By 1948 the ongoing difference of opinions pitting North and South Korea against each other resulted in their separation. In its wake were two separate Korean nation states. Tensions between the two nations eventually led to the North (supported by Communist USSR) invading the south in an attempt to spread their influence and seize lands. This war dragged on until 1953 when it was slowed down by a truce agreement. A truce is not the same as a peace however, and even with the ongoing support of the United Nations this final phase remains unsigned to this day (2018). Traditionally an armistice or truce agreement (laying down of weapons) is arrived at in good faith, and with general understanding that both sides intend to work towards diplomatic discussions targeting long-term peace.

North Korea grew increasingly protective, eventually pulling away from international relations completely. North Korea widely adopted a cultural practice known as ‘Songbun’ which derived to be centre of political and social life. In this class system the achievements and contributions made by your ancestors towards the state would ascribe your family’s level of trust and power within society. This system affected a citizens’ ability to obtain education, promotion and specific freedoms. The more you and your ancestors sacrifice for the building of the nation the higher your reward. This form of advancement in society created a sort of ‘Cult of Personality’, where people compete to show their unconditional support for the leadership of the nation. An example of this would be when the Supreme Leaders Kim Il-Sung and Kim Jong-Il died in
1994 and 2011 (respectively) citizens were ordered to observe a mandatory 100 days of mourning. No one wanted to be seen as ‘disloyal’ to the nation by not weeping publicly throughout this period.

**REPUBLIC OF KOREA (ROK) AKA SOUTH KOREA**

In direct opposition South Korea recognized the western values of democratic capitalism and continue to protect their worldviews of government and international participation from targeted attacks from the north. Their acceptance of western systems of democracy infuriated the leadership of North Korea even more, making South the centre of a propaganda and military campaign aimed at promoting the greatness of the North Koreans people and destruction of the south.

The United States, along with many other western liberal nations, backed South Korean attempts to distance themselves from the communist regime above them. Billions of dollars were transferred into the South Korean manufacturing, resource and educational sectors with the intent of helping their economy rise to leader status in Asia.

As a result, 60+ years later South Korean technological and educational research and output is amongst the most sophisticated in the developed world. The disparity between the two Koreas has only become more distant, as their acceptance of Globalization introduced historic Human Rights Laws and Economic Freedoms, North Korea’s regime eroded farther into despotism and state-funded terror, effectively starving its own people in order to retain control over the mass population.

**Olympic Breakthrough, or Propaganda?**

Recent escalations between North Korea and the united States President, Donald Trump, sent shockwaves through the international community preparing for a world event promoting sport and peace as a means of cooperation. In an attempt to reopen discussion lines between the north and south, the PyeongChang Olympic Committee decided they would offer North Korea and opportunity to compete alongside the South on a number of events. This joint entry into the Olympic history may be proof that North
Korea is willing to open up future peacemaking initiatives. This was welcome news for many who were concerned that the rogue nation would launch military attacks during the games as the world watched. Participating alongside South Korea provides hope for many who have long held ambitions to bring the two nations back together. For others it is a cause for protest, as the long standing and ongoing Human Rights violations committed in the North seem should not be overlooked simply because they have decided to participate in these games.

Imagine you risked your life escaping from North Korea in the midst of chaos. Everything you had, and everyone you loved had to be left behind. After escaping you find yourself in a good life, living and working in South Korea with a new identity ever fearful that a North Korean spy might track you down. How might you respond to the following?

1. Mandatory military service for all citizens (aged 18-45) (conscription).
2. North Korea being invited to participate in the Olympic Games.
3. United Nations voting on whether to intervene in North Korea with a strategic military operation.
WILL THE WINTER OLYMPICS EASE TENSIONS ON THE KOREAN PENINSULA?

The world’s attention is turning to South Korea for the 2018 Winter Olympics, and North Korea’s participation may be cause for cautious optimism

By Associate Professor Barbara Keys and Nicholas Langdon, University of Melbourne

Hundreds of North Koreans – athletes, cheerleaders, trainers, officials, even a pop star have descended on Pyeongchang in South Korea for the Winter Olympic Games, including among them Kim Yo-jong, the sister of North Korea’s dictator Kim Jong-un.

Remarkably, given current tensions, the two countries are fielding a joint women’s ice hockey team and will march together under the ‘unification flag’ at the opening ceremony.

