

World Cup and Northeast Asia: An opportunity for a new diplomacy

by Brent Choi

Members of the Japanese royal family making an unprecedented trip to Seoul, 1 million fans crowding into the soccer stadiums and roughly 6 billion glued to TV broadcasts of the matches - the World Cup is not just a soccer tournament, it truly is an international phenomenon.

Korea

For South Korea the 2002 World Cup is a chance for a new momentum to carry the nation to new heights. It may sound grandiose, but it really does mark the beginning of a national transformation. Actually, South Korean leaders have used international events big and small over the past 20 or so years to cement national bonds and build up the country's image in the rest of the world. From 1950-1988 the country remained under the tight fist of authoritarian government, its eyes firmly set on rebuilding a nation tattered by war, ingrained corruption and over three decades of Japanese colonial rule. The 1988 Seoul Olympic Games allowed the nation to officially open up, above all, and triggered the need to democratize. Of course new-found freedom is not an easy thing to deal with, and the country has made its share of mistakes. The conflict between social classes deepened, regional bickering worsened and political parties failed to set up common visions for people to follow. Now 14 years later South Korea is given another chance to make up for the mistakes and leap forward once more. "This is really a chance to move away from our past of immature political mudslinging," former prime minister Lee Hong-gu said.

The nation also hopes to shed its international association with Korean War-era poverty and its reputation as a producer of cheap consumer and industrial goods. It looks to replace those images with the more promising picture of a country with a blossoming IT industry and top-notch infrastructure. More than 8 million of South Korea's 42 million people subscribe to broadband Internet services and over 30 million subscribe to mobile phone services. Samsung Electronics and other renowned domestic firms view the World Cup as a chance to promote their businesses. According to the Korea Development Institute the Cup is likely to bring 5.4 trillion won (\$4.4 billion) in value-added business and create jobs for an additional 360,000 South Koreans.

And then we have the politicians, those amazing tribal chieftains who could manipulate almost anything to promote themselves. President Kim Dae-jung wants the World Cup to serve as the grand finale of his term in office. Representative Chung Mong-joon, head of the Korea Football Association, a FIFA vice president and National Assemblyman, will likely try to use the tournament to promote his image as an international politician. And the eager presidential candidates, Roh Moo-hyun of the ruling Millennium Democratic Party and Lee Hoi-chang of the opposition Grand National Party, will also try to capitalize on the glory of the exciting soccer event.

ROK-Japan relations

Forget the fact that this is the first World Cup in Asia. Forget the fact that it's the first World Cup of the 21st century. South Korea and Japan, of all countries, co-hosting the event may be the most interesting chapter in the 72-year history of the World Cup. Ties between the two countries throughout the 20th century were filled with tragedy, with Japan's exploitation of the Korean people during its 35 years as their colonial master topping the list. It is often said Japan is Korea's closest neighbor, and her most distant. Of course there are many issues still to be addressed such as Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi of Japan paying his respects at the Yasukuni shrine or what most scholars call Japan's glossing over of the uglier details of countries' historical relationship.

But things are slowly changing for the better. Korean kimchi, pop songs and movies are gaining popularity in Japan, while South Korea goes equally wild over the latest Japanese fashions, singers and animation. The soccer tournament could really be a chance to expand those strengthening ties.

Emperor Akihito of Japan recently quoted a historical document that showed the imperial family has blood ties with the ancient Korean kingdom of Baekjae. "I, on my part, feel a certain kinship with Korea," the Emperor said, adding that both peoples should "try to understand correctly" the history of their nations. It was a fact rarely mentioned in Japanese society, and by speaking of it publicly the emperor was expressing his wish to visit Korea to relieve some of the regrettable feelings between the two nations. His timing was impeccable, too. But Japanese bureaucrats are still not as bold as the emperor himself. That's why Japan's Prince Takamado, a cousin of Emperor Akihito, and his wife Princess Hisako came to Seoul instead, which could still be viewed as progress.

Inter-Korean relations

While North Korea has maintained its official poker face in regard to the World Cup, reports say part of two of the matches have been broadcast by North Korean state television. The matches were shown, mostly unedited, just a day after each match took place. Other reports from Russia say the North even broadcast the May 26 friendly between France and South Korea. It is likely the broadcasts are a sign that Pyongyang wants to stay friendly with the South. Why now? Because with local elections just a week away in the South and the presidential vote coming in December, Seoul may undergo changes that could effectively end its patient attitude toward the North for at least five years. Pyongyang may realize time has run out for its usual "one step forward, two steps back" approach to the South.

Another sign of the North's change in attitude came at the start of the World Cup, when Pyongyang notified Seoul that it plans to drain some water from its Geumgangsán Dam in preparation for the summer rainy season. South Korea has been worried by the North's dam that reportedly has two large cracks in it. They said that they notified Seoul out of brotherly compassion and humanitarian reasons. Let's just say though, they have a lot further to go on those fronts.

China

One day when I was riding the subway in Seoul I heard the stops being announced in an unfamiliar language - Chinese. The South expects some 40,000 Chinese to visit during the World Cup. South Korea is already a popular tourist destination for Chinese tourists, and Seoul expects economic ties to expand rapidly between the two countries.

Perhaps it is not South Korea or Japan but China that is most excited about this World Cup, which is the first finals for its national team. There is also an economic side to Beijing's enthusiasm for the event. About 1 million tourists are expected to travel to East Asia during the month-long tournament, and China is considered a "hidden host" as many may make a side trip after the tournament to see some of the country's popular tourist attractions.

It would have been even better if President Jiang Zemin of China had made it to Seoul. Despite President Kim's official invitation China offered up a laundry list of reasons why he could not attend the opening ceremony and match. I strongly suspect that the "Pyongyang factor" was the real reason. It would be serious affront to North Korea, China's close ally, if the Chinese president chose to attend the World Cup rather than the North's Arirang Festival,

which is intended to compete for visitors with the international soccer event. But I think it is obvious which event Jiang will be tuning into in private.

To create community of our own

Despite thousands of years of history of ties between the countries of Northeast Asia, South Korea, China and Japan have relatively weak connections. They cannot compare with international bodies like the European Union, which has gathered under the common value of democracy and now is using a single currency. The three countries may be close historically and geographically but they actually share few common social values aside from Confucian traditions and the fact that they all use basic Chinese characters.

Maybe, just maybe, this World Cup could be a starting point. For many years the only things that managed to bring Seoul, Tokyo and Beijing together were cold, hard issues like politics, economy and diplomacy. Nothing common people can or want to relate to. Soccer is unique in this respect. All three countries are wild about the game, which reaches across class lines.

So why not create a Northeast Asian "Three Nations" soccer tournament. All three countries have professional soccer leagues, and they have now all played in a World Cup finals. Make it something like the European Cup, and let the national teams fight it out for the title of best Asian side. North Korea could be asked to join in later as well.

Let's establish a common Northeast Asian currency. Most of the countries in Northeast Asia went through a rough time coping with the financial crisis from 1997-1999. It's high time the three countries come up with a common accounting system that could respond more effectively to a liquidity crunch and better benefit from trade and tourism.

Finally, we should regularize four-way talks between Seoul, Pyongyang, Tokyo and Beijing. Although we already have the ASEAN plus three meeting, it hasn't yielded much in the way of results. A four-party forum would not only contribute to improving the overall environment for regional business and resolving other problems but could make some significant impacts on resolving problems related to North Korea.