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On your marks, get set... stop

The Winter Olympics will not defuse the North Korea crisis

Read this article in German

Kim Jong-un loves parades and displays of military might. He thinks the overblown pomp keeps North Koreans in line and distracts them from the grinding poverty that grips the country.

Pomp and ceremony also feature strongly in the Olympics. But is sport – and the supposedly apolitical Olympic movement – really just politics by another name?

Can Kim Jong-un, the South Korean government and the Olympic Committee succeed where decades of diplomacy and sanctions have failed? Can we take seriously Pyongyang's call on both North and South Koreans to 'crush' resistance to unification of the divided nation?

Recent developments are astonishing given the crisis surrounding the North Korean nuclear-weapons programme and last year's war of words between Kim Jong-un and Donald Trump. With its provocative missiles and nuclear weapons tests, the regime in Pyongyang seemed undeterred the international community's reprimands.

Yet now, in February 2018, North and South Korea are competing in the Winter Olympics under a joint flag. Will the participation of North Korean athletes lead to a lasting thaw in relations?

Saving face

Nearly everyone involved stands to gain credibility. North Korea can appear a peacemaker, South Korea a generous host keen on easing tensions, and the Olympic Committee a neutral broker.

That may leave the US and China feeling cheated. The two superpowers have repeatedly tried to reign in the North's excesses through diplomatic

channels, including UN resolutions and sanctions and even occasional threats of war.

Given all the media attention, expectations are high. But such 'rapprochement through sport' is nothing new. Teams from the North and South competed under one 'unification flag' both at the 2000 and 2004 summer games in Sydney and Athens, and at the 2006 Winter Olympics in Turin, with no political, economic or security breakthroughs to show for it. Indeed, tensions in this part of the world are greater than at any time since the 1953 ceasefire.

The arms-control diplomacy used to dissuade North Korea from its nuclear programme has been stop-start for decades. In the early 1980s, the US and the then Soviet Union successfully persuaded North Korea to sign up to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Despite this achievement, the nuclear-weapons programme continued unchanged. Two decades later, North Korea became the first and only nation in the world to pull out of the programme. It has been building its nuclear capabilities ever since.

In 1994, North Korea and the US actually approved the 'Agreed Framework', after the US had previously announced the withdrawal of its tactical nuclear arsenal from South Korea. Economic aid and international pressure forced concessions from Pyongyang. North Korean reactors used to extract plutonium were shut down.

In return, North Korea was to be supplied with two light-water reactors along with oil and other economic aid. It was a carrot and stick approach aimed at stopping production of weapons-grade material.

Ain't no sunshine

Following North Korea's agreement to a moratorium on missiles testing in 1999, South Korea developed its Clinton-backed 'Sunshine Policy' which rejected confrontation with the North in favour of economic cooperation. As with East and West Germany in the 1970s, the aim was to transform relations through trade and cross-border family reunions.

Yet the Agreed Framework collapsed, and sunshine soon gave way to cloudy skies. While Pyongyang rightly complained that promises of aid had largely come to nothing, the US Bush administration accused North Korea of breaching the Agreed Framework and secretly pressing ahead with its nuclear-weapons programme. The Agreed Framework was no

longer worth the paper it was written on.

Subsequent six-party talks between North and South Korea, the US, China, Russia and Japan got off to a fitful start. The North Koreans walked out on several occasions. In April 2009 they launched their second nuclear test, signalling a complete break from negotiations.

Representatives of North Korea's government cite two key events as justification for the country's nuclear-weapons programme. The first is the illegal invasion of Iraq in 2003 which led to the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime. Britain and the US tried to justify their actions based on manipulated claims that weapons of mass destruction were being held in the country.

The second was regime change in Libya in 2011. Libyan dictator Muammar al-Gaddafi abandoned his own attempts to procure nuclear weapons after tough negotiations with the West. He was subsequently killed in the 2011 civil war, following Western military intervention.

To my mind, euphoria over the Olympic collaboration is unfounded. North Korea will not scrap its nuclear-weapons programme unless the US commits to ruling out regime change. Following events in Iraq and Libya, Kim Jong-un sees the programme as life insurance for his regime.

Of course, the Koreans should grasp any opportunity to defuse tensions, including the forthcoming Olympics. But when it comes to easing the North-South stand-off, 'taking part' is by no means the only thing that counts.



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