World Cup within reach as Asian qualifying for 2026 ramps up

AFP- Son Heung-min's South Korea face Palestine while Japan host old rivals China when the third round of Asian qualifying kicks off on Thursday with the 2026 World Cup tantalisingly close.
The expanded 48-team World Cup in the United States, Canada and Mexico is looming into view.

The 18 remaining sides in Asia are divided into three groups of six and will play home and away fixtures, with the top two from each pool guaranteed a place at the World Cup.

South Korea will aim to put a turbulent year on and off the pitch behind them with a fast start against the Palestinians in Seoul in Group B.

Iraq, Oman, Kuwait and Asian Cup runners-up Jordan are the other sides in the group.

The Koreans are on their fourth coach of the year in the form of Hong Myung-bo, following the sacking of Jurgen Klinsmann in February and spells for two different caretaker managers.

Skipper Son will undoubtedly be the Koreans' biggest threat but Hong is also looking to the future, giving a first call-up to exciting attacker Yang Min-hyeok.

The 18-year-old will join Son at Premier League Spurs in January.

"We won't have much time to practise before these qualifying matches," said Hong, who first coached South Korea at the 2014 World Cup in Brazil, where they went out in the group phase.

“For us to take the next step, we’ll have to work even harder, and it’s important to keep developing young talent in order to be more competitive at the World Cup.”

While the Koreans will expect to reach the World Cup for the 12th time, Palestine are making their debut at this stage of qualifying, despite the conflict in Gaza.

Under their Tunisian coach Makram Daboub, Palestine reached the knockout rounds of the Asian Cup for the first time at the start of this year.

Daboub’s side went down to Qatar in the last 16 and the hosts went on to beat Jordan in the final to retain their continental crown.

Qatar, the 2022 World Cup hosts, are in Group A and start the latest qualifying round home to the United Arab Emirates on Thursday.

Qatar and Iran will be favourites to qualify from a group that also includes Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and North Korea.

– Mitoma threat –

Group C looks much harder to call.

In the first round of matches in that group, Japan play China while Australia host Bahrain. Ambitious Saudi Arabia, under the Italian coach Roberto Mancini, welcome Indonesia to Jeddah.

Japan and Australia both sailed through the second qualifying round with maximum points and without conceding a goal.

Japan are the highest-ranked team in Asia at 18 in the world and under coach Hajime Moriyasu they beat Spain and Germany at the 2022 World Cup, before going out in the last 16 to Croatia on penalties.

In Brighton winger Kaoru Mitoma, Japan have a player who looks back to his scintillating best and returns to the squad after a frustrating few months hindered by injury.

In contrast, China squeezed into the third qualifying round thanks to a superior head-to-head record over Thailand and have only reached the World Cup once, in 2002.

Their Croatian coach Branko Ivankovic warned that heavily fancied Japan will have a fight on their hands when the sides meet in Saitama.

“We’re not going to go into any game with our hands up,” he said.

The third qualifying round wraps up in June.

The sides that finish third and fourth in each group are still in the hunt for the 2026 World Cup and will go through to the fourth qualifying round.

South Korea’s run to the semi-finals of the 2002 World Cup, which they co-hosted with Japan, remains the best performance of an Asian team in the history of the competition.

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