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Korean Peninsula

Crisis and Olympic diplomacy

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As the Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang take place, the Korean peninsula is experiencing a moment of détente whose consequences cannot be predicted, but which has already changed the geopolitical situation and sheds new light on the way in which the question of reunification is posed. [1]

After his election in May 2017, the new South Korean President Moon Jae-in tried to open a dialogue with the North Korean regime. Kim Jong-un had rejected the overtures, stripping all credibility from this initiative, which, moreover, displeased Washington. [2]. The North-South dialogue, however, was suddenly unblocked during the preparations for the Pyeongchang Winter Olympic Games. On January 9, 2018, a meeting was held in Panmunjom, a village in the demilitarized zone separating the states along the 38th parallel and serving as a point of contact between the two capitals. Pyongyang's participation in the Olympics was announced, as well as the organization of official military talks. For its part, Seoul has obtained the postponement of the United States/South Korea naval aviation manoeuvres scheduled for February. The diplomatic process was engaged on for real

It is obviously too early to know how long this will continue after the close of the Olympics, and how far this moment of détente goes, but it has already changed the geopolitical situation. It also sheds new light on how the question of reunification arises, particularly in the South.

The symbolism of detente has gone significantly further than the minimum necessary. At the opening ceremony on February 9th, North and South Korean sportsmen and women marched together in a single delegation. A joint ice hockey team has been formed. Kim Yong-nam, head of state with symbolic functions, made the trip from Pyongyang, as well as a large contingent of “cheerleaders” and a group of artists. More importantly, for the first time, a high-level dignitary of the northern regime went to the South, and not just anybody: Kim Yo-jong, younger sister of Kim Jong-un, the only woman to have entered the leading nucleus, where her influence seems important. She sent a letter of invitation to Moon Jae-in to go to Pyongyang.

“Sporting diplomacy” has a long international history, but why did the Pyeongchang Games allow a “thaw” (despite temperatures often below -20%!) which was so spectacular, even if momentary? The two regimes have a common goal: to regain control and no longer be hostages to decisions made by Trump who is not used to consulting his ally (Seoul) and to consider the consequences for the civilian population on both sides of the demilitarized zone of a US military intervention - which has been repeatedly threatened. Neither North Koreans nor South Koreans want to die to allow Washington to assert its hegemony.

Transformations in the North

The North Korean regime has, for its part, reached a plateau in the development of its nuclear and ballistic capabilities, although there are probably still unresolved operational problems. On the eve of the opening of the Games, it organized an important military parade; but a pause in this area may be welcome. Moreover, the constant tightening of sanctions decided at the UN is not trivial. Pyongyang certainly knows how to circumvent them or reduce their impact on the centralized economy; but since taking office in 2011, Kim Yong-un has promoted the rapid development of an informal market economy with a greater reliance on international trade.

The North Korean economic system is hybrid, in transition, imbricating the state sector (often under the control of the

military), the licit and illicit markets, and flourishing smuggling, with corruption as lubricant. If the situation of a large part of the people remains very precarious, social inequalities widen, the enrichment of a minority appears, new lifestyles are diffused in a non-negligible part of the population: consumerism, imported goods, solar panels, electric bicycles, taxis, computers, urban modernization (especially in the capital) and so on. For Philippe Pons, "The system is based on an iron triangle: the regime's elite - starting with the military hierarchy, which controls entire sectors of the economy - the apparatchiks - who cash in their sinecures - and the market operators, who "grease their paws" to turn the machine." [3]

Social elites are diversifying and expanding, now including entrepreneurs. North Korea is no longer the "hermit kingdom" of yesteryear - a success for the totalitarian Kim Dynasty that consolidates its base, but at the same time makes the regime more vulnerable to internal isolation, even if imperfect and circumvented.

