

BEYOND ALL BARRIERS: The Politicization of the International Olympic Committee in the 1988 Seoul Olympic Crisis

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The Korean Peninsula found itself engrossed in an international sporting conflict given political significance by the overarching Cold War tensions at play in the 1980s after it was announced that Seoul would host the 1988 Olympic Games. South Korea pursued their bid in search of legitimacy on the global stage, and North Korea sought to prove the legitimacy of Kim Il Sung's authoritarian regime. However, the purportedly apolitical International Olympic Committee (IOC) wielded the idealistic nature of the Olympic Movement, the organization's relative stability, and the diplomatic experience of President Juan Antonio Samaranch to lead the charge in the co-hosting negotiations for the 1988 Seoul Games. This paper argues that, under Samaranch, the IOC not only solidified itself as a viable non-state actor amid the 1988 Olympic crisis but also temporarily diffused broader political tensions on the Korean Peninsula, bringing the Soviet and Western blocs together in one of the most successful Olympic events to date and legitimizing itself as an independent actor in the sphere of foreign affairs.

Introduction

The 11th Olympic Congress was coming to a close at the 1981 International Olympic Committee (IOC) session in Baden-Baden, West Germany. IOC representatives had just heard closing statements from the delegations representing Nagoya, Japan, and Seoul, South Korea, during the final round of presentations in the fight to host the 1988 Summer Olympics. Japan was a seasoned Olympic host, having organized two Olympic Games in the previous two decades; South Korea, on the other hand, was a newcomer to the Olympic Movement, boasting an up-and-coming economy but suffering from a great deal of political instability. Japan did not hesitate to take several rhetorical jabs at South Korea's unpredictability, and this dismal portrayal of Seoul made it even more shocking when, following a secret ballot vote by IOC members, the world learned that Seoul was selected over Nagoya with a final tally of fifty-two to twenty-seven.

North Korea's opinion was clear from the moment the IOC announced South Korea's win, as its IOC delegate was recalled from Baden-Baden back to the North Korean capital of Pyongyang almost immediately.¹ By awarding the games to South Korea alone, North Korea perceived the IOC to have slighted both Kim's authoritarian regime and the one-third of the Korean population that lived within its borders; in the eyes of the North, if the entirety of Korea was not hosting the Games, then the Games simply could not be held in Korea. The North Koreans' perception of the IOC

¹ Richard W. Pound, *Five Rings Over Korea: The Secret Negotiations Behind the 1988 Olympic Games in Seoul* (Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1994), 58.

disrespecting their legitimacy on the international stage set the tone for a sporting proxy war on the Korean Peninsula that would ultimately disrupt larger Cold War tensions, thereby necessitating the mediation of the IOC.

South Korea pursued a bid for the 1988 Seoul Olympics in search of legitimacy on the global stage, and North Korea sought to derail South Korea's success to prove the legitimacy of Kim Il Sung's authoritarian regime, first by aiming to have the Games moved from Seoul and then by demanding to co-host with the South as a symbol of Korean unity. However, with political tensions so deeply engrained into the agendas of both the North and South Korean delegations in the co-hosting negotiations leading up to the 1988 Summer Olympics, it was the IOC that was able to drive the dialogue on the Seoul Games while also igniting broader discussions about Korean reunification. The crucial role played by the IOC in the secret negotiations begs the question of how an independent non-state actor with little means to enforce its aims was able to successfully involve itself in a global sporting crisis-turned-proxy war and emerge more legitimized than any other party involved. The previously apolitical IOC was able to wield the idealistic nature of the Olympic Movement, the organization's relative stability, and the diplomatic experience of President Juan Antonio Samaranch to lead the co-hosting negotiations for the 1988 Seoul Games. Under Samaranch, the IOC not only gained public recognition as having successfully resolved the 1988 Olympic crisis but also diffused broader political tensions on the Korean Peninsula, bringing the Soviet and Western blocs together in one of the most successful Olympic events to date and legitimizing itself as an independent actor in the sphere of foreign affairs.

American Olympian Eric Heiden famously stated that "sports and politics don't mix" in reference to President Jimmy Carter's decision to boycott the 1980 Moscow Games.² As much as sporting organizations like the IOC might like to believe that they are several times removed from global politics, in an increasingly globalized world, this notion could not be farther from the truth. The rise of sports literature is challenging traditional conceptions of international relations as a state-centered discipline.³ Global sporting competitions are increasingly used as soft power mechanisms, which has heightened the study of sport diplomacy. There has been a similar growth in the body of scholarship focusing on the role of non-state actors in international affairs; however, with sports literature centering more on the impact of fans, digital media, and corporations, there is a current lack of knowledge regarding how international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) function as political actors in the global sporting arena.⁴ To accurately present the personal motivations of each party involved in the negotiations and to better understand the political situation surrounding the 1988 Seoul Games, this article relies on public statements of foreign leaders, personal correspondences between President Samaranch and members of the international community, meeting minutes from the negotiations, and media reports. With the credibility offered by the preponderance of both primary and secondary source analysis, this paper seeks to establish the 1988 Olympic crisis as a test case for how a non-political INGO such as the IOC was able to influence an issue as politically contentious as inter-Korean relations. Additionally, with little existing literature discussing the Seoul Games in general, this piece also aims to fill a current gap in

² Thomas Gift and Andrew Miner, "'Dropping the Ball': The Understudied Nexus of Sports and Politics," *World Affairs* 180, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 132, JSTOR.

³ Verity Postlethwaite and Jonathan Grix, "Beyond the Acronyms: Sport Diplomacy and the Classification of the International Olympic Committee," *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 27, no. 2 (2016): 296, Taylor & Francis Online.

⁴ Postlethwaite and Grix, "Beyond the Acronyms," 299.

sports literature by presenting the story of the 1988 Olympic negotiations as somewhat of an historical narrative focusing on the stories of the specific individuals involved. All this being said, by increasing its diplomatic legitimacy to sit on par with that of the involved state actors, the IOC's role in the secret negotiations points to the importance of non-state actors in the resolution of crises in an interdependent world order.

