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**SPORT IN SOCIETY SPECIALL ISSUE**

**Do the scale and scope of the event matter?**

**The Asian Games and**

**the relations between North and South Korea**

By

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Do the scale and scope of the event matter? The Asian Games and the relations between North and South Korea

### **Abstract**

This paper examines the political dimension of the Asian Games. More specifically, it focuses on the implications that hosting the Asian Games in South Korea had for its relationship with North Korea. The four editions of the Asian Games that this study looks at show that the fluctuated relations between North and South Korea tends to be mirrored through the sporting events. In that sense, it can be argued that the international sporting competitions function as a barometer to measure the relations between the two Koreas. However, this study also notes that the political value of sport must not be overestimated. More often than not it is wider political circumstances that determine the nature of the inter-Korean sporting relations. In this respect, sport is more likely to work as a dependent variable on broader political structure. Finally, while the Asian Games is a relatively smaller scale event in comparison with global sports mega event such as the Olympic Games, it by no means indicates that this continental competition is an event of less political significance. Rather than scale and scope, it is the context within which a particular sporting event is staged that assigns political meaning to the competition.

*Keywords:* The Asian Games, Politics, North Korea, South Korea, Inter-Korean relations

## **Introduction**

In terms of the scope and scale, the Asian Games may not be considered as one of the major global mega sporting events. Given that the Asian Games does not normally attract meaningful media and popular attention outside Asia, this continental level competition can be categorised as part of the third order sporting contest according to Black (2008)'s typology of mega events.<sup>1</sup> This implies that this Asian sporting festival produces smaller economic value in the global sport market compared with the gigantic sporting event couplet namely the Summer Olympic Games and the FIFA World Cup Finals. Also, the athletic performances in the Asiad are to some extent not as competitive as those in the world championship events although it by no means suggests that athletes taking part in the Asian Games strive less for achieving their sporting goal.

Despite relatively less substantial economic value and minor sporting significance, the political ramifications of the Asian Games must not be equally treated as less meaningful. Frequently, the government's decision to host or to send its delegates to any kinds of international sport competitions has political implications both domestically and diplomatically (Bridges 2008, Byrne 2014, Cha 2013, Grix and Lee 2013). Occasionally, it is the outcome of a strategic political calculation to invite a specific country's national team and to boycott a competition taken place in a particular nation state (Cha 2009, Houlihan 1994, Strenk 1979). Hence, one should consider historical, political and social context within which a specific sporting event is staged in order to measure the social scientific value of sporting competitions more accurately.

With this in mind, this paper examines the political value of the Asian Games. More specifically, it focuses mainly on the political implications of hosting the Asian Games in South Korea for the relations between North and South Korea. It should be noted that the reunification of the nation has been one of the major political aims of the governments on both sides of the

armistice line since its division in 1948 (Lee 2010, Merkel 2008). Throughout the post Korean War history, the relations between the two Koreas have been fluctuating, and sport often mirrors this volatile situation.<sup>2</sup> Depending on the political context, sport has played three distinctive roles. These include 1) a means to claim ideological superiority, 2) a vehicle for facilitating inter-Korean communication, and 3) a way to display shared cultural and national identity (Cha 2009). Put simply, sport functions as a barometer to measure the political relations between the two Koreas.

Since the mid-1980s, South Korea has hosted three editions of the Summer Asian Games in 1986, 2002, and 2014 respectively. This paper concerns with a different political mechanism at work regarding the relations between the two Koreas in each version of the Asian Games that the South Korean cities delivered. One notable exception is the case of the Beijing Asian Games in 1990. Though this Asiad took place in the Chinese capital, it had a significant impact on the inter-Korean relations (Lee 2010). Thus, this paper also examines the political occasions unfolding in Beijing. Before investigating the series of the Asian Games, it is necessary, albeit briefly, to review the relations between North and South Korea and the role that sport plays in the Korean peninsula as this offers a useful contextual backdrop of the current study.

### **Sport, Politics and the Inter-Korean relations**

The relations between North and South Korea is rather complicated and to some extent paradoxical. As the Korean peninsula is the last remnant of the Cold War, the communist north and the neoliberal south are still severely vying for the supremacy of its political and economic systems over the other. Especially when the political tension surrounding this Northeast Asian region escalates, this ideological conflict occasionally leads to an actual military clash in the border area that often causes a number of casualties (BBC 2010b). Yet, because the majority

of the Korean people is a member of a homogeneous ethnic group sharing historical traditions and cultural legacy, most Koreans perceive the current division to be a relatively temporal problem (Cumings 2005). The reunification of the Korean nation, therefore, is the ultimate aim of political and social policy on the both sides of the border (Grinker 2000). The interface between ideological difference and ethnic homogeneity gives rise to the circumstance where the feeling of hostility and sympathy has coexisted in the inter-Korean relations since its division in 1948.

