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### Pyeongchang v Pyongyang: The Endless Game of Inter-Korean Sports

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Pyeongchang v Pyongyang: The Endless Game of Inter-Korean Sports

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May 19, 2020

## **Abstract**

Since their division, North and South Korea have fluctuated between a peaceful and chaotic relationship. This project explores the role of athletics within inter-Korean relations, using a multidimensional conceptual framework. In particular, this research examines the significant role sports play within each country's political affairs, how this phenomenon has evolved, and the impact of sports on how South Koreans view their neighbors and the idea of reunification. Through in-depth historical and quantitative analysis, we see that sports can be understood as a political tool that has matured over time. Initially emerging as a means to gauge the status of affiliation between North and South Korea, sports has since evolved into a medium which promotes diplomacy while reflecting public perception. The results of this project not only allow audiences to comprehend inter-Korean relations through a new lens but provides vital context for the upcoming 2021 and 2032 Olympic Games.

*Keywords:* North Korea, South Korea, Inter-Korean Relations, Sports Diplomacy, Soft Power

## The Kick-Off

On the morning of January 13th, 2018, I was awakened by the frantic buzzing of my phone on the nightstand. As I reached over, expecting to see a familiar name, a notification instead read: “BALLISTIC MISSILE THREAT INBOUND TO HAWAII. SEEK IMMEDIATE SHELTER. THIS IS NOT A DRILL.”<sup>1</sup> Realizing this was the result of the recent tensions between North Korea and the United States, I spent the next half hour making hectic phone calls to family and friends while flipping between news stations as I remained helpless in the suburbs of Honolulu.

Less than one month later, reports regarding North Korea once again made NBC headlines. Rather than reassuring the safety of the Hawaiian Islands and condemning the nuclear ambitions of Kim Jong-un, news outlets worldwide instead praised the nation’s diplomatic decision to march and compete at the 2018 Winter Olympics in unison with South Korea. As an interdisciplinary scholar and global citizen, what was I—and am I—to think of my recent introduction to North Korea? Why and how is sport being used as a conciliatory medium on the grandest of scales? And what do people, especially Koreans, really think about all of this?

Today, my impression of North Korea along with my academic background has led me to this Capstone project that examines the role of sports in inter-Korean relations. This research analyzes how looking at the dynamics of sports diplomacy through a holistic lens helps us to contextualize the past and current state of Korean affairs. This analysis asserts that sport has evolved from a tool that gauges the fluctuating measurement of these relations to an active medium that promotes diplomacy. Moreover, the use of joint-Korean events, teams, and

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1. Adam Nagourney, David E. Sanger, and Johanna Barr, “Hawaii Panics After Alert About Incoming Missile Is Sent in Error,” *The New York Times* (The New York Times, January 13, 2018).

presentations impacts South Korean's opinion of their geographic counterparts as well the speculative possibility of reunification.

The importance of this research is underscored by the idea that we are not only living in the "Asian Century"<sup>2</sup> but also the "Asian Century in Sports."<sup>3</sup> With the recent influx of foreign revenue and athletes joining the region's domestic leagues, the consistency of victories in global competitions, as well as three consecutive Olympics being held in East Asia, it is justifiable to claim the sporting spotlight of the world is shifting toward the Asia Pacific.<sup>4</sup> In relation to global affairs, the relevance of this Capstone is demonstrated by the fact that "North Korea [has] made clear that the door to dialogue is not closed."<sup>5</sup> This geopolitical stance is immensely significant due to the international concerns surrounding North Korea's humanitarian crisis and rapid nuclear development. Reinforced by the current president of South Korea, Moon Jae-in, and his decision to revitalize dialogue with the North, inter-Korean exchange remains one of the most reliable and pacifying routes towards denuclearizing the peninsula. This research calls attention to the fact that athletics certainly remain as a component within their agenda and highlights the overlooked connections between sports and politics in both Korean studies as well as greater academia. Lastly, this Capstone contributes to the overall narrative of inter-Korean relations by filling gaps in the discourse about the current and future potential of sports diplomacy.

This research begins with a review of the existing literary framework as well as the historical conditions of inter-Korean sports. Not only does this provide an essential contextual

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2. Jung Woo Lee and Tien-Chin Tan, "The Rise of Sport in the Asia-Pacific Region and a Social Scientific Journey through Asian-Pacific Sport," *Sport in Society* 22, no. 8 (May 29, 2019).

3. "The 'Asian Century' in Sports?," East West Center, November 9, 2007.

4. Lee and Tan.

5. Joshua Berlinger, "South Korea's Moon Says Door Not Closed on Talks with North Korea," CNN (Cable News Network, January 14, 2020).

background but identifies the factors directly responsible for the emergence of sports diplomacy. This argument proposes that the inauguration of President Moon Jae-in has led to the recent revitalization of North and South Korean dialogue and the use of sports as a diplomatic medium. In building a historic framework to understand contemporary concerns, the analysis will integrate statistical data from the Korean Institute for National Unification (KINU) as well as the Institute for Peace and Unification Studies at Seoul National University (IPUS). Such data examination will reinforce the arguments regarding sport's impact on political policies, South Korean perceptions, and the future potential of athletic ventures. The original intention to interview South Korean citizens and expats alike was severely restricted by the recent COVID-19 pandemic, so for the sake of this project, secondary sources are relied upon to show public perceptions and views.

