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Restoring Inter-Korean Relations by Promoting Sports Exchange

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The Moon Jae-in government's stance on North Korean policy maintains that it strives to mobilize every possible measures in achieving a complete renouncement of North Korea's nuclear program, including both sanctions and dialogue and that it will deploy a flexible approach in examining major inter-Korean agendas, such as private sector exchanges, within the framework of not hampering international sanctions currently imposed on North Korea. However, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DRPK) has already launched missiles as much as four times on May 14th, 21st, 27th, and 29th ever since the Moon Jae-in administration took office. A series of missile launches is burdening the government especially on its plan to resume the inter-Korean dialogue. Under such circumstance, the Moon government approved the Korean Sharing Movement's request to contact North Korea on May 26th, abiding by the new government's principal of separating humanitarian assistance from political consideration. The recent approval – came out for the first time since January 2016 – has been in the public limelight over whether this initiative can open the door of improving inter-Korean relations

although South-North Korean exchanges have already been underway in the sports sector.

The North Korean women's national hockey team participated in 2017 International Ice Hockey Federation (IIHF) World Championship from April 2nd to 8th. And South Korean women's soccer team visited North Korea to participate in Group B qualifying match of Asia Football Confederation (AFC) women's 2018 Asian Cup from April 3rd to 11th. Moreover, the North Korean-led International Taekwondo Federation (ITF) and South Korean-led World Taekwondo Federation (WTF) made an agreement that North Korean Taekwondo team will have a demonstration performance at 2017 World Taekwondo Championship in Muju, Jeon-buk province on June 24th.

Although there are negative views of sports being misused for the political purpose and as a tool for the political offensives, the benefits of inter-state exchanges through sports offset the adverse effects.

First, sports exchanges serve as a catalyst to promote a dialogue between nations that are either in conflict or hostile toward each other. As the old saying "sports neither have national boarder nor ideology" suggests, it is relatively easy in the sports sector to host a meeting on a regular basis between states, come out of it with productive results and implement them. Moreover, even in the midst of escalated conflicts and tensions among nations, sports can alleviate the tension by securing a communications channel at the inter-state or civilian level.

Second, sports contribute to creating the ripe environment for reconciliation among the public. Sports exchanges not only play a positive role for sports players themselves but also bring about positive interactions between the cheering public, thereby ultimately providing an opportunity to break down the wall of mutual distrust.

The incumbent government's North Korean policy dictates that it will sternly respond to North Korean nuclear provocation and at the same time initiate a dialogue

in the private sector, restoring inter-Korean relations. Although the international community currently imposes sanctions and hard-line approach on North Korea, focus is shifting to engaging dialogue with the North. The US has opened a 1.5 track dialogue with the DPRK since the inauguration of the Trump administration and declared to ultimately resolve North Korean issues through dialogue with the intensified sanctions and pressure still in place. Therefore, the government of the Republic of Korea (ROK) should also be prepared for the possible phase of full-blown dialogue on the Korean Peninsula and take the initiative in resolving North Korean nuclear issues by kick-starting the stalled inter-Korean relations so that Pyongyang's nuclear issue cannot be addressed with a primary focus on the interests of the US and China only.

Utilizing sports in restoring inter-Korea relations - an area in which inter-Korean exchanges have been maintained for some time - will be the most effective way considering the currently strained South-North Korean relations. Fortunately, South Korea plans to host 2018 Pyongchang Winter Olympics next February. The ROK government should continue the latest momentum into the upcoming olympics, such as qualifying matches of women's hockey and soccer team with the North. The government should consider how to utilize Pyongchang Winter Olympics in overcoming an impasse of strained inter-Korean relations in consultation with the local governments, the organizing committee and IOC. Examples could be North Korean national team's participation in the Winter Olympics, passing mountain Baedu for Olympic Torch relay, and hosting some events in Masingnyeong ski resort in Northern part of the peninsula.

If Pyongchang Olympics would bring about the expansion of inter-Korean exchanges, restore mutual trust, and creat a spill-over effect into other areas, it could improve currently-strained inter-Korean relations and provide the necessity and rationale behind inter-Korean exchange and cooperation to the international community, ultimately garnering its full-support.

An improvement in inter-Korean relations is a prerequisite to secure peace



on the Korean Peninsula. However, it requires dialogues and cooperation between the two Koreas. Starting with politically less sensitive areas like social, culture and sports sectors, we can restore inter-Korean relations step by step. ©KINU 2017

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