Sport often reflects this political situation. Whenever the two Korean states face each other at an international stadium, this sporting contest tends to engender political ramifications (Lee 2010). Depending on the context in which the inter-Korean sporting encounters take place, it can either deepen the order of confrontation and mistrust or facilitate the mood of reconciliation and cooperation (Lee and Maguire 2009, Merkel 2008). At this juncture, it may be useful to discuss an instrumental value of sport in politics briefly before discussing the role of sport in the inter-Korean relations. A political realist perspective stresses that a state is the primary actor in international politics and that each state largely concerns with maximising its interest by attaining more power (Waltz 1979). In line with this, Strenk (1979) identifies four major political and diplomatic functions of sport. These include gaining prestige, protesting a particular circumstance, reinforcing political ideology, and recognising other states. More recently, Hill (2004) adds the role of sport in a nation building process both domestically and diplomatically including asserting various forms of nationalism at inter and intra state levels.

In contrast to the state centred approach, an idealist view highlights that the major goal of international relations is to build a peaceful international order by increasing interdependency chains that prompt cooperation amongst nation-states (Dunne 2014). In this respect, Levermore and Budd (2004) note that sport has potential for ameliorating tension and resolving conflict between nation-states by facilitating an interaction and dialogue between the

two parties. Through this process, it is expected that the two states reduce the degree of animosity and enhance the level of mutual understanding eventually. The use of sport as a vehicle for assisting developing countries such as building sport facilities and introducing physical education programmes can also be part of this idealist perception of sport (Levermore and Beacom 2009). It is not the intention of this paper to evaluate these two different paradigms of international relations and the role of sport understood by each political perspective.<sup>3</sup> As will be discussed later in this paper, it is sufficient to note that the instrumental function of sport in the context of North and South Korean relations exemplifies both realistic and idealistic exploitation of sport.

Given that the main cause of the division of the Korean Peninsula is the ideological conflict, the Cold War political structure must be considered in order to paint a more accurate picture of the situation that the two Koreas face. It is well documented that international sporting competitions frequently worked as a symbolic warfare to claim the superiority of its political system between the Western capitalist states and the Eastern communist bloc during the Cold War (Senn 1999, Wagg and Andrews 2007). The sporting relations between North and South Korea is not meaningfully dissimilar to this conflict laden nature of competitions. One of the most interesting cases that demonstrates this sporting rivalry would arguably be the 1966 FIFA World Cup Finals. In this competition, the North Korean football team advanced to the quarter finals, beating the top notch Italian football team in a group stage match. For the North Korean government, this was a remarkable sporting success which enabled the regime to display the existence of the Korean communist state to the world, especially asserting its superiority over the state's southern sibling (Bridge 2012). Given that the football match took place at the height of the Cold War, the political benefit that the successful football campaign brought to the North Korean regime was invaluable. For the South Korean government, however, the North Korean achievement at the Football World Cup Finals was seen as a serious

political challenge. This incident made South Korean ruling elites aware of the political significance of sport at international stages. Subsequently, South Korea began to foster elite athletes strategically in order to win more medals and trophies at various international sporting competitions. By doing so, the south expected that the country would attain more prestigious status than the communist neighbour. In effect, the 1966 FIFA World Cup triggered sporting arms race between North and South Korea.

The inter-Korean sport exchange programme is another facet of sport in the Korean Peninsula. In contrast to the sporting rivalry, the two Korean states have also utilised sport as an instrument for building a social and cultural ties between the north and the south (Cha 2009, Lee 2010, Merkel 2008). Since the first joint declaration in 1972, North and South Korean governments gradually began to consider the reunification of the nation without involving a military clash. While the order of conflict and mistrust still dominated political circumstances over the Korean Peninsula in the 1970s and the 1980s, this was meaningful progress in the relations between the two Koreas (Park 2012). Reflecting this change, the two Koreas held a series of meetings to discuss the possibility of taking part in major sporting events as a united team and to resolve practical problems in inviting South Korean athletes to sporting competitions in North Korea and the vice versa in the 1970s and 1980s (H. R. Lee 2000).<sup>4</sup> Despite the dialogue between the two Koreas neither sporting union nor cross broader participation was materialised at that time. Yet, the inter-Korean sporting conversation was not fruitless because North and South Korea at least agreed in principle that it is socially and culturally important to organise a unified Korean team and that the two Korean states will make best effort to realise the reunification in sport (H. R. Lee 2000). Nonetheless, the two sides had to wait until 1991 to see the first sporting union at the World Table Tennis Championships in Chiba, Japan where the united female double team won the title. This breakthrough in the 1990s will be discussed further in relation to the 1990 Beijing Asian Games later in this paper. Here,



