On February 4, 2022, the Winter Olympic Games opened in Beijing, where 63 South Korean athletes will compete for medals in six sports.

On December 6, 2021, Jen Psaki said that the United States is “diplomatically boycotting” the Beijing Winter Olympics because of human rights violations in China.

The next day, on December 7, the South Korean Government reaffirmed its principled support for the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics and expressed the hope that the event would be successful and contribute to peace and inter-Korean relations. During a December 13 visit to Australia, Moon Jae-in confirmed that South Korea was not considering a diplomatic boycott of the Beijing Games. The South Korean leader stressed that neither the United States nor any other country had asked Seoul to join the boycott.

On the same day, December 13, in response to a request from a KBS correspondent to comment on the statement of the South Korean President, a representative of the US State Department said that the United States was not campaigning for a global diplomatic boycott of the Beijing Winter Olympics. The American side discussed a diplomatic boycott of the Beijing Winter Olympics with its allies and partners before the White House made a corresponding statement, and thus, Washington made it clear that each country should make its own decision on whether or not to diplomatically boycott the Olympic Games.

On December 15, Park Soo-hyun, senior presidential secretary for public communication, noted that South Korea
should have a special interest in the Beijing Winter Olympics as the host country of the previous Games. It is worth remembering that at the opening and closing ceremony of the Pyeongchang Winter Olympic Games in 2018, China sent officials at the level of Vice Premier of the PRC State Council, namely Han Zheng and Liu Yandong. Besides, the 30th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries is celebrated in 2022, and not sending anyone means running into retaliatory actions similar to those in 2016 after the deployment of American missile defense in South Korea.

At this stage, many people got the impression that Seoul had gone against Washington, but such a demonstrative confrontation was due to two reasons. Firstly, Seoul was actively counting on a breakthrough similar to what took place in 2018 after the Pyeongchang Games. Supposedly, Kim Jong-un may come to such a landmark event and on the sidelines of the Olympics, the leaders of both Koreas will hold a summit or even solemnly announce the end of the 1950-53 Korean War.

The second reason is that a month before the end of his term, Moon Jae-in can afford demonstrative actions which he would not be punished for. But it is very important for him to be remembered as a person who opposed the American course, because at the end of the presidential term, Moon should think about what will come next for him.

In large part due to his own actions, being an ex-president in Korea is very dangerous. The successors will find a way to put him away, and Moon, like a good Game of Thrones master, is not going to jump off a cliff like Roh Moo-hyun or go to jail like Park Geun-hye or Lee Myung-bak.

The opposition, naturally, attacked the president. In particular, the Conservatives cited as an example of damage to the image of the country the 2015 incident when former President Park Geun-hye visited China on the anniversary of the end of World War II and, together with Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin, stood on a podium in Tiananmen Square, while watching a military parade.

But looking closely at the situation, the author became convinced that in the end Seoul will habitually switch back to the American side, as it has done before. It is worth reiterating how at the beginning of the trade war with Japan, South Korea threateningly promised to tear up the GSOMIA agreement, but pulled back at the last moment. Or how South Korea seemingly refused to send its troops to join the anti-Iranian coalition, but then the scope of action of the South Korean contingent, which was supposed to fight Somali pirates, was suddenly expanded, and de facto it found itself in the same bloc with US ships. Or that Moon has met with American presidents more than any conservative president.

Turns out, the author was right all along! At first, Moon’s representatives began to declare that, based on grammatical constructions, Seoul supports the Olympic Games not in general, but at this particular moment, suggesting that this position may change in the future. Then, when on December 30, the presidential candidate from the ruling party, Lee Jae-myung, said that South Korea should not diplomatically boycott the Beijing Games, the Blue House remained silent.

Then, on January 7, 2022, hopes for inter-Korean negotiations on the sidelines of the games ultimately collapsed. The North Korean KCNA news agency announced, “We could not take part in the Olympics due to the hostile forces’ moves and the worldwide pandemic, but we would fully support the Chinese comrades in all their work to hold splendid and wonderful Olympic festival.” The “hostile forces’ moves” in this context include both the anti-Chinese campaign inspired by the United States, and the fact that earlier the IOC decided to suspend the North from the Beijing Olympics as a punishment for refusing to participate in last year’s Tokyo Games over COVID-19 concerns.

Noth Korea additionally criticized the United States for “getting evermore undisguised in their moves against China aimed at preventing the successful opening of the Olympics.”

And on January 12, 2022, an official from the Blue House said on condition of anonymity that Moon Jae-in was not considering participating in the Beijing Winter Olympics. The representative of the presidential administration added that a “corresponding” delegation will go to Beijing, expressing the hope that “the Olympic Games will contribute to peace and prosperity in Northeast Asia and the rest of the world, as well as improve inter-Korean relations.” The head of this delegation was first called Deputy Prime Minister Yoo Eun-hye, who is also the Minister of Education, but then it was announced that instead of the Deputy Prime Minister, simply the Minister of Culture, Sports and Tourism Hwang Hee, who went to the Summer Olympic Games in Tokyo last year, would participate.

However, Seoul still tried to straddle the fence. Simultaneously with the Olympic delegation, the South Korean National Assembly Speaker Park Byeong-seug went to China at the invitation of the Chairman of the Standing
Committee of the National People’s Congress Li Zhanshu. Formally, for “negotiations to discuss ways to intensify exchanges between the two countries, which this year celebrate the 30th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations.” The visit lasted from February 3-6, and (as a source close to political circles told Yonhap news agency by phone before the trip) on the day of the Olympics, the speaker attended the Games and headed the parliamentary delegation, which was separate from the official delegation of the government.

The North was “with everyone... in spirit.” Kim Jong-un sent a message to Xi Jinping emphasizing the invincible strategic relations between the two countries and noting that “the successful opening of the Beijing Winter Olympics, despite the global health crisis and unprecedented difficult circumstances, is another great victory won by socialist China.”

But here, it is worth talking about whether Seoul has managed to achieve anything other than trying to please China and dodging the bullet of joining the diplomatic boycott. On January 29, Hwang Hee announced that he would look for ways to convince China to lift the tacit ban on South Korean content, imposed in 2016, but instead there was a nationwide scandal with public outcry about national humiliation and cultural appropriation.

The reason for discontent was the fact that the opening ceremony of the Beijing Games was attended by a woman representing the Korean ethnic minority who wore a traditional Korean hanbok clothing, which some politicians viewed as an attempt by the Chinese government to publicly lay its claims to Korean culture and history. The official Seoul stated that it did not see anything wrong with the situation, and therefore did not intend to file a protest, but the two leading presidential candidates slammed both China and the current administration.

However, this story about yet another of Moon’s attempts to have it both ways would best be summed up with the phrase “We tried our best, you know the rest.”

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