



North Korea Wins The Propaganda Gold

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Whatever other awards North Korean athletes earn at the Winter Olympics now underway in Pyeongchang, South Korea, their country has made a championship level effort at manipulating the international press.

This week, the American media went on overload in praise of North Korean Minister of Propaganda and Agitation Kim Yo Jong, sister to North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. The minister was praised for her poise, her smile, her fashion sense and her handwriting. The *Washington Post* compared her to Ivanka Trump, (which even the *New York Times* found a bit much). There hadn't been this kind of gushing over a dictator's handmaiden since Leni Reifenstahl was hailed as a genius for her Nazi propaganda film about the 1936 Munich Olympics. And North Korea's propaganda minister can return to her brother claiming a gold medal performance.

Pyongyang's sports diplomacy is all about promoting an image of unity. It can also be read as a barometer of relations on the peninsula.

In the leadup to the 1988 Seoul Olympics, North Korea's dynastic founder Kim Il Sung rejected the idea that there could be an international event of this importance in the south that he did not co-host, either in whole or for some events. Years of negotiations leading up to the games produced no agreement, and North Korea encouraged communist states to skip Seoul. But the previous two Olympics had suffered from boycotts and there was little enthusiasm for yet another just to satisfy Kim's wounded pride. Ultimately, only Cuba joined North Korea in boycotting the games.

But by 1990, as Kim's East Bloc patronage was collapsing, he saw new value in outreach, and the North and South Korean men's and women's soccer teams were allowed to play inter-peninsula matches. In 1991, the south's Hyun Jung-hwa and northerner Li Pun Hui formed a unified ping pong team that defeated China for the gold at the world championships in Chiba, Japan. They were the first team to appear under the blue "unified Korea" banner.

But by 2008 and the Beijing games, this spirit broke down. New South Korean president Lee Myung-bak was taking a harder line towards the North, and bilateral reconciliation talks were suspended. Also, when protests erupted against China hosting the games because of human rights concerns, it was easier for Pyongyang to champion its ally to the north without coordinating with Seoul. The atmosphere was also complicated by the defection of a North Korean soldier and the shooting of a South Korean tourist in the months leading up to the games. The International Olympic Committee tried to negotiate a joint march right up to the opening, but failed to do so. Sour north/south relations were also reflected in London in 2012, a year after Kim Jong Un took power, when a women's soccer match was delayed for an hour after a North Korea player was introduced and a South Korea flag accidentally flashed on the jumbo screen.

So why the display of Korean unity now? The American press adopted a tone that suggested this was somehow "sticking it to Trump," that the South joined the North as an insult to Washington, that Vice President Mike Pence was "forced" to sit near Kim Yo Jong, who then "stole the show."

But it makes more sense to see North Korea's outreach as a sign of weakness, not strength. President Donald Trump's harder line with North Korea, his diplomatic effort to link the issues of nuclear proliferation to U.S.-China trade and increased American military pressure, pushed Kim to pursue a low cost way of reducing tension. Sending athletes to march under a unification flag and dispatching his sister to charm the impressionable press turned into a public relations bonanza.

The media was less interested in the counter-narrative, such as showing protests outside the venue, in which South Koreans burned North Korean flags. It downplayed Pence's meeting with North Korean dissidents, or his hosting of the parents of Otto Warmbier - the American student beaten into a coma in custody in North Korea, who died shortly after his release - at the opening ceremony. These were also diplomatic signals, intended to convey a clear message: that Pyongyang's sports diplomacy was not going to alter the international playing field.

Whatever happens at the Olympics, the strategic threat of the North Korean nuclear and missile programs remains. To the extent people were distracted or charmed by the spectacle, score one for North Korean propaganda working its magic on susceptible Americans. But soon, the Olympics will end and the real games will begin again.

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