'And the Gold Medal Goes to': Sport Diplomacy in Action at the Winter Olympics

J Simon Rofe

In a period of heightened tensions between North and South Korea, the 2018 Winter Olympics in PyeongChang represent an opportunity for the disarming power of sport diplomacy to take centre ice.

The 23rd Winter Olympics in PyeongChang, Republic of Korea (South Korea) have seen sport diplomacy being played out far from the rinks, tracks or slopes where the medals will be decided. The initial gold medal winner in the sport diplomacy event at PyeongChang has been the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (North Korea), with their star performer not being an athlete, but the slight, smiling and silent figure of Kim Yo-jong, the sister of North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. Kim Yo-jong has been ably supported by a team of cheerleaders who have shown a unity of purposes that typifies North Korean public diplomacy, augmented by the #Cor hashtag being used on social media, and which sends shivers down the spines of those who are concerned with the secretive state’s nuclear ambitions.

It is worth recalling North Korea’s standing in international affairs: they have been treated as a pariah on the global stage, are subject to UN sanctions and have traded barbs with US President Donald Trump, who labelled their leader ‘a rocket man’ at the United Nations General Assembly on 29 September 2017. Their only ally in global affairs, the People’s Republic of China, has their own international position to maintain as they take on an increasingly important and prominent role in global governance.

Kim Yo-jong holds a position north of the demilitarised zone, propagandising on behalf of a regime that has an unparalleled human rights record, so one should introduce caution in rushing to anoint her as the ‘face of the games’. Equally, the North Korean regime’s dual development of nuclear weapons and ballistic missile capabilities has many in the region and beyond worried.

It is nonetheless remarkable that via the platform provided by elite, lycra-gladd winter sports, the North Korean regime has purveyed an image to the world that has drawn so much attention. They have some heritage in this realm through Kim Jong-un’s personal interest in basketball, a fascination that has seen former professional basketball player Dennis Rodman travel to Pyongyang to share lunch with Kim. What this tells us is that sport – in its broadest sense – has an uncanny ability to communicate, and hence facilitate, diplomacy. Why does sport diplomacy matter? Sport diplomacy accounts for the coming together of representation, communication and negotiation – all facets of global diplomacy – played out through a domain of contemporary society that touches vast numbers of people either through participation or spectatorship, namely ‘sport’. It has the power, to paraphrase Nelson Mandela’s remarks, to shape the world through diplomatic transactions not only between states, but a raft of other actors on the global stage, including international sporting bodies such as the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the International Paralympic Committee (IPC); non-governmental organisations such as international sporting federations; media partners with national, regional and global interests; the athletes themselves as potential sporting ‘diplomats’; and business interests that make any sporting-mega event a multimillion-pound enterprise. All of this is observed, dissected and recycled by a phalanx of commentators, facilitated by twenty-first century social media for a global audience.

The messages that sport carries are rarely singular, and that it can speak to many different audiences is why it requires careful decoding and analysis. IOC President Thomas Bach’s remarks at the PyeongChang opening ceremony, proclaiming sport as a means of reconciliation and a harbinger of peace, have long antecedents in that organisation. Bach stated that the joint entrance of athletes from North and South Korea during the opening ceremony was a ‘great example’ of sport’s ‘unifying power’: ‘United in our diversity, we are stronger than all the forces that want to divide us’. He continued by pointing to the multiple audiences for such an act: ‘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. We all join and support you in your message of peace’. Bach’s remarks reveal two facets of sport diplomacy, firstly the emotional dimension – being ‘touched’ by the gesture, which we will come to, and the link to peace. The link between peace and the Olympics can be seen in the often referenced but rarely analysed notion of the Olympic Truce. It is really, however, through the concept of Olympism that the IOC themselves describe the Olympics as contributing ‘to building a peaceful and better world by educating youth through sport practiced without discrimination of any kind and in the Olympic spirit, which requires mutual understanding with a spirit of friendship, solidarity and fair play’. Bach concluded his remarks.
by pointing to the communicative character of sports diplomacy: in PyeongChang, the athletes from the teams of the ROK [South Korea] and DPRK [North Korea], by marching together, send a powerful message of peace to the world.

Bach’s remarks in PyeongChang should come as little surprise given his personal diplomatic enterprise in using his office to orchestrate, in a way that other actors on the international stage have not, negotiations between North and South. These efforts resulted in the Olympic Korean Peninsular Declaration being issued by the IOC on 20 January 2018. The declaration recalls the ‘Olympic spirit of understanding and mutual respect,’ and how the efforts of an international sporting organisation through the Olympic Winter Games PyeongChang 2018 are hopefully opening the door to a brighter future on the Korean peninsula and inviting the world to join in a celebration of hope. In bending the organisation’s own rules on athlete registration by accepting entrants from North Korea after the IOC’s deadline had passed, Bach’s efforts illustrate how sport can, at certain points in time and under certain conditions, bring harmony to conflicting parties.

