week.

The more than 200 fans due to arrive in Beijing for the match will be very close-

ly watched by the Beijing police and will be confined to a separate enclosure during the game.

There will be an estimated 6,000 police officers on duty at the match, all of whom will be primed and ready for any trouble, before, during and after the game.

Alcohol has been banned from the stadium, but there are dozens of small bars and restaurants (including one

frequented by Shen Guofang) within walking distance, and the police have been placed under orders to keep a close eye on any rowdy activity.

English fans tempted to take on Beijing's finest should be warned, however, that Beijing is in the middle of one of the biggest crime crackdowns in recent years.

Thousands of criminals have been arrested and are facing long prison sentences or execution.

It is very unlikely that China would go so far as to execute a few soccer hooligans, but if England takes the match 10-0, who knows what might happen.

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