

Korean Peninsula - After the Year of Living Dangerously: Why Pyeongchang really could be the “Peace Games”

Saturday 24 February 2018, by [SCOTT Alan](#) (Date first published: 22 February 2018).

Few have given peace on the Korean Peninsula a chance after the Pyeongchang Games finish, but after a tense 2017, the Winter Olympics have opened a path towards peace

At the outset of the women’s slalom at the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics, US superstar Mikaela Shiffrin was ranked first and North Korea’s Kim Ryon Hyang last among the field of 79 skiers. True to form, Kim finished last among the finishers and Shiffrin, who was sick, came in a disappointing fourth. During both rounds of the competition, Kim received by far the biggest ovation led by a troupe of North Korean cheerleaders — decked out in sunglasses and matching sneakers — who in turn led a left-leaning group of South Korean supporters as they too cheered in disciplined formation. Such is reality in the topsy-turvy world of Pyeongchang 2018, dubbed the “Peace Games.” A supposedly apolitical event has turned political in the extreme, the boogie men have transformed into heroes and the losers into winners. While North Korea has expertly orchestrated a love-in with the majority of South Koreans, Americans have looked on somewhat bemused as this divided people enjoy all too rare facetime. But can Olympic euphoria last and lead to real peace?

When Kim Jong-un signed off the launch of a Hwasong-15 Inter-Continental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) on November 28 last year [1], much of the focus was on its range — 8,000 miles. Far enough to reach every corner of the continental US, it was the first such test of its kind by North Korea. But the timing now also looks significant. After conducting 16 missile tests in 2017, the most ever in a single year, the DPRK then went silent in what now looks like an effort to lay the ground for a rapprochement with the South in a bid to drive a wedge with the US. Five weeks later, Kim delivered his traditional New Year’s speech with two key points [2]: The DPRK was ready to join the Pyeongchang Games, he said. And then came a warning for the US: “The nuclear button is on my office desk all of the time. The United States needs to be clearly aware that this is not merely a threat but a reality.”

Kim’s comments represent the most significant gambit North Korea has played in recent times. Although his threat was interpreted as an offensive posture by the US and much of the international media, inside North Korea it was considered defensive. Kim was telling the US, and South Korea, that the North has all but perfected an insurance policy for its own independence. Now Pyongyang was ready to talk, and bargain.

Three days later, South Korean President Moon Jae-in responded to Kim. Joint military drills with the US, which simulate an attack on the North and anger Pyongyang, due to take place in the Spring would be suspended during the Winter Olympics. Moon’s overtures to the US confirming this freeze required little more than massaging Trump’s ego. Before making his announcement, the South Korean president first allowed Trump to Tweet that it was he who had brought the two Koreas together [3]. Then, a week later, Moon flattered his US counterpart [4]: “I give President Trump

huge credit for bringing about the inter-Korean talks, and I'd like to thank him for that," he said.

China and Russia have repeatedly called for a "dual freeze" [5], a cessation of missile tests by the North alongside a stop to military exercises by the US and the South. So even before the opening ceremony, the Olympics had delivered — without being hailed as such — the very thing that North Korea's only two neighbors and so-called allies had championed for months. For the moment, an unspoken dual freeze continues.

Following 2017, among the most dangerous years on the peninsula in the six decades since the Korean War, this year has witnessed almost daily overtures towards peace. Multiple military talks have been held on the DMZ, the military hotline between the two Koreas has been re-established, and Kim Yo-jong, sister of Kim Jong-un, has become the first member of North Korea's ruling family to visit the south since the Korean War when she joined titular head of state Kim Jong-nam in Pyeongchang for the Olympics opening ceremony on February 9 [6].

The full implications of this high-level visit are still to be felt. The media has played up the PR masterstroke by Kim Jong-un in Pyeongchang but Moon has also pulled off something similar, if not more advantageous, in regards to his own position and agenda. Not only has the left-leaning president exposed the ruling Kim dynasty to the South for the first time, he may also have brought more South Koreans into his political camp — one which advocates engagement and ratcheting down tensions over bellicose threats. Moon's approval rating slid below 60 percent for the first time in late January after announcing both Koreas would walk together during the Olympics opening ceremony [7]. But by the day of the actual event, polls showed Moon was back up to 63 percent, and a week later 61.5 percent of South Koreans polled were in favor of a meeting between Moon and Kim Jong-un [8]. Such a meeting, proposed in an invitation hand delivered by Kim's sister to Moon, will likely prove crucial as to whether the "Peace Games" can actually deliver a thaw in relations that extends beyond the end of the Paralympics on March 18.

