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Pyeongchang Winter Olympics

What's Behind the Korean Unification Flag?

By Shawn Ho

Synopsis

The Korean unification flag, in its first version, consists of a blue and undivided Korean peninsula as well as Jeju island to its south. There is a lot more to this flag than meets the eye.

Commentary

SOME 190 athletes from South Korea and North Korea will march in together behind a common flag bearing the name "KOREA" – symbolising Korean unification -- at the opening ceremony of the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics this Friday 9 February 2018. This is significant because it has been 12 years since the two Koreas have marched together as one group in an Olympics with a flag displaying an undivided Korean peninsula.

Since its conception in the early 1990s, a few versions of the flag have emerged during the march-ins of the Korea group at the opening ceremonies of various international sporting events. Whenever this flag appears at official events, the number of islands shown on the flag is closely watched by Japan. This flag also serves as a reminder of the deep divide between the policies taken by the conservative and liberal camps in South Korea towards North Korea.

Versions of the Flag and the Japan Factor

Several versions of the Korean unification flag have been flown over the last 27 years since it was first used publicly by the joint Korea team at the 1991 World Table Tennis Championships in Chiba, Japan. This first version included just the Korean peninsula and Jeju island. The flag notably left out two islands off the eastern coast of the

peninsula. These two islands are known as Ulleungdo (which is undisputed Korean territory) and Dokdo (disputed territory with Japan; also known as Takeshima by Japan).

At the 2002 Asian Games in Busan, South Korea, a second version of this flag appeared at the opening ceremony and Ulleungdo had been added to the map. The third version of the flag included both Ulleungdo and Dokdo. It was used at the 2006 Winter Olympics in Turin, Italy, and at the 2007 Asian Winter Games in Changchun, China. This inclusion of Dokdo as part of Korean territory proved to be controversial since the island has long been disputed territory between Korea and Japan.

Precisely because of this controversy over Dokdo, it is likely that the flag that will be used at the Pyeongchang opening ceremony will exclude Dokdo. This will undoubtedly lead to some domestic backlash in Korea against President Moon Jae-in and his administration.

Such a move will be seen as giving in to Japanese pressure (to exclude Dokdo). Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's attendance at the opening ceremony would have certainly factored in the final decision about the composition of this Olympic's Korean unification flag.

Given the backdrop of the comfort women issue between South Korea and Japan, along with pressure from the United States for South Korea to have better relations with Japan for a united trilateral front to deal with North Korea's nuclear and missile programmes, Seoul is treading carefully with regard to its foreign policy towards Japan.

Korean Domestic Politics

The history and appearance of any version of the Korean unification flag at the Olympics also reflects the deep divide between the conservatives and liberals in various South Korean administrations' policies towards North Korea. The appearance of this flag at the Olympics typically occurs when liberal administrations are in power in South Korea. The liberals tend to favour engagement with rather than isolation of North Korea.

The very first time this unified Korean flag appeared in the history of the Olympics was during the 2000 Summer Olympics in Sydney. It is no coincidence that this historic moment had taken place during the "Sunshine Policy" years of the liberal administration of Kim Dae-jung (1998-2003).

The momentum that was established to improve inter-Korean ties was carried further during the subsequent liberal administration of Roh Moo-hyun (2003-2008). The two Koreas continued to march together under the unified Korean flag at the opening ceremonies of the 2004 Summer and 2006 Winter Olympics (although they continued to compete as separate teams).

Shift in South Korean Policy

A change in government in South Korea in 2008 brought about a significant shift in

inter-Korean relations. This spilled over to the Olympics as well. During the conservative administrations of Lee Myung-bak (2008-2013) and Park Geun-hye (2013-2017), there were no joint march-ins by the two Koreas at the Olympics.

The unified Korean flag also did not make an appearance at both the Summer and Winter Olympics from 2008 to 2016. The conservative administrations during this period adopted more hardline policies towards North Korea and they did not believe in proactively engaging North Korea, especially when the North continued to conduct nuclear and missile tests.

In Pyeongchang, the two Koreas will, however, field a combined women's ice hockey team - the first time that a joint Korean team has been formed at the Olympics. However, the formation of this joint team has led to a backlash from conservative groups in South Korea. Even some of the younger generation in South Korea feel that President Moon has gone overboard in his pro-engagement policy towards North Korea to form a unified ice hockey team.

President Moon's decision has not only led to several South Korean athletes losing their places in the squad in order to make way for the inclusion of several North Korean athletes; it has also led to his approval ratings dropping below 60% for the first time since he took office in May 2017.

Legacy of Pyeongchang Olympics?

Since he took office in May 2017, President Moon has been enthusiastically promoting the Pyeongchang Olympics as the "Peace Olympics". How long this current thaw in inter-Korean tensions will last and whether the US and North Korea will commence direct talks either during or after the Olympics is anyone's guess.

Regardless of what will happen after the Olympics, engagement and peace between the two Koreas is definitely a preferred development over the alternative of war on the Korean peninsula.

If there is going to be one takeaway from the Pyeongchang Olympics, it proves once again that sports can never truly be separated from domestic or international politics. If, and it is certainly a big if, President Moon can successfully achieve a breakthrough in inter-Korean relations, the Pyeongchang Olympics might just be remembered as the Olympics where Korea won its best ever gold medal.

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