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## The Winter Olympics and Paralympics in South Korea and the Development of the Inter-Korean Dialogue

Oskar Pietrewicz

*The Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games in Pyeongchang helped to restore the high-level political dialogue between North and South Korea. Both states treated the events as an opportunity to take the lead in shaping the situation on the Korean Peninsula. It opened the way to a summit between the countries' leaders and facilitated talks between North Korea and the U.S. The continuity of the dialogue will depend on the North Koreans' readiness for talks and acceptance of diplomatic solutions.*

International sports events have been an important tool in South-North relations since the 1990s. During the inter-Korean rapprochement, or so-called Sunshine Policy (1998–2008), sports events enabled the two states to demonstrate their affinity. North and South Korea have marched under a unified flag at the opening ceremonies of the 2000, 2004, and 2006 Olympic Games. Since the conservatives took power in South Korea in 2008, cooperation has been limited because of their scepticism about engagement with North Korea. Attempts to restore high-level communication, for example, during a visit by a North Korean delegation to the Asian Games in Incheon in 2014, failed.

The opportunity arose again with the Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang (8–25 February). It became the first top-flight global sports event organised by South Korea in which North Korea took part. In addition to 10 athletes, the North sent a group composed of several hundred cheerleaders and artists. During the Opening Ceremony, both countries walked together under the flag of a unified Korea. They also fielded a joint women's ice hockey team. In addition, North Korea took part in the Paralympic Winter Games (9–18 March) with a 24-member delegation, the first winter showing in its history and its third Paralympics. However, most important in the context of relations were visits by high-ranking North Korean representatives.

**Inter-Korean Dialogue in the Context of the Games.** The Opening Ceremony of the Winter Olympics was attended by a delegation consisting of Kim Yong-nam (the titular head of state) and Kim Yo-jong (sister of North Korean leader Kim Jong-un), and others. For the first time in history, a member of the governing family of North Korea had officially visited South Korea. The North's delegation met with a South Korean delegation headed by President Moon Jae-in, who in turn received an invitation to meet with Kim Jong-un.

High-level talks continued after the Games. On 6 March, Kim Jong-un, in an unprecedented moment, met with envoys of the South Korean president in Pyongyang. South Korea announced that the sides agreed to organise a summit between the leaders of both states at the end of April in Panmunjom. This would be the third summit of its kind in history. The previous ones were held in Pyongyang in 2000 and 2007. Moreover, they agreed to set up a telephone hotline between Moon and Kim. In addition, the North was to declare its readiness to denuclearise, on the condition that unspecified security guarantees are obtained, the start of talks with the U.S., and the suspension of nuclear and missile tests during the talks.

**South Korean Perspective.** Establishing a dialogue with North Korea during the Games was a success of Moon Jae-in's administration. It validated his declarations of willingness to improve the bilateral relations, which he has made since the beginning of his presidency in May 2017. It also provided the basis for shaping the situation on the Korean Peninsula in line with the South's own concept of ensuring a continuous dialogue with the North and preventing an escalation of tension.

According to South Korea, the improvement of inter-Korean relations is a necessary step towards denuclearisation and the settlement of disputed issues on the peninsula. For this purpose, South Korea has adopted the role of intermediary in relations between the U.S. and North Korea. After the meeting with Kim Jong-un, the South Korean delegation flew to the U.S., providing information about the conditions on the dialogue presented by the North and Kim's willingness to meet Donald Trump as soon as possible. The U.S. president has agreed to this proposal and the summit is expected to be held in May.

In addition, South Korea has tried to be the initiator of multilateral diplomacy. After the visit to the U.S., the South Korean delegation went to China, Russia, and Japan. The South's diplomatic activities in Europe are also visible. For example, Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha attended the EU Foreign Affairs Council meeting in March.

**North Korean Perspective.** Participation in the Games and the restoration of the dialogue with South Korea are in line with North Korean declarations, especially those made during the 2018 New Year's address of Kim Jong-un. It is possible that the North's main goal is to improve the state's image and to reduce the impact of increasingly heavy sanctions. By choosing a more conciliatory tone and utilising the engagement-oriented attitude of Moon's administration, North Korea appears to have contributed to easing the tensions and, at the same time, avoiding the impression that it was forced to do so because of the increasing international pressure. The North Korean regime has for now avoided the prospect of escalation related to a possible U.S. military strike while also providing itself with the time needed to further develop its nuclear and missile potential.

North Korea's usage of conciliatory rhetoric aims to check the South Korean and American readiness to initiate dialogue. At the same time, it seeks to undermine the cohesion of the U.S. and South Korean alliance, exploiting the differences between Moon's conciliatory approach and Trump's confrontational stance. The North's policy is also characterised by intentional ambiguity and a wait-and-see attitude—information about the Kim-Moon and Kim-Trump summits and the willingness to denuclearise have not yet been confirmed by North Korean officials. The delay allows North Korea to distance itself from the South and to try to avoid any responsibility for the possible failure of the talks.

The North's diplomatic initiative may be the result of its efforts to recover from isolation while retaining the potential for nuclear deterrence. The advances in its nuclear and missile programmes could have convinced the North Korean authorities that they have a strong negotiating position in any talks with South Korea or the U.S. In agreeing a temporary freeze on nuclear and missile tests and declaring (probably apparent) readiness for denuclearisation, North Korea may seek to initiate talks on recognising its nuclear status and the possible normalisation of relations with the U.S. To validate the North Korean diplomatic activity and strengthen its negotiating position ahead of the talks with South Korea and the U.S., Kim Jong-un paid a visit to China at the end of March, his first foreign visit.

**Conclusions.** The Pyeongchang Olympics facilitated the opening of dialogue between the Korean states. The Kim-Moon summit scheduled for 27 April is one direct outcome. During the Games, both Koreas displayed their willingness to take the initiative in solving the contentious issues on the Korean Peninsula as well as their ability to alleviate the tensions in the region.

However, deepening the inter-Korean dialogue and initiating negotiations between the U.S. and North Korea will depend primarily on ensuring Kim Jong-un's readiness for the talks. When it comes to the latter, the Trump administration's position will also be crucial. This means challenges for South Korea, since it is equally important for the country to maintain top-level communication with the North and to persuade the U.S. to adopt the South's concept for solving the problems on the Korean Peninsula. The nomination of Mike Pompeo as the new Secretary of State and naming of John Bolton as the president's new National Security Advisor could mean tougher conditions from the U.S. to agree to negotiate with North Korea. In turn, Kim's visit to Beijing may mark greater Chinese diplomatic engagement on the peninsula.

In addition to attempting to influence the direction of the talks between the U.S. and the North, South Korea will seek to strengthen its position as the initiator and advocate of diplomatic solutions. For this purpose, the South will engage other countries in stabilising and solving problems on the peninsula, including those in Europe, where both Koreas are active diplomatically. In March, apart from the visit by Minister Kang to Brussels, the North Korean minister of foreign affairs visited Stockholm, and U.S.–North/South expert talks took place in Helsinki. The EU and its Member States are perceived by the Korean countries as important partners in supporting peaceful solutions and the negotiations between the U.S. and North Korea. The success of current attempts at dialogue and a further de-escalation of the tensions on the Korean Peninsula are in Poland's interest.