

On the eve of the Winter Olympics in Korea

Thursday 8 February 2018, by [HURST Daniel](#), [PENGELLY Martin](#), [Reuters](#), [The Observer](#), [TISDALL Simon](#) (Date first published: 8 February 2018).

Contents

- [‘Protocol headache’](#)
- [Trump’s rhetoric threatens](#)
- [Mike Pence to stop North \(...\)](#)
- [North Korea to send head \(...\)](#)
- [The Observer view on the \(...\)](#)

‘Protocol headache’

‘Protocol headache’ for Winter Olympics as Mike Pence and Kim Jong-un’s sister arrive

US vice-president and North Korea’s Kim Yo-jong have ‘no intention’ of meeting but seating plan for opening ceremony could put them metres apart.

US and senior North Korean officials say they have no intention of meeting each other at the Winter Olympics – even though vice-president Mike Pence and Kim Jong-un’s younger sister will be seated just metres apart at the opening ceremony.

Friday’s VIP seating arrangements are seen as a “protocol headache” for the South Korean hosts, who have been pushing for the Games in Pyeongchang to be known as a “peace Olympics”.

Instead, the opening ceremony could prove to be an awkward and frosty affair. Pence is to be accompanied by the father of Otto Warmbier, the American student who was imprisoned by North Korea and died just days after being returned to the US in a coma last year.

North Korean leader Kim Jong-un’s younger sister, Kim Yo-jong, is blacklisted under US sanctions. She oversees the regime’s propaganda department and has been playing an increasingly prominent role in the ruling Workers’ party [1].

It is speculated that she might carry a message from her brother to the South as she becomes the first member of the immediate family to cross the border between the countries that are technically still at war.

In a further sign of rapprochement, a spokesman for the South Korean president, Moon Jae-in, said he would meet and have lunch with the North Korean delegates on Saturday.

But in a show of strength likely to increase tensions just a day before the Winter Olympics open in the South, the North Korean regime staged military parade in Pyongyang.

Footage posted online showed truckload after truckload of soldiers being driven away from the city centre after taking part in the parade, with cheering onlookers lining the streets, followed by tanks

and other armoured vehicles.

Some observers have suggested that the North is trying to drive a wedge between South Korea and its American ally.

Pence, who will lead the US delegation, has vowed to prevent Kim from “hijacking the message and imagery” of the Olympics.

“We’ll be there to cheer on our American athletes, but we’ll also be there to stand with our allies and remind the world that North Korea is the most tyrannical and oppressive regime on the planet,” Pence said on Wednesday.

“We will not allow North Korean propaganda to hijack the message and imagery of the Olympic Games. We will not allow North Korea to hide behind the Olympic banner the reality that they enslave their people and threaten the wider region.”

Before travelling to South Korea, Pence said the US would soon unveil “the toughest and most aggressive round of economic sanctions on North Korea ever” in a bid to pressure it to abandon its nuclear ambitions. He told American troops in Japan that the US was “ready for any eventuality”.

“North Korea’s continued threats have stirred the United States of America to act – and we will continue to act with vigilance and resolve as our lodestar,” he told the troops on Thursday.

“To any who would threaten our people, our allies, know this: under this commander in chief, the greatest fighting force in the world – the United States – is ready; ready to defend our homeland, defend our allies, any time, anywhere.”

The US and North Korean delegations say they are not angling for a meeting, although some interaction may occur, possibly at a reception before the opening ceremony.

“We have no intention whatsoever to meet US authorities during our visit to the South,” North Korean foreign ministry official Cho Yong-Sam said, according to state media.

The International Olympic Committee is leaving the delicate decisions on seating to the South Korean hosts. The IOC president, Thomas Bach, said he would “not make the mistake to try to interfere” as that would be “a recipe for disaster”.

One official familiar with the planning told the Reuters news agency: “This is a protocol headache ... How close should the North Koreans and Americans sit, when Washington has been so public about sanctions and pressure against North Korea? And who takes a higher seat?”

Moon Jae-in, the South Korean president who has pushed for greater dialogue between North and South, said he hoped the “mood for peace” would continue after the Games. Athletes from both sides of the border will march under the one flag.

Japan, another US ally in the region, has taken a harder line. Prime minister Shinzo Abe said countries should not be “captivated by the charm offensive”.

The sudden outbreak of North-South cooperation has not been all plain sailing. A United Nations committee is considering granting an exemption to sanctions that would prevent Choe Hwi, of North Korea’s national sports guidance committee, from travelling to the Games.