Historical Context

The KOREAN CONFLICT and its RESIDUAL EFFECTS

It is best to refer to the end of the Second World War to gain an understanding of the specific Cold War tensions underpinning the 1988 Olympic crisis. The United States and the Soviet Union agreed to divide Korea at the 38th parallel to restabilize the country in what the West thought would be a temporary arrangement; however, reunification was not so easily resolved.⁵ The mostly ideological conflict turned physical when the North, with the Soviet Union's support, invaded the South in June of 1950. The United Nations, relying mostly on the military strength of the United States, joined in the fight on the side of the South Koreans and, after over 4 million casualties were incurred on both sides of the 38th parallel, the fighting came to a close in July of 1953.⁶ Negotiations in the year following the armistice proved fruitless for those hoping to see a reunited Korea, and there has been both a cultural and physical divide between the North and South ever since.

The Korean people suffered not only massive loss of life but also ruinous economic devastation in the aftermath of the Korean War. North Korea reported the loss of over 600,000 residences, roughly 8,700 manufacturing plants, and almost one million acres of farmland.⁷ North Korean leader Kim Il Sung, known for his tendency to sugarcoat the sufferings of his people, simply stated that his "people's economy [had] been *totally* destroyed by the war."⁸ The South Korean economy fared no better, losing almost twice as many industrial facilities and suffering property damage valued at over \$2 billion; however, Western aid and a desire to internationalize allowed South Korea to slowly recuperate from their economic losses in a way that North Korea's isolationist tendencies prevented.⁹ The successful recovery of the South Korean economy by the 1980s and its emergence as a regional economic superpower made it possible for Seoul to compete to host the 1988 Summer Olympics and, in a similar vein, it was the continued suffering of the North Korean economy that made co-hosting so appealing.

The plight of North Koreans after the war motivated Kim Il Sung to pursue the ideological indoctrination of his citizens in an effort to maintain control over his state.¹⁰ The United States had become his foremost enemy due to their involvement in the Korean conflict, a reputation that was propagated by North Korea's insistence that the United States had actually caused the war; Kim repeatedly claimed in the decades after the Korean War that he was prepared to destroy the United States so as to protect his state, and engaging in negotiations disruptive to the 1988 Games was yet another metaphorical battlefield on which Kim could face off against South Korea and its ally, the United States. This continual perpetuation of lies about the culpability

⁵ "Korean War," Encyclopedia Britannica.

⁶ B.C. Koh, "The War's Impact on the Korean Peninsula," *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 2, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 57, JSTOR.

⁷ Koh, "The War's Impact," 59.

⁸ Koh, "The War's Impact," 58.

⁹ Koh, "The War's Impact," 59.

¹⁰ Koh, "The War's Impact," 64.

of the United States in the Korean War and Kim's repeated denial of responsibility for the atrocities that ensued was one of many factors that contributed to the weakening of North Korea's trustworthiness in the eyes of the South which, in turn, affected the attitudes with which the two parties entered negotiations. The possibility of Korean reunification was bleak well in the 1980s as a result of this mutual distrust and, with the judgement of both Korean delegations clouded by disdain, the Olympic negotiations would necessitate an impartial mediator who could resolve the sporting crisis against the backdrop of decades-long tensions.

The CONVERGENCE of COLD WAR TENSIONS

Both state and non-state actors derive their legitimacy from other political actors. States like the two Koreas are able to exhibit their power via economic success or military strength; however, non-state actors like the IOC rely on the recognition of their status by other actors in order to be perceived as influential and salient.¹¹ With the 1988 Olympic crisis serving as a microcosm of the broader Western and Soviet tensions at play during the latter half of the 20th century, relations to the Cold War's superpowers both guided and restricted the actions of the state and non-state actors involved in the co-hosting negotiations.

South Korea feared that the larger ideological conflict between the Soviet Union and the United States regarding the two Koreas posed the most imminent threat to the 1988 Seoul Olympics. According to President Chun Doo-Hwan, "Without the support of [the USSR or the USA], North Korea can do absolutely nothing and if it were to do something, that would be an act of self-destruction ... If North Korea attacks, it will be destroyed."¹² The South had the support of the United States who desired a peaceful Seoul Games. American Senator Ted Stevens, in a 1988 letter to Samaranch, implored the IOC not to use Seoul as a way to propagate the its own foreign policy but to instead use the Games as an opportunity to facilitate cultural exchange between the North and the South.¹³ Stevens had been in consistent communication with Samaranch because his constituency in Anchorage was in search of a Winter Olympic bid, but this explicit begging on Stevens' behalf displayed not only American support for South Korea but also increasing global recognition of the IOC's political motivations. James Lilley, American ambassador to South Korea during the Games, suggested that Seoul was "much more stable than LA was in '84," putting the full faith of the United States behind the Seoul Games and legitimizing the IOC's efforts to create political stability both within South Korea and on the Korean Peninsula as a whole.¹⁴

On the other side of the Cold War conflict, the Soviet Union had the most established relations with the North Koreans during the 1988 Olympic crisis due to

¹¹ Steven Ward, *Status and the Challenge of Rising Powers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017): 35.

¹² Sergey Radchenko, "It's Not Enough to Win: The Seoul Olympics and the Roots of North Korea's Isolation," *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 29, no. 9 (June 2012): 1251, Taylor & Francis Online.

¹³ Ted Stevens, "Letter from US Senator to the President of the International Olympic Committee on Reagan and Gorbachev's Support of De-politicizing 1988 Seoul Olympics," July 5, 1988, *History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, International Olympic Committee Archives* (Switzerland). Obtained for NKIDP by Sergey Radchenko, Wilson Center Digital Archive.

¹⁴ Mark McDonald, "Seoul's Show Ready for World Stage," *The Dallas Morning News*, September 11, 1988: 2K. NewsBank.

