



OLYMPIC PAUSE: TESTING, NOT TRUSTING NORTH KOREA

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South Korean President Moon Jae-in faces mounting domestic criticism for inviting North Korea to participate in the Winter Olympics. Although Kim Jong Un is reaping favorable press while apparently pressing ahead with a military parade on the eve of the Pyeongchang Games, opening this international athletic competition to one of the most isolated countries is a savvy use of sports diplomacy. This savvy use of sports diplomacy momentarily lowers tensions, tests North Korea's willingness to negotiate, and all without sacrificing national security.

First, the Moon administration's efforts to bring North Koreans to Pyeongchang offers a momentary pause and, possibly, a chance for a more prolonged respite from escalating tensions. The spirit of Pyeongchang probably will be short-lived, but there are too few opportunities to initiate a diplomatic framework in which to place this longstanding cold war with North Korea. If Pyongyang were to indicate a genuine interest in temporarily freezing nuclear and long-range ballistic missile tests, Washington would at a minimum be keen to have that discussion. It might quickly break down, in which case the maximum pressure strategy remains unchanged. But if a modest opening is gleaned, then another small step might be possible, and from there who knows.

Second, Seoul understands North Korean participation in the Winter Games is the best insurance policy to avoid North Korea from spoiling this important economic event. Hosting the Olympics is an expensive investment, and without a modicum of peace, South Koreans could be footing a very costly bill for unsuccessful games. Empirically, North Korea seldom conducts major provocations when it is engaged on the world stage. Conversely, given the fact that neighboring Japan and China host the 2020 and 2022 Olympic events, there was always a natural and shared interest among these three leading Northeast Asian economies. President Moon recognized this confluence of interests, and as a result, worked hard to win North Korea's participation without making dangerous concessions.

A series of United Nations Security Council resolutions help to make peeling back the onion of economic pressure very difficult. No doubt Kim Jong Un realized that the February and March Olympics and Paralympics would be an inauspicious time for a nuclear test or ICBM launch, and his charm offensive reflects this. Perhaps he is testing the market value of his burgeoning capacity to put nuclear warheads on long-range ballistic missiles. But Kim is apt to find that the value of such technological feats is less than he thinks, and eventually this toing and froing from brinkmanship to diplomacy and back will convince him that the cost of building a Pakistan-sized nuclear arsenal will come at a very high price indeed.

Third, the Olympic respite offers the world a chance to catch its breath, admire the wonder of humanity in peaceful athletic competition, and imagine a future different from the one we are presently on course to create. In other words, even a brief glimpse of a brighter future could eventually help produce a pathway to a future peace, because it is an idea that is inherently attractive, all the more so as we move closer to ever-heightened tensions and potential miscalculation and war. We should not flinch from enforcing the pressure strategy until such time that North Korea starts to get serious about negotiations, but we should never shy away from exploring a potential diplomatic opening. The Olympics provides precisely that moment, and Seoul has been right not to waste it.

Finally, let me be clear that the price of peace is worth an invitation to the Olympics. Yes, this has a cost, but it is an acceptable cost. If nuclear war is a "low-probability, high-impact" scenario, then the Olympic invitation is a "low-cost, low-probability" exploration for another way forward. History is oblique and comes at us from angles we did not expect; since one of those angles could be a nuclear war, it is worth the effort to explore other ways. Granted, Kim has not yet given the United States any indication he is willing to slow down on his core military programs that may in the coming months or couple of years pose a direct threat to the US homeland.

Sure, Kim is able to prey upon public opinion to soften his image in pursuit of forestalling or eroding economic sanctions and pressure. But if that is all he wants he will not succeed. Those who fear that either the Moon administration or public opinion is so naive are under-

estimating the knowledge and wisdom of officials and the general population. Democracies are wonderfully fractious, and opinion would harden quickly should the Moon government seek to offer irrevocable steps and major unilateral moves without commensurate reciprocity from Pyongyang.

While we watch the Olympics in peace, let us test the opportunity for dialogue. But let us also recognize that North Korea is unlikely to wind down the nuclear and missile programs it is feverishly working to complete. Since the 1953 Armistice, we have been locked in a cold war with North Korea, and such tensions are not easily or quickly improved upon. Perhaps, as with the postwar East-West contest, diplomacy and eventually detente may provide a way forward.

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