

2018 Winter Olympics held in Korea under shadow of war

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The 2018 Winter Olympic Games opened in South Korea last Friday under the official theme of “peace,” with a ceremony that included a choreographed candlelight depiction of a white dove and a rendition of John Lennon’s “Imagine.” Thomas Bach, the president of the International Olympic Committee, declared that it would send a “powerful message of peace to the world.”

Bach noted, with no apparent sense of irony, that the 2016 Olympics had officially provided a “message of hope” to refugees, in a year that ended with more than 5,000 refugees drowned attempting to cross the Mediterranean, with many thousands more since.

This year’s bromides should be taken no more seriously. The reality is that not since the 1936 Olympics in Hitler’s Germany have the games been held under such an immediate threat of war. Overshadowing the events in South Korea is the real possibility that the United States will launch a “bloody nose” strike on North Korean military facilities in the immediate aftermath of the games, which could trigger a nuclear conflagration and lead to the deaths of hundreds of thousands, if not tens of millions, on the Korean Peninsula.

The Trump administration has made clear that it will allow no let-up in its insistence that Pyongyang unconditionally submit to US demands for an end to its nuclear weapons program, or face military action. The decision for the North and South to compete on the same Olympic team—though welcomed by millions throughout the region in the hope that it might signal a lessening of tensions—was met with unconcealed hostility by the Trump administration.

This was epitomized by Vice President Mike Pence’s arrogant display at the opening ceremony, where he remained seated and stony-faced as the joint Korean team entered the stadium to a standing ovation. The

American vice president left no doubt that Washington regards South Korea, occupied by some 35,000 US troops, as a semi-colony that should know its place.

Pence’s attendance at the Olympics was converted into a tour preparing for war, including a visit of US ballistic missile systems in Alaska and trips to US allies in both Japan and South Korea. Speaking last Wednesday in Tokyo, Pence declared, “We will not allow North Korea to hide behind the Olympic banner the reality that they enslave their people and threaten the wider region.”

This from the representative of a government that between 1950-53 carried out a war that killed at least three million Koreans, and is now carrying out a massive military buildup in the region, including the stationing of nuclear-capable B-2 bombers in Guam, in preparation for war.

Contrary to its supposed “international ideal,” the Olympics has always been an arena for the virulent promotion of nationalism and geopolitical interests by the world’s major capitalist powers, from Hitler’s efforts to use the games as a demonstration of Aryan supremacy, to the determination of the US to demonstrate its supremacy over the Soviet Union throughout the Cold War.

This Olympics, like those that have preceded it, has been dominated by the most extreme expressions of nationalism and chauvinism, particularly by the United States, summed up in the belligerent chant of “USA, USA!” One would think that a country with size, wealth and military might of the United States would have no need to engage in such endless self-promotion, which assumes a jingoistic, hyper-militaristic character. It can only be explained by the crisis eating away at American capitalism and the growing challenges to Washington’s strivings for global hegemony.

In addition to the US military buildup against North

Korea, the 2018 Olympics have been dominated by a ban on Russia by the IOC Executive Committee last December, under pressure from the United States. The allegations of systematic Russian doping are largely based on the testimony of Grigory Rodchenkov, who ran Russia's anti-doping laboratory before moving into the protective custody of the American government in 2016.

While 168 Russian athletes are competing in the games, they are subject to additional intrusive drug testing, while all Russian flags have been banned, and the Olympic theme has been played in place of the Russian anthem at medal ceremonies where Russians have won. The IOC announced this month that the Russian athletes and coaches who had their lifetime bans on