Sport and Politics

Two Faces of Sport

"Serious sport has nothing to do with fair play. It is bound up with hatred, jealousy, boastfulness, disregard of all rules and sadistic pleasure in witnessing violence: in other words, it is war minus the shooting."

- George Orwell

"The power of sport is its universality, it always builds bridges, it never erects walls. Sport has played a fundamental role in creating a bridge between North and South Korea. The Olympic Games showed the world how to compete peacefully. They showed us that, despite all our differences, it is possible for humankind to live together in peace, respect and harmony."

- Thomas Bach, IOC President

Sport’s Political Nature

- Sport is embedded in the political, economic, and social trajectories of states
- Olympics, from inception to current mission and state, has been imbued with political overtones
- Sport is a high-profile, low-cost instrument in promoting greater inter-Korean cooperation and exchanges
- Sport diplomacy need not be conciliatory (e.g. boycotts, banning teams from participation)
- Shift in use of Olympics by two Koreas from platform for espousing ideological superiority and contesting for political recognition during the Cold War to utilizing it as a vehicle for reconciliation, cooperation, and peace post-Cold War

Findings and Analysis

Potential of Sport Diplomacy

- Provide temporary respite from military and political tensions
- Send diplomatic signals
- Test foreign policies
- Sustain public discourse on reunification
- Create sense of pan-Korean identity
- Provide venue to discuss other matters outside of sport
- Initiate people-to-people exchanges

Criticism and Limitations of Sport Diplomacy

- Propaganda tool for North Korea (e.g. reshape narrative away from human rights abuses, missiles and nuclear weapons development, economic underdevelopment)
- Ease sanctions and buy time for North Korea
- History of inability to lead to long-term, lasting changes in political climate (yet to be seen how dialogue surrounding PyeongChang 2018 will play out)
- Sacrifice South Korean athletes’ opportunity at sporting success to achieve parity with North Koreans (in creating a joint team)
- Unable to succeed apart from conscious political decisions made in advance of sporting event

Conclusion

In contemporary Korean politics, the pattern of greater inter-Korean engagement via sport and other means during South Korea’s liberal administrations and a reversal of this trend during conservative administrations manifests sport’s incapability to truly break free and shape inter-Korean relations in the long haul. Despite this limitation, sport is also relatively free from existing political constraints; it is in the midst of heightened tensions that sport can uniquely serve to reduce strife and provide a venue to address potential issues of conflict, without high costs.

Successful sport diplomacy does not occur apart from South and North Korea already having established policy goals that they desire to achieve, at which point sport becomes one particular tool by which to carry out and realize these objectives. In other words, sport, in and of itself, does not have the ability to dramatically alter political and social environments.

We should not underestimate sport’s influence and role in international affairs. Sport’s potential is powerful in that it can bring people together, shape a new identity and understanding of oneself and others, provide an opportunity to exhibit goodwill and build trust, and stir increased willingness to sit down and talk on pressing matters outside of sport.