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THE PENINSULA

The Two Koreas and the Olympic Games—Tokyo and Beyond

Published April 9, 2021

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Category: [Inter-Korean](#)



Thomas Bach, current Chairman of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), published a [lengthy opinion piece](#) about the Olympic Games last October. In a strong defense of the games as “an event that unites the world,” he unequivocally proclaimed that “the Olympic Games are not about politics.”

While keeping politics out of the Olympic Games may be a worthy goal of the organizers, the games have long been enmeshed in politics. At the 1936 Berlin Olympics, German spectators gave the racist Nazi salute as African-American Jesse Owens received the gold medal for the running broad jump. In 1956 at the Melbourne Olympics, the water polo semi-final match in which Hungary defeated the Soviet Union 4-0 was so vicious and

bloody that it was known as the “blood in the water” match. The intensity was stoked by the fact that just one month earlier Soviet tanks rolled into Budapest and brutally suppressed the 1956 Hungarian uprising.

I was living in Munich during the 1972 Olympics. I watched helicopters fly overhead after Black September Palestinian terrorists kidnapped and killed 11 Israeli Olympic athletes and five of the eight terrorists were killed in a German military effort to free them. The 1980 Moscow Olympics were boycotted by the United States, West Germany, Japan and a few other countries because the Soviet Union had just invaded Afghanistan. In retaliation the Soviet Union and its Central European allies boycotted the Los Angeles Olympic Games four years later in 1984. There are many, many more examples, but the point is clear. The Olympics are no stranger to politics.

In an effort to “depoliticize” the games on the eve of the Tokyo Olympics, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) adopted regulations prohibiting “gestures of a political nature, like a hand gesture or kneeling.” This was an effort to give more precise meaning to a rule in the Olympic Charter: “No kind of demonstration or political, religious or racial propaganda is permitted in any Olympic sites, venues or other area.” The experience of the United States, however, indicates that making political statements in a sports venue has a long tradition, and former U.S. President Donald Trump failed in his strategy to defame sports figures for using their prominence to give political messages by kneeling during the national anthem or other gestures at sporting events.

For North and South Korea, the Olympic Games—in particular Seoul 1988, Pyongchang 2018, Tokyo 2020, and beyond—have had and will likely continue to have significant political importance in their fraught relationship.

North Korea Withdraws from the Tokyo Olympics Citing COVID-19

The Olympiad that will soon take place in Tokyo will likely be remembered as the “COVID Games.” The competition was originally scheduled for three weeks in July-August 2020, but four months before that date, after the Olympic torch had already been lit in Greece but hours before the torch relay was to begin its 121-day journey throughout Japan, the Games were postponed until summer of 2021 in hopes that the pandemic would be sufficiently under control to permit the sports competition. Still called the “2020
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Olympics,” the Games are now scheduled to begin July 23, 2021, and the Olympic torch relay through Japan officially began on March 26 at Fukushima Prefecture, site of the devastating earthquake ten years earlier.

Problems continue, however, and on March 20 the Tokyo organizing committee announced that overseas spectators would be banned from watching the games in person. Only residents of Japan will fill the seats in the year-old multibillion dollar stadiums and other Olympic venues. Still, questions are being raised about whether the Games can be held. On the other hand, only if the games go ahead will there be much chance of recouping at least some of the \$15 billion costs of the event, and the International Olympic Committee could lose as much as Japan stands to lose if the games are not held. Furthermore, future Olympic hosts will be much harder to attract if the Tokyo Games are not successfully staged.

On April 6, the national Olympic committee of North Korea announced that it “decided not to join the 32nd Olympics Games to protect athletes from the global health crisis caused by the coronavirus.” North Korea has participated in every Olympics since 1988, when it refused to attend the games held in Seoul that year. This gives the North the distinction of being the first, and thus far the only, participant to withdraw from the Tokyo Games this year.

