Playing Games: The Two Koreas and the Beijing Olympics

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Abstract

For divided nations such as the two Koreas, which by their very rationales are involved in a highly-charged competition for legitimacy with their other 'part-nation', the Olympics have been a particularly potent arena for political posturing. This article examines the troubled history of the two Koreas' endeavours to out-do each other in the Olympic movement, the prospects of a joint Korean team for the Beijing Olympics being realised, and the potential Chinese role in the run-up to those Olympics, which mean so much to China.

The Olympic Games, to be held in Beijing in August 2008, are already omnipresent. As nations from around the world finish preparing and selecting athletes for Beijing, one focus of attention will be the representation from China's neighbours, the two Koreas. With the support and encouragement of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), the two Koreas' National Olympic Committees (NOCs) have raised the possibility of fielding a joint team for the first time ever at an Olympics Games. However, despite several rounds of discussions both bilaterally and with IOC involvement, there has been no definitive agreement on this joint team and time has all but run out.

This article examines the prospects for the creation of a joint team against the background of six decades of sporting and political competition, cooperation, and recrimination between the Republic of Korea (hereafter South Korea) and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (hereafter North Korea).

Despite the ideal that 'sport has nothing to do with politics', there is little doubt that the two are closely linked for divided nations, which by their very rationale are involved in a highly-charged competition for legitimacy with their other 'part-nation'. Under these circumstances, the Olympics inevitably become an arena for political manoeuvre.

Two Koreas and the Olympics

Since their formal foundation in 1948 the North and South Korean states had been involved in a competitive struggle, which had found expression not just through the military clashes of the Korean War but also through diplomatic, economic and cultural means. Both governments initially adopted a 'one Korea' policy, which in the Cold War environment meant that the South was recognised and supported by the United States and the West Europeans, while the North was similarly endorsed by the Soviet Union, China and the East Europeans. Neither Korea was admitted to the United Nations, but both worked hard to achieve support and recognition amongst the emerging 'Third World' countries. Sport was no exception to this struggle for advantage, prestige and legitimacy.

Western sports, introduced into Korea in the late nineteenth century, were seen by some Korean modernizers as a useful means to promote

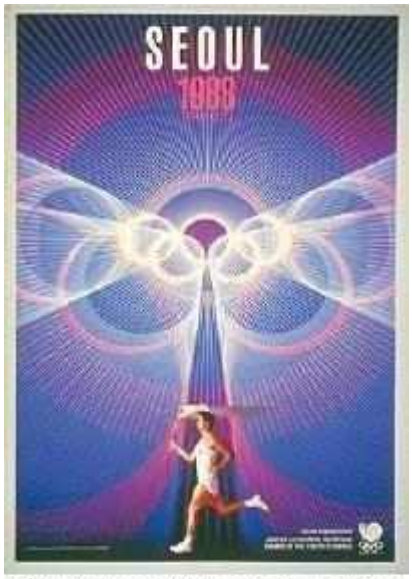
national solidarity. Later, Japanese colonisers introduced some sports such as judo and table tennis as part of their attempt to 'Japanize' Korean society. After liberation from Japanese rule, Koreans on both sides of the border sought international sporting recognition as avidly as they campaigned for diplomatic recognition.

Ha Nam-Gil and J.A.Mangan have commented that post-1945 South Korean sport was 'closely linked to political priorities, purposes and personnel' and was 'politically-driven, resourced and endorsed and it was the direct product of…. ideological purpose'[1]. This assessment could equally validly be applied to North Korean priorities. Sport represented a tangible means to showcase the proclaimed superiority of each political system in this intense bilateral rivalry for national and international legitimacy.

The South Korean National Olympic Committee (NOC) quickly applied for IOC recognition and even sent athletes to the 1948 London Olympics. The North made repeated attempts to gain IOC recognition for its own NOC, but was rebuffed on the grounds that there could not be more than one recognised NOC in any one country. In the late 1950s, as pressure began to build up from the Soviet bloc, the IOC began to shift towards favouring a joint Korean team on the German model [2]. But not until the 1964 Tokyo Olympics did both South Korea and, for the first time ever in the summer Olympics, North Korea send athletes. Yet, the latter actually withdrew after its athletes arrived in Japan, when some of them were disqualified, providing a last minute twist to what had been a series of complicated and contentious efforts over the previous three years to try to secure a joint Korean team for the Tokyo Olympics [3].

