

# Contextualizing Winter Olympics in South Korea

Tuesday 6 February 2018, by [WON Youngsu](#) (Date first published: 6 February 2018).

**Pyeongchang, a small town just below the demilitarized zone (DMZ), will host the coming Winter Olympics. In the background, the conflict between North Korea and the United States over the nuclear missile programme, the North-South Korea initiative for Peace Olympics, acute social and generational issues...**

## Contents

- [The North Korean factor](#)
- [Backlash against North-South](#)
- [North-South unity under \(...\)](#)
- [Almost no opposition to \(...\)](#)

In South Korea, this winter is extremely cold, many days well below minus 10 degrees, possibly another symptom of climate change. And Pyeongchang, a small town of Gangwon Province, just below the demilitarized zone (DMZ), is one of the coldest, and it will host the coming Winter Olympics scheduled on February 9 to 25. another global sport event 30 years since Seoul Summer Olympic games in 1988.

Political conjuncture is rather unique in that Park Geunhye, former president who was supposed to welcome the international competition, is now in prison waiting for her sentence, and Lee Myeongbak, another former president, is waiting for a summon from the prosecution for recently exposed illegal bribe and other irregularities.

Also, internationally, Winter Olympics has been meddled with the conflict between North Korea and the United States over the nuclear missile programme. Especially, Donald Trump poured out a barrage of verbal threats on North Korea which in return responded with a further series of missile launch programmes.

## The North Korean factor

In this hostile conjuncture, the event took a sharp turn when through early January's New Year speech, Kim Jong-eun, North Korea's supreme leader, expressed his wish for successful Winter Olympics as an occasion for enhancing the prestige of the Korean nation. Soon the follow-up measures were taken for North-South cooperation for Peace Olympics.

North and South Koreans began official talks and decisions are made to exchange delegations, hold joint exercises and cultural performances, and form a united women's hockey team, which had been arranged by the initiative of the International Olympics Committee (IOC).

Thus, at least, during the olympics period, peace, not war and conflict, will prevail and the historical

tradition of the ceasefire during olympic games appears to repeat itself. Though the Olympics cannot shut up Trump's dirty mouth completely, the Olympics will manage to deliver its long-forgotten message of world peace.

### **Backlash against North-South Cooperation**

The improved relations between North and South Korea has been one of prioritized goals of the present government, born out of 2017-18 candlelight protest movements. The conflict between North Korea and the United States hindered any move of Moon jae-in government to ease the tensions and pursue a peaceful solution over North Korean crisis.

Moon Jae-in's diplomatic performance worked, and Donald Trump was forced to admit South Korea's initiative for cooperation with North Korea in terms of the international winter sport game, in spite of the international sanctions on North Korea.

However, the conservative opposition parties found faults with the government's approach to North Korea, claiming that the government made too many concessions to North Korea which is allegedly making use of the Olympics to detour the ever-increasing economic sanctions for its nuclear missile programme. The extreme right politicians shouted: is it for Pyeongchang or Pyeonyang?

Popular opinion in the South Korea overwhelmingly prefer peace to conflict, and generally shows the positive acceptance of the recent development between North and South Korea, though majority of people don't support Kim Jong-un or his regime, and its persistent development of the nuclear weapons programme.

### **North-South unity under hostile environment**

However, over the issue of the united women's hockey team, unexpected response from young generations surprised the government. On the internet communities, quite a few young people opposed to the move for the united team, showing their sympathy for the South Korean female hockey players in their similar ages who would lose the chance that they have spent years of hard efforts to join the olympic games.

In face of unexpected criticism, President Moon Jae-in apologised for not considering young female players enough. This episode reflects the harsh realities that young generations are faced with: insane competition, high youth unemployment, growing social polarization, and little hope and growing uncertainty for the future. Thus, unlike older generations, the national reunification is not an absolute good, and, in a sense, North Korea is just another country which happens to speak a similar language.

North Korean refugees in South Korea welcome this recent national dialogues and cooperations. However, their realities are harsh as well, as they are generally struggling hard to survive, except for some fortunate(?) ones who could depend on the help from the National Information Service (NIS) for their service. Failure to adjust to highly competitive capitalism drives some of them, if not all, into even dreaming to go back to North Korea.

## **Almost no opposition to the mega sports event**

Since the hosting of winter olympics was decided, some local residents and environmentalist groups occasionally expressed their opposition in regards to maldevelopment, environmental destruction, and lack of economical use of huge facilities.

Also, in hasty construction process, many of construction workers were injured and wage arrears have been frequent. However, excepts for protests from construction workers' union, the trade unions hardly involved in any protest. Furthermore, as the nationalist atmosphere prevails, marginalised reformist parties, with nationalist tendencies, welcomes the olympics as Korean nation's event.

In this rather complicated and chaotic atmosphere, the South Korean government wants to maximize the halo of the global sports festival, with the support of national and international commercial media. Also, with absence of any fundamental critiques of sport spectacles, 2,925 players from 19 countries will compete under the auspices of global capital and international sports mafia. Thus, as Brazil's 2016 summer olympics showed, it is their festival, not ours.

**Youngsu Won**

International Forum in Korea

---