it is sufficient to note that sport is a politically significant activity that potentially makes meaningful contribution to improving the relations between North and South Korea.

### **The 1986 Asian Games in Seoul**

The Seoul Asian Games was the first international multi-sport competition that took place in South Korea. As a rapidly developing country, the South Korean government attempted to display its economic success to the world by hosting two major sporting competitions in the 1980s: the Asian Games in 1986 and the Olympic Games in 1988 (Bridges 2008, Cha 2009). As the two events took place within a relatively short time frame in the same location, social scientific investigation into the Seoul Olympic Games has attracted more academic interest than the Asian Games, unfairly treating the latter as a simply preparatory event for the former (Koh 2005). While this understanding is not completely incorrect, the Asian Games also had its own political ramifications that deserve separate academic attention. This is especially so because some unique incidents that demonstrate the political rivalry and hostility between North and South Korea can be identified in relation to hosting the Asian Games. Thus, the political significance of the Seoul Asiad must not be overshadowed by that of the Seoul Olympiad.

The 1986 Asian Games can be characterised as the Asian Cold War Games. Given that the Korean Peninsula was the East Asian frontier of the ideological conflict, the two Korean states reacted sensitively to any social, political, and economic issues occurring on the other side of the armistice line. Even though the world observed the wind of change in the mid-1980s which eventually led to the end of the Cold War the political relations between the two Koreas was still predominated by the order of hostility and suspicion (Chung 1991). Given that the political significance of international sport, the fact that the Asian Games was awarded to the south was perceived as a serious political threat to the North Korean communist regime

(Lee 2010). It is this order of confrontation that influenced the organisation of the Seoul Asian Games in 1986.

Before addressing the issues that directly related to the 1986 Asian Games however, it is worth noting that South Korea underwent more or less humiliating experience in the 1960s with regard to hosting the Asian Games. In 1966 the Olympic Council of Asia selected the South Korean capital to be the host of the 1970 Asian Games. Yet, the two years before the event, the South Korean government had to return the right to stage the sporting contest because of the security threat from North Korea and the subsequent political turmoil (Kim 2008, Nauright and Parrish 2012). In January 1968, a group of North Korean commandos infiltrated into Seoul to assassinate the then South Korean president Park Chung-hee. Although the communist's military mission failed, 66 South Korean soldiers were killed in the military operations to defend the capital and the president. This North Korean invasion was the event of shock and horror for the most South Korean people and consequently the security became the priority policy in the country. While it is unclear whether this sudden attack was related to North Korean attempt to interrupt the organisation of the Asian Games in Seoul, the unstable political situation caused by this incident certainly rendered the Korean government reconsider hosting the Asian Games because the sporting competition potentially made Seoul more vulnerable to further North Korean threats. Eventually, the country gave up its plan to stage the Asian Games. This was a misfortune for South Korea as the Asian Games could have been an invaluable opportunity to enhance the country's political status in the East Asian region (Kim 2008). This unfortunate experience in the 1960s added more political meaning to the 1986 Asian Games for this was an important occasion for the South Korean government to save its face in the Asian relations.

It is interesting to note that the North Korean city of Pyongyang was also bidding for the 1986 Asian Games in the early 1980s. It seems that it was more of political gesture by the

North Korean regime in response to Seoul's Asian Games campaign than Pyongyang's genuine attempt to host the sporting festival. However, when the South Korean capital was awarded to stage the 1988 Summer Olympic Games in 1981, the chance for Seoul to win the 1986 Asian Games bid was also amplified. Having observed this development, North Korea withdrew from its Asian Games bid because the defeat in a direct competition against its southern neighbour could be viewed as political humiliation. When Seoul was finally chosen to host the Asian Games, the North Korean government employed other tactics to interrupt the Games: terrorism and a boycott.