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their ideological similarities and military alliances. However, these shared understandings were not strong enough for the Soviet Union to be willing to engage in another proxy war on North Korea's behalf. The Soviets had long provided the North with its nuclear missiles and, with violent outbreaks in and around the Korean peninsula expected to occur prior to the Games to destabilize the region and deter states from attending, the Soviet Union publicly assured the world that they would do everything in their power to ensure a successful Olympic event.¹⁵ Gorbachev supported the North in a public address accusing the South Koreans and the United States of attempting to "slow down the process of unification," but he privately "appreciated the patience of the IOC" in dealing with the absurdity of North Korea's demands.¹⁶ The Soviets and the Americans realized that using the 1988 Seoul Olympics as yet another proxy war would serve more harm than good, which allowed the IOC to prompt the Olympic negotiations and mediate Korean relations.

The OLYMPIC GAMES as POLITICAL STAGE

The original Olympic Games enjoyed over twelve centuries of prestige in the ancient era. In 1894, Pierre de Coubertin established the International Olympic Committee in preparation for the revival of the Olympic Games, with the first Olympic event of the modern era slated to occur in Athens, Greece, the birthplace of the Olympic Movement, in 1896.¹⁷ The return of the Olympic Games was intended to serve as a break from the political conflicts of the era, and the IOC was touted as possessing a sense of "political neutrality" that would allow it to indiscriminately promote the concept of Olympism around the world.¹⁸ The Olympic Charter, established by Coubertin following the IOC's inception, champions Olympism as:

... a philosophy of life, exalting and combining in a balanced whole the qualities of body, will, and mind. Blending sport with culture and education, Olympism seeks to create a way of life based on the joy of effort, the educational value of good example, social responsibility and respect for universal fundamental ethical principles.¹⁹

The Olympic Movement hoped that countries would be able to overcome political strife for the sake of their athletes and for the benefits of cultural exchange amongst global citizens. With the development of the IOC as the ultimate nonpartisan international sporting organization, Coubertin believed that the modern Olympic Games could transcend the decline in quality and the political entanglement that befell its ancient predecessor.²⁰

¹⁵ Pound, *Five Rings Over Korea*, 297.; "Soviets, Chinese Vow to Help Keep Olympics Terror Free," *The Dallas Morning News*, July 17, 1988: 28A. NewsBank.

¹⁶ Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev, "Statement by M.S. Gorbachev: 'The Amelioration of the International Situation, Strengthening of Peace'," November 11, 1986, *History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Archive of the Gorbachev Foundation*, Fond 5, opis 1, Dokument 20669. Obtained and translated for NKIDP by Sergey Radchenko, Wilson Center Digital Archive.; Willi Daume, "Information Note on a Visit by Soviet Olympic Committee President Gramow to Munich," January 15, 1988, *History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, International Olympic Committee Archives* (Switzerland). Obtained for NKIDP by Sergey Radchenko, Wilson Center Digital Archive.

¹⁷ Jean-Loup Chappelet and Brenda Kübler-Mabbott, *The International Olympic Committee and the Olympic System* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 78; "Pierre de Coubertin: Visionary and Founder of the Modern Olympics" International Olympic Committee.

¹⁸ International Olympic Committee, *Olympic Charter*, (Lausanne: Comité International Olympique, 1908): 11.

¹⁹ IOC, *Olympic Charter*, 11.

²⁰ History.com Editors, "The Olympic Games," HISTORY, updated February 7, 2022.

The Olympics were quickly employed by foreign states as platforms upon which they could promote their own policy aims. Adolf Hitler infamously used the 1936 Berlin Games to propagate his new Reich.²¹ The IOC was the first international organization to cut all ties with South Africa due to their apartheid and, two years later, the 1972 Munich Games served as the execution site of eleven Israelis in the Black September terrorist massacre.²² The type of Cold War politicization that the Seoul Olympics suffered from emerged in 1980 with the US-led boycott of the Moscow Games. In response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, American president Jimmy Carter announced that the United States would be boycotting the 1980 Summer Olympics, and he convinced sixty-four other nations to join in protest.²³ The Soviet Union attempted to return the favor at the 1984 Los Angeles Games, but “the world [was] tiring of Olympic boycotts,” and it was only able to convince thirteen of its satellites to follow suit.²⁴

As the world became more interconnected on all fronts, it was inevitable that governments would shift their perception of global sporting events as opportunities to promote “international goodwill” toward, instead, using competitions like the Olympics as soft power mechanisms to garner prestige.²⁵ While the ideological appeal of Olympism persisted, the heightened politicization of the Olympic Games and, more specifically, Olympic boycotts aimed at the “pursuit of broader diplomatic goals” required the IOC to assume a more active role on the global political stage in the negotiations to resolve the 1988 Olympic crisis.²⁶

The Negotiations

North Korea initially directed its efforts at promoting South Korea’s instability to derail the 1988 Games while protecting its own legitimacy as a sovereign state, but the North’s transition toward desiring to co-host alongside Seoul necessitated the IOC’s mediation in talks between the two Koreas. The idea of North Korea co-hosting allegedly originated with Italian Foreign Minister Giulio Andreotti in June of 1984.²⁷ However, it was brought to international attention following a 1985 interview of Cuban president Fidel Castro in which Castro wished to “avoid the catastrophe which the choice of Seoul alone implies.”²⁸ Castro possessed a great deal of influence both within socialist circles and among non-aligned countries. With Kim’s fragile international standing, the backing of the Cuban government to the North’s desire to jointly host gave credence to North Korea’s new slant on the 1988 Seoul Olympics. Summarized in a report from IOC Vice President Ashwini Kumar following his 1985 trip to Pyongyang, “North Korea now felt that if they boycotted [or disrupted] the Games they would perhaps earn the odium of the whole world and the best way to

²¹ Pound, *Five Rings Over Korea*, 19.

²² Pound, *Five Rings Over Korea*, 25-27.

²³ Pound, *Five Rings Over Korea*, 33.

²⁴ Pound, *Five Rings Over Korea*, 33, 37.

²⁵ Lincoln Allison and Terry Monnington, “Sport, prestige, and international relations,” in *The Global Politics of Sport: The Role of Global Institutions in Sport*, ed. Lincoln Allison (New York: Routledge, 2005), 11.