By that date, North Korea will have gone 110 days without a missile test [9] — barring something unexpected — the longest period since Trump became president. South Korea has said it will announce resumed joint military exercises with the US between March 18 and April 1 with the aim of starting drills after this period [10]. This will be the key test.

From the US side, the clock is ticking. With every passing week, Kim gets closer to perfecting and expanding his nuclear threat. But time is also of the essence for North Korea. Just before Christmas, the UN Security Council passed yet harsher sanctions which restrict fuel imports and require all North Korean laborers to return home within 24 months, thereby cutting off a vital supply of foreign currency [11]. The White House's "maximum pressure" campaign with the option of talks, as described by Pence following his return from Pyeongchang, is effectively mirrored on the North Korean side, however. An opinion piece published by the government-run Korean Central News Agency on February 19 stated [12]: "The DPRK is fully ready for both dialogue and war."

Both sides have therefore reached high noon on the Korean Peninsula, Moon playing good cop and Trump bad in a showdown with Kim. Who will blink first? If US-South Korea military exercises resume in April then Kim will almost certainly sign off more missile tests, effectively ending the recent Olympics honeymoon period. This in turn raises a key point: by inflaming tensions on the Korean peninsula with talk of attacks on the North, the Trump White House has not only brought the region closer to war, it has also encouraged Kim to speed up his weapons program, the very thing the US is trying to avoid.

The US sees biannual military exercises as a key showcase of its military presence in the South, a display of force also partly aimed at China. Moon appears less supportive, berating the Japanese

Prime Minister Shinzō Abe for urging the resumption of drills after the Games finish. Moon will therefore surely attempt to stall the US further on joint exercises with the aim of extending the current period of improving North-South relations, thereby creating conditions for a visit to Pyongyang, while encouraging direct dialogue between the US and North Korea. Should the South Korean president reach Pyongyang, the Korean peninsula and its enduring Cold War standoff will enter rare territory. There have only ever been two previous visits by a South Korean president to Pyongyang — Kim Dae-jung in 2000 and his successor Roh Moo-hyun in 2007. Both efforts eventually fizzled to nothing. Moon should thereafter scrap the worst of this previous “Sunshine Policy,” notably secret multi-million-dollar payments to Pyongyang and a lack of focus on the Kim dynasty’s appalling human rights record, while keeping parts that worked, namely top-level talks and a zero-tolerance policy on Northern military aggression.

And so despite the cynicism, and fears that the current thaw on the Korean Peninsula won’t last until the Spring, the so-called “Peace Games” have, in theory, opened up a path towards peace. The question is: will all those involved walk down it?

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P.S.

* Verso Books. 22 February 2018:

<https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3632-after-the-year-of-living-dangerously-why-pyeongchang-really-could-be-the-peace-games>

* Alan Scott is the pseudonym of a British reporter based in East Asia.

Footnotes

[1] <https://www.38north.org/2017/11/melleman112917/>

[2] <https://www.38north.org/2018/01/rfrank010318/>

[3] <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/jan/04/trump-tells-south-korean-president-that-talks-with-north-would-be-a-good-thing>

[4] <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-42636101>

[5] <https://thebulletin.org/end-us-south-korean-military-exercises-conditions11095>

[6] <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/02/10/asia/kim-sister-olympics/index.html>

[7] http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/829656.html

[8] http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/829656.html

[9] <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/05/29/asia/north-korea-missile-tests/index.html>

[10] [http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/news/2018/02/20/0200000000AEN20180220005600315.htm](http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/news/2018/02/20/0200000000AEN20180220005600315.html)
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[11] <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-missiles/u-n-security-council-imposes-new-sanctions-on-north-korea-over-missile-test-idUSKBN1EG0HV>

[12] <https://kcnawatch.co/newstream/1519050626-218123629/u-s-is-left-with-little-option-kcna-commentary/>