North Korea has been particularly sensitive about the COVID-19 virus. Pyongyang claims that there is not a single North Korean who has been infected with the virus, and the country has taken draconian action to limit any possibility of infection. The country does not have much COVID testing capability, and the country’s news media are under strict political control. If there are cases of the disease, it would not be publicly acknowledged. North Korea’s health care system is underfunded and fragile, and a serious pandemic would be very difficult to control if it broke out. The decision not to participate in the Tokyo Games was made by the North’s national Olympic committee. But a decision of this importance, which has received significant international attention, would not have been taken without Kim Jong-un’s personal involvement.

Efforts for North-South Olympic Cooperation—Tokyo 2020 and a Joint Bid for 2032

Seoul had hoped to use the Tokyo Olympics as a venue to restart talks with Pyongyang.
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Since assuming office in May 2017, President Moon Jae-in has eagerly sought to improve North-South relations. Cooperation at the Olympic Games have been a useful venue for doing that. With only a year remaining in his presidential tenure, President Moon has sought opportunities to jump start his efforts with the North, but the Tokyo Olympics now will not provide that venue.

In early winter 2018, the PyeongChang Winter Olympics were hosted by South Korea, and a very senior North Korean delegation led by Kim Yo-jong, sister of the Supreme Leader, was present for the opening ceremonies. Athletes from North and South marched together under a single flag in the opening ceremony of the Games, as had been done on a few other international sport occasions in the past. In 2018 for the first time ever the two also fielded a joint team for competition in women's hockey.

In February 2019, a year and a half before the 2020 Tokyo Olympics were originally scheduled to open, delegations from South and North Korea met jointly with IOC President Thomas Bach in Lausanne, Switzerland, to discuss the two Koreas' proposal for joint North-South participation in some sports at the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. They proposed that again the athletes from the North and South jointly enter during the opening ceremony, as they did in the PyeongChang Winter Games of 2018. The one-year delay in holding the games and now the decision by the North not to participate in the Games is yet another blow to the Moon administration's efforts to engage with the North.

The proposal for a joint bid for the 2032 Games was agreed upon by President Moon Jae-in and Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un in September 2018 at their summit in Pyongyang. Five months later, the joint bid was discussed with the IOC leadership in Switzerland. At that time IOC President Thomas Bach made positive comments about the joint hosting proposal: "The IOC has very warmly welcomed this initiative because it reflects the mission of the Olympic Games and demonstrates the unifying power of sport."

On April 1 of this year, the city of Seoul formally submitted a proposal for Seoul jointly to cohost the 2032 Olympic Games with Pyongyang. It was clear, however, that the proposal was submitted by Seoul alone, and no indication was given that Pyongyang was involved in drafting the proposal or even that discussions on the issue had been held. The condition of North-South relations raises questions about the status of the joint bid proposal. Another more serious concern that brings into question the significance of the joint bid is the fact that the IOC has already designated Brisbane, Australia, as the frontrunner or the preferred partner to begin negotiations with the IOC for the 2032

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It is significant that just as the effort was underway for the latest Olympic Games, the President of the IOC Thomas Bach was given the prestigious Seoul Peace Prize. This honor was created shortly after the highly successful 1988 Seoul Olympic Games to recognize individuals who have contributed to international peace and humanitarian causes. The first recipient of the Prize was Juan Antonio Samaranch, President of the IOC at the time of the 1988 Seoul Olympics. In 2020 the Prize was given to the current President of the IOC for his efforts in encouraging peace through sport. There is surely the hope that Bach will play a positive role in the joint proposal for the Seoul-Pyongyang Olympic Games, though there are still many questions about joint Games.

