

A politicised Winter Olympics

By [Patrick Walker](#)

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[Image: Republic of Korea]

One of the key principles of the Olympic movement is unity; how-ever, Olympic games of the past have been far from politically neutral. The games are often rocked by controversy, for example during the most recent summer Olympic games in 2016, suspended Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff refused to attend Rio's opening ceremony on political grounds, saying she did not want to sit 'below' interim President Michael Temer. That said, South Korea's so-called 'Peace Games' in Pyeongchang county may have some of the greatest political significance of any Olympic event since the Cold War. The two most significant issues are representative: Russia's athletes have been prevented from competing under a Russian flag, while the two Korean states have mutually agreed to march under one standard, in unity. For better or worse, Pyeongchang 2018 could have lasting implications for the global political stage.

The Olympics were arguably most successfully used as a political tool by Russia during the Soviet era; the 1980 Moscow Olympics were dubbed the 'Chemists' Games' due to the prevalence of doping, and a subsequent study found that there likely was not a medal winner who wasn't "on some form of drug or another". Authoritarian regimes like Soviet Russia see international sporting success as an expression of the superiority of their system, a highly political statement. China's huge investment in athletic training has shown that it too recognises the value of medal-winning. Success is beneficial domestically too. Putin's approval ratings hit an annual high following Russia's good performance at Sochi in 2014. It is no surprise then, that Putin was angered by the IOC's decision to prevent Russian athletes from competing under a Russian flag. Moscow called the ruling a 'crime against sport', and, without a hint of irony, accused the US of attempting to impact Putin's election in March. Sochi 2014's highest medal winner will be excluded from these games, and the country is understandably not happy.

The political implications of this year's games are immediately obvious, given the South Korean hosts, and the disunity which pervades the Korean peninsula. As was the case with the Russian Winter Olympics in 2014, historical precedent is cause for concern. North Korea has already shown it is willing to use force to disrupt its neighbour's Olympic success. A year before the 1988 Seoul Olympics, North Korean agents detonated a bomb on a South Korean flight in an effort to scare foreign visitors from the games. It marked the first deterioration in the Korean Armistice Agreement that had been kept for 34 years. South Korea is understandably desperate to make the event it spent 15 years working towards run smoothly. It must reassure both the US and North Korea of its ability to maintain security, and has pleaded with the US to

cease military exercises until after the games. It's worth not-ing that North Korea has decided to implement its own parade on the eve of the games with hundreds of missiles and tanks.

All that said, there is potential to improve relations between the two countries. Kim Jong-un's sister will attend the opening ceremony in South Korea as a gesture of good faith. Not only will the two countries enter the opening ceremony under the same banner, they have collaborated to form a unified women's hockey team: part of Pyeongchang's strategy of 'unity through diversity'. The two countries began talks on 9th January to this end, managing to conduct meaningful dialogue on the peninsula for the first time in two years. The significance of holding the games in Gang-won province is immense: it is the only region of the peninsula which retains the same name according to both governments, cut in half by the demilitarised zone (DMZ.) Once a symbol of division, Gangwon could in time see greater associations with unity. Not everyone is happy with the move towards reunification: younger South Koreans see wider practical issues, namely the huge cost of returning North Korea and its citizens to South Korean standards of infrastructure, economic welfare, and education. While there are many practical issues to face, Pyeongchang 2018 might be a good start to healing relations, however. As one critic put it: "it can do no harm, and possibly some good".



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