

A portrait of Kim Jong-un, the leader of North Korea, is centered in the image. He is wearing a dark suit and has a serious expression. The background behind him is the flag of North Korea, which consists of a red field with a white star in the center, and blue and white horizontal stripes at the top and bottom. The text is overlaid on this background.

Gold medal brinkmanship: North Korea's Winter Olympic coup d'état

Pyongyang's Olympic olive branch should be seen as a strategic victory for the regime and a blow to international efforts to wind back its nuclear program, Stephen Nagy writes

North Korea's participation in the 2018 Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang, South Korea has been a strategic victory for the Kim regime. The temporary détente to allow for its participation has provided the North valuable political space to further consolidate its strategic nuclear deterrent – a deterrent designed to dissuade the US from a pre-emptive strike to either remove North Korea's nuclear capabilities or destroy the regime itself.

The strategic calculation behind the apparent thaw in North-South relations is several fold. First, participation in the Winter Olympics provides the North the opportunity to alter the narrative of its regime and people. Over the course of the Games, we can expect to see images of both the North and South Korean athletes marching together under the same flag and competing together on the same ice hockey team.

The way the media frames this apparent thaw in relations will have the effect of humanising the North Korean athletes, and subsequently the people of North Korea, in the eyes of the rest of the world.

Pyongyang has astutely understood that the ephemeral warm feelings derived from these images will make any US-led coalition to forcefully denuclearise the North more difficult to mobilise. The Chinese, Russians and other stakeholders will balk at deepening sanctions or bolstering military pressures on the regime. They'll use the Olympic diplomacy to argue that 'carrots' and not 'sticks' are more effective in dampening tensions on the Peninsula.

Simultaneously, the lull in sustained pressure on North Korea provide Beijing and Moscow time to find new and creative ways to ensure the Kim regime remains friendly to their respective countries.

Second, by pushing the Moon administration to the negotiating table, Pyongyang's approach fractures the joint US-South Korean approach to dealing with the North. President Moon will find it increasingly difficult engage in a Sun-

shine Policy 2.0 with North Korea while its alliance partner demands a harder and harder line against the North.

Here is where Moon's conundrum lies. Pyongyang's nuclear deterrent strategy is aimed at the US, not South Korea. It is conceivable that Moon could pursue an engagement strategy that focuses on warming relations with the North while securing guarantees that the South would not be a nuclear target. However, this would anger the US, as it would still leave the US vulnerable to Pyongyang's nuclear missiles. It would also consolidate the Kim regime, leaving the region and the world with a nuclear state with a track record of weapons of mass destruction proliferation.

Now that stakeholders in the region have a richer understanding of President Trump's tactics, domestic challenges and their own comparative advantages, regaining this momentum will be increasingly difficult

While negotiation with Pyongyang may bring short-term gains for Seoul, in the mid to long-term it would give the North the upper hand in their precarious relationship. Once having consolidated its strategic nuclear deterrent, the North could (and would) begin to shunt its resources into strengthening its domestic economy, realising its *byung-jin* objective of [parallel nuclear and economic development](#).

At best, this would ossify the reunification process. At worst, it would be a platform for the Kim regime to pursue unification on its own terms, an objective that has been the *raison d'être* and source of legitimacy of the Kim dynasty.

The third reason why Pyongyang's Olympic olive branch is a strategic coup d'état is that it undermines the trilateral cooperation between Seoul, Tokyo, and Washington.

With President Moon the weak link in a unified approach to putting pressure on Pyongyang, Tokyo is already considering further strengthening its own capabilities. These include [pre-emptive strike capabilities](#) and sea and terrestrial-based defence systems such as the [Aegis Ashore](#).

While imperfect solutions to dealing with the North, Japan's potential acquisition of pre-emptive capabilities will indeed decrease the threat from North Korea. However, they will also have the boomerang effect of increasing China's anxieties over Japan's perceived re-militarisation, and how these defensive systems could contribute to nullifying Beijing's minimum nuclear deterrent strategy. The cascade effect could lead to a destabilising arms race in the region.

Aside from bolstering unilateral defence to mitigate the threat from the North, Tokyo has also deepened its commitment to the US-Japan alliance, stressing that it is the [cornerstone of Japan's security](#). This has not changed with

Moon's Olympic diplomacy with North Korea. However, it has cast a shadow on the potential for deeper, broader and unified cooperation between the trifecta in dealing not only with the immediate challenge of nuclearised North Korea, but also the long-term challenge of managing China's rise.

Finally, from the North Korean perspective, Pyongyang's Olympic diplomacy weakens South Korea's credibility as a reliable partner for Tokyo and Washington. The North Korean regime has strengthened its position on the Peninsula by making it harder for American, South Korean and Japanese policymakers to have a unified approach towards Pyongyang.

Pyongyang's gold medal brinkmanship has provided North Korea a tool to change the narrative from nuclearisation to one of diplomacy and cooperation. By orchestrating the suspension of united diplomatic and military pressure, North Korea has slowed the momentum that Washington under President Trump has created in his first year in office.

Now that stakeholders in the region have a richer understanding of President Trump's tactics, domestic challenges and their own comparative advantages, regaining this momentum will be increasingly difficult. ■

Stephen R Nagy is a Senior Associate Professor of Politics and International Studies at the International Christian University, Tokyo

This piece was first published at Policy Forum, Asia and the Pacific's platform for public policy analysis and opinion. Read the original [here](#)