



## AN OLYMPIC WINDOW FOR KOREAN NUCLEAR DE-ESCALATION

BY JONGSOO LEE

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Kim Jong Un's New Year's address has created the potential for improved inter-Korean relations. Though caution is necessary in dealing with Pyongyang's peace overtures, Washington and Seoul should work together to leverage Kim's overture to create an opening for de-escalation in the nuclear standoff between Pyongyang and Washington.

It is understandable that Kim's speech may be seen as anti-American and a ploy to drive a wedge between Seoul and Washington. Indeed, Kim's sudden ardent call for inter-Korean reconciliation was surprising when contrasted with previous New Year's addresses, which lacked that call. Kim devoted much time to the case that peace on the Korean Peninsula will come from inter-Korean cooperation instead of relying on interventions by foreign powers. Kim repeatedly named the United States as the chief foreign power opposed to inter-Korean peace and reconciliation.

For Washington to oppose steps for inter-Korean dialogue underway in the wake of Kim's speech would be to take Pyongyang's bait and give credence to Kim's claim that Washington is an enemy, not a friend, of the Korean people. The United States must counter decades-old North Korean propaganda that it is the chief force behind Korea's modern tragedies, including partition of the peninsula after World War II, the Korean War, and the continuing division of the peninsula. For decades, the Pyongyang regime has used this propaganda to indoctrinate and rally the North Korean masses behind its rule. Washington needs to demonstrate by words and actions that Kim's

narrative is deceptive. Once the North Korean people come to see that the trumped up existential threat to their country posed by the US is not real, cracks will appear in the foundations of the Kim family regime.

A way out for Washington from the nuclear standoff is to deprive Kim of his rationale for nuclear weapons and the claim that they are necessary for self-defense against Washington's aggression. Instead of obliging Kim by exchanging threats and taunts, escalating tensions and fueling Pyongyang's anti-American propaganda, Washington should engage Pyongyang with peace initiatives demonstrating that the US is not an existential threat and that it supports peaceful Korean reunification through inter-Korean dialogue.

Washington has made a step in the right direction by agreeing with Seoul to freeze their joint military exercises during the upcoming winter Olympics in South Korea. Indeed, the Olympics comes almost as a godsend: it has provided the cover necessary for Pyongyang, Seoul, and Washington to call a truce and enter into a de-escalating mode, at least temporarily. If there ever was an acute interstate conflict that the Olympics may have been designed to help de-escalate, this nuclear standoff may be it.

Washington and Seoul enjoy a strong, decades-old alliance that has weathered North Korean provocations and charm offensives. As long as the allies remain in close coordination vis-à-vis Pyongyang, they should be able to overcome any attempt to weaken their alliance and use the opening created by Olympic diplomacy to generate momentum for de-escalating the crisis. Inter-Korean dialogue could lead to direct talks between Pyongyang and Washington that discuss steps such as a post-Olympic freeze in joint military exercises in return for a halt to Pyongyang's nuclear and missile program. If successful, such steps can pave the way for more confidence-building measures aimed at

inducing to North Korea to behave as a responsible member of the international community and its eventual denuclearization.

The international community should support this Olympic momentum for de-escalation. Failure to do so would probably mean a worsening crisis as joint military exercises resume in the spring and Pyongyang likely follows with more nuclear or missile tests.

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