And a ship carrying North Korea’s art troupe to the South has requested fuel supplies. Seoul is still

weighing up how that gels with UN sanctions.

Daniel Hurst in Tokyo

@danielhurstbne

* The Guardian. Thu 8 Feb 2018 08.41 GMT First published on Thu 8 Feb 2018 05.03 GMT:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/feb/08/protocol-headache-winter-olympics-mike-pence-kim-jong-un-sister>

Trump's rhetoric threatens peace-making in Korean peninsula

Cautious overtures to Kim Jong-un from the South being undermined by the US.

Despite the painstaking efforts of Moon Jae-in, South Korea's president, to use this week's opening of the Winter Olympics to build bridges with North Korea, Donald Trump remains locked on a dangerous collision course with what he calls Kim Jong-un's "depraved regime".

Kim's last-minute acceptance of Moon's invitation to send a North Korean delegation to the Games, which get under way in Pyeongchang on Friday, raised hopes that tensions with the US and its allies over the North's nuclear weapons build-up and missile tests may be defused, at least in part. North Korea agreed to send nearly two dozen athletes, cheerleaders and an orchestra in a delegation numbering more than 200 people.

The two Koreas will also field a joint women's ice hockey team in the Games and march under a "unification" flag in the opening parade. Moon, a left-leaning liberal, was elected last year with a pledge to pursue engagement with the North, but has faced opposition from Trump. The US president has characterised conciliation efforts as appeasement, demanded South Korea pay more for its defence and threatened unlimited military action "to totally destroy" North Korea. Moon's exercise in sporting diplomacy - he terms it a "stepping stone" to peace - also has critics among his rightwing opponents at home.

Some ice hockey fans complain, meanwhile, that their team will be weakened by the inclusion of inexperienced players from the North. The integrated team lost their first match, a friendly against Sweden on Sunday, 3-1. While support for reunification has fallen among South Koreans in recent years, most will welcome any reduction in tensions with Pyongyang and note that, after months of nuclear brinkmanship, the North has not test-fired any missiles since November. And Moon can point to another breakthrough: the resumption of an inter-Korean dialogue after a break of more than two years.

At their first meeting at Panmunjeom last month, the two sides agreed to expand the agenda to include military issues and to reconnect a military hotline. These are small steps. But, given the collapse in 2009 of the six-party talks process, which had involved China, the US, Russia, Japan and both Koreas, the resumed bilateral forum could prove significant. From Washington's perspective, hopes of an end to the confrontation with North Korea, which peaked last year after Kim exploded the North's sixth and biggest atomic bomb and test-fired a string of intercontinental ballistic missiles, appear premature.

The Trump administration remains highly sceptical. It has dismissed Kim's Olympics outing as a propaganda stunt, and despatched Mike Pence, the vice-president, to Pyeongchang to counter North Korean attempts to "hijack" the Games. "Everything the North Koreans do at the Olympics is a charade to cover up the fact that they are the most tyrannical and oppressive regime on the planet," a Pence aide was quoted as saying.

Ignoring the recent lull, Trump went out of his way in his State of the Union address last week to ramp up tensions again, insulting North Korea's ruler in personal terms, condemning human rights abuses and vowing to exert "maximum pressure" on the regime. Further upping the ante, it also emerged last week that senior White House officials, led by HR McMaster, Trump's national security adviser, are considering what they call a one-off "bloody nose" military strike. This, they argue, could deter Kim without sparking all-out war.

The state department and the Pentagon reportedly oppose the idea, which a senior US diplomat said could result in hundreds of thousands of civilian deaths.

Given the hostile drumbeat in Washington, North Korea has every reason to treat Moon's blandishments with caution. It described Trump's State of the Union threats as "the height of Trump-style arrogance, arbitrariness and self-conceit". The foreign ministry said Trump was "terrified" of the country's military might. This "might" will go on show in a giant military parade in Pyongyang on Thursday on the eve of the Games. Trump officials claimed the timing is further proof Kim is merely trying to score propaganda points.

The evident danger now is this scepticism will prove self-fulfilling. To the extent that a tentative North-South rapprochement has begun under Moon's auspices, it remains extremely fragile. Either out of ignorance or by design, Trump seems intent on wrecking it.

Simon Tisdall

* The Guardian. Mon 5 Feb 2018 07.00 GMT Last modified on Wed 7 Feb 2018 17.34 GMT:
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/feb/05/trumps-rhetoric-threatens-peace-making-in-korean-peninsula>

Mike Pence to stop North Korea 'hijacking' Winter Olympics, aide says

Vice-president believes North's presence 'a charade'.

