



### A THAW IN NORTH KOREA AND SOUTH KOREA RELATIONS

By  
Ghazala Yasmin Jalil  
*Research Fellow*

Edited by  
Najam Rafique

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*(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)*



The year 2017 was a busy one for North Korea. It conducted a nuclear test and several ballistic missile tests which it claimed could reach the United States mainland. It was a tense year where there were numerous rounds of threatening rhetoric and counter rhetoric between the US and North Korea. The joint military exercises conducted twice a year in spring and winter by the US and South Korea further fuelled tensions on the Korean Peninsula and there was talk of military action by the two sides as well.<sup>1</sup> However, the year 2018 has started with an offer from North Korea of what seems like an olive branch to South Korea when Kim Jong Un offered talks over sending a delegation to the Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang, South Korean in February 2018.

In high-level talks held between the two Koreas on January 9 at the border village of Panmunjom, also known as “truce village,” North Korea agreed to send its athletes to the Winter Olympic, as well as a cheering squad and a performance-art troupe. This will be the first time in eight years that North Korea has participated in the Winter Games. South Korea also suggested that the two Korean teams march together during the opening ceremony of the Olympics. The South also proposed that

<sup>1</sup> "US military says war with North Korea cannot be ruled out," *The Independent*, July 5, 2017, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/us-north-korea-war-icbm-test-not-ruled-out-donald-trump-kim-jong-un-nuclear-weapons-missile-launch-a7824101.html>, "North Korea accuses Trump of making declaration of war," *Financial Times*, September 25, 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/f43863bc-a20e-11e7-9e4f-7f5e6a7c98a2>

the two countries revive their program of temporarily reuniting elderly people who have not seen their cross-border relatives since the Korean War unofficially ended in 1953.<sup>2</sup>

The two countries also announced military talks to ease the current tensions. The statement released by the two countries said that “South and North Korea have decided to make joint efforts for the unity of the people and reconciliation by establishing an environment for peace and easing military tensions on the Korean Peninsula,”<sup>3</sup> This thaw in relations came through after months of escalating tensions over the North’s rapidly advancing nuclear and missile programs, and US-South Korea joint military exercises.

Earlier, North Korea's leader, Kim Jong Un, in his new year address has said that “this year is a year of significance both for the North and South Korea as our people will celebrate the 70th anniversary of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) as a great auspicious event and there will be the Winter Olympic Games in the south.”<sup>4</sup> He further said that “In order to host the great events of the nation with splendor and demonstrate the dignity and stamina of the nation, we should melt the frozen north-south relations, thus adorning this meaningful year as a year to be specially recorded in the history of the nation.”<sup>5</sup> This is definitely an olive branch held out to South Korea to bring about a thaw in the relations between the two countries. In the past as well, sports was used to try to ease tensions on the Korean Peninsula. At the 2000 Sydney Olympics, representatives of the North and the South marched together at the opening ceremony behind a banner that said simply “Korea”.

This is a welcome departure from the North Korean stance throughout 2017 which was non-conciliatory. South Korean President Moon Jae-in, as part of his pursuit of engagement with the North had, earlier in November 2017, called for North Korea's participation in the Winter Olympics saying that it “will provide a very good opportunity for inter-Korean peace and reconciliation”.<sup>6</sup> South Korean President Moon Jae-in's spokesperson, Park Soo-hyun, has said that the President's office welcomed Kim's comments about the need to improve inter-Korean relations and his offer to send a delegation to the Olympics. He added that South Korea has been expressing its intent to talk with North Korea anytime, anywhere and for the normalization of the inter-Korean relations and for

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<sup>2</sup> Choe Sang-Hun, "North Korea to Send Athletes to Olympics in South Korea in Breakthrough," *The New York Times*, January 8, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/08/world/asia/north-korea-south-olympics-border-talks.html>

<sup>3</sup> Taehoon Lee, Joshua Berlinger and Angela Dewan, "North and South Korea agree to hold talks on easing military tensions" *CNN*, January 10, 2018, <http://edition.cnn.com/2018/01/09/asia/north-korea-talks-intl/index.html>