### **Global Sport**

For centuries, people everywhere have debated about the relationship between sports and politics. While many argue there is a clear separation between the two and claim politics threaten the integrity of sports, it is undeniable, especially in our postmodern world, to ignore their intrinsic link. From the countless war-torn Olympics throughout the 20th century to the more recent “More Than an Athlete” campaign led by LeBron James,<sup>6</sup> the inevitable connection between the two is a profound yet often overlooked aspect of our globalized world. In order to efficiently utilize the term “sport” and the dozens of definitive properties, the following research presumes sports serve as a form of soft power. Coined by Joseph Nye, soft power is, “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments. It arises from the

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6. Michael McCann, “Analyzing the ‘More Than An Athlete’ Lawsuit Against LeBron James’ Uninterrupted,” *Sports Illustrated*, February 24, 2020.

attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies.”<sup>7</sup> This soft power takes various forms, ranging from the charisma of individual athletes or teams and their impact to the audience engagement that arises from watching them in sporting competitions to the broader socio-cultural effects that are associated with hosting a global event.

In the context of Korea, scholars Kwang-Gil Yu, and Seong-Yong Park have explained that “sports exchange has significance as an applicable and practicable soft power and can be used as a first step towards increasing and encouraging the inter-Korea exchange.”<sup>8</sup> More accurately characterized as “sports diplomacy,” this terminology will be used henceforth in analyzing how sport is a diplomatic tool within North-South Korean affairs.

### **Korean Sport**

Sports diplomacy, as a form of soft power, has been expansively studied throughout the past twenty years. The academic discourse primarily addresses the impact of hosting global sporting events, namely the Olympics, Asian Games, and the FIFA World Cup. The scholarly work of Doosik Min, Yujeong Choi, Jung Woo Lee, and Udo Merkel, for example, collectively acknowledges that sport within the inter-Korean context serves as a platform to promote dialogue as well as peace. At the same time, it is also largely agreed upon that sports are a barometer of politics and that the idea of reunification remains speculative. Best expressed by Dr. Lee, most research regarding North and South relations and sports diplomacy argues that, “More often than not it is wider political circumstances that determine the nature of the inter-Korean sporting

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7. Joseph Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004).

8. Kwang-Gil Yu and Seong-Yong Park, “Selection and Concentration Strategy in the Sports Exchange between North and South Korea,” *Journal of Asian Public Policy* 8, no. 2 (2014).

relations.”<sup>9</sup> In other words, whether it be co-hosting an event, participating with a joint team, or showcasing a unified flag, for example, sports “function as a barometer to measure the relations between the two Koreas.”<sup>10</sup>

While this narrative remained intact for quite some time, it is arguable that the use of sports in Korean politics has shifted during the course of history and is currently being revived under the leadership of President Moon Jae-in. President Moon has not only restored the use of athletic exchanges after a twelve-year hiatus but also continues to advocate for its relevance with a tweet reading:

The small snowball that we have been rolling together up to the present has become a snowman of peace. The joint inter-Korean ice hockey team has helped South and North Korea form unified teams in various other sports such as canoeing, handball and table tennis. There have been three summits between the two Koreas, and the historic North Korea-US summit last year is leading to a second summit in Hanoi, Vietnam. All of these compose steps toward peace, and all are also miraculous gifts that Pyeongchang has given us.<sup>11</sup>

Referencing how the 2018 Winter Olympics has created a chain reaction between the two nations, it is plausible to claim that Moon Jae-in is reconceptualizing sports diplomacy and utilizing its utmost potential.

While relevant studies analyzed how South Korean individuals view reunification, there is a lack of research on what type of impact, if any, sports has made upon their perspectives. In particular, it is publicly known that South Korea’s younger population has recently become unfavorable toward North Korean relations and discern reunification as unnecessary due to the

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9. Jung Woo Lee, “Do the Scale and Scope of the Event Matter? The Asian Games and the Relations between North and South Korea,” *Sport in Society* 20, no. 3 (2017): 45-59.

10. Lee, 46.

11. The Office of President Moon Jae-In. Twitter Post. February 9, 2019.



socioeconomic burdens that would ensue including inflation and an increasingly competitive job market.<sup>12</sup>

On the contrary, reports suggest North Korea views re-unification as a feasible goal only if the protruding foreign influences are condemned.<sup>13</sup> Simply put, North Korea views nations and specifically, the United States, as direct obstacles towards the goal of advancing inter-Korean relations due to their external involvement and implemented sanctions. While this sort of foreign engagement has limited the progress of North-South dialogue, the areas of tourism, border-area cooperation, and most notably “sports exchanges” remain as open avenues for discussion.<sup>14</sup> As these fields of diplomacy are viewed as less significant in comparison to nuclear development, for example, this leaves a gap in the research regarding how different Korean communities view the use of sports exchange and how it impacts—if to any degree—their perspectives on inter-Korean relations and reunification. Finally, prior studies often address individual events as well as European parallels but tend to overlook the historical conditions of sport as a political tool and its ability to inform present day relations. Additionally, the majority of relevant work regarding Korea was conducted prior to the 2018 Winter Olympics, leaving space to analyze how specific historical conditions have accounted for the nations’ recent success.

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12. Choe Sang-hun, “Olympic Dreams of a United Korea? Many in South Say, 'No, Thanks',” *The New York Times* (The New York Times, January 29, 2018).

13. Young Ho Park. *South and North Korea's Views on the Unification of the Korean Peninsula and Inter-Korean Relations*. Korea Institute for National Unification. 2014.