The vice-president, Mike Pence, will stop North Korea "hijacking" the Winter Olympics, an aide said on Sunday, by using his own presence at the Games to remind the world "everything the North Koreans do at the Olympics is a charade to cover up the fact that they are the most tyrannical and oppressive regime on the planet".

Such rhetoric contrasts with recent diplomatic exchanges between North and South Korea. The two countries will march under one flag at the Games, which begin in Pyeongchang on Friday. They will also field a joint women's ice hockey team.

Diplomacy around the Games has been hailed as a success, at odds with confrontational and

inflammatory rhetoric from the White House and Pyongyang since Donald Trump became president last year.

Kim Jong-un's pursuit of a nuclear weapon deliverable to US soil has fuelled tension, as have Trump's aggressive speeches and tweets on the subject. Last month, a false alarm of an incoming ballistic missile spread panic in Hawaii.

Trump, who has repeatedly threatened military action, criticised North Korea in his State of the Union speech to Congress this week, at which a North Korean defector was a praised guest.

A spokesperson for North Korea's foreign ministry said on Sunday the speech reflected "the height of Trump-style arrogance, arbitrariness and self-conceit".

Pence is due to attend the Olympics opening ceremony and some early events, as part of an Asia tour.

The Axios website quoted the unidentified aide to the vice-president as saying: "At every opportunity, the VP will point out the reality of the oppression in North Korea by a regime that has enslaved its people. We will not allow North Korea's propaganda to hijack the messaging of the Olympics.

"We are seeing unprecedented level of international cooperation on the maximum pressure strategy targeting the Kim [Jong-un] regime, and the vice-president will make clear that this maximum pressure campaign will only intensify."

Axios quoted another unidentified government source as saying: "North Korea wants to make this about cute photo ops. The vice-president is countering North Korea's desire to control the message.

"We're not going to cede two weeks of world media to North Korea."

In January, Trump spoke approvingly of the Olympic rapprochement, for which he appeared to take credit.

He said: "A lot of people have said and a lot of people have written that without my rhetoric and without my tough stance - and it's not just a stance, I mean this is what has to be done - that they wouldn't be talking about Olympics, they wouldn't be talking right now."

Martin Pengelly

@MartinPengelly

* The Guardian. Sun 4 Feb 2018 15.30 GMT Last modified on Wed 7 Feb 2018 17.34 GMT:
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/feb/04/mike-pence-north-korea-winter-olympics>

North Korea to send head of state to Seoul for first time in years

Kim Yong-nam, the head of the North's parliament, is the highest-level North Korean official to visit South Korea since 2014.

North Korea will send its nominal head of state and other senior officials to South Korea this week, as the neighbours push through with attempts at rapprochement ahead of this month's Winter Olympics.

Kim Yong-nam, the head of the North's parliament, will be the highest-level North Korean official to visit South Korea since the North sent then-No. 2 Hwang Pyong So at the close of the 2014 Asian Games in Incheon, South Korea. Kim's trip touched off immediate media speculation that direct contacts between Pyongyang and Washington may be possible during the Olympics, with the US sending vice president Mike Pence to the games that start on 9 February.

On Sunday night, the North sent a message via a cross-border communication channel saying its high-level delegation will visit South Korea from 9 to 11 February, the South's unification ministry said in a statement. It said the North's delegation includes Kim and three other officials but gave no further details like its itinerary.

Kim chairs the top decision-making body of North Korea's rubber-stamp parliament, and his official title as president of the Presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly as the North's nominal or ceremonial leader. Kim, 90, has been frequently seen on state TV making propaganda-filled speeches with deep, booming voices on key state anniversaries or receiving visiting foreign dignitaries on behalf of leader Kim Jong-un and his late dictator father Kim Jong-il. Some experts say Kim Yong-nam's actual influence in state affairs has been diminished gradually over the years largely due to his age.

The North dispatching a high-level delegation was part of agreements the two Koreas struck last month over Olympic cooperation. Under the deals, the North is sending 22 athletes to the Pyeongchang games, who will parade together with South Korean players under a single flag during the 9 February opening ceremony. Twelve of the North Korean athletes have formed the Koreas' first Olympic team in women's hockey, and the North is also to send a 230-member cheering group and a 140-person art troupe.

The Koreas' reconciliation mood follows a year of heightened tensions over North Korea's advancing nuclear and missile programs. Some experts say the North may want to use its Olympic-related overture as a way to weaken US-led international pressure and sanctions.

