



**S. RAJARATNAM SCHOOL
OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES**
A Graduate School of Nanyang Technological University

RSIS COMMENTARIES

RSIS Commentaries are intended to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy relevant background and analysis of contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of the S.Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission from RSIS. Due recognition must be given to the author or authors and RSIS. Please email: RSISPublication@ntu.edu.sg or call (+65) 6790 6982 to speak to the Editor RSIS Commentaries, Yang Razali Kassim.

No. 155/2012 dated 15 August 2012

North Korea at London 2012: Beyond the glory of medals

By Ong Suan Ee

Synopsis

North Korea put on a good show at the London 2012 Summer Olympics, finishing 20th in the overall medal tally and breaking a world record in the process. What does participation in the world's foremost international sporting event mean for the Hermit Kingdom?

Commentary

The 2012 London Olympics have proved to be a valuable international stage for a high-performing North Korean contingent. 56 North Korean athletes competed in events across eleven different sports. They finished 20th in the overall medal tally by winning four gold medals and two bronzes – ahead of Spain, Brazil and Canada. One of its weightlifters, Un Guk Kim, even set new Olympic and world records in the men's 62kg weightlifting category. What does participation in the world's foremost international sporting event mean for North Korea?

What the Games Mean to North Korea(n Athletes)

The Olympics are an opportunity for North Korea to demonstrate the strength and resilience of its people (and by extension, its political regime). Incidentally, the sports in which North Korean Olympic athletes have traditionally excelled are those that require exceptional physical forte, such as weightlifting.

Having participated in the Olympics since 1972, eight years after its maiden participation in the 1964 Winter Olympics, North Korea has amassed 47 medals from the summer Olympics and two from the winter games, wedging it between Argentina and Mexico in the all time summer Olympics standings. Not a bad performance for an impoverished and economically isolated state that has suffered repeated blights of famine and natural disasters.

This year, its athletes have unanimously attributed their success to their new leader, Kim Jong-Un, saying that their victories enable them to glorify their nation under the guidance of their Marshal. The 56kg weightlifter and gold medallist Om Yun Chol said that the reason for his gold medal was "the warm love of the Great Leader Kim Jong-Il and Great Comrade Kim Jong-Un".

The North Korean contingent's victories in London certainly serve to strengthen the country's image at a domestic level and, by proxy, reinforce the public's devotion to and faith in the Kim regime. This is crucial,

particularly at a juncture where Kim Jong-Un is still cultivating his fatherly image, consolidating popular support, and working towards the oft-stated aim of making North Korea a “strong and prosperous nation” by the end of this year.

The fanfare and excitement of North Korea’s victories at the Olympics have also served as a timely distraction from other more pressing domestic problems. Floods and heavy rain that began in June and have continued into August have thus far killed 169, left 400 missing, rendered an estimated 212,000 people homeless and destroyed 65,000 hectares of cropland. The United Nations approximates that two-thirds of North Korea’s 24 million inhabitants currently suffer from chronic food shortages.

Media reports suggest that there is much more at stake for the North Korean Olympics athletes than just national pride. Upon returning home, medallists are not only given a hero’s welcome, but are also rewarded with prize money and other material gifts such as apartments, cars, refrigerators and television sets. On the other hand poor performances are not without penalties. It is commonplace for athletes who return empty-handed to be subjected to public “review meetings” where their performances are assessed and appropriate punishment dispensed.

This happened to the North Korean football team that shocked fans worldwide by not making it past the group stage of the 2010 World Cup. After being sent home, the squad was subjected to a “grand debate” and shamed onstage at the People’s Palace of Culture for failing in their “ideological struggle” in South Africa. The team’s coach was reportedly expelled from the Workers’ Party and forced to become a builder. South Korean intelligence has also suggested that in the past, underperforming North Korean athletes have even been sent to prison camps.

Sport and Political Controversy

North Korean officials have maintained that their participation in the Olympics was in the spirit of sportsmanship and being a part of the international community. Looking back at recent history, one might be inclined to agree. At the 2000 Sydney Summer Olympics, North and South Korean athletes marched together behind a single flag depicting the Korean peninsula for the first time since the 1948 London Games. They repeated this feat in Athens in 2004 but not in Beijing in 2008.

Unsurprisingly, political controversy has followed the North Koreans all the way to the British Isles. The North Korean women’s football team stormed off the pitch in protest after they were mistakenly introduced with the South Korean flag at their first match of the games. A cheekily placed South Korean flag fluttered in Old Trafford’s stands as the US and North Korea faced off in the women’s football quarter-finals match. The state-run Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) accused Australian newspaper mX of bullying after it labelled North Korea as “Naughty Korea” and South Korea as “Nice Korea” in an Olympic medal tally.

What does it all mean?

While it may be unwise to dismiss North Korean participation in the Olympics as completely superficial, it may be going too far to interpret it as a step towards increased openness to the international community and the harbinger of change in Pyongyang’s foreign policy.

However, there is no denying that North Korean presence and performance at the Olympics plays an important role in boosting domestic morale. Beyond the ambit of the personal, North Korean athletes – like those of any other country – take the aspirations and dreams of their people and nation to an international stage. Ultimately, perhaps North Korea’s participation in the Olympics finds its highest meaning in offering its people a shared sense of identity with the rest of the world; one that extends beyond the realm of the political.

Ong Suan Ee, formerly senior research analyst at the Centre for Multilateralism Studies, RSIS, is currently a Masters of Public Health candidate at the Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, National University of Singapore.