

## **Building Bridges: The Significance of Inter-Korean Sports and Cultural Exchange**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

**I**nter-Korean relations may be on the road to recovery, thanks in part to some progress in the area of sports and cultural exchange. Since North Korea's apology for the naval skirmish in the West Sea (June 29, 2002), the two Koreas have worked to bridge their differences. At the seventh round of Ministerial-level talks, they agreed on the reconnection of two cross-border railways, along with the implementation of a host of cooperative projects as follows: The Inter-Korean Unification Soccer Match (September 7, 2002); Exchange visits by the South Korean Taekwondo demonstration team to Pyongyang (mid-September) and a return visit by the Northern team to Seoul (late October); and a performance of the Inter-Korean Symphony Orchestra in Pyongyang (September 20-21). Along with other inter-Korean cooperative projects on which the two Koreas had already agreed, such as the Mt. Kumgang Tourism project and reunion of separated families, the North's decision to participate in the 14th Busan Asian Games (September 29-October 14) can be viewed as a sign of peace and cooperation between the

two Koreas.

Inter-Korean cultural and athletic exchanges are seen as practical measures to revitalize a shared culture that was torn apart following Korean division. It is hoped that mending that cultural fabric through non-political exchanges will, in turn, bring the two nations closer together. Therefore, a wide range of cultural exchanges is a practical foundation for Korean unification in a country long fought by ideological hostilities.

While inter-Korean cultural and sports exchanges have improved relations, they have been severely limited by political considerations of the two governments. Fortunately, with the adoption of the Sunshine Policy, the launch of the Mt. Kumgang tours from November 1998 and the summit meeting in June 2000, cultural exchanges have gradually improved. Article IV of the June-15 Joint Declaration at the summit states clearly that "the two Koreas will work on follow-up measures for the revitalization of social, cultural, athletic, environmental areas." In accordance with the agreement, the two sides held a series of inter-Korean events in Seoul: performances by the Pyongyang Acrobatic Troupe, the National Orchestra of North Korea. There have been other signs of amity. The two sides marched together during the opening ceremonies of the 2000 Sydney Olympics, and the North was visited by CEOs from South Korean press. Unfortunately, those one-time exchanges were overwhelmed by the negative impacts of the Pyongyang Grand Unification Festival (August 15, 2001) and more recently by September 11.

Recognizing new opportunities on the Korean peninsula such as the North's participation in the Busan Asian Games, this paper intends to discuss future tasks in relation to inter-Korean cultural and sports exchange programs, along with their contributions to national integration.

### **CHRONOLOGICAL REVIEW OF INTER-KOREAN SPORTS EXCHANGES**

The first attempt at inter-Korean sports exchange was made in Lausanne, Switzerland in 1963 on the recommendation of the International Olympic Committee (IOC). To deal with the expressed interest of North Korea (not an IOC member at that time) to participate in the 1964 Tokyo Olympic, the IOC proposed a unified team of the two Koreas. In the first inter-Korean athletic exchange, South and North Korean authorities agreed to form one team, marching under the single banner of "Korea," and accompanied by the Korean folk song "Arirang." The dream ended in failure, however. After a momentary respite, a series of proposals following the July-4th Joint Communiqué in 1974, included efforts to form a joint team for the 35th World Table Tennis Championships in Pyongyang, but they, too, failed. In the 1980s, three government-level meetings were held to discuss the dispatching a joint team to the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic and the Asian Games in 1986. Those efforts also came to nothing. In addition, four government-level talks (1985-1987) between the two Koreas, which were arbitrated by the IOC, also failed to reach agreement on the matter of co-hosting the Seoul Olympic Games.

It was not until the early 1990s that substantive progress was made in inter-Korean athletic exchanges. First, authorities of the two Koreas agreed in 1990 to form a single cheering squad for the Beijing Asian Games. Then, a South-North Unification Soccer Match was held in Seoul and Pyongyang in October 1990. The two events marked the first direct athletic exchange between the two Koreas since the Korean division. Not long after, the two sides sent a joint team to the World Table Tennis Championships, held in Japan in 1991, and also formed a unified soccer team for the 6th World Junior Soccer Championships in Portugal the same year. Any positive results were cancelled out, however, by the defection of a North

Korean judo player, Lee Chang-soo.

