

Olympic diplomacy and elusive peace amid North Korea reality

BY LISA COLLINS, OPINION CONTRIBUTOR — 01/16/18 08:00 AM EST

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Sports can sometimes help transcend barriers and overcome intractable conflict between parties. During the Cold War, "[ping-pong diplomacy](#)" was credited with helping to initiate a political thaw between the United States and China that later led to a fundamental change in Sino-American relations.

This week there were some hopes that a similar diplomatic breakthrough could be achieved through discussions between North and South Korea over the 2018 Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang. The two Koreas recently met to discuss North Korea's participation in the Olympics and a few other long-standing issues. The outcome of the meeting was relatively modest, resulting in a [joint statement](#) in which the two sides agreed that North Korea would participate in the [Winter Olympics](#) and reopen a dormant [military hotline](#).

It was also decided that families separated by the Korean War would be given the opportunity to meet soon and that inter-Korean military talks would be held at a future date. While the Moon Jae In government in South Korea is likely to consider this a short-term political win, after promising an improvement in inter-Korean relations, it is too early to tell whether this engagement will lead to genuine rapprochement between the two Koreas.

Unfortunately, even if limited progress is made over the next couple months, there are serious [domestic issues](#) that could derail the positive

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momentum and regional security dynamics could also be a significant obstacle to further advancements in diplomacy. Therefore, despite the dialing down of tensions this past week, prospects are still dim for the long-term resolution of the North Korean nuclear problem. In the month leading up to the Olympics, we can expect the following issues to be at the forefront of discussions.

First, the two Koreas will need to manage some very real practical problems and the optics associated with North Korea's participation in the Olympics. Depending on initial demands made by Pyongyang and South Korean concessions to the requests, there is a high likelihood that sanctions could present a problem for participation of some high-level North Korean officials and other members of the Olympic delegation.

For example, United Nations Security Council resolutions banning travel for certain blacklisted North Korean officials could limit their attendance. If South Korea offers to cover the expenses for transportation and housing for the North Korea delegation the prohibition on bulk cash transfers to the regime could also present logistical problems. South Korean President Moon Jae In has promised that sanctions will continue to be enforced despite talks with North Korea, but there are likely to be obstacles that must be overcome along the way.

Second, the two Koreas will have to decide how and when to demonstrate inter-Korean cooperation and unity during the Olympics. In the past, two Koreas have marched together during the Olympic opening ceremonies under a neutral "unification flag" but competed with separate national teams during the actual sporting events. Attempts to field inter-Korean sports teams have usually failed because the two sides could not narrow their differences over the quality and quantity of the athletes participating.

In international sporting competitions, South Korean athletes participate in greater numbers and win medals more often than their North Korean counterparts. In theory sports diplomacy could boost greater cooperation and contribute to confidence building measures, but in reality participation in international sporting events often also highlights the extreme differences between the two Koreas. This presents a serious problem for the regime's domestic legitimacy and North Korean propaganda.

Third, and most importantly, sports diplomacy is not likely to be the key that unlocks the intractable problem of North Korean denuclearization. The roots of the problem are too deep and complex for that. If inter-Korean talks become a bridge to returning to the Six Party Talks or direct talks between the United States and North Korea on denuclearization, there may be greater hope for long-term progress. However, in the same speech that North Korean leader Kim Jong Un proposed Olympic participation, he also repeatedly emphasized the strength and importance of his nuclear weapons program.

Kim Jong Un's reference to a "nuclear button" and these statements combined indicate that he will not be giving up nuclear weapons and that he feels confidently in control as the North Korean leader. So despite North Korea's recent diplomatic outreach, Pyongyang is unlikely to return to talks about denuclearization unless there is a fundamental shift in their security calculus over the next couple months.

Where does this leave us? After a peaceful respite during the Olympics, we will probably return to a new cycle of North Korean missile launches

and nuclear brinkmanship. In this environment it will be necessary for the United States and South Korea to work within the bounds of the alliance to maintain a strong deterrent force and to persevere with pressure and multilateral diplomacy until the North Korean calculus can be changed.

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