On the 14<sup>th</sup> of September in 1986, a week before the commencement of the Seoul Asian Games, a bomb exploded at the Gimpo International Airport in Seoul. 5 civilians were killed and more than 30 people injured by the explosion. Given that this airport was the main gateway to South Korea and that it was the time when athletes and officials from other countries kept arriving, South Korea immediately increased the level of security alert at the airport (Lee and Jeon 2011). More security measures were also taken to safeguard sporting venues against further attacks (Lee and Jeon 2011). Later, it was revealed that it was an act of terrorism by North Korean agents in order to interrupt a successful delivery of the Asian Games. Neighbouring countries equivocally blamed North Korea for the violent action against innocent South Korean citizens. In effect, while North Korea realised its short term political aim to terrorise South Korea before the Asian Games, the airport bombing damaged the communist Korea's reputation in the long term (Lee 2010). In spite of the Gimpo Airport bombing, not only did South Korea manage to deliver the Games effectively, but it also achieved a notable sporting success at the Asian Games (Uh 1986).

In the end, North Korea boycotted the Asian Games in Seoul and a number of communist allies including Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Mongolia, South Yemen, and Syria followed suit in support of the North Korean anti-Seoul campaign (MOFAT 2009). As a result,

a number of participating states in the Seoul Asiad were smaller than that of the previous Games. A notable exception was China. In fact, China was the only communist country that took part in the Seoul Asian Games. A superficial reason for the Chinese's decision to send its delegates to Seoul was that Beijing would host the next edition of the Asian Games in 1990. A more subtle motive was that China intended to open economic relation with South Korea (Chung 1991). Chinese's participation in the Seoul Asian Games was interpreted as a sign of improving Sino-South Korean relations (S. S. Kim 2006). This development had profound implications for the North and South Korean relations because China was the closest ally of the North Korean communist regime. The next section will delve into these triangle relations further in the context of the Beijing Asian Games.

### **The 1990 Asian Games in Beijing**

The Beijing Asian Games took place in a post-Cold War setting. In Europe, the Soviet Union was undergoing Perestroika and the two Germanys were undertaking the process of reunification in 1990. Though the Northeast Asian region was still ideologically divided at that time, the encounter between South Korea and the two traditional communist allies, China and North Korea, at the sporting competition clearly mirrored the emerging political order (Cha 2013, Lee 2010). In other words, the 11<sup>th</sup> Asiad in Beijing was the sporting occasion that represented the mood of détente in East Asia.

In terms of the Sino-South Korean relation within the post-Cold War political order, the two distinctive factors facilitated the interaction between the two states surrounding the Asian Games: 1) the South Korean government's intention to improve its relationship with communist states and 2) the Chinese government's ambition to deliver the sporting event successfully. Firstly, South Korea implemented a foreign policy called *Nordpolitik* to normalise its political and economic relation with communist states since the late 1980s (Chung

1991). In line with the post-Cold War political structure, this northern policy intended to expand South Korea's economic and diplomatic ties with the states that had traditionally allied with North Korea (Sanford 1993). In so doing, the South Korean government ultimately aimed to improve its relationship with North Korea. Given that China was the closest ally of North Korea in the Northeast Asia, it was important for South Korea to establish a formal connection with China.

Secondly, China had a strong ambition of staging the Asian Games successfully as it was perceived as a political opportunity to display the restoration its cultural and political power to the rest of the Asian community (Hong 2005). However, because the Asian Games was the first large scale sporting event that China ever hosted, the communist state concerned about its capability of delivering the Asian Games and therefore was in need of technical and practical assistance from more experienced countries (Sanford 1993). Yet, the international community was reluctant to involve in Chinese's Asian Games campaign mainly due to the Tiananmen squares' massacre in 1989 which caused the life of the hundreds of students who participated in the pro-democracy protest (Phillips 1996). Unlike other counties, South Korea, as the host of the previous edition of Asian and Olympic Games, shared its experience with the new host in the hope of opening a new diplomatic channel with China after the Games (Sanford 1993). South Korea also donated 400 cars to be used during the Games and offered a financial sponsorship deal which valued more than 15 million US Dollars (Billing 1990, Sanford 1993). Additionally, South Korea sent the largest delegate to Beijing and more than 22,000 Korean tourists visited the host city during the event (Shim 1990). In effect, the symbiotic ties created through mutual political needs helped facilitate the active interaction between South Korea and China during the Asian Games.

The emerging relations between South Korea and China in preparation for the Beijing Asian Games also had significant implications for the inter-Korean relations (Lee 2010).