In the spirit of the South Korean government's Sunshine Policy, several attempts by the private sector were also made for more active inter-Korean athletic exchanges. Examples are the soccer match between labor unions from both Koreas, the Unification Basketball Matches held in Seoul and Pyongyang and the Unification Table Tennis Games held in Pyongyang. More recently, Hyundai Asan Foundation has been working on the construction of a 12,335-seat gymnasium in Pyongyang. The 57.5 million-dollar project will provide a modern space for future sports and cultural events in North Korea.

Since the historic inter-Korean summit, there has been significant progress in sports exchanges. At the opening and closing ceremonies of the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games, players from both nations marched behind a unified Korean flag wearing identical uniforms. At the third ministerial talks (September, 2002), South Korean authorities proposed the revival of a Seoul-Pyongyang soccer match. In addition, the Minister of Culture and Tourism of the South visited Pyongyang to discuss several athletic and cultural exchange programs between the two Koreas.

There is much to be done, however, especially given the failure to co-host the 2002 World Cup or to form a single team for the 46th World Table Tennis Championships in 2001. Substantive progress has yet to be seen in matters such as co-hosting the 2010 Winter Olympic Games and the North's participation in the national athletic meets held in South Korea.

#### **PARTICIPATION OF NORTH KOREA IN THE BUSAN ASIAN GAMES**

The North's participation in the 2002 Busan Asian Games actually raised the level of inter-Korean exchange programs, and increased the likelihood of more active exchanges between the two

Koreas in the near future. Although the North's recent confession that it possessed enriched uranium could be regarded as destabilizing the South Korean tolerance policy in general, inter-Korean athletic exchanges can still help mend South-North relations.

Given that the main actors at large sports events are international organizations, it can be argued that inter-Korean athletic exchanges can improve South-North relations because they are relatively free from the immediate political interests of either side. In fact, the two Koreas want to participate in sports that allow each country to find its relative strength. Of further significance, the North's participation in the Busan Games could contribute to the social integration of two Koreans, as well as diversification of exchange programs. In contrast, past exchange programs to have focused mostly on forming a single team and/or co-hosting inter-Korean as well as international sports events.

Another positive implication of the Asian Games is that it was not the result of political compromise, but of continued communication and negotiation between the two Korean governments. In a February 2001 letter to Kim Un-Yong, chairman of the Korea Sports Council (KSC), Park Myoung-Chul, chairman of North Korea's National Olympic Committee, proposed the expansion of inter-Korean exchange programs. According to an article in *Chollima* titled "Prospects on the Athletic Development in the 21st Century," Park also emphasized the necessity of sports activities in order to spark more friendly and cooperative relations with other countries. In a recent statement, he said North Korean athletes would have many future opportunities to play, both inside and outside of the country, hinting that the North would promote travel by its players to foreign countries.<sup>1)</sup> Confident of the North's positive gestures toward inter-Korean exchange programs, Kim Un-Yong, president of KSC at that time, and Choi Jae-seung, chairman of the culture and tourism committee of the National Assembly visited

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1) *Chosun Ilbo*, March 12, 2001.

Pyongyang, to aggressively promote the North's participation in the Busan Asian Games. North Korean officials agreed to review the matter positively.<sup>2)</sup> Doubts regarding the North's participation lingered for the following reasons: First, although North Korean athletes had visited Seoul for the unification soccer match in 1990 and the unification basketball games in 1999, they had never participated in international sports events held in South Korea. Second, a series of government-level talks to discuss the co-hosting of 2002 World Cup Games failed.

Nonetheless, the Busan Asian Games Organizing Committee (BAGOC) kept in constant contact with the North Korea's National Olympic Committee.<sup>3)</sup> In two working-level talks at Mt. Kumgang resort, arranged by the BAGOC, South Korean representatives tried to avoid politically sensitive questions such as forming a single team. Rather, they focused on relatively less political and less sensitive agenda such as a joint parade at the opening and closing ceremonies, hoisting a unified Korean flag, and the torch ceremonies conducted on Mt. Halla in the South and Mt. Paektu in the North. As a result of the agreements reached at the working-level talks between the two sides, North Korea dispatched a total of 695 people, including a 340-strong delegation composed of athletes, IOC members, umpires and supportive staff, in addition to the 355-member North Korean cheering squad. This marked the first time that the North had participated in an international sports event held in the South since national division, and it was the largest inter-Korean exchange program since the 1990s.