14. Kevin Krolicki and Hyonhee Shin, “Inter-Korean Projects Could Help Ease Sanctions on North: South Korea's Moon,” *Reuters* (Thomson Reuters, January 14, 2020).

## **The Historical Evolution of Sports in Korea**

Through a detailed review of the peninsula's short history, we see the evolution of inter-Korean sports and how it fluctuates between diplomatic and destructive uses. Whether it be the terrorist attacks that disrupted the 1988 Olympics in Seoul<sup>15</sup> or the women's table tennis teams who argued to compete together rather than against one another thirty years later, sports has become a key component in understanding inter-Korean relations. In particular, history proves that sports exchange is a symbol of the current status of inter-Korean affairs as well as outside perceptions of North Korea. Employing a Neo-functionalist approach, the following section addresses the history of sports exchange in Korean history while introducing supportive quantitative data. Further analyzed in the latter portions of the Capstone, both avenues of inquiry legitimize sport's diplomatic function while providing context for the political agenda of Moon Jae-in.

### **Chaos & Glory**

Following the end of World War II and the formation of the Republic of Korea (South) and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North), sports as a topic in inter-Korean dialogue was essentially non-existent. While the International Olympic Committee (IOC) voiced their approval regarding the athletic assimilation of North Korea into the South, the diplomatic use of sports in inter-Korean relations during this time was deemed impractical by citizens alike and become subject to propaganda. This continued until 1985 when Seoul was chosen as the host city for the 1986 Asian Games. Due to preexisting political tensions, Kim Il-Sung, the founding leader of the North Korea, quickly voiced his opposition in the nation's only newspaper, stating,

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15. Seoul is the capital city of South Korea.

“[South Korea] aims to fix national division on the pretext of the international sports festival and thus create a favorable atmosphere for the creation of two Koreas.”<sup>16</sup> Eventually boycotting the event entirely, Kim Il-sung’s decision not only introduced athletics as a somewhat manipulative means to create a sense of unity in the relationship between the “two Koreas” but his refusal to participate in the festival as a means of defiance.

Coincidentally, the two nations found themselves in an identical situation the following year. After the success of the Asian Games, the 1988 Summer Olympics was scheduled to be held in Seoul. While numerous discussions were organized amongst the two nations and the International Olympic Committee in regards to Seoul co-hosting the games with Pyongyang,<sup>17</sup> no middle ground was achieved, and the North once again expressed their disapproval in a chaotic manner. Not only did Kim Il-sung organize a boycott against the event entirely but even went to the extent of organizing a terrorist attack against South Korean citizens. In the months building up to the global competition, a North Korean spy, Kim Hyon-hui, loaded an explosive onto Korean Airlines Flight 858, killing all 115 passengers aboard.<sup>18</sup> Originally unaware of the terrorist’s motive, it was later revealed that, “the mission was to block the upcoming 1988 Seoul Olympic Games.”<sup>19</sup> Portraying the importance and severity of managing North Korea, this event, in particular, reinforced that sporting events were the site of tension and turbulence in inter-Korean affairs.

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16. “North Korea to Boycott Asian Games in Seoul,” *The Washington Post* (WP Company, September 2, 1986).

17. Pyongyang is the capital city of North Korea.

18. Paula Hancocks and Jake Kwon, “Ex-North Korean Spy Recounts Olympic Plot to Blow up Plane,” *CNN* (Cable News Network, January 26, 2018).

19. Hancocks and Kwon.

While these actions did not promote diplomatic relations between the nations, and, in fact, did quite the opposite, they at least introduced sports into their dialogue. The intention of using sports as a weapon of condemnation and turmoil, however, started to gradually shift. Sports as conciliatory tool was a concept that emerged during the new decade when both head ministers from the North Korean and South Korean Ministry of Sport, Chung Dong-seong, and Kim Yu-soon respectively, met a total of 22 times in order to discuss the dynamics of a unified team. As a result, a two-part deal was agreed upon to enter the 1991 World Table Tennis Championships as well as the 1991 FIFA Youth World Cup as “Korea.”<sup>20</sup> Most notable is the story of the 1991 Korean table tennis team that received a total of four medals in the 1991 World Table Tennis Championships. After only meeting 30 days before the competition, eleven North and eleven South Koreans went on to win two bronze, one silver, and most notably a gold medal in women’s team.<sup>21</sup> As documented in the 2012 film *As One*, a key aspect of the narrative that surrounded the women’s gold medal victory was that historically, neither South nor North Korea could defeat the Chinese in table tennis. But when reunified for the first time, they were not only successful, they were victorious.

Following the success of the inaugural joint-Korean teams, a narrative of peace and glory slowly began to engulf the peninsula. Along with international media coverage and routine-like meetings, the historic “Agreement on Reconciliation, Non-Aggression, and Exchanges and Cooperation Between North and South Korea” was enacted just seven months after the women’s team was awarded gold. More commonly referred to as the “Inter-Korean Basic Agreement,” this

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20. Giwoong Jung, “Sport as a Catalyst for Cooperation: Why Sport Dialogue Between the Two Koreas Succeeds in Some Cases but Not in Others,” *International Area Studies Review* 16, no. 3 (2013).