Intensifying competition

Subsequently, despite intermittent discussion over the following decades, the two Koreas have never fielded a joint Olympic teams. The North gained more from these failed talks in the early 1960s than did the South, since from the 1968 Olympics it was able to compete for the first time on an equal footing with the South. But in the 1970s the South became more adept diplomatically, waging a campaign which was to culminate in the 1981 IOC decision to award the 1988 Olympic Games to Seoul.



IOC / Olympic Museum Collections
1988 Olympic Poster

In fact, during the 1960s and 1970s the South Korean government of President Park Chung-hee used sports promotion as one of several means to create a national revival in the wake of the traumas of colonization and war. Labelled by some as the 'father of modern sport', Park introduced a number of innovative sports policies at both the elite and mass level and the idea of hosting the Olympics originated during his years in office. In North Korea too sporting activity became an important part of societal mobilization and development. Mass sports involving gymnastics became a regular feature of North Korean society. Nonetheless, throughout the 1960s and 1970s both Koreas remained relatively low-key in terms of participating in international sporting events, with the notable example of the North Korean soccer team's almost legendary exploits in the 1966 World Cup

in England.

Pak Doo-ik kicks North Korea's winning World Cup goal against Italy

Periods of relative rapprochement between the two Koreas frequently led to discussions of joint teams, but as the political atmosphere soured again, so too did the sporting talks splutter and fail. Even after the political breakthrough of the 1972 North-South Joint Declaration, efforts to develop sporting exchanges and even form joint teams failed. Sports organisations and facilities in the South had developed to the stage that it could host some international competitions, but, under pressure from the North, athletes from socialist countries did not participate. Agreement failed to field a joint team for the 35th World Table Tennis Championships, held in Pyongyang in 1979, the first major international sporting event hosted by the North, and South Korean table tennis players were not admitted. This failure, and what was perceived internationally as North Korean intransigence, had two results: firstly, international sporting federations became wary of the North, which has not since hosted a major international sporting event, and, secondly, during the 1980s, socialist states became more willing to compete in international sporting events in the South.

The partial boycotts of the 1980 and 1984 Olympics and the IOC's determination to assure a boycott-free Olympics in Seoul made the 1988 Olympics a particular focus of controversy. The North Koreans, with particularly vocal support from Cuba, criticised the choice of Seoul on safety grounds. When the IOC refused to change venue, the North asked for a co-hosting arrangement. Both the South and the IOC rejected this proposal (not least because the Olympics are awarded to only one city), but the IOC showed some willingness to discuss the possibilities of some events being held in the North. There followed during 1985-88 a series of convoluted discussions, which are described in impressive detail in Richard Pound's insider account [4]. At one stage the two Korean NOCs and the IOC came close to agreement over some preliminary rounds of sports being held in the North. But the offers were insufficient to satisfy the North and, although the IOC kept the door open until the very last minute, North Korean athletes did not participate in the Seoul Olympics. With the exception of Cuba, all other socialist countries sent athletes to Seoul and in the process helped to lay one of the foundations for what would become their diplomatic recognitions of the South during the course of the following four years.

The road to Beijing

The dream of a joint Korean Olympic team continued to remain just that, a dream. In fact, only twice, in the same year of 1991 at the World Table Tennis Championships held in Japan and the Junior World Football Championships in Portugal has a joint Korean team been fielded in a major international sporting event. This achievement, which came at a time of renewed North-South political dialogue at the prime ministerial level, may have had a Chinese dimension, since joint cheering of each others' athletes by South and North Korean supporters attending the Beijing Asian Games in 1990 was an important impetus. Nevertheless, the joint teams were the result of 'government contacts rather than purely civilian exchanges' and little in the way of sporting exchanges followed [5]. It is against this background that we consider the more recent Olympics.

The historic June 2000 summit between Kim Dae-

jung and Kim Jong Il, in Pyongyang, opened the way for greater cooperation and collaboration in North-South Korean relations. Consequently, at the 2000 Sydney Olympics the two Koreas entered the Olympic stadiums under a joint flag (the so-called 'unification flag', consisting of a blue outline of the undivided Korean peninsula on a white background) and wearing identical uniforms at the opening ceremonies. It was an emotional moment for Koreans. However, the athletes competed as two separate national teams.

The two Kims and entourage following the June 15, 2000 Joint Declaration

Subsequently, the North participated in the September 2002 Asian Games in Busan, the first ever such occasion for North Korean athletes to participate in an international sporting event in the South. That success seems in part to be due to the South's strategy of avoiding the complicated questions of a joint team and instead focusing on a joint parade at the opening and the participation of North and South Korean athletes in separate teams [6].