²⁶ Lincoln Allison, “Sport and globalization: The issues,” in *The Global Politics of Sport: The Role of Global Institutions in Sport*, ed. Lincoln Allison (New York: Routledge, 2005), 11.

²⁷ Radchenko, “It’s Not Enough to Win,” 1245.

²⁸ Fidel Castro, “Interview with Fidel Castro,” interview by Mervyn Dymally, July 25, 1985; *History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, International Olympic Committee Archives* (Switzerland). Obtained for NKIDP by Sergey Radchenko, Wilson Center Digital Archive.

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prove the other side wrong was to ask for a unified team.”²⁹

In response to North Korea’s demands, the IOC determined that a meeting between the National Olympic Committees (NOCs) of the two Koreas under its supervision was the best course of action. The IOC was not at all interested in allowing North Korea to co-host the 1988 Games but, by entangling the North in a series of formal negotiations, President Samaranch hoped to avoid any preemptive boycotts that North Korea might organize and buy himself the time to increase acceptance of Seoul as a host city.³⁰ The United States and the Soviet Union both experienced firsthand the devastation of hosting an Olympic event overshadowed by a political boycott, prompting their NOCs to sign an agreement in 1985 that would prevent future boycotts orchestrated on the basis of Cold War hegemonic tensions.³¹ With Castro publicly expressing his support of a Korean co-hosting situation, however, a boycott of non-aligned states presented a noticeable threat that the IOC hoped to quell by entertaining negotiations with North Korea. The awarding of the 1988 Summer Olympics to Seoul was “final and irrevocable,” but Samaranch recognized that appearing to engage with North Korean demands would promote the image of an apolitical IOC and distance the organization from possible insult by Kim’s regime.³² By keeping the North in talks with the South, Samaranch hoped that Kim would have no reason to disrupt an Olympic event that Pyongyang might come to co-host.

The South Korean NOC knew they were not going to be expected to cede Olympic events to the North; they were simply looking to prevent retaliation against the 1988 Games by regional superpowers who might back North Korea, namely the Soviet Union and China.³³ Having witnessed the impact of the 1980 and 1984 boycotts, Seoul accepted the negotiations with North Korea as an opportunity to prevent their Olympics from suffering a similar fate. Most perceived the North’s demands to be authentic, but IOC Vice President Richard Pound theorized that North Korea was hoping to create an unresolvable situation that would allow them to place culpability for the failed negotiations on the IOC and the South.³⁴ Aside from being able to blame the other parties, North Korea also benefitted from the IOC’s exhaustion of boycotts.³⁵ While the IOC and South Korea possessed a shared understanding that North Korea would not serve as a 1988 co-host, the threats posed to the Seoul Games by North Korea’s network necessitated negotiations between the two Koreas in an environment that would allow Samaranch to slyly influence the evolution of North-South tensions to minimize their impact on the success of the Seoul Olympics.

The IOC hosted the NOCs at its headquarters in Lausanne, Switzerland, on three occasions between October 1985 and June 1986 in attempts to promote the stability and success of the 1988 Seoul Games. The North Korean NOC initially demanded to host half of Seoul’s twenty-three Olympic sports in Pyongyang. The IOC and South Korea presented several counteroffers, each consisting of a few small-scale

²⁹ Ashwini Kumar, “Report by International Olympic Committee Vice President on his Trip to North Korea,” July 16, 1985, *History and Public Policy Digital Archive, International Olympic Committee Archives* (Switzerland).

Obtained for NKIDP by Sergey Radchenko, Wilson Center Digital Archive.

³⁰ Pound, *Five Rings Over Korea*, 84.

³¹ “North Korea warns of boycott in 1988,” *Daily Breeze* (Torrance, CA), October 9, 1985: D3. NewsBank.

³² “North Korean Warns of Boycott in 1988.”

³³ Radchenko, “It’s Not Enough to Win,” 1244.

³⁴ Pound, *Five Rings Over Korea*, 78.

³⁵ Pound, *Five Rings Over Korea*, 78.

disciplines like table tennis and wrestling in conjunction with individual events, such as hosting one of four preliminary soccer rounds.³⁶ Over the course of the first three meetings, the North proved unwilling to accept less than eight full sporting events to be hosted on North Korean territory, especially after Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev publicly stated that, as a matter of “arithmetic,” the North should co-host one-third of the 1988 Olympics in proportion to their hosting one-third of the Korean population.³⁷ No matter how many Olympic events the South offered to the North, the North Korean NOC remained unwilling to compromise unless their specific demands were met, suggesting that it was Kim Il Sung’s intention to create a deadlock in order to blame the IOC for favoring the South during the negotiations and, in turn, advocating for the South’s primacy on the Korean peninsula.

Prior to the first meeting, IOC Vice President Ashwini Kumar traveled to Pyongyang to meet with North Korean sports officials to investigate the current state of inter-Korean tensions and their potential effects on the Seoul Games. Kumar, in his letter back to Lausanne, advised Samaranch not to rush the negotiations due to their entanglement with larger political issues. In the words of Kumar, “Talks are going on other subjects where there are differences between the two countries and if they come to a decision on those subjects, I have no doubt that they will come to a fruitful decision on the sports front also.”³⁸ North Korean officials did not speak on the logistics of co-hosting, but they promised Kumar that, if granted the opportunity to co-host, they would provide “much better facilities than the archaic ones” provided by Los Angeles.³⁹ The IOC returned a year later to check on Pyongyang’s preparations. The infrastructural development occurring in the North impressed the IOC; Pyongyang was in the process of constructing four stadiums, nine gyms and a health complex, as well as media facilities and three hotels.⁴⁰ The costly investments made by the North Koreans created the appearance of their commitment to co-hosting, but this physical preparation was incongruent with the development of the North’s argument as the IOC negotiations progressed.

