

Big Power Diversions: Olympic Diplomacy on the Korean Peninsula

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The more overtures, sudden but entirely appropriate, being made by North Korea to their South Korean counterparts, the more concern seems to emanate from quarters in Washington and Tokyo. A recurring streak in these engagements is the fear that Pyongyang is simply prevaricating, distracting and diverting: they are having us all for fools.

This betrays the whole premise of how US policy, and to a good degree that of Japan, has been linked to an obsession to place nuclear weapons dismantling and removal as a first step of talks rather than a final outcome with an [enduring peace settlement](#).

Such a settlement, by its very composition, would have to normalise affairs between both Koreas, end the armistice with a peace treaty, with the possible icing on the cake being a Nuclear-Weapons Free Zone. But surely, a declaration of non-hostility on the part of Washington might be a good start?

Initial freezes in terms of testing (ballistic weapons, the nuclear program) complemented by a suspension or delay of large military exercises by the United States and South Korea, would then follow as a way of smoothing the way.

In many security channels, this might seem like very large pie in a very distant sky. Various powers, led by the United States, see a North Korean nuclear weapons program as satanic, untenable, the freakish sore of the international comity. It must be removed, excised, disarmed, or shackled. But even in the darkest moments of theatre, bluster and boisterousness, talks have been taking place. There have been discussions, albeit quietly held, reverberating in the background.

These talks have lead, in balletic, searching format, to Olympic diplomacy. In a sense, it is fitting. The Olympics have often been the scene of protest, propaganda and boycotts, a grandiose and costly hypocrisy that crushes the host city even as it drains its coffers. But this occasion at Pyeongchang promises to be slightly different, returning the games to their initial, if contrived purpose: to promote peaceful engagement in sporting ventures and a cessation of hostilities for the duration of the event.

The security mandarins in Washington and Tokyo are seemingly not convinced. Last weekend, it transpired that President Donald Trump's national security adviser, H.R. McMaster, had made a secret journey to San Francisco to discuss North Korea's nuclear

weapons program with Japan's Shotaro Yachi of the national security council, and officials from South Korea. The agenda item – the recent resumption of communications between Pyongyang and Seoul – was treated with some scorn, with Olympic diplomacy here deemed a diversion that will have little if any impact on the nuclear weapons program.

Again, the narrow horizon, the chatter of small minds prevailed, evinced by such remarks by McMaster to Fox News' Bret Baier at the Reagan National Security Forum in California. For McMaster, the nuclear program is a bacillus that requires expunging with immediacy, leaving little, if any room, for accommodation. Being alarmed is a way of being.

“I think it's increasing everyday,” he spoke with orthodox, rehearsed urgency.
“It means we're in a race. We're in a race to be able to solve this problem.”

(On this score, McMaster is [hardly being original](#), having insisted on this futile contest for months.) While there were “ways to address this problem short of armed conflict” this was a “race because he's getting closer and closer and there's not much time left.” Such a sinister suggestion, the self-clapping in irons that restricts diplomacy because the war monger longs to reach for his weapon.

As [Leon Sigal](#), Director of the Northeast Asia Security Project at the Social Science Research Council explained to the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee last year, denuclearisation was the “ultimate goal”. However, “demanding that Pyongyang pledge that now will only delay a possible agreement, enabling it to add to its military wherewithal and bargaining leverage in the meantime.”

This point is being insistently ignored by a set of policy makers in Washington, leaving no room for manoeuvring, theatre, dissimulation, in short, all aspects that are vital to the resolution of lingering disputes. Senator Lindsey Graham, for one, [claimed on Wednesday](#) that Seoul was “undercutting what Trump's trying to do” in allowing Pyongyang to participate at the Winter Olympics.

What McMaster is alluding to is brutal, surrendering simplicity: come out with your hands up, surrender your weapons, and all will be well. He does this by insisting that,

“The greatest immediate threat to the United States and to the world is the threat posed by the rogue regime in North Korea and his continued efforts to develop a long range nuclear capability.”

In Vancouver, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson carried out his usual double act in a press conference following a meeting with Canadian, Korean, Japanese and UN Command officials. [He began with](#) “one policy and one goal”: “the complete, verifiable, irreversible denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula.” The pressure of sanctions, long shown to be ineffective in having any actual impact on Pyongyang's weapons program, would continue, albeit in a more targeted way. Combating the evasion of sanctions and interdiction to prevent “ship-to-ship transfers” was also discussed.

Then came a slight [adjustment in tone](#): while “maximum pressure”, one designed to push Pyongyang to denuclearisation talks, buttressed by a “resolute military option” had been the object of the Trump administration, Vancouver provided a different setting,

featuring “constructive discussions about how to push our diplomatic efforts forward and prepare for the prospects of talks.” All to the good, though heavily qualified by the next spurt of bellicosity from President Trump himself.

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