Having noticed opening new trade windows between its political allies and its rival, North Korea found it difficult to keep underplaying the increasing economic and political influence of South Korea in the Northeast Asian region. Especially, the two notable facts including the Chinese participation in the 1986 Asian Games and the 1988 Olympic Games in Seoul against the North Korean request, and the South Korean engagement with China in staging the 1990 Asian Games in Beijing, prompted North Korea to reconsider its relations with South Korea lest the communist Korea be isolated politically and economically in the region (Sung, et al. 2003). As a result, North Korea proposed the inter-Korean sporting talk to discuss the possibility of joint participation in the Beijing Asian Games as a unified team. Given that North Korea had continually demonstrated hostile attitudes towards South Korea over the past decade, South Korea was initially lukewarm about the communist Korea's move (H. R. Lee 2000). Yet, the south eventually accepted this proposal as fundamentally it was also aware of the political significance of making sporting union at international sporting competitions in displaying unified Korean identity to the world (S. H. Park 2007).

From March 1989 to February 1990, 15 inter-Korean sporting talks in relation to the Beijing Asian Games took place. Some notable agreements were made at the meeting. These included the official name of the unified Korean team at the event, the use of the Korean Peninsula flag at the ceremonies at the Asiad, and the use of Korean traditional folk song, *Arirang*, as an anthem for the Korean delegation (H. R. Lee 2000). These were important progress in the relations between the two Koreas because, in consideration of the political significance of symbolism in national identity politics (Hobsbawm 1990), making an agreement to use these political symbols at the sporting event can be seen as meaningful step forwards to the peaceful co-existence and ultimately to the reunification of the nation.

In spite of such positive development, the two sides failed to make sporting union at the Beijing Asian Games. South Korea demanded prompt initiation of the team selection

process and of a joint training programme as the Asian Games was only a few months away. However, North Korea refused this request unless South Korea first promised that the south would not participate in the Asian Games as a separate entity under any circumstances. It was a difficult condition for South Korea to accept as the country needed to protect its right to take part in the Asian Games alone in case North Korea withdrew from its Asian Games campaign in an attempt to prevent South Korea from participating in the sporting competition taken place in the North Korea's closest ally (Ministry of Unification 2013). The meeting ended without resolving this issue and the two Korean teams finally participated in the Asian Games separately as a consequence.

Nevertheless, a series of the inter-Korean sporting talks bore some fruits. Even though sporting union was not materialised, the frequent dialogues to some extent mitigated the hostility between North and South Korea at least in a sporting domain (H. R. Lee 2000). One of the most notable incidents that showed this trend was the collaboration between tourists and cheerleaders from the two Koreas in Beijing (Sung, et al. 2003). The fact that the two Korean states now had common national symbols that represent a unified Korea made spectators from the both Koreas possible to display a unified Korean identity at the Games. There were a number of occasions when supporters from North and South Korea sat together and cheered for Korean athletes as one (Hahm and Chun 2009). In that sense, it can be said that at least in the stands at the Asian Games stadium, a sporting union was actually materialised.

In addition, the inter-Korean sporting dialogues also created circumstances where two Koreans continually engaged in a conversation to discuss further collaboration and exchanges in sport in the 1990s. Especially, having understood the complicate and sensitive relations between the two Koreas and China, the Chinese government mediated a high-level sporting talk between North and South Korea during the Beijing Asian Games (Shim 1990). In Beijing, the two Korean states agreed to hold the inter-Korean friendly football matches in Seoul and

Pyongyang after the Asian Games. This home and away type football friendlies were held with the expectation that it would enhance mutual understanding between the two (H. R. Lee 2000). The football matches also triggered subsequent basketball exchanges and this amicable environment generated through the sporting connection finally influenced to organise a unified Korean team for the World Table Tennis Championships and for the FIFA World Youth Championship in 1991 (D. S. Kim 2001).

Yet, the mood of the détente in the early 1990s did not last long. When a North Korean judoka defected to South Korea just after the World Judo Championship in July 1991, the inter-Korean sporting relations began to freeze rapidly (H. R. Lee 2000). Moreover, when North Korea declared its intention to withdraw its membership from Non-Proliferation Treaty of Nuclear Weapons in 1993 the security barriers between them appeared to be re-raised (Heo and Woo 2008). This political crisis halted inter-Korean sporting exchanges programmes completely. Korean people had to wait for a few more years to see the revival of North and South Korean sporting collaboration.