The unified Korean flag, a symbol of national reconciliation and inter-Korean unity, made its first appearance at the 41st World Table Tennis Championships in April 1991 and at the World Junior Soccer Championship in June of the same year, when the two sides fielded the first joint team since the division. Since then, cheering squads

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2) *Chosun Ilbo*, June 22, 2001.

3) *Chosun Ilbo*, June 13, 2002.

have used it at international sports events such as the Bangkok Asian Games, the Nagano Winter Olympics in 1998, and the Osaka World Table Tennis Championships in 2001. It also was carried in the march during opening ceremonies of the 2000 Sydney Olympics.

Based on the precedent that the host country takes care of the invited nation, the South Korean government provided full support for the North's delegation, funding hotel and other expenses from the inter-Korean Cooperation Fund.<sup>4)</sup> Governmental-level support for the North Korean delegation was not only aimed at more friendly relations between the two Koreas, but also towards the restoration of a national community. Finally, Busan citizens deserve much credit for their support of the Northern athletes throughout the Busan Games.

#### FUTURE TASKS

Unlike inter-Korean exchange programs in other areas, the sports exchanges between the two Koreas have developed according to a bilateral approach, rather than unilaterally. It should also be pointed out that non-governmental sectors such as Huyndai Asan Foundation and labor unions have taken an active role in the exchange programs. In addition, the North's participation in the Busan Asian Games can be regarded as another important step for more fruitful athletic exchanges between the two Koreas. Given that the ultimate goal of inter-Korean sports exchanges lies in cultural integration and the restoration of national homogeneity, the significance of recent changes in inter-Korean relations cannot be overemphasized.

Admittedly, numerous challenges lie ahead. Like exchange

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4) South Korea had borne all expenses in the past, 164 million won for the 41st World Table Tennis Championships in April 1991 and 786 million won for the World Junior Soccer Championships in June of the same year.

programs in other areas, sports exchanges do not have a stable foundation. As evidenced by the failure to co-host 2002 World Cup Games, it is clear that sports exchange programs are still dependent on, or subject to political rivalries. A more strategic approach is therefore needed. First, there should be a focus on sports in which North Korean athletes excel. As can be seen from the successful inter-Korean exchange programs in the past, the North responded more positively when engaged in soccer and table tennis, their strong points. Thus, it is expected that future inter-Korean sports exchanges will include the women's marathon, judo, and gymnastics.

Secondly, given the difficult economic situation in North Korea, the South Korean government needs to provide more comprehensive support by supplying equipment and paying for the Northern athletes' expenses. Since economic woes are a factor in whether or not the North agrees to sports exchanges, a variety of new financial sources must be sought. Currently, however, major sports institutions in the South, such as KSC, are not actually earmarking any money for inter-Korean sports exchanges. On the positive side, the South Korean government announced that it would take a variety of measures to support inter-Korean exchanges in the future, for example, the National Sports Promotion Fund and the Inter-Korean Cooperation Fund.

Thirdly, there should be efforts to attract more concrete support from international organizations. Since North Korea will most likely reach out to the international community, through sports exchanges in an attempt to improve its status in international community, the South Korean government must play a more active role in sports diplomacy, not only to support the entry of North Korea onto the international stage, but also to promote more inter-Korean sports exchanges.

Fourthly, there must be a clear-cut and more detailed blueprint to deal with inter-Korean exchanges, and professional leaders must be fostered for that purpose. Several examples are as follows: A) Short-term projects, lasting one to five years, such as reciprocal

performances of traditional sports such as Korean wrestling, joint parades during the official ceremonies of international sports events, a wide range of support measures for athletes in the North, and participation as a single team in international sports events. B) Projects lasting six to ten years, such as combined practice sessions of athletes from the two sides, reciprocal participation in the annual national athlete meet held by the two Koreas, and regular meetings between sports-related institutions of the two sides. C) Long-term projects (10 years or more) such as co-hosting major international sports events, free access to sports facilities by players, and the construction of new sports facilities at the DMZ.

Lastly, a cultural accord covering inter-Korean sports and cultural exchanges should be reached between the two Koreas. An institutional apparatus is necessary, not only for the vitalization of inter-Korean exchanges, but also to promote exchanges in the future. Such an agreement would contribute not only to the unification process, but also to the restoration of national homogeneity at the Post-unification stage.