



PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

The 2018 Winter Olympics: Divided We Stand

by Dr. Alon Levkowitz

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 735, February 9, 2018

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The PyeongChang 2018 Winter Olympics in South Korea is a major political as well as sporting event. The Olympic spirit of peace will be on full display when the North and South Korean teams enter the stadium together and even play together. But the new euphoria on the Peninsula has reignited a political debate between Korean conservatives and liberals on policy towards North Korea. While liberals see the Olympics as an opportunity for negotiation, conservatives see Pyongyang's agreement to attend as a tactic to gain benefits and not a genuine expression of warming relations.

The PyeongChang 2018 Winter Olympics in South Korea, which begin on February 9, will offer moments of euphoria. The North and South Korean teams will enter the stadium together and a unified Korean women's hockey team will compete, representing both Koreas. One can compare the current elation to the June 2000 meeting between the late South Korean leader Kim Dae-jung and the late North Korean leader Kim Jong-il. People thought that meeting might be the beginning of a beautiful friendship – but their hopes did not last long. Tensions in the Korean Peninsula soon resumed.

The attempts by South Korean President Moon Jae-in to persuade Kim Jong-un to send the North Korean team to participate in the PyeongChang 2018 Winter Olympics took a great deal of effort. Pyongyang did not initially see that any significant benefits would accrue from its participation in the Games. Part of Seoul's effort involved persuading Washington to ease its anti-Kim rhetoric. Ultimately, Pyongyang decided it was willing to participate in the Games to maximize the gains it can accumulate following its achievement of credible deterrence via its ICBM with a nuclear warhead.

The participation of North Korea in the PyeongChang Olympics reveals once again the political division in South Korean society between conservatives and liberals on the issue of North Korea. This division is now even more profound.

Prof. Moon Chung-in, security advisor to President Moon Jae-in,ⁱ represents the liberal optimist camp. This camp sees the North Korean decision to participate in the 2018 Olympics as a first step towards cooperation with South Korea. Aware as it is of the DPRK's modus operandi, the liberal camp is willing to overlook some of the mild provocations Pyongyang might initiate, provided it does not cross any red lines. They see the Olympics as an opportunity for negotiation with North Korea, a process they understand will take time and is unlikely to run smoothly. But they insist that this opportunity should be seized and that Washington should lend a hand and support the negotiation process, even if that means delaying the yearly military drill or abstaining from any military attack on North Korea.

Prof. Kim Young-hoⁱⁱ represents the conservative camp. The conservatives criticize President Moon's liberal policy towards the North, even though the last two South Korean presidents – Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye – were themselves conservatives who failed to halt the North Korean nuclear and missile programs. There is a correlation between the criticism expressed by US President Donald Trump of the failure of previous administrations to solve the North Korean nuclear and missile issues and the criticism expressed by South Korean conservatives. They believe now is not the time for concessions towards the DPRK, and that the sanctions placed on it should continue and even be increased. They argue that any economic assistance that might be promised by Seoul to Pyongyang during negotiations will undermine the effectiveness of the sanctions and allow Pyongyang to continue developing its nuclear and missile capabilities.

The PyeongChang Olympics, followed by the Paralympics Games, should delay the next potential crisis until the end of March 2018, at which time the issue of the US-South Korea joint military drill will come back to the table. North Korea has demanded that South Korea not participate in this exercise. While Washington was willing to postpone it until after the Olympics, it will not approve a further request by Seoul to postpone for the sake of inter-Korean negotiations. The Trump administration will not support a second delay because it might be interpreted as allowing Pyongyang to dictate the rules of the game.

Should that occur, President Moon will face criticism not just from Korean conservatives for appeasing the North, but from Washington and Pyongyang as well. Moon's dilemma is stark: either participate in the military drill and terminate the dialogue with Pyongyang, or delay the drill, continue the dialogue, and intensify the dispute with Washington.

As Trump administration officials discuss a possible "bloody nose" limited attack on North Korea, Moon cannot disengage himself from Washington. Despite Seoul's objections, Moon has little chance of convincing Washington not to pursue such an attack.

Dr. Alon Levkowitz, a research associate at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, is an expert on East Asian security, the Korean Peninsula, and Asian international organizations.

BESA Center Perspectives Papers are published through the generosity of the Greg Rosshandler Family

ⁱ https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2018/01/356_243343.html

ⁱⁱ <https://mailchi.mp/pacforum/pacnet-1166617?e=b29d54d64b>