What Bach’s efforts also demonstrate is how an international sporting nongovernmental organisation, what Lincoln Allison and Alan Tomlinson have called a SINGO, can engage in diplomacy. On a broader level, Bach’s individual efforts and the IOC’s place on the global stage have been termed ‘Olympic Diplomacy’ by Aaron Beacon as he describes ‘how the Olympic Movement engages in and with international diplomatic discourse’.

Yet, Olympic diplomacy carried out by the IOC has not always been successful, both on the Korean peninsula and elsewhere. Amongst Bach’s predecessors, Juan Antonio Samaranch’s regime attempted to broker rapprochement between North and South Korea ahead of the 1988 Seoul Summer Olympics, only to end in failure with then leader Kim Il-sung leading a North Korean boycott of the first Olympics held on the peninsula. Equally, the IOC failed in its attempts to influence the United Nations in the early 1980s to pass a resolution committing member states not to boycott the Olympics. The importance of what the renaissance writer Francesco Guicciardini identified as the ripe moment for diplomacy is as relevant to sport diplomacy as it has been to any other diplomatic endeavour.

Whether one considers sport diplomacy as positive or not – and it should be noted that the results have sometimes been disastrous, even fatal (consider the ‘Football War’ between Honduras and El Salvador, where competition on the football pitch escalated into armed conflict) – there are alternative tales and narratives at play in PyeongChang of sport and diplomacy that illustrate the interwoven relationship between the two. Perhaps most intriguing is the participation of the ‘Olympic Athletes from Russia’ – the sporting equivalent of a stateless person – a team that was formed after Russia’s National Olympic Committee was banned from participation for state-sponsored doping. What is revealing here is the degree of state-sponsored crime that goes against the Olympic spirit, as the IOC, like other sporting bodies, propagate the unrealistic notion that sport is distinct from politics. One wonders what the Putin regime makes of this year’s focus on Korean reconciliation, as Moscow played out a different diplomatic course during the previous Winter Olympics in Sochi, where tensions between Russian and Ukraine peaked with the annexation of Crimea by Russia just days after the games ended.

Equally, the narrative of countries participating in their first Winter Olympics, including Ecuador, Eritrea, Kosovo, Malaysia, Nigeria and Singapore, bringing the number of participating countries to 91 – and the Olympic Athletes from Russia – making PyeongChang the most diverse to date. One of most intriguing tales has been ‘Africa’s first bobsled team’ – a women’s team from Nigeria. Nearly all reports on the team point directly to the pioneering parallel with the Jamaican bobsled team who competed at the 1988 Calgary Olympics, to the extent that it has become cliché to mention their portrayal in the Hollywood movie Cool Runnings, as a first for Caribbean participation at the Winter Olympics.

What Jamaica’s bobsled team did in 1988, despite failing to complete the event after crashing out on their final run, is to instil in their audience an emotional response to their endeavours. To return to the importance of emotion here is to pause and think about why sport – as distinct from other facets of life – resonates with so many people across the world while transcending national, racial and other boundaries. That is not to defy sport: the emotions of sport have turned into violence on more than one occasion, but recognising emotion in the transactions of sport diplomacy adds an important quality to the often emotionless image of diplomacy as the preserve of faceless diplomats. The narrative of triumph and tragedy that typifies Olympic sport, indeed all sport, is something that taps into our human condition and can make diplomats out of any one of us. To that end, beyond the screams of success or the tears of failure in PyeongChang, the image of Kim Yo-jong’s smile while she shook hands with the president of South Korea, Moon Jae-in – an unprecedented diplomatic move – illustrates that sport and diplomacy are wholly intertwined.

Finally, less we be too consumed by this particular moment in the history of sport and diplomacy, let us remember that sport is inherently transient; there is always the next match, the next race and the next Olympics. We won’t have to travel far from PyeongChang to continue the conversation about sport diplomacy and the Olympics: see you in Tokyo and then Beijing.

J Simon Rofe
Simon is Reader in Diplomatic and International Studies and Programme Director for the MA Global Diplomacy in the Centre for International Studies and Diplomacy at SOAS University of London. His research interests lie in the study of diplomacy and foreign relations particularly in relation to post-war planning and international sport.

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