21. Sam Borden, “Ping Pong Diplomacy: How Two Koreans United for Table Tennis -- and Haven't Met Since,” *ESPN* (ESPN Internet Ventures, February 8, 2018).

general compromise was based upon the principles of cooperation and mutual respect amongst the two nations.<sup>22</sup> The Inter-Korean Basic Agreement can be understood as one of the first occurrences of sports somewhat influencing politics, rather than vice versa. The unity between the two nations via athletics gained traction following the Basic Agreement with the plan to field another joint-Korean team at the upcoming 1994 Asian Games in Hiroshima, Japan.

While the combination of sports and politics seemed to have shifted from chaotic to diplomatic, the majority if not all of inter-Korean matters came to an abrupt halt in 1994 with the unexpected death of the nation's founding leader, Kim Il-Sung. Nicknamed the "Great Leader," the passing of Kim Il-Sung is known as one of the most defining moments in North Korean history. With waves of shock and hysteria engulfing the nation, it is plausible to claim the nation "shut down" for the time being with the nation's government postponing, reconfiguring, or completely terminating their foreign agenda.<sup>23</sup> Severing the growing relationship with their neighbors, North Korea's decision immediately impacted South Korea's perception of this pressing matter. Portrayed in figure 1, positive perception ratings or the more amicable view of North Korea completely dropped following their shutdown in 1994.

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22. Gil-Park, Soo and Ri Tcheul. The Agreement on Reconciliation, Non-aggression and Exchanges and Cooperation Between the South and the North. Conference of Disarmament. March 25, 1992.

23. Terry McCarthy, "'Organized Hysteria' for Kim Il Sung," *The Independent* (Independent Digital News and Media, July 10, 1994)

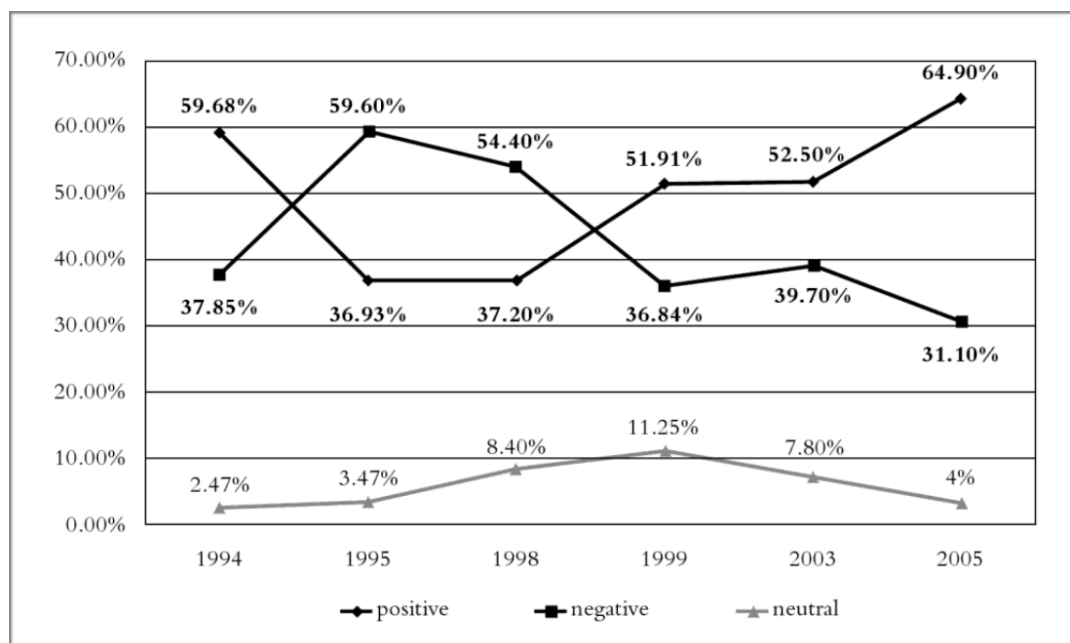


Figure 1. Changes in South Korea's Threat Perception: South Korean Public's General Perception Toward North Korea.

*Source:* Annual National Survey on Unification Issues (1994-2005), Korea Institute for National Unification.

At the same time, the negative or hostile perspectives of the North increased by more than 20%. This inaugural survey of over 1,000 South Korean participants not only accurately reflected the nature of inter-Korean affairs but introduced the notion that key events have a direct impact on how they view their Northern neighbors. Comparing this to prior cases, it is clear that sport has fluctuated through the decades—at times, playing a more divisive, destructive role, and at others, serving as a means for peace and unification. While the deeper meaning of sports is often neglected in the context of Korean history, we see athletics emerge as a force that intertwines with politics and society, providing a lens that helps us clearly see the peninsula's affairs.

### **The Turning Point**

As history has shown, the role of sports within inter-Korean relations has teetered back and forth like a pendulum, swinging from negative to positive and back again, since its inaugural emergence in the 1980s. In the latter half of the 20th century as well as the beginning of the 21st, these fluctuations begin to stabilize, and sports becomes primarily a way to emphasize and tangibly display diplomatic progress. This direction gained momentum in 1998 when democratic representative, Kim Dae-jung, was elected as the eighth president of the Republic of Korea and introduced the Nobel Peace Prize winning “Sunshine Policy.” The Sunshine Policy offered a political approach that encouraged conversations with the North as well as further steps toward reunification by the use of soft power as its centerpiece.<sup>24</sup> With this strategy as Kim Dae-jung’s new geopolitical focal point, South Korean’s began to experience an entirely new way in viewing and understanding North Korea. Inverting the public perceptions ratings set just four years prior (see figure 1), the Sunshine Policy sparked what some thought as a new chapter of inter-Korean relations.