Reuters

* The Guardian. Mon 5 Feb 2018 00.51 GMT Last modified on Wed 7 Feb 2018 17.34 GMT:
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/feb/05/north-korea-to-send-head-of-state-to-seoul-for-first-time-in-years>

The Observer view on the Winter Olympics and tensions with North Korea

The Games in Pyeongchang are an opportunity for Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un to end their nuclear standoff.

Hard-fought contests at the Winter Olympics, which open on 9 February at the Pyeongchang stadium in South Korea, will enthrall millions of television viewers. But the Games have also become

the stage for a different, unsporting contest, potentially deadly in character, which pits the US against North Korea.

At stake is not a gold medal and a victory wave from the podium, but the sustainability of the recent, fragile reduction in military tensions and the avoidance of nuclear war on the Korean peninsula.

As all the world knows, in 2017 the armed confrontation between Washington and Pyongyang escalated sharply. North Korea carried out its sixth and biggest nuclear explosion and test-fired three intercontinental ballistic missiles that in theory could reach the US mainland. Donald Trump responded with a nuclear build-up and hysterical threats, vowing at one point to “totally destroy” North Korea. In his intemperate State of the Union address last week, he described Kim Jong-un, North Korea’s dictator, as “depraved”.

Kim has matched Trump’s threats of Armageddon with blood-curdling warnings of his own. But since November, when North Korea last launched a missile, the situation has calmed a little. Trump predictably claims credit for this lull. The more probable cause is that pressure from China and tougher UN sanctions persuaded Kim to hit the pause button rather than the red one marked “Fire”.

The brave persistence of South Korea’s president, Moon Jae-in, in offering dialogue, despite public American criticism, has also paid off. Limited talks resumed last month after a break of two years. And Pyongyang accepted Moon’s Olympics invitation. Twenty-two North Korean athletes will compete, including an all-Korea women’s ice hockey team. The North is also sending a squad of 230 cheerleaders and an orchestra. The two countries’ teams will march together under a blue and white “unification” flag at the opening ceremony.

Given the state of war that technically still exists between North and South, these gestures have enormous symbolic and political significance. If this collaboration goes smoothly – a big “if” given the possibility of sudden spats, embarrassing defections and the animosity of South Korean right-wingers – it could form the basis for continuing rapprochement and further military de-escalation. The problem is, senior figures around Trump, and conceivably Trump himself, appear to view this prospect with alarm. The risk is that they will deliberately sabotage it.

The US is already making a stink about a large military parade in Pyongyang the day before the Games open. American hardliners characterise the event as provocative and proof that Kim’s evil intentions are unchanged. The White House says Mike Pence, the vice president, will use his attendance in Pyeongchang to counter North Korean efforts to “hijack” the Games for propaganda purposes. Washington is also refusing to cancel US-South Korean war games that were temporarily postponed last month at Seoul’s urging.

More worrying still is the irresponsible debate within the Trump administration about mounting a limited military strike. Officials seem to have belatedly grasped that their key demand – for Kim to unilaterally scrap his nuclear arsenal – is absurdly unrealistic. Yet rather than pursue diplomatic routes towards gradual, mutual disarmament, HR McMaster, Trump’s national security adviser, and other hawks are reportedly advancing the idea of what they call a limited “bloody nose strike”. They argue this would deter (or even kill) Kim without provoking all-out war.

Although this dangerous fantasy is opposed by the state department, it is gaining traction. After Victor Cha, a respected diplomat expected to be the next US ambassador to Seoul, warned that a “bloody nose strike” could cause hundreds of thousands of deaths, his nomination was scrapped. This reckless idea must also be viewed in the wider context of the Pentagon’s dismaying new nuclear posture review, which opens the door to first use of tactical nuclear weapons on conventional battlefields.

Kim is predicting the US will use the Olympics as a “stage for confrontation” and that any positive gains will be swiftly squandered. Trump and his advisers must prove him wrong. They should stop the mad talk about winnable nuclear wars and use this rare opportunity to enhance the security of all Koreans.

Observer editorial

* The Guardian. Sun 4 Feb 2018 00.02 GMT Last modified on Wed 7 Feb 2018 17.34 GMT:

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/feb/04/observer-view-tensions-with-north-korea-winter-olympics-pyeongchang>

Footnotes

[1] ESSF (article 43082), [Promotion to the politburo of North Korea's workers' party: Kim Yo-jong, the sister who is the brains behind Kim Jong-un's image](#).