<sup>4</sup> Transcript of Speech of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, *Korean News*, January 1, 2018, Embassy of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in Islamabad, Pakistan.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ankit Panda, "3 Takeaways From Kim Jong-un's 2018 New Year's Address," *The Diplomat*, January 1, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/01/3-takeaways-from-kim-jong-uns-2018-new-years-address/>

the peace of the Korean Peninsula and hoped that “South and North Korea will peacefully resolve North Korea's nuclear issue while closely cooperating with the international community.”<sup>7</sup>

In another positive development, North Korea established contact on January 3 on a hotline that has been dormant for nearly two years. No details were available on what was discussed. This certainly is another positive sign that North Korea is reaching out for the improvement of relations between the two countries.

Earlier, it seemed that North Korea's participation in the Winter Olympics may or may not materialize. A complicating factor was the scheduled annual springtime US-South Korea joint exercises Foal Eagle/Key Resolve.<sup>8</sup> The joint exercises have been a bone of contention between North Korea and South Korea which the former sees as preparation for attack on the country. South Korea has requested the US to consider delaying the exercises until after the conclusion of the Olympics in March 2018. As part of efforts to smooth the path to the Olympics, the US has agreed to suspend the joint military exercises. US Defense Secretary James Mattis said the delay was “a practical matter” and part of “the normal give and take.”<sup>9</sup> The exercises would be conducted after the Paralympics finishes in March. It seems the stage is all set for North Korea to participate in the winter games.

As opposed to the conciliatory note for South Korea, Kim set out a firm posture against the US. Kim Jong Un reiterated that the country had completed its nuclear deterrent against the US. He also said that he had a nuclear button installed on his desk in his office in an obvious reference that North Korea now has the nuclear deterrent against the US and it is willing to use it if threatened or provoked. It also alluded to the fact that the nuclear button was in firm control of Kim. Completing the nuclear deterrent was a reference to the successful flight testing of Hwasong-15 intercontinental ballistic missile in November 2017 which can potentially reach the US mainland. He noted with satisfaction that “the US can never fight a war against me and our state.”<sup>10</sup> US President Donald

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<sup>7</sup> Alanne Orjoux and Steve George, "Kim Jong Un offers rare olive branch to South Korea," *CNN*, January 2, 2018, <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/12/31/asia/kim-jong-un-new-year-address-nuclear/index.html>

<sup>8</sup> It involves field training and large-scale mobilization of troops from both South Korea and the United States

<sup>9</sup> "North Korea accepts Olympics talks offer, says South," *BBC News*, January 5, 2018, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-42574870>

<sup>10</sup> Transcript of Speech of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, *Korean News*, January 1, 2018, Embassy of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in Islamabad, Pakistan.

Trump, in response, tweeted that his nuclear button is “much bigger” and “more powerful” than Kim Jong Un’s.<sup>11</sup>

But even as the mutual rhetoric heats up with the US, the North Korean leader's speech had positive notes for the improvement of relations between North and South Korea. Sending a delegation to participate in the Winter Olympics in South Korea would go a long way towards thawing relations between the two countries. The talks held on January 9 are a welcome opening to further military talks between the two Koreas. South Korea’s president, Moon Jae-in, is a strong proponent of dialogue with North Korea. North Korea has also shown willingness to participate in talks to reduce tensions. The two countries can use the lull in hostilities to create a momentum for negotiations between their countries initially, and later with the US as well. North Korea, South Korea and the US all need to seize this opportunity to reduce tensions on the Korean Peninsula. It is perhaps time for the US to realize as well that the door to military action against North Korea has closed. The US must realize that a policy of coercion and military threat would not resolve the North Korean nuclear issue. Dialogue and engagement is the only way forward.

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<sup>11</sup> "Trump to Kim: My nuclear button is 'bigger and more powerful'" BBC News, January 3, 2018, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-42549687>