One of the most visible benefits of Kim Dae-jung’s Sunshine Policy was the organization of the 2000 Inter-Korean Summit where the “June 15 North and South Korea Declaration” was put into place.<sup>25</sup> Also known as the “6.15 Declaration,” this revolutionary consensus was designed to increase peaceful relations through five key strategies. Interestingly enough, the fourth tactic in the proclamation states explicitly, “that the South and the North have agreed to consolidate mutual trust by promoting balanced development of the national economy through

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24. Bonhak Koo and Changhee Nam, “South Korea's Sunshine Policy and the Inter-Korean Security Relations,” *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 13 (2001).

25. Seong-whun Cheon, “Managing a Nuclear-Armed North Korea: A Grand Strategy for a Denuclearized and Peacefully Unified Korea,” *International Journal of Korean Studies* 21, no. 1 (2017): 119-149.

economic cooperation and by stimulating cooperation and exchanges in civic, cultural, sports, health, environmental and all other fields.”<sup>26</sup> Commonly overlooked, this terminology is precisely responsible for the inter-Korean teams collectively marching at the 2000 Summer Olympics in Sydney, 2002 Asian Games in Busan, 2003 Summer Universiade in Daegu, 2004 Summer Olympics in Athens, 2006 Winter Olympics in Turin, as well as the 2006 Asian Games in Qatar.<sup>27</sup> A milestone in Korea’s divided history, these events as well those prior provided validity for the use of sports diplomacy. The legitimacy achieved is largely in part due to the impression it made on the perspective of people in South Korea. By reaching a record high positive perception rating of 64.90% following the first four years of events (see figure 1), the South Korean government viewed sports as a tool for progressing their relations while not being hindered by public outcry but rather supported by their citizens. While this trend pointed toward the continued maturation and positive influence of sports, joint-Korean activities came to a surprising halt preceding the 2008 Beijing Olympics. As reports across the peninsula claimed the decision was in regards to the amount of North Koreans athletes being selected for the official roster, we must ask, as some did at the time: Why now? Why would six years of successfully prompting diplomacy through sport suddenly stop?

### **Halftime Hiatus**

While various sociocultural and humanitarian concerns attributed to the temporary suspension of inter-Korean affairs, the narrative surrounding the peninsula at this time was

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26. Kim Dae-jung and Kim Jong-il. *South-North Going Declaration*. United States Institute of Peace. June 15, 2000.

27. Doosik Min and Yujeong Choi. “Sport Cooperation in Divided Korea: an Overstated Role of Sport Diplomacy in South Korea.” *Sport in Society* 22, no. 8 (April 2018): 1382–95.



arguably overwhelmed by the two drivers: nuclear advocacy and political successions. During this time, sports diplomacy as a whole became obsolete. Similar to how the current pandemic of COVID-19 has ceased sports worldwide, the combination of aggressive nuclear advancements and drastic political alterations overshadowed any vision of a unified “Team Korea” for the next twelve years.

The two hiatus-driving factors emerged centerstage following the decision of Kim Jong-il —North Korea’s second leader—to withdraw the country from the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, which involves a coalition of 190 nations that, “prevent the spread of nuclear weapons and weapons technology.”<sup>28</sup> Defiantly conducting its first nuclear test in 2006 and becoming only the eighth nation in the world to do so,<sup>29</sup> North Korea continued to express its notoriously reclusive and aggressive nature by cutting nearly all of its geopolitical ties. From being teammates one day to becoming the most vulnerable target the next, perception ratings of North Korea plummeted the following year. As shown below, surveys from both the KINU and IPUS display how South Koreans’ view of reunification was exceptionally high following the 2006 Winter Olympics in Turin with 63.8% of the survey’s participants viewing reunification as necessary. Due to the date of publications, the drastic decrease caused by the North’s nuclear advocacy the can be seen in percentages following 2007 (see figure 2).

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28. “Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) – UNODA,” United Nations.

29. Cheon, “Managing a Nuclear-Armed North Korea: A Grand Strategy for a Denuclearized and Peacefully Unified Korea,” 125.