### **The 2002 Asian Games in Busan**

The 2002 Asian Games in Busan was the second Asiad held on South Korean soil. This sporting event can be seen as the Games of reconciliation between North and South Korea. In 1998, the new president Dae-jung Kim was in power in the south. The President Kim's administration set improving the stalemate relations with North Korea as one of the policy priorities, and eventually introduced an inter-Korean policy of engagement called Sunshine Policy (Hogarth 2012). Instead of a political realist's stick and carrot method, this idealist approach tended to embrace the stubborn North Korean communist regime politically and to offer economic assistance and food aid until it opened its mind to the south and the rest of the world (C. N. Kim 2004). As long as North and South Korean relations were concerned, this



approach worked. The dialogue between the two Koreans resumed and cultural relations revived. More importantly, the inter-Korean Summit took place in 2000 for the first time since its division. At this highest level political meeting, the two heads of states signed a joint declaration which includes an article that North and South Korea are to develop cooperation in a socio-cultural programme including sport (BBC 2000). It is in this political context in which the Busan Asiad took place.

The 2002 Busan Asian Games was a significant political breakthrough because it was the first time in Korean history that North Korean athletes took part in an official international sporting competition held in South Korea (The *Economist* 2002). Before this time, North Korea had continually boycotted any international sporting contests taken place in the south as the communist regime had not formally recognised the political legitimacy of the South Korean government.<sup>5</sup> This attitude began to change after the 2000 inter-Korean Summit which recognised the existence of the two separate governments in the Korean Peninsula. In addition, the mood of reconciliation that the Sunshine policy prompted also helped resume the inter-Korean sporting exchanges in a pre-Asian Games setting (H. R. Lee 2000). Basketball teams from the two Koreas travelled to Seoul and Pyongyang in 1999 respectively, and the inter-Korean table tennis friendly was held in the North Korean capital in 2000. Notably, at the opening ceremony of the Sydney Olympic Games in 2000, the two Korean states marched together bearing the Korean Peninsula flag even though they participated in actual sporting contests separately. The series of sporting events that had facilitated cultural communication between North and South Korea constructed political environments that enabled the North Korean team to visit Busan.

In line with the political development in the early 2000's the Organising Committee of the Busan Asian Games wished the sporting event to be a symbolic occasion to represent the mood of reconciliation (Busan Metropolitan City 2002). In 2001, the Organising

Committee and the South Korean government sent North Korea an official invitation to the Busan Asian Games. At first, the north responded negatively with the perception that it was politically too risky to send a large number of its athletes to South Korea. After a number of negotiations and persuasion, North Korea eventually accepted the invitation in August 2002. Two additional meetings were held between the two sides to adjust some logistical issues concerning North Korea's participation in the Asian Games, and finally the north informed that 318 athletes, 22 state officials, and 355 cheerleaders would travel to Busan to attend the sporting event.

During the Busan Asian Games various occasions that highlighted the improved relations between the two Koreas unfolded. Firstly, the Asian Games torch was first lit on the top of *Baekdu* Mountain in North Korea and handed over to South Korea on the North Korean side of *Kumkang* Mountain. The selection of these two locations in the North Korean territory was a highly symbolic choice because the former is associated with Korea's mythic origin and thereby is closely related to Korean national identity. The latter was the first and the only place where the North Korean authority opened to South Korean tourists since the late 1990s and in that sense this place symbolised the inter-Korean economic collaboration. Secondly, the two Korean teams marched together at the opening and closing ceremonies of the Asian Games. This was the second joint march at the major sporting competitions since the Sydney Olympic Games and through this the two Korean teams were able to demonstrate a unified Korean identity to the Asian community. This joint march was a highly emotional sporting union in a sense that it took place on the South Korean soil before a large number of Korean spectators filled the stadium. Finally, not only did a group of North Korean cheerleaders shouted for their fellow communist athletes, but they also acclaimed the South Korean team at the venue. The most notable event included the runner up football match between South Korea and Thailand, and in this game the supporters from two Koreas cheered for the South Korean team as one

(Busan Metropolitan City 2002). This collaboration between North and South Korean supporters was the occasion that shared ethnic homogeneity can be experienced and displayed.