The newly-established 'tradition' of a joint team entry was carried on to the 2003 Asian Winter Games in Aomori and the 2004 Athens Olympics Games. Although international tensions had been raised because of the crisis over the North's suspected nuclear-weapons development, from October 2002, both sides came together for these sporting events. For both countries, a desire to pass a political message to the United States may have contributed to this cooperation. Both North and South wished to show the United States that they could coordinate at a time of worsening US-North Korean tensions [7].

This, in turn, led to the revival of ideas to form a joint team for the 2006 Asian Games in Doha and the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Representatives of the two Korean NOCs met in Guangzhou in September 2005, where they agreed in principle on a unified team, in Macau in November 2005, and in December 2005 when they began a series of bilateral meetings in Kaesong, on the North-South Korean border. As in earlier talks, the IOC has actively encouraged bilateral talks and occasionally hosted trilateral talks. In June 2006 IOC President Jacques Rogge wrote to both Kim Jong Il and South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun urging them to cooperate in forming a unified team. The missile tests by the North brought a halt to exchanges, but Rogge, in September, hosted the heads of the two NOCs at a meeting in Lausanne and included an offer to increase the number of athletic spots open to Koreans if there were to field a unified team. Once again, after the October nuclear test by the North, the two Koreas' athletes marched in together at the opening ceremony but competed separately at the Doha Asian Games. Nonetheless, at this time North Korea did openly convey to the IOC its support for South Korea's bid to host the 2014 Winter Olympics [8].

During 2007 formal inter-Korean talks on a joint Olympic team took place in Kaesong in February, with more informal contacts in Kuwait in April and in Hong Kong in June 2007, but no solution was achieved. There is considerable agreement on issues such as the flag (the unification flag), the national anthem to be played when medal winners are on the podium (the 1920s version of the traditional Korean folk song 'Arirang'), and the uniforms (following earlier designs but all supplied by the South). One key area remains outstanding – and it is an issue that has remained since those early days of the 1960s – how to

choose the athletes to compete.

The unification flag used since 1991

For individual sports, the accepted manner is for individual athletes to achieve qualification for the Olympics by reaching the necessary standards set by the IOC. The problems come with team sports. The disagreement basically boils down to the selection of team members. The South argues that the athletes should be chosen on merit (simply the best players from each side), while the North argues that they should be chosen in equal numbers, to reflect the truly unified and egalitarian nature of the team. For the South, one unified team should be stronger than two divided ones, particularly in certain team sport events. For the North, it is a matter of national pride that its athletes should not be seen as inferior to the South's and should be treated equally. Clearly in some team sports the South is stronger, such as men's soccer and handball, while in others the North has a stronger international reputation, such as women's soccer. Even if the basic principle of selection is agreed, there remains the issue of the mechanism for selecting the players through training or practice matches or some other format.

At the second North-South Korean Summit in Pyongyang in October 2007, the issue was briefly discussed, but the only agreement was on Kim Jong Il's proposal that a joint cheering team should be formed and travel on the newly-opened cross-border train from Seoul to Pyongyang and then on to Beijing.

What role can the IOC and China, whether the government or the Beijing Organising Committee for the Olympic Games (BOCOG), play? As before, the IOC is encouraging from the sidelines, but is less actively involved than it was in the pre-1988 talks. In addition, to induce some degree of urgency, it has pointed out to both Koreas that the team qualifying competitions already have begun. Soon it will be too late to change already settled finalists.

China has committed significant resources and prestige to hosting a successful Olympics. In the Korean context, China would like to have at the very least the repetition of the joint entry parade at the opening and closing ceremonies. It is playing an additional role by announcing that the Olympic torch route will pass overland from Seoul to Pyongyang in April this year. But, as with its role in pushing forward a solution to the nuclear issue through hosting the six-party talks and cajoling the participants towards a solution (the February 2007 agreement, for example), China is probably looking for more in the sports field too. In other words, the goal is joint entry plus alpha. A real joint team for the first time in Olympic history would at the very least bring reflected glory to China. China has so far remained largely on the sidelines, as the two Koreas deal with the IOC, but some informal

pressure, especially on the North Koreans, may be expected in the coming months.

However, even if the joint team concept is unrealisable, China may yet try to gain other diplomatic and political benefits from Korean participation. Whereas a North-South Summit between Roh and Kim was held in October 2007, the newly-inaugurated South Korean President, Lee Myung-bak, has made it clear that he is in no rush to head north, expecting Kim to come south first. If that situation remains stalemated, then perhaps the Olympics in Beijing could provide another opportunity to bring the two leaders together. Invitations to the two Korean leaders, Lee and Kim, to attend the opening ceremony might enable an unprecedented three-party summit to take place in Beijing under Hu Jintao's auspices.