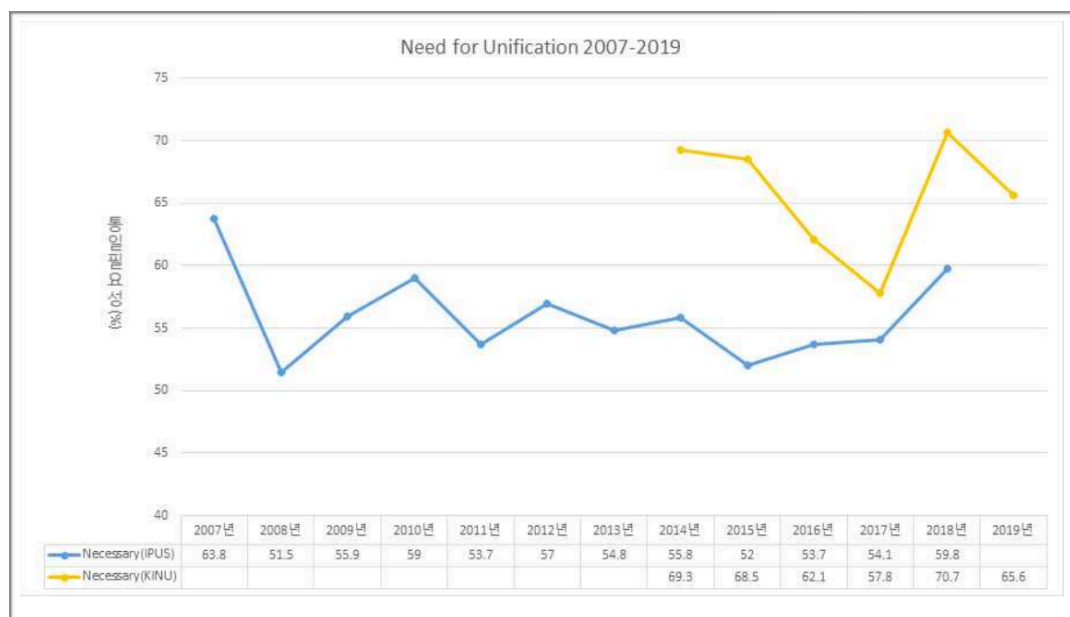


Figure 2. Changes of Perception on the Need for Unification

Source: KINU Unification Survey 2019: Realistic Outlook and Persistent Confidence, Korea Institute for National Unification.

In order to rekindle the relationship between the two parties, South Korea responded in 2008 with the presidential election of Lee Myung-bak. Deeming the preexisting Sunshine Policy and the inter-Korean teams both a failure and a driving factor toward North Korea's defiance, President Lee replaced soft power as well as sports diplomacy with the intensified "Vision 3000" plan.<sup>30</sup> Scrapping the previous groundwork of affable engagement and rapprochement, Lee instead turned to a more aggressive approach fueled by societal and nuclear criticism. Declaring that aid and support would only be provided when North Korea addressed their humanitarian crisis and started to dismantle its nuclear weapons program, Lee made it clear that sports were no longer part of the agenda. While many thought President Lee's "vision" would drastically transpose perception ratings, as seen with the Sunshine Policy and joint-Korean teams (see figure

30. Hong Nack Kim, "The Lee Myung-Bak Government's North Korea Policy And the Prospects for Inter-Korean Relations," *International Journal of Korean Studies* XXI, no. 1 (2008).

1 and 2), surrounding nations, as well as South Korea encountered a new challenge following the death of Kim Jong-il.

Succeeding his father was a young Kim Jong-un, who was eager to make his own and his nation's image known to the world. Relying on the preexisting policy of "byungjin" or the parallel development of a nation's economy and military,<sup>31</sup> Kim Jong-Un decided to revamp the nuclear weapons program as his front-running initiative. Dismissing the constant concerns from the South and inter-Korean relations as a whole, North Korea has since conducted over one hundred ballistic missile tests and six individual nuclear demonstrations. Eventually declaring the arsenal "complete" in the late months of 2017,<sup>32</sup> their neighbors to the south were now faced with an entirely new challenge. Not only would South Korea be placed as the frontrunner for mediating global concerns about denuclearization but would have to negotiate with a new military-driven dictator after a twelve-year hiatus. Sports, for the time being, receded into the background.

### **The New Coach**

During this time, South Korea was experiencing profound leadership changes, which paved the way for the reemergence of sports as a significant cultural phenomenon. Following Lee Myung-bak's term and the impeachment of his successor, Park Geun-hye, the South desperately called for a new less-nefarious leader. Winning nearly half of the total votes, democratic representative Moon Jae-in was elected as the twelfth president of the Republic of Korea in

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31. Lorraine Murray, "Kim Jong-Un," Encyclopædia Britannica (Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., January 2, 2020).

32. Justin McCurry, "Kim Jong-Un: North Korea's Nuclear Arsenal Is Now Complete," *The Guardian* (Guardian News and Media, January 1, 2018).

2017. Keen on reviving relations with the North, President Moon coached his way out of the “halftime hiatus” with the use of the “Moonshine Policy.” Influenced by previous presidents and most notably, Kim Dae-jung and the once dismissed Sunshine Policy, the Moonshine Policy aimed to reconcile with North Korea through similar historical practices, including the use of soft power. By engaging in both political and non-political dialogue, President Moon has since used sport as a driving medium in negotiating with the Kim regime.<sup>33</sup> Shaping a “second half” of inter-Korean affairs through economic, social, and political appeasement, public perception has largely been in favor of President Moon’s approach with ratings skyrocketing following his election in 2017 (see figure 2). Now backed by the citizens’ positive perspectives and motivated by his predecessors, Moon was able to move forward with his groundbreaking initiative. Making the announcement less than a year after his election and only four weeks before the 2018 Winter Olympics, he made it official that North and South Korea had agreed to restore sports diplomacy in Pyeongchang.

While similar uses of sports have clearly been exhibited in the past, the 2018 Winter Games or the “Peace Olympics” still remains the most credible display of sports as a form of unity. Not only had it been over a decade since North and South Korean athletes marched alongside one another but it was the first time a unified team was set to compete in over twenty-five years with twelve North Korean athletes joining the South Korean women’s national hockey team. Additionally, it was also the first time a member of the Kim family (Kim Yo-jong) had stepped foot in South Korea since the peninsula’s division.<sup>34</sup> With a long and successful history

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33. Ramon Pacheco Pardo, “Moon on a Mission: South Korea's New Approach to the North,” *The Diplomat* (The Diplomat, March 14, 2018).