North Korea’s recent nuclear tests have led experts to warn that the risk of war between the North and South is at the highest level since the 1950s, so many observers are expressing relief at this apparent détente.

There are two reasons for this cautious optimism. The Games are safer with North Korea’s participation, and exposure to the West may help undermine the propaganda the North Korean regime relies on to maintain power.

A SAFER GAMES

Quite simply, North Korean participation has many benefits over a North Korean boycott. In 1988, Seoul staged a highly successful Summer Olympics, but in the lead-up to that event, North Korea expressed great interest in co-hosting. The South Koreans were understandably dubious. The International Olympic Committee had awarded hosting rights to Seoul, which had invested enormous resources in building and planning before the North jumped in.

North Korea’s true motives for this bid, like almost everything else about its internal politics, remain murky. No doubt then dictator Kim Il-sung resented the global attention that Seoul was receiving and wanted to reap some Olympics benefits, too.

Co-hosting was never a realistic option, but North Korea spent considerable sums building sporting venues, anticipating that it would secure an agreement to host at least a few Olympic events. It didn’t, largely because its demands were unrealistic and because South Korea did not want to share its debut on the world stage.

In the end, North Korea boycotted the Seoul Olympics. Its communist allies, with the exception of Cuba, overcame their Cold War prejudices and went to the Games despite Pyongyang’s entreaties. The North was left isolated, angry, and humiliated. In an attempt to deter visitors and athletes from attending the Games, Kim Jong-il ordered his agents to bomb a Korean Air passenger flight in 1987, killing everyone on board.

Some South Koreans are upset by the favourable attention that North Korea is now getting. The Pyeongchang organising committee has spent years of effort and billions of dollars to reap a publicity bonanza, only to watch as Kim Jong-un’s political games overshadow the sports festival.

The frustration is understandable. But if North Korea were not participating – if it were standing on the sidelines, fretful, resentful, irate – the Games themselves could be at risk of violent retaliation or of attention-seeking actions like unannounced missile tests.

INCHING TOWARDS REFORM

Beyond safety, the second reason to be hopeful is that the Games could accelerate the erosion of the North’s propaganda efforts. One brief event cannot in itself achieve a reconciliation after 70 years of division, or resolve a
decades-long nuclear crisis. It can, however, be part of a patient strategy to undermine the legitimacy of the North Korean regime, ultimately leading to reform.

The collapse of communist rule in Eastern Europe in 1989 and the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 were made possible because communist leaders and ordinary citizens came to realise how much better life was in the West. When Mikhail Gorbachev, who would later try to reform communism but ultimately brought about its demise, visited Western Europe as a high party official in the 1970s, he was amazed not only by the material prosperity he saw, but by the free and easy-going lifestyle there.

North Korean propaganda still barrages citizens with messages about the horrors experienced by their southern neighbours. It can no longer deny there is prosperity in the South, so instead it depicts material wealth as the price South Korea pays for being an oppressed colony of the United States.

The hundreds of visitors from the North, including newly promoted Politburo member Kim Yo-jong – the highest-ranking North Korean and the first member of the Kim dynasty to ever to visit the South – will see life in South Korea over the next two weeks. They will come home with a far deeper knowledge of just how far behind their own country is and their experience will outweigh the regime’s hysterical falsehoods.

The North is no longer as cut off from the world as it was in the Cold War. Thanks to cultural products like South Korean soap operas circulating on DVDs and flash drives, most North Koreans are aware that life in non-socialist countries offers ease and comforts that they lack. Still, seeing the gulf at first hand could have a powerful affect on even well informed North Korean visitors. When former Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping visited the US in 1979 and saw first hand its factories and farmlands, he was so overcome that he couldn’t sleep for several nights.

The freedoms enjoyed in a democracy have even greater potential to shock. Although the two Koreas have diverged so far that dictionaries are needed to help the new ice hockey teammates communicate, what the North Korean members of the team will notice far more than the mobile phones (which are now widely used in North Korea) is how freely South Korean teammates talk to each other and to the media.

After its recent spate of nuclear weapon and missile tests, Pyongyang may finally be confident that it has an effective nuclear deterrent and be willing to return to the negotiating table. But there are dangers. If the North hopes that sporting goodwill will lessen the sanctions it is now struggling under, it will be disappointed.

The Olympics are not a magic bullet, but with time and patience, we may look back on this moment as an important step on the path to peace. After the last twelve months, even the smallest of steps forward is welcome.