In spite of the feeling of reconciliation being built through the Busan Asian Games, the presence of the North Korean athletes in the South Korean city also generated a controversy, particularly over the public display of the North Korean flag (Jae 2002). As North and South Korea were still technically at war, the use of the North Korean flag in public space in the south may be considered as an illegal act according to the National Security Law. Yet, as the host of the Asian Games in which North Korea participated, it seemed inevitable to raise the communist Korea's national symbol in the city alongside other participating nations' flag. Yet, some right wing civic organisations protested against the appearance of the North Korean flag in public areas (Jung 2002). In contrast, a number of liberal social organisations claimed that no restriction should be placed on the use of North Korean symbols during the Asian Games (J. W. Lee 2002). In the end, the administrative authority settled that the use of the North Korean flag was allowed inside of the sporting venues by non-South Korean citizens only. This meant that the public display of the North Korean national flag was illegal and a South Korean who held the North Korean flag at the stadium may be prosecuted. This controversy over the use of North Korean symbols indicates the complicate nature of the politics in the Korean Peninsula, and comprehensive mutual understanding between North and South Korea was by no means an easy task.

### **The 2014 Asian Games in Incheon**

The 2014 Asian Games in Incheon was the third Asian Games taken place in South Korea. More importantly, this edition of Asian Games was held when the political climate surrounding the Korean Peninsula was being frozen again. A number of factors contributed this worsening relation. Firstly, the South Korean government withdrew from the engagement

policy of the previous regime and reintroduced a North Korea policy based on a stick and carrot approach when the conservative party regained its power in 2008 (Choi 2008).<sup>6</sup> Secondly, North Korea militarily attacked South Korea twice in 2010 including a torpedo attack on a South Korean navy ship and the firing of shells on a South Korean island (BBC 2010a, BBC 2010b). Finally, the North Korean dear leader Kim Jong-il died suddenly in 2011 and his son Kim Jong-un succeeded the political and military regime in the communist Korea. With the new leader in power, North Korea attempted to strengthen its military power and displayed an aggressive gesture to the south in order to show off the political stability of the new regime (The *Guardian* 2012). The combination of these three political factors rendered the relationship between North and South Korea soured.

In spite of the political impasse, North Korea initially indicated that the communist state had intention to send its delegates to the Asian Games. It also requested to hold working level talks to negotiate some practical issues regarding the North Korean athletes' visit to Incheon (J. A. Kim 2014). The South Korean government responded positively expecting that this sporting talk might also facilitate the inter-Korean conversation on other areas. Yet, the thorny relation dominated the Korean Peninsula was not mitigated at the meeting. The north requested financial assistance to send a large group of North Korean cheerleaders alongside the athletes, but the south refused to do so (the *Hankyoreh* 2014). The south stated that it would only allow to raise a standard size North Korean flag at the venues according to the regulation of the Olympic Council of Asia and ban North Korean people from using a large size communist flag at the stadium (B. G. Kim 2014). The talk produced no fruit. After this the north made a statement that it would reconsider the intention to take part in the Incheon Asian Games (Ahn 2014). As the commencement of the Asian Games came closer, however, the communist Korea noted that it would participate in the sporting event, but no cheerleaders would travel to the south at this time.

During the Asian Games, the cold climate continued. In contrast to the 2002 Busan Asian Games where two Korean states celebrated a shared national identity, the Organising Committee the current edition of the event treated the team from the north of the boarder as any other foreign nationals taking part in the competition (Paik 2014). No sporting collaboration such as a joint march at the opening ceremony happened, and no public display of North Korean symbols were permitted. Importantly, the South Korean authority also placed restrictions on the use of the Korean Peninsula flag which represents a unified Korea that the north and south had agreed to use since 1990 (Ahn 2014). This decision indicated that the South Korea officials had no intention to see the north as a potential partner at the Games (B. G. Kim 2014). Additionally, the South Korean government continually imparted hawkish messages to the communist regime during the sporting event where North Korean athletes were taking part (Paik 2014). This meant that South Korea simply ignored a chance to refresh deadlocked North and South Korean relations through sport. It seems that overall circumstances that surrounding the Games was the coldest ever since the 1986 as long as the inter-Korean relations were concerned.