34. Motoko Rich, “Unified Korean Hockey Team Finishes Winless. So Why All the Cheering?,” *The New York Times* (The New York Times, February 20, 2018).

of “Team Korea,” hopes were high for both the players and the Olympics as a whole. Unfortunately the team lost every match and only accumulated two total goals, so the media hailed their performance as mainly a political success, giving birth to the renaissance of inter-Korean alliances forged through sports.

Following in the footsteps of these achievements, policy changes surprisingly occurred only thirty days after the commencement of the 2018 games. In Panmunjom, a rural village residing on the border of North and South Korea, the *Panmunjom Declaration for Peace, Prosperity, and Reunification of the Korean Peninsula* was famously enacted on April 27, 2018. With the overall goal of promoting, “common prosperity and reunification of Korea through dramatic improvement and development of inter-Korean relations,” the Panmunjom Declaration was built upon three main concepts: improving general communication between the two nations and their citizens, relieving military tensions, and establishing an official administration for peace on the peninsula. As many of the components of the declaration are still being implemented, the agreement between Moon Jae-in and Kim Jong-un is more commonly known for declaring an official “end” to the Korean War.<sup>35</sup>

Ironically enough, just two days after the Panmunjom Declaration was signed, the semifinals of the 2018 World Table Tennis Championship was scheduled between the North and South Korean women’s national teams. Rather than compete against one another, the two instead reached a historic agreement with the International Table Tennis Federation to combine teams and move forward to the semifinals against Japan. Efficiently documented through #PeaceThroughTableTennis, this unexpected decision seemed to be influenced by the success of

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35. “Panmunjom Declaration for Peace, Prosperity and Unification of the Korean Peninsula”. Ministry of Foreign Affairs: Republic of Korea, April 27, 2018.

the Winter Olympics and the Panmunjom Declaration.<sup>36</sup> Further contributing to the ongoing sports-politics pattern within their relationship, President Moon had successfully revived the diplomatic use of sports.

In the following months, the two nations once again agreed to field teams at the region's largest sporting competition. Hosted in Jakarta and Palembang, twenty-six North Korean and thirty-four South Korean athletes unified to form "Team Korea" at the 2018 Asian Games. Competing together in "women's basketball, men's and women's dragon boat racing, and men's and women's rowing," the teams went on to win four medals including a gold in the women's 500m dragon boat race.<sup>37</sup> Although overshadowed by the year's prior events, the organization and actions of this particular unified Korean team were meant to specifically resemble the accomplishments of the 2018 Olympics in Pyeongchang. Emphasizing that, "sport can build bridges"<sup>38</sup> according to IOC President, Thomas Bach, the 2018 Olympics not only created a diplomatic ripple effect within their policy making but reached the shores of South Korean society once again. Specifically, the sequencing success of the Olympics, Declaration, and the Asian Games had an immediate and arguably the most profound impact on public perception. As seen in figure 3, South Koreans' willingness to offer aid, support, and cooperation with North Korea has dramatically increased as a result of the President Moon's initiatives.

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36. Aimee Lewis, "Koreas Unite for Historic Table Tennis Match," *CNN* (Cable News Network, May 4, 2018).

37. Theresia Kurniawan, "Korean Peace Parade Comes to Jakarta," *Korea.net*, September 21, 2018.

38. "North and South Korean Olympic Participation Meeting": IOC Begins Talks in Lausanne to 'Build Bridges,'" Olympics, *International Olympic Committee*, January 20, 2018.

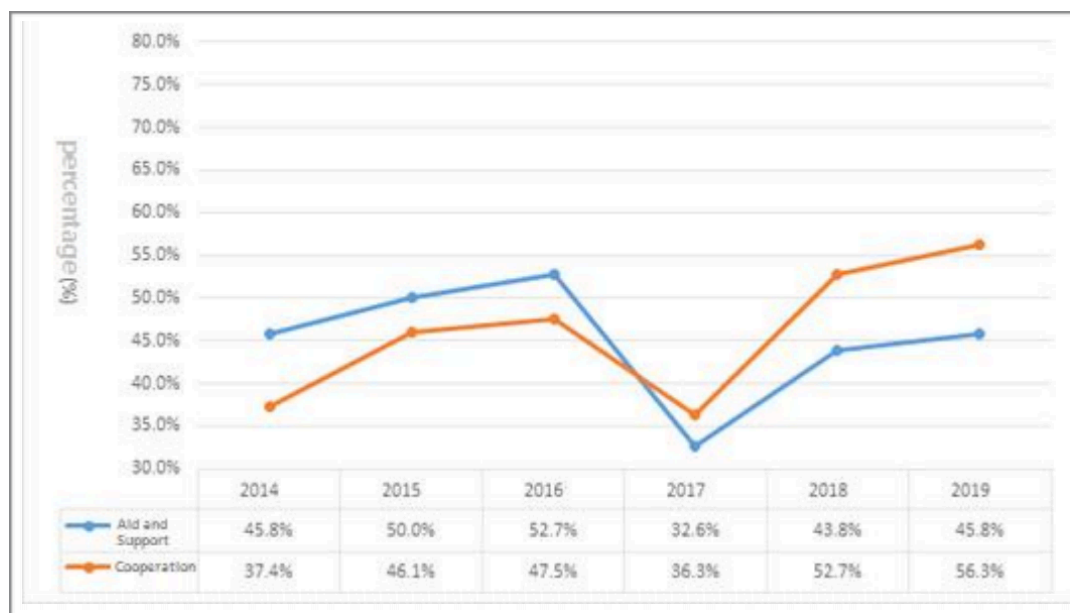


Figure 3. Aid to Support to/Cooperation with North Korea

*Source:* KINU Unification Survey 2019: Realistic Outlook and Persistent Confidence, Korea Institute for National Unification.