The Legacy of the 1988 Seoul Olympics

Underlying the North-South interaction involving the PyongChang 2018 Winter Olympics, the fading hopes for the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, and a potential joint bid for the 2032 Olympics is the legacy of the 1988 Seoul Olympics. The 1988 Seoul Games were particularly important for bringing positive international attention to South Korea. By 1988—thirty-five years after the Korean War ended—the South had become an important economic power, which the Olympics highlighted. Seoul was the second Asian country to host the Games, and the first on the Asian mainland. It was something of a “coming out” event for an increasingly self-confident and prosperous South Korea. It also enhanced the legitimacy of the South Korean government. With both North and South claiming to be the legitimate government and both claiming to be the government of all of Korea, the attention and authority of hosting the games gave Seoul a distinct advantage.

Pyongyang recognized the benefit to Seoul for hosting the Olympic Games and undertook a series of actions directed against the South in connection with the Games. First was a proposal by North Korea in 1985 that North and South jointly host the games. The IOC was willing to permit the teams from North and South to march together in the opening ceremony and to exhibit common Korean cultural activities (singing, dancing, drama, etc.). IOC President Juan Antonio Samaranch opposed splitting the games between two countries, however. In discussions with the IOC, the North Koreans insisted that in order for them to participate “with dignity” three conditions had to be met: the Olympics must be organized jointly, events must be equally shared by the two countries, and the official name for the games had to be changed to “Korea Pyongyang Seoul Olympic Games.”

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 04/09/2021 12:32 PM. It is not clear, an “accidental error” could have disastrous effects on the peaceful conduct of the Games, and reference was made to possible “violence and unrest in South Korea.”

In subsequent meetings officials of North Korea, South Korea, and the IOC negotiated over the role for Pyongyang, but the North refused to compromise on its demands. South Korean officials were willing to compromise on some issues, and IOC officials were willing to make slightly more positive gestures toward the North, but Pyongyang’s intransigence made any final agreement impossible.

The North sought help from the Soviet Union and China to boycott the Games if the North’s demands were not met. Kim Il-sung went so far as to travel to Moscow in large-part to persuade Mikhail Gorbachev to keep the Soviet Union out of the games. Interestingly, the Chinese were planning to make their own bid for the 2000 Olympic Games, and the Chinese leadership did not support the North Koreans for fear they would lose IOC support for their own bid to host. The Soviet Union, which boycotted the 1984 Games in Los Angeles, was not willing to repeat their action to support the North. They wanted to participate in the games in Seoul in 1988. The South Korean government had also made successful diplomatic outreach to the communist countries of Central Europe, and there was little support for North Korea there.

After two years of negotiations with the IOC without progress, the position of the North became even more intransigent. The issue of Pyongyang participation in the games was still being discussed at very senior levels even in early 1988 six months before the games were set to begin, and North Korean threats of violence against the South and against the Games continued. By then the die was cast, however, and the games went forward without the participation of North Korea. Pyongyang was only able to rally Cuba and a few other countries to join a boycott.

The threats of violence by the North were not empty. One particularly hostile and despicable act occurred in late 1987. The North Korean government sent secret agents to plant a bomb on a South Korean commercial passenger flight from Baghdad to Seoul. That plane was destroyed over the Andaman Sea off the coast of Myanmar, and all 115 passengers and crew were killed. One of the North Korean agents who planted the bomb aboard the South Korean airliner was captured within days, and she explained the link between the Seoul Olympics and the terrorist bombing.

The 1988 Seoul Olympics were an enormous success. They expanded South Korea’s
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international influence and prestige, and they precipitated diplomatic recognition of the South by the countries of the socialist bloc. North Korea, on the other hand remained isolated and humiliated. Six months after the Seoul Olympics, South Korea and Hungary established diplomatic relations, full diplomatic recognition with the Soviet Union came in 1990, and with China in 1992. In many regards these actions were a consequence of Seoul's Olympic role.

In a similar fashion a joint North-South Olympics in 2032 could reshape views of the Korean Peninsula, but North Korea's continued intransigence on a range of issues and decision to withdraw from the Tokyo Games demonstrates how far there still is to go.

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