The way forward

For some observers and participants, sporting contacts are a way to overcome or at least ameliorate political conflict and so can contribute to improving international relations. Park Sung-il, a South Korean NOC official, has said: 'We are all brothers, one mind, one soul. And we are confident that through sports we can bring the two Koreas together' [9]. A China Daily editorial writer has also written that a joint Korean team for the Beijing Olympics 'is expected to help achieve new breakthroughs in inter-Korean relations. The significance of such a partnership will go far beyond sports' [10]. The basic point is that socio-cultural exchanges, of which sport is a key example, can contribute to co-existence on the Korean peninsula and, ultimately, to unifying the nation.

For others, however, it is politics that drive, distort or obstruct sporting exchanges. Byun Jin-Heung, describing the Korean situation, has argued that 'although the basic principle requires that inter-Korean sports exchange should be freed from the shadows of political manipulations, it has not been able to pull it off' [11]. From this perspective, for socio-cultural contacts to be effective in inducing change a basic convergence in political and economic standpoint is necessary. In divided societies and countries, where nationalism and political legitimacy are closely intertwined, sporting contacts and cooperation are likely to be dictated by political and diplomatic circumstances.

In February 1963 then IOC President Avery Brundage wrote to the President of the North Korean NOC declaring that the initial agreement to form a united Korean team for the next Olympics was 'a great victory for sport' [13]. His optimism proved premature back then. Can his dream be realised 45 years later? The answer is almost certainly 'no' and the recent decision by football's governing body, FIFA, to switch the 26 March North Korea-South Korea World Cup qualifying match to Shanghai because the two countries could not agree on which flags and national anthems should be used at that game (originally scheduled to be played in Pyongyang) suggests that sporting relations may even be deteriorating. While diplomatic and political relations between North and South remain 'abnormal', the prospects for 'normal' sporting exchanges remain cloudy. In this context, it remains highly likely that once again, in Beijing, no unified Korean team will compete in the Olympics.

Notes

[1] Ha Nam-Gil and J.A. Mangan, 'Ideology, Politics, Power: Korean Sport - Transformation, 1945-92', in J.A.Mangan and Fan Hong, eds, Sport in Asian Society: Past and Present, (London: Frank Cass, 2003), p.214.

[2] Christopher Hill, Olympic Politics. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992). In the 1956, 1960 and 1964 Olympics, an all-German team competed, composed of athletes

from both West and East Germany. Wallace Irwin, Politics of International Sport: Games of Power,(New York: Foreign policy Association, 1988), p. 38.

[3] Full details are in Brian Bridges, 'Reluctant Mediator: Hong Kong, the Two Koreas and the Tokyo Olympics', International Journal of the History of Sport, Vol.24, No.3, March 2007, pp. 375-391.

[4] Richard Pound, Five Rings Over Korea (Boston: Little, Brown & Co, 1994). See also Park Seh-jik, The Seoul Olympics: The Inside Story (London: Bellew Publishing, 1991).

[5] Gabriel Jonsson, Towards Korean Reconciliation: Socio-Cultural Exchanges and Cooperation. (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), pp. 119-120. Byun Jin-Heung has argued that effectively there was an eight-year break in inter-Korean sports exchanges in the 1990s. 'Inter-Korean Exchanges and Peace on the Korean Peninsula', in Peace on the Korean Peninsula through Sports Exchange. (Seoul: Sports Institute for National Unification, 2003), pp.131-132.

[6] Choi D., 'Building Bridges: The Significance of Inter-Korean Sports and Cultural Exchange', East Asian Review, Winter 2002, p.112

[7] Song Young-Dae, 'The Political Situation on the Korean peninsula and the 2010 Pyeongchang Winter Olympic Games', in Peace on the Korean Peninsula through Sports Exchange. (Seoul: Sports Institute for National Unification, 2003), p.30.

[8] The President of the North Korean NOC sent a letter to Rogge in December 2005 stating that a Pyeonchang Olympics would enhance reconciliation and cooperation between the two Koreas. Korea Times, 22 December 2006. In July 2007 Pyeonchang lost the decision to Sochi, Russia.

[9] South China Morning Post, 1 November 2005.

[10] China Daily, 27 February 2004.

[11] Byun, 'Inter-Korean Exchanges', p. 133.

[12] Olympic Studies Centre Archives, Lausanne, Switzerland: Avery Brundage Collection, microfilm of papers from Box 138.

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