Supplementing the increase that followed Moon’s president election, sports, regardless of being victorious, was now an active and effective tool in facilitating diplomacy while being supported by South Korean society. Now with clear statistical backing, President Moon carried this momentum into the new year.

The final example that shows the powerful synthesis of Korean politics and sports can be seen in the early months of 2019 when Germany and Denmark hosted the 2019 World Men’s Handball Championships. Securing a wildcard spot in the tournament, four Northern players went on to join sixteen Southern athletes to comprise the first-ever inter-Korean handball team. Although the team was unable to progress past the group stage with a finishing record of zero wins and five losses, the event was hailed as a global success with Thomas Bach stating, “The Olympic Games and sport show us what the world could look like if we were all guided by the

Olympic spirit of respect and understanding.”<sup>39</sup> In relation to the KINU and IPUS studies, there remains a common misconception that the men’s team negatively impacted perceptions toward unification (see figure 2). While the percentage does, in fact, decrease 4.9%, the “65.6% in 2019 reflected the fact that the need for unification did deteriorate but returned to the normal levels.”<sup>40</sup> As there is no official reasoning for this decrease, it is arguable that the repetition of inter-Korean teams throughout 2018 and now 2019 produced a sense of normalcy among South Koreans, where a unified team is no longer a spectacle but rather a routine occurrence.

### **Postgame Discussion**

Due to the extensive variety and changing nature of both the KINU and IPUS surveys, this study has relied on the analysis of the multiple graphs to most accurately express how the utilization of sport has fluctuated—both in its usage as a tool linked to politics and diplomacy and its perception by the public. Shown in the earliest years of surveying, inter-Korean affairs and in this case, the death of Kim Il-sung as well as the Sunshine Policy had an explicit effect on how South Korean’s perceive the North. Exemplifying how certain external factors have influence over internal perspectives, this notion has paved the way for identifying the effect of sports upon South Korean society. Displayed by the aforementioned figures, following the 2000 Summer Olympics, 2002 Asian Games, and the 2003 Universiade, the positive perception of North Korea increased by 0.59%. This momentum continues with the 2004 Summer Olympics, the 2006 Winter Olympics, and the 2006 Asian Games which produced an additional 12.4% gain.

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39. IOC President Meets and Congratulates Joint Korean Team at Handball World Championship 2019 - Olympic News,” *International Olympic Committee*, January 11, 2019.

40. Korean Institute for National Unification, *KINU Unification Survey 2019: Realistic Outlook & Persistent Confidence*, 2019.



As previously argued, sports are then revived under the guidance of President Moon with visual charts and survey results (see figures two and three) that portray across the board influxes regarding the need for reunification as well as aid, support, and cooperation with North Korea.

While these results in no way neglect the “halftime” downfall caused by political considerations and nuclear development, they rather suggest that sports has long served as an underrated medium in shifting public perception. This argument can be framed through neo-functionalism and the “spillover” concept. Originally used to explain the processes of European assimilation, neo-functionalism is based upon the idea that successful regional integration begins with one distinct policy, which will ultimately “spillover” into other areas of concern.<sup>41</sup> As the analysis has shown, this initially began with politics being seen as the variable responsible for “spilling over” into sports. Gradually reversing roles under President Moon, sport can now be understood as a practice that later “spills over” into and even facilitates politics—as seen with the 2018 Winter Olympics and the ensuing Panmunjom Declaration. Furthermore, this pattern has continued to maintain its legitimacy with the now postponed 2020 Olympics. Although the future is difficult to gauge due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, both nations have tentatively agreed to field joint-Korean teams in women’s basketball, mixed judo, and a variety of rowing events.<sup>42</sup> While the circumstances surrounding the Tokyo Olympics as well as its competing nations still remain under speculation, the reality of a 2021 “Team Korea” has and will continue to reconfigure inter-Korean relations and how global citizens perceive them.

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41. Philippe C. Schmitter, “Ernst B. Haas and the Legacy of Neofunctionalism,” *Journal of European Public Policy* 12, no. 2 (August 17, 2006): pp. 255-272.

42. “IOC Considers Request for Unified Korean Teams to Enter Qualification for Olympic Games Tokyo 2020 - Olympic News,” Olympics (International Olympic Committee, April 19, 2020).

## **Conclusion**

This Capstone has demonstrated how sports can be utilized as an effective medium for us to comprehend inter-Korean affairs. While the field has long seen sports as either separate from or subsumed beneath politics, this work provides new insight regarding its recent evolution. Through historical contextualization and quantitative analyses, this research complicates oversimplified and generalized views of sports by providing new avenues of interpretation. We can conclude that sports has evolved from a mere gauge that measures the fluctuating relationship between two nations to an active, dynamic tool that facilitates their diplomacy. Making it clear that joint-Korean teams, events, and presentations have a direct impact on public perception, the two parties have since continued to engage in the ongoing dialogue regarding the most effective use of sports to promote goals of unity. As this area of research largely remains at a standstill due to the current global pandemic, future studies are necessary to determine how the 2021 Tokyo Olympics will benefit North and South Korean relations as well as the possibility of Seoul and Pyongyang cohosting the 2032 Summer Olympics.

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