On the 4<sup>th</sup> of October, the final day of the Asian Games, three senior officials including the second highest political officer made a surprise visit to Incheon to attend the closing ceremony (The *Telegraph* 2014). Even though these high level politicians officially travelled to South Korea to take part in the Asian Games, the visit implied a highly symbolic gesture to send a political message to the south (BBC 2014). In fact, it was an invaluable opportunity to reopen a blocked conversation channel between the two sides. The south offered to hold an ad hoc meeting and the North Korean trio accepted it. The two parties agreed to organise a high-level talk either in the late October or the early November to negotiate the way to resolve the current political stalemate (Ministry of Unification 2014). It seems that after experiencing uncomfortable sporting encounters during the event the Asian Games finally played a role in

thawing the frozen inter-Korean relations. A week later, however, North and South Korean soldiers exchanged fire at the border area. This incident cooled down the relations between the two Koreas that was just about to rekindle, and in the end the north refused to hold the planned high-level talk. This was the moment that the hope that the Asian Games has inspired was completely crashed.

## **Conclusion**

This paper looked at the political dimension of the Asian Games. More specifically, it focused on the implications that hosting the Asian Games in South Korea had for its relationship with North Korea. This study makes it clear that international sporting events reflect wider political circumstances within which the sporting occasions are staged (Black and Bezanson 2004, Byrne 2014, Cha 2013). As the case of the series of Asian Games reveals, the fluctuated relations between North and South Korea tends to be mirrored through the sporting events that the two Korean states are somehow involved. In that sense, it can be argued that in the Korean Peninsula sport operates as a barometer to measure the relations between North and South Korea.

In addition, despite the meaningful role that sport plays in politics, its effect on resolving conflict and on promoting peace must not be overestimated (Cha 2009, J. W. Lee 2010). North and South Korean relations at the Asian Games demonstrated that more often than not the existing political environment determined the nature of sporting relations between the two Korean states. This implies that when the mood of reconciliation encircled the Korean Peninsula, an international sport arena worked as theatre that the inter-Korean collaboration was enacted and a unified Korean identity is exhibited. Yet, unlike some idealists' presumption (Gary and Rubin 2012), sporting relations rarely contributed to tackling political impasse between the two Korean states when the order of tension and confrontation was prevalent.

Instead, sport tended to reaffirm and reproduce the conflict-laden relation. In this respect, sport is more likely to operate as a dependent variable on broader political structure.

Finally, while the Asian Games is a continental level second order sporting event (Black 2008), this does not necessarily mean that this event is of less political significance than larger scale mega sporting contests such as the Olympic Games and the FIFA World Cup Finals. As long as the inter-Korean relations are concerned, the four editions of Asian Games that this paper examined all engendered meaningful political implications. It is worth noting that in 2002 South Korea hosted two major sporting events, namely the FIFA World Cup Finals and the Asian Games. Between them the Asian Games was a far more important event in respect to improving the inter-Korean relations even though the Asiad was a smaller scale competition than the FIFA World Cup. Therefore, regardless of the scale and scope, what makes a sporting event a politically significant occasion is the context in which this specific sporting contest is staged.

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<sup>1</sup> Black (2008) identifies the three different types of sporting events according to the scale and scope of the event. The first order games are the events that attract meaningfully significant global attention. The second order games refer to the events that are of international scope but attract limited media and popular interest. The third order games mean regional or continental level sport competitions. According to this typology, the Asian Games is the third order event.

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<sup>2</sup> The Korean War broke out in 1950 and ended in 1953 without a peace treaty but with the armistice agreement. In this sense, the two Koreas are still technically at war. This inter-Korean warfare results in a permanent division of the Korean Peninsula.

<sup>3</sup> See Houlihan (1994) for a more comprehensive discussion on this topic.

<sup>4</sup> In fact, the first inter-Korean sporting talk took place in 1963. However, it was largely prepared and mediated by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to resolve the issue around the first entrance of North Korea to the 1964 Tokyo Olympics. In that sense, it is difficult to see that this first meeting genuinely reflected the two Korean governments' willingness to meet and discuss the possibility of sporting union with the aim of facilitating the reconciliation between the two Korean states. For more discussion on this issue, see Bridge (2007).

<sup>5</sup> Of course North Korean athletes visited South Korea in the early 1990s to participate in inter-Korean friendly matches. Yet, strictly speaking these occasions were not international competition but were part of sporting exchange programme. Notably, no national symbols were used in these competitions in order to erase any elements representing a statehood of each Korea. Instead, the two sides used a unified Korean flag that the two Koreas agreed to adopt in preparation for the Beijing Asian Games in 1990.

<sup>6</sup> Until 2007, the two Koreas actively discussed the possibility for sending a unified Korean team to the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. When the new president was in power in the early 2008, the inter-Korean sporting talks halted and no sporting union or exchanges between North and South Korea were made at the Olympic Games in the Chinese capital (J. W. Lee 2010).



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