

Fearing Peace: Olympic Diplomacy in Action

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***Mike Pence** was a man with a mission. At stages through the opening parts of the Winter Olympics in South Korea, he looked like a man on a mission. With diplomatic gestures flowering all around with weedy vigour in Pyeongchang, he was intent on fighting them. The gardener of empire had his implements at the ready.*

The US Vice-President had a brief: ignore, stall, and frustrate. Most of all, be wary of being wooed.

“We’ll continue,” [he warned](#) on Thursday, “to seize every opportunity to ensure that North Korea does not use the powerful imagery and backdrop of the Olympics to paper over an appalling record of human rights and a pattern of developing weapons and conducting the kind of missile launches that are threatening our nation and threatening neighbours across the region.”

He proceeded to meet four North Korean defectors. He had been in Japan announcing “the toughest and most aggressive” sanctions against Pyongyang yet, [exhorting troops](#) at Yokota Air Base to guard against “the rogue regime in North Korea”. At the opening ceremony, he refused to engage with his North Korean counterparts. That ice, at least for the moment, would remain in place.

The fact that progress is being made by both Koreas in a multi-decade conflict goes against the grain of US foreign policy. (Admittedly, this grain varies depending on mood, timing and person.) Rather than expressing sighs of relief that the two Koreas, who ultimately are the only ones who matter in any final accord, are speaking, larger powers are poking around the corner. They are the potential spoilers.

President of the International Olympic Committee, [Thomas Bach](#), could not resist noting the moment of symbolic unity. The effect of both Koreas marching into the stadium under one flag hit the mark.

“All the athletes around me, all the spectators here in the stadium, and all Olympic fans watching around the world... we are all touched by this wonderful gesture.”

High jinks of sort would have been hard to avoid. The North Korean cheer leaders, for instance, greeted athletes with a flag sporting the disputed islands of Dokdo. (For Japan,

these are known as Takeshima.) This ribbing was cheekier given South Korea's continued insistence on ownership.

"This issue," according to [Dong-Joon Park and Danielle Chubb](#), "brings together all Koreans, no matter what their political inclination – a rare occurrence in a country that is itself deeply ideologically and politically divided."

For all that, the most important niggler was that of division. Soft power would be used to prize apart and isolate. Would Seoul and Washington be separated, their warm, strategic relationship cooled by the seductive advances of Pyongyang? And what of a persistently prickly Japan, locked, by virtue of security and circumstance, in an at times awkward alliance with South Korea and the United States?

Pyongyang has certainly been stocking up on its soft power inventories, disseminating them in short sharp bursts. Kim Jong-un's sister, **Kim Yo-jong**, supplied an ample "spear" in the "charm offensive" by attending the opening ceremony.

North Korean pop singer **Hyon Song-wol** of [Excellent Horse-like Lady](#) fame had also been doing the rounds in the South to inspect the venue where the DPRK Samjiyon Orchestra would perform, prompting concerns that she might be a good disguise as a [Trojan Horse](#).

Rather than seeing this as opportunity, some of the paladins in Washington fear a near hypnotic control being exerted by Pyongyang. The DPRK agenda here is to retain a nuclear capability while also seeking closer ties with South Korea, all the time attempting to isolate the US.

"North Korea," suggested former South Korean vice foreign minister [Kim Sung-han](#), "appears to be winning gold."

In such an assessment, the DPRK "delegation and athletes are getting all the spotlight, and Kim Jong-un's sister is showing elegant smiles before the South Korean public and the world. Even for the moment, it appears to be a normal state."

The Olympic moment was something of an intoxicated binge, a high point that could, in time, dissipate into depressed normality. Former senior US diplomat [Douglas Paal](#) suggested how "tough" it was "not to get caught up in the emotions of an Olympics event".

Another ally to be discomfited in this moment of diplomacy is Japan. The fact that Japan's prime minister, **Shinzo Abe**, decided to grace Friday's opening ceremony with his troubling presence raised the spectre of North Korea's abduction of Japanese nationals. (Some [470 abductions](#) are said to have taken place between the 1960s and 1980s.) He also proceeded to irritate his South Korean hosts by insisting that joint military drills with the US would resume immediately after the Olympics.

South Korea has, in turn, been attacked by various Japanese figures for being soft and sympathetic to their North Korean brethren.

“South Korean **President Moon Jae-in**,” [stressed Kazuhiro Araki](#), head of the Unidentified Persons Investigation Committee at the National Association for the Rescue of Japanese Kidnapped by North Korea, “is pro-Pyongyang and he has used the Winter Olympics to protect North Korea from the pressure that was being applied by Japan and the US.”

The Korea Central News Agency was certainly attuned to the efforts of Japanese politicians to muddy the waters.

“If Japan runs amok, defying our warnings,” [went a release](#) on January 26, “the Korean people will surely force Japan to pay a very high price for its crimes with their strong fists.”

As for Pence, North Korean soft power, at least behind the scenes, may have had its [seductive effect](#). From icy standoffishness at the ceremony, [he would say](#) aboard Air Force Two on Sunday that the United States would be open, despite the ongoing “maximum pressure” campaign, to talks without preconditions with Pyongyang.

There was the natural caveat, the now genetically programmed refrain.

“The point is, no pressure comes off until they are actually doing something that the alliance believes represents a meaningful step towards denuclearization.”

Conditions, without preconditions, a muddled state of affairs that will not necessarily trouble the negotiating wing of the DPRK.

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