The negotiations had resulted in few conclusions by the time the third Lausanne meeting had occurred, and it was at this point that both the IOC and the South Koreans were beginning to realize the absurdity and inflexibility of the North’s demands. The meetings focused on logistical issues that would have to be resolved in order for Pyongyang to co-host, such as the opening of the border along the 38th parallel to the Olympic family and foreign media; however, the North Korean delegation preferred to talk about more trivial issues, such as whether cycling races would start or end in Pyongyang.⁴¹ It became evident that the North’s “position was moving from the unrealistic to the surreal” when they convened a fourth and final meeting just over two months before invitations were to be sent out and revisited their initial demands for half of the twenty-three sporting events.⁴² While the years-long inter-Korean negotiations under the supervision of the IOC failed to come to an agreement, Samaranch recognized the necessity of maintaining control over the political tensions at play in the 1988 Olympic crisis, both for the success of the Seoul

³⁶ Pound, *Five Rings Over Korea*, 78.

³⁷ Gorbachev, “Statement by M.S. Gorbachev.”

³⁸ Kumar, “Report.”

³⁹ Kumar, “Report.”

⁴⁰ James Miles, “North Koreans prepare to co-host 1988 Olympics Games,” *Houston Chronicle*, December 21, 1986: 24. NewsBank.

⁴¹ Pound, *Five Rings Over Korea*, 181, 216.

⁴² Pound, *Five Rings Over Korea*, 301.

Olympics and for the protection of his personal and institutional legitimacy.

The Necessity of Legitimacy

SOUTH KOREA

South Korea sought to use the 1988 Summer Olympics as a form of “public diplomacy,” a soft power mechanism wherein the government of one state aims to manipulate public opinion amongst citizens of a second state in order to coerce the second state’s government to bend to its will.⁴³ The southern half of the Korean Peninsula had begun to emerge as a regional economic power by the 1980s, and it was hoped that the Seoul Games would legitimize South Korea as a viable political actor, as well. This search for legitimacy prompted South Korean presidents Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo-hwan to pursue an Olympic bid, but it also encouraged South Korea to agree to IOC-led negotiations with North Korea when doubts of Seoul’s stability emerged. With the backing of the IOC and the United States, the South hoped to conquer the North in the Olympic negotiations to resolve broader Korean tensions on their own terms.⁴⁴

North Korea was not the only global actor to express doubts about the selection of Seoul as the 1988 host city. South Korea lacked a favorable international reputation when it bid for the 1988 Summer Olympics due to its entanglement in the Korean conflict. The IOC’s decision to award the Games to Seoul was even more politically contentious when one considers the fact that South Korea lacked membership in the United Nations following the Korean War and South Korean-Soviet negotiations were practically non-existent.⁴⁵ With the world eager to avoid another Olympic boycott, the choice of a host country so far removed from the Soviet bloc was perceived as a volatile oversight even by Samaranch, who questioned: “How ... any member of the IOC could vote for a country that had no diplomatic relations with most countries, that is not represented at the UN?”⁴⁶ South Korea had its own doubts in pursuing the 1988 Summer Olympic bid, so much so that Seoul seriously considered withdrawing its candidacy in 1981 for fear of losing.⁴⁷ South Korea had previously embarrassed itself after having to forfeit its hosting of the 1976 Asian Games due to Seoul’s lacking infrastructure.⁴⁸ The country was unexpectedly able to defeat Nagoya for the Olympic bid, though Seoul’s win may be accredited to the fact that Japan had hosted the Olympics twice in the previous two decades: the 1964 Tokyo Summer Games and the 1972 Sapporo Winter Games.⁴⁹ Almost immediately after Seoul’s win, several cities, including Los Angeles, New York, Berlin, and Mexico City, volunteered to host the 1988 Games should Seoul prove unable to do so, shedding light on the widespread expectations of South Korean failure in successfully staging the Olympics; however, the Olympic Charter allows for the relocation of an Olympic event only in the case of war, and, when asked if the 1988 Games were going to be held in another city, Samaranch stated that “either we go to Seoul or there will

⁴³ Jarol B. Manheim, “Rites of Passage: The 1988 Seoul Olympics as Public Diplomacy,” *The Western Political Quarterly* 43, no. 2 (June 1990): 279, JSTOR.

⁴⁴ Radchenko, “It’s Not Enough to Win,” 1244.

⁴⁵ Radchenko, “It’s Not Enough to Win,” 1245.

⁴⁶ Radchenko, “It’s Not Enough to Win,” 1245.

⁴⁷ David R. Black and Shona Bezanson, “The Olympic Games, Human Rights and Democratisation: Lessons from Seoul and Implications for Beijing,” *Third World Quarterly* 25, no. 7 (2004): 1251, JSTOR.

⁴⁸ Black, “Olympic Games,” 1252.

⁴⁹ Black, “Olympic Games,” 1251.

be no Games.”⁵⁰

Cities tend to be interested in serving as an Olympic host for one of two reasons: they need an outlet through which to promote their country, or they desire the economic benefits associated with the convergence of hundreds of thousands of individuals upon their city; in the case of Seoul, the associated boosts in international prestige and economic profit were equally motivating. As has been previously mentioned, Park Chung-hee originated the idea to host the 1988 Olympics in Seoul to legitimize his authoritarian regime and, after stealing power in a military coup, successor Chun Doo-Hwan pursued the Games for similar reasons. Chun saw the Seoul Games as an opportunity to bring international awareness to the North Korean threat which would, he hoped, serve as somewhat of an insurance against North Korean attacks.⁵¹ Seoul desired to emulate Japan’s use of the 1964 Tokyo Games to reintroduce itself as an advantageous diplomatic partner and, though it was not candid in this regard, it became increasingly clear that Seoul recognized the economic benefits of the Olympics, as well.⁵²

South Korea could not ignore the boost that would come to Seoul as thousands of athletes, Olympic officials, foreign figures, and spectators traveled to and profitably engaged with its hotels, restaurants, and shops. Seoul was the world’s fifth-largest metropolitan area at the time of their winning bid, and the infrastructural developments being made to transportation systems to accommodate the convergence of the Olympic family would only add to the city’s modernization.⁵³ A member of the Seoul Olympic Organizing Committee (SLOOC) commented that “the purpose is not to make money, but we do think we have a big prospect, financially speaking.”⁵⁴ This unspoken search for profit even motivated the SLOOC to attempt to circumvent the IOC in joint negotiations for American television rights, which were and continue to be one of the largest sources of Olympic income for host states.⁵⁵ South Korea hoped that, by drawing the attention of international media, it would be able to reintroduce itself to the world and further develop into the political and economic superpower it longed to be.