On the symbolic side, since 2017 during the New Year's greetings, Kim Jon-un presents himself in a business suit and no longer in Mao outfit - as for the portrait of his grandfather Kim Il-sung, it was on this occasion no longer visible. The use of classical terms such as Songun (priority to the army and not to the party), the ideas of "Juche" (Korea's model of socialist construction), "Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism" (in honour of the thought of his predecessors) is reduced or abandoned. For the first time in 2018, Kim named the South Korean head of state as "President Moon Jae-in", calling for reconciliation, but announcing that he would reactivate the pressure for a reunification of the "ethnic nation". This year, the date of the military parade celebrating the founding of the army has been changed. It was held on April 25 in reference to the creation by his grandfather, in 1932, of a Korean anti-Japanese guerrilla unit operating in China; it will now be held on February 8 in reference to the constitution, in 1948, of the national army of the North. Kim Jong-un must be idolized for himself and no longer according to his ancestry.

A generational rupture in the South

In the South, President Moon Jae-in belongs to a political movement for whom the national question (namely reunification) has always been central: his approach is not simply opportune or opportunistic. However, the Games have brought to light a profound break in the generations. Young people overwhelmingly supported Moon in recent elections against the corrupt and militarist right then in power. They do not want to be dragged by Trump into a devastating war, but they do not dream of reunification. The division of the peninsula dates back sixty-five years and a lot of water has since passed under the bridge. They have no parents in the North, they have another story and fear a decline in their standard of living. Refugees from the North welcome the president's policy more favourably, but some who are unable to cope with the capitalist hyper-competitiveness of the South plan to return to their country of origin. [4].

Some groups have mobilized against the organization of the Games because of their environmental impact, their cost and the huge projects carried out in order to hold them, whose usefulness post-Games is very doubtful. As for the combative wing of the labour movement, it has not regained all its freedom of action. Union leaders imprisoned under the previous, authoritarian, right-wing government are still in detention and Moon Jae-in is pursuing neoliberal policies.

The desire for Korean reunification remains the majority sentiment among the whole population (although more weakly than in the past), but it has become a minority among youth. Many young South Koreans judge that Seoul is paying too much for the presence of northerners in Pyeongchang. They are furious at the fate of their ice hockey players: the creation of a single team has ended their hopes of medals and, faced with the virulence of the critics, President Moon had to apologize for not having paid more attention to the future of these sports. The Seoul government does not seem to have seen the scale of the generational breakdown before.

The present issue: the military de-escalation

The ongoing transformations in the peninsula evoke others. In the North, a transition with a capitalist horizon is initiated, as in China in the late 70s. In the South, the feeling of belonging to the same nation and the aspiration to reunification weakens, as was the case in Taiwan (and in a very particular context in Hong Kong). The historical memory of the Japanese occupation and the Korean War (1950-1953) no longer occupies the same place within and beyond the 38th parallel. These evolutions will have very important consequences and must be followed with attention: the future is even less sure inasmuch as, today like yesterday, world geopolitics imposes itself brutally and can modify the Korean dynamics.

What matters in the immediate future is that a blow has been put dealt to the war drive on the peninsula. Washington has increased verbal provocations, tightened sanctions until the opening of Games, and manifested its bad mood. From Tokyo, Vice President Mike Pence had warned Moon Jae-in that he would not allow North Korea to use the Olympics for propaganda purposes. The United States and Japan have now had to take note of the fait accompli of Pyeongchang. For now, nuclear tests and firing of missiles in the North have been interrupted. US-South Korean naval manoeuvres are postponed (to June?); the question is how big will they be and if the North will be ostensibly the target as before? War and peace are in the balance. The de-escalation movement initiated by the Koreans must extend beyond the Olympics - and international solidarity must contribute to it.

[1] The French original of this article was published on February 15 2018

[2] See Pierre Rousset, "The Korean crisis, the US, geopolitical instability in Asia and nuclear proliferation"
<https://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article42389>

[3] Philippe Pons, "Corée du Nord : la cuirasse du régime À l'épreuve des sanctions", <http://www.lemonde.fr/international...>

[4] Won Youngsu, ESSF (article 43055), "Contextualizing Winter Olympics in South Korea" <https://www.europe-solidaire.org/sp...>