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How informal diplomacy might just get the Koreas to the negotiating table

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Come together: South Korea's president and first lady (front) with North Korea's head of state and Kim Jong-un's sister. EPA/Yonhap

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As the 2018 Winter Olympics draw to a close in Pyeongchang, the medal count has taken a back seat to a remarkable diplomatic moment. International attention is being given to North and South Korea – still technically at war after 65 years, and yet apparently making steps to reach out to each other more than at any time in recent years.

Only weeks before the games, an exchange of olive branches began. In the event, North Korea sent 22 qualified athletes, a 229-member cheering squad, and a delegation that included North Korean leader Kim Jong-un's younger sister, Kim Yo-jong. The Koreas fielded a unified women's hockey

Author

Priscilla Jung Kim
Ph.D. Candidate, University of Central Lancashire

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team, and marched into the opening ceremony under a single flag. The 140-member North Korean Samjiyon Orchestra held a concert at the National Theater of Korea in Seoul to congratulate the Winter Olympics, where a former member of K-pop girl group Girl's Generation joined a North Korean art troupe to sing songs about unification and peace.

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Only months before, north-south tensions were high due to North Korea's nuclear warhead and long-range missile tests. But then Kim Jong-un said he was in principle open to dialogue with his southern counterpart, Moon Jae-in – and out of that gesture came the Olympic collaborations. So why has Kim Jong-un apparently changed course, and will the south prove genuinely receptive?

While North Korea will probably never explain why, the spectacle of the two countries coming together at the Winter Olympics indicates that Kim has taken note of Moon's attitude. The southern president has adopted a far warmer tone than his predecessors Park Geun-hye and Lee Myung-bak, and is at odds with the harsher pronouncements of the Trump administration. (US vice-president, Mike Pence, attended the games, but a scheduled meeting with the North Koreans fell through).

As far as Kim is concerned, Moon has opened up space for Track II, or unofficial, inter-Korean diplomacy – perhaps the North's current best chance to get proper negotiations started, and alleviate the harsh conditions that have been imposed from outside.

Strategic optimism

The term “track II diplomacy” was coined in 1981 by Joseph V. Montville, a former foreign service officer in the US State Department. In his article, “The Arrow and the Olive Branch: A Case for Track Two Diplomacy,” Montville argues that the diplomats and leaders of Track I, or official,

diplomacy are faced with certain limitations, such as the need to be strong, wary, and indomitable in the face of the enemy. Moreover, he assumes that the resources and procedures of formal diplomacy may not be enough to resolve the fundamental issues that underpin seemingly intractable and long-running conflicts.

As Montville wrote:

Track II diplomacy is unofficial, non-structured interaction. It is always open minded, often altruistic, and ... strategically optimistic, based on best case analysis. Its underlying assumption is that actual or potential conflict can be resolved or eased by appealing to common human capabilities to respond to good will and reasonableness.

To be sure, this sort of engagement is not a substitute for Track I negotiation. But it has the capability of playing a complementary role to official processes, not least by helping two parties break the psychological barriers to formal, official negotiation.

Montville's analysis helps explain why Kim Jong-un might have chosen to use Track II outreach to an olive branch to South Korea, rather than resorting to formal Track I methods – and why he might have done so now.



Kim Jong-un oversees a floundering economy. EPA/KCNA

North Korea is currently struggling under the weight of tough economic sanctions, imposed as punishment for cyber attacks, money laundering

and the nuclear programme. The sanctions seriously restrict the North's energy supplies, such as gasoline and diesel, and clamp down on smuggling and the employment of North Korean workers overseas. The North's economy is already in trouble – and it looks to be headed for worse.

As argued by Montville, Kim Jong-un is constrained by the understandable need for him to be, or at least be seen as, strong, wary, and indomitable in the face of the South Korean government. He cannot afford to look weak, or to be seen as giving into pressure from the international community. By turning to track II diplomatic endeavours as his main channel to achieve his objectives, Kim is able to save face and avoid being perceived as weak.

Kim Jong-un has, therefore, initiated and agreed to the recent series of events surrounding the 2018 Winter Olympics, to help compensate for his inability to maintain his state's current economic position.

Warming up

The performance by the North Korean art troupe and the unified hockey team seem to demonstrate that North Korea is genuinely interested in improving relations with South Korea and building a collaborative relationship. And crucially, the events seem to have created a spirit of comradeship among everyday South Koreans.



North Korean cheerleaders hold the Korean Unification Flag as they root for the South Korean ice hockey team. EPA/Yonhap

A poll conducted on February 15 – halfway through the Winter Olympics – found that 61.5% of South Korean adults were in favor of inter-Korean dialogues between Moon and Kim Jong-un. Although the polling results may not be a direct result of the spectacle at the games, it does underline that a majority of South Koreans are friendly enough towards the North that their leaders can confidently make some kind of overture.

Having officially invited his counterpart to visit North Korea after the Olympics were

over, Kim Jong-un might just have opened a path to real negotiations. If Moon and Kim do sit down at a formal bilateral summit, they'll have plenty to talk about besides the nuclear issue. They might discuss re-opening the once-shared Mount Kumgang Tourist Region and the Kaesong Industrial Complex, where southern companies until recently employed northern workers.

Set against the challenge of clearing the peninsula of nuclear weapons, these might sound like small steps – but until recently, even they seemed impossible. The two Koreas, however, have to start somewhere.

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Patrick Newman

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The question is just how much can be achieved without the involvement of the USA who see South Korea as an extension of their backyard. Remarkably there is now talk about talks with the Americans and it was a pity Pence kind of snubbed N Korea when at the Winter Games. Asking NK to destroy its nuclear weapons is unrealistic but a non escalation/proliferation treaty might be on the cards. The Winter Games was a once in a life time opportunity for both parties to break out of the box!

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