The anticipation of this attention functioned as a catalyst for South Korea’s rapid democratization. “All South Koreans [supported] the Olympics” and, although South Korean civil society had agreed to put long-term labor disputes on the backburner in support of the Olympic Games, a small number of radical student protests projected the image of an unstable South Korea to the world.⁵⁶ Domestic activists had long been calling for constitutional reforms to alleviate themselves of authoritarian regimes but, a year before the 1988 presidential elections, Chun Doo-hwan “suspended debate” on the issue of constitutional reform so that the country could focus on South Korea’s “twin hurdles: the change of government and the Seoul

⁵⁰ Associated Press, “IOC Would Cancel Rather than Move Olympics,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 8, 1987: G10. NewsBank.

⁵¹ Manheim, “Rites of Passage,” 282.

⁵² Spencer Sherman, “1988 Summer Olympics – Countdown in Seoul: One year to solve problems,” *Houston Chronicle*, September 20, 1987: 10. NewsBank.

⁵³ Fred Brown, “To Seoul, Olympics More than Fun, Games – ‘88 Games are Catalyst in South Korea’s Boom,” *The Seattle Times*, June 30, 1985: C6. NewsBank.

⁵⁴ Brown, “To Seoul.”

⁵⁵ Robert K. Barney, Stephen R. Wenn, and Scott G. Martyn, *Selling the Five Rings: The International Olympic Committee and the Rise of Olympic Commercialism*, (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2004), 216.

⁵⁶ Sherman, “1988 Summer Olympics.”; McDonald, “Seoul’s Show.”

Olympics.”⁵⁷ As riots turned more violent, Chun’s Democratic Justice Party needed to quell outcries that would further delegitimize South Korea as both a modernizing state and a suitable Olympic host city. Roh Tae-Woo, the presidential nominee from the Democratic Justice Party, released his Eight Point Proposal in June of 1987, promising democratic ideals like tolerance to political opposition, freedom of the press, and devolution from national to local seats of government; Roh would ultimately go on to win South Korea’s first presidential election with a thirty-seven percent plurality.⁵⁸ With the world’s televisions tuned in to Seoul in anticipation of the 1988 Summer Olympics, South Korea used the attention as an opportunity to increase its standing on the global stage and strengthen its agency against its neighbor to the North.

NORTH KOREA

Kim Il Sung’s authoritarian regime found itself constantly at war with the international community as a result of its flagrant human rights record. After having propagated the “American imperialist aggressors” as the primary threat to North Korean government and, therein, the safety of North Korean citizens, Kim decided to ignite the debate over whether the North should be able to co-host with the South in order to appear as though he was engaging with the United States on yet another front.⁵⁹ North Korea had pursued a path of relative isolationism following the Korean War, aside from maintaining bilateral relations with the Soviet Union, China, and other socialist states who found it easy to ignore Kim’s humanitarian violations. As South Korea began to emerge as a regional power, the North realized that it, too, needed to search for outlets through which it could strengthen its lacking international connections. Due to its inherent connection to the United States and the Western bloc, the United Nations had been an enemy of the North Korean regime since the Korean conflict; however, “since the 1960s and the independence of former European colonies, taking part in the Games has been seen as a sign of sovereignty as strong or perhaps even stronger than being admitted to the United Nations.”⁶⁰ With North Korea lacking UN membership, its participation in the 1988 Games was crucial to its international standing, and co-hosting would only serve to increase its global credibility.

While the international media attention associated with hosting the Olympics spurred impressive democratization in South Korea, it proved to be the main obstacle in North Korea’s demands to co-host. Foreign journalists were rarely allowed into North Korean territory, which was Kim’s way of ensuring that his regime’s human rights abuses went unrevealed; however, the IOC questioned the North Korean NOC throughout the negotiation process as to how the North would make the transition from maintaining strictly closed borders to welcoming thousands of members of the Olympic family and, more specifically, foreign media representatives who could broadcast camera footage of starving North Korean citizens halfway across the world in a matter of seconds. The North claimed that they would facilitate “free travel by road, rail, air and ship” during the Games but, when the IOC delegation traveled to Pyongyang to check on the North Korean capital city’s infrastructural progress in 1987, Kim declined their request to open the de-militarized zone to IOC executives

⁵⁷ Han Sung-Joo, “South Korea in 1987: The Politics of Democratization,” *Asian Survey* 28, no. 1 (Jan. 1998): 53, JSTOR.

⁵⁸ Su-Hoon Lee, “Transitional Politics of Korea, 1987-1992: Activation of Civil Society,” *Pacific Affairs* 66, no. 3 (Autumn 1993): 356-357, JSTOR.

⁵⁹ Koh, “The War’s Impact,” 64.

⁶⁰ Chappelet and Kübler-Mabbott, *International Olympic Committee*, 10.

who wanted to know how such transborder travel would work.⁶¹ The disconnect between wanting to increase its global stature and looking to hide the atrocities suffered by North Korean citizens not only impeded any progress that might have come out of the negotiations but also proved the North's ulterior motivations to the world.

North Korea hoped to pose a physical threat to the Seoul Olympics, but while the North's military had a slight edge over that of the South in regard to its heavily populated soldiery, its superiority was declining.⁶² North Korea's compulsory military service made its armed servicemen more numerous than the South Korean military but, with the South's technological sophistication and backing by American armed forces, South Korea perceived acts of aggression from the North to be increasingly less serious. Furthermore, economic constraints were causing Kim to implement budget cuts in military spending which, at its highest point, accounted for twenty-five percent of the gross national product.⁶³ These same economic restrictions made co-hosting the Games practically infeasible for Pyongyang. Serving as an Olympic host city requires investment not only upfront in the construction of stadiums and lodging but also after to maintain the infrastructure.⁶⁴ North Korea's isolationist tendencies had closed it off to a world of trading opportunities and, with debt being inevitable for host cities lacking the necessary infrastructure, co-hosting would have further destabilized Kim's regime. Similar to South Korea, the North desired to host the Olympics so that they might reap the economic benefits but, because of its self-inflicted alienation and declining security and financial capabilities, North Korea was unsuccessful in negotiating a co-hosting arrangement, further delegitimizing the North Korean state in view of an already wary international community.

The North Koreans' inadvertent isolation in the months leading up to the Seoul Olympics cemented the Games' success. North Korean agents bombed Korean Air Flight 858 on November 29, 1987, ultimately killing the 115 people on board and eliciting global outrage.⁶⁵ This blatant expression of violence and volatility quickly turned the international community against Kim's regime; as the North's demands became more absurd, North Korea lost any support it may have had from socialist or non-aligned states who feared that associating with the North would, in turn, destroy their own credibility. With the North Koreans essentially destabilizing their own reputation, the IOC and South Korea escaped the co-hosting negotiations unscathed, allowing them to focus their efforts on the Seoul Olympics.

The INTERNATIONAL OLYMPIC COMMITTEE

Due to its degrees of separation from inter-Korean tensions and its organizational stability, the IOC under Samaranch was best positioned to increase its political legitimacy by participating in the 1988 Olympic negotiations. The IOC, by

⁶¹ "North Korea warns of boycott in 1988.," Pound, *Five Rings Over Korea*, 216.

⁶² Dr. Klaus Georg Wieck, "Information Note from Dr. Klaus Georg Wieck to International Olympic Committee President on the Issue of Security and Terrorist Threats to the 1988 Seoul Olympics," July 6, 1988, *History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, International Olympic Committee Archives* (Switzerland). Obtained for NKIDP by Sergey Radchenko, Wilson Center Digital Archive.

⁶³ Brown, "To Seoul."

⁶⁴ Volker Nitsch and Nicolai Wendland, "The IOC's Midas Touch: Summer Olympics and City Growth," *Urban Studies* 54, no. 4 (March 2017): 972, JSTOR.

⁶⁵ Susan Chira, "Korean Plane, 115 Aboard, Crashes in Southeast Asia," *The New York Times*, November 30, 1987.

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international relations classifications, is an “undemocratic, unelected, transnational, multi-billion-dollar, not-for-profit, non-governmental organization.”⁶⁶ The overarching Cold War tensions of the late twentieth century placed a great deal of focus on state actors, especially those connected to the bipolar hegemon of the time. While the IOC was recognized as a viable legal entity under Swiss law on account of its headquartering in Lausanne, its status as an international non-governmental organization (INGO) offered it little leverage in global affairs.⁶⁷ The IOC’s non-profit status does not take away from the fact that the organization itself is financially independent.⁶⁸ This self-sufficiency allows for independence from state actors, and the resulting agency, especially when employed by President Samaranch, enabled the IOC to stand apart from and above North and South Korea.

The diplomatic background possessed by former Spanish ambassador Samaranch facilitated the IOC’s involvement in politically contentious issues. While many viewed Samaranch’s presidency as dictatorial, no doubt fueled by his insistence on being called “Excellency” and the fact that he raised the age limits for IOC presidents twice during his presidency to prevent himself from aging out of the position, Samaranch set the precedent for an “executive [IOC] presidency,” being onsite in Lausanne more frequently than past presidents and involving himself in more IOC functions overall.⁶⁹ The IOC administration underwent rapid expansion following Samaranch’s election, thereby allowing it to devote itself to developing an international reputation not just as the gatekeeper for global sports but also as an influential non-state actor.⁷⁰

In expanding the IOC’s administration, Samaranch made himself responsible for larger difficulties stemming from the increasingly complex bureaucracy in conjunction with prior financial mismanagement. Lord Killanin, the IOC president before Samaranch, was known to spend frivolously and almost contributed to the collapse of the IOC in the late 1970s.⁷¹ Aside from having to facilitate the IOC’s financial recuperation, Samaranch was also tasked with taking responsibility for its bureaucracy. The intricate connections between the organizations comprising the Olympic Movement makes accountability quite hard to place and so, in most Olympic failures, culpability fell on the IOC and, therefore, on Samaranch.⁷² However, Samaranch was able to increase both the international prestige of the IOC and its funding by successfully procuring rights to the Olympic rings.⁷³ By selling rights to the Olympic rings to transnational corporations, the Samaranch heightened the brand recognition of the Olympic Movement and incurred a steady income for its organizations, thereby solidifying the IOC as a competitive and adaptive INGO within the international sphere.

⁶⁶ Postlethwaite and Grix, “Beyond the Acronyms,” 295.

⁶⁷ Postlethwaite and Grix, “Beyond the Acronyms,” 301.

⁶⁸ Dr. Efthalia (Elia) Chatzigianni, “The IOC as an International Organization,” *Sport Management International Journal* 2, no. 1-2 (2006): 98, EBSCOhost.

⁶⁹ John Hoberman, “Think Again: The Olympics,” *Foreign Policy*, no. 167 (Jul. – Aug. 2008): 26, JSTOR.; Chappelet and Kübler-Mabbott, *International Olympic Committee*, 21, 24.

⁷⁰ Chappelet and Kübler-Mabbott, *International Olympic Committee*, 28.

⁷¹ Barbara Keys, “Political Protection: The International Olympic Committee’s UN Diplomacy in the 1980s,” *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 34, no. 11 (2017): 1161, Taylor & Francis Online.

⁷² Ryan Gauthier, *The International Olympic Committee, Law, and Accountability* (London: Routledge, 2017): 67.

⁷³ Chappelet and Kübler-Mabbott, *International Olympic Committee*, 107.

Non-state actors like the IOC tend to seek legitimacy because they lack the ability to encourage compliance with their aims through the application of violence.⁷⁴ Samaranch understood the need to be perceived as credible when dealing with international affairs, and the IOC had already experienced several failed forays into global politics. Samaranch attempted to obtain observer status in the UN for the IOC; however, “Eastern bloc enthusiasm made the initiative less appealing to Western European countries” who interpreted the IOC’s attempts as being “communist-inspired,” causing the initiative to fail.⁷⁵ The disasters in Mexico City and Munich, as well as the boycotts in Moscow and Los Angeles, further necessitated the success of the 1988 Seoul Olympics.⁷⁶ Samaranch was looked upon by some as “an unreconstructed Spanish fascist” who allowed corruption to run rampant within the IOC, with accusations even swirling about the possible bribery of IOC members contributing to Seoul’s win over Nagoya in 1981.⁷⁷ The IOC had previously resolved the “immense problems of the two Germanies and the two Chinas,” so Samaranch took it upon himself to navigate the IOC through the issue of the two Koreas and take charge of the resulting negotiations so as to allow the success of the Olympics to reflect positively on the IOC.⁷⁸

Samaranch’s diplomatic background enabled him to maintain personal relationships with South Korean leaders. Both the IOC and South Korea recognized that North Korea would not be granted the opportunity to co-host, but Samaranch involved himself in South Korea’s political transition to ensure that the Seoul Games were in the best position to succeed otherwise.

During South Korea’s democratic transition, Samaranch overstepped in some of the demands he made, going so far as to ask Chun Doo-Hwan to postpone South Koreans’ first presidential election until after the Olympic closing ceremonies in order to ensure that the Seoul Games would remain unmarred by political controversy and potentially violent public protests.⁷⁹ He suggested that Roh Tae-Woo hold off on the annual Team Spirit military exercises exemplifying the physical strength of the South Korean and American militaries so as not to provoke the North.⁸⁰ Samaranch visited Seoul two days prior to the public delivery of Roh’s watershed June 29, 1987 Declaration envisioning a newly democratic South Korea and, with Roh’s repeated mentioning of the Olympics in his address, there are even rumors that Samaranch prompted Roh to deliver this statement in an attempt to quell political opposition to the Seoul Games.⁸¹ By directly involving himself in South Korea’s political transition, Samaranch ensured that South Korea would not be the cause of a failed Olympic event that could further tarnish the IOC’s reputation.

Conclusion

The International Olympic Committee’s functioning as an INGO inherently drew the

⁷⁴ Gauthier, *The International Olympic Committee, Law, and Accountability*, 27.

⁷⁵ Keys, “Political Protection,” 1169.

⁷⁶ Gauthier, *The International Olympic Committee, Law, and Accountability*, 34.

⁷⁷ Hoberman, “Think Again,” 26.; Chappelet and Kübler-Mabbott, *International Olympic Committee*, 87.

⁷⁸ Pound, *Five Rings Over Korea*, 304.

⁷⁹ Pound, *Five Rings Over Korea*, 168.

⁸⁰ Juan Antonio Samaranch, “Letter from the International Olympic Committee President to Roh Tae-Woo, Requesting the Adjournment of the ‘Team Spirit 88’ Exercises for the Safety of the 1988 Seoul Olympics,” January 21, 1988, *History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, International Olympic Committee Archives* (Switzerland). Obtained for NKIDP by Sergey Radchenko, Wilson Center Digital Archive.

⁸¹ Black, “Olympic Games,” 1251.

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organization into global politics; however, under the leadership of President Juan Antonio Samaranch, the IOC underwent a transformative politicization in its resolution of the 1988 Olympic crisis. Though the prosperity and democratization that occurred in South Korea in the years precipitating the 1988 Seoul Games facilitated its emergence as a regional powerhouse, the South, along with North Korea, was still marred by its history of political instability and tied down by its loyalty to its Cold War hegemon. The IOC, on the other hand, entered the co-hosting negotiations with organizational stability and the universal appeal of Olympism. With Samaranch's diplomatic capabilities at the helm, the IOC emerged from the Korean negotiations most victorious, having not only put on a wildly successful Olympic Games but also subduing tensions between the two Koreas, thereby proving itself to be a serious and effectual non-state actor.

Though the IOC's recent selection of Sochi and Beijing as host cities raises questions about its newfound anti-democratic leanings, the Olympics Games nonetheless present a unique opportunity for the promotion of human rights. As the cameras of the foreign media put on display the impressive infrastructure of a host city or the interactions between the world's most impressive athletes, panning a little to the left might reveal immense urban poverty or the suppression of political opposition. Such was certainly the case in Seoul in 1988. Though it would be inaccurate to say that the IOC directly prompted the democratization of South Korea, Roh Tae-Woo recognized that international headlines highlighting the repression of student protests and Chun Doo-Hwan's pressing pause on constitutional reforms would only serve to weaken the international community's perception of South Korea as a valuable trading partner and a forward-thinking political ally. The recent 2022 Winter Games in Beijing serve as a prime example of this continued confluence of human rights and global sporting events. The United States, along with nine other states, participated in a diplomatic boycott of the Games in protest of human rights abuses against Muslim populations in China's Xinjiang province. Whether this boycott will improve the conditions of China's vulnerable Uyghur population has yet to be seen. However, it not only offers proof of the inextricable linkage between the Olympics and issues of human rights but also suggests that states recognize the legitimacy of the IOC and the potential of the organization to enact positive political change in arenas where state governments may not prove as effective.

There can be no doubt that the IOC became politically active the moment it selected Seoul as the 1988 Summer Olympics host city, and the success of this first political venture established the IOC as a legitimate actor, creating more space for non-state sporting actors to influence international politics in an increasingly globalized world. This analysis of the IOC's ascendancy to not only sit on par with state actors but, in the case of the 1988 Olympic crisis, outpace them proves the ever-important role held by non-state actors and suggests that looking to INGOs during times of crisis (especially those related to human rights violations) may help to promote international norms of peace and cooperation when state governments are either unwilling or unable to do so themselves. As states continue to collaborate in formal international institutions and informal cultural exchanges, non-state actors operating in the realm of global sports are increasingly functioning as informal channels for state communication and, therefore, warrant further exploration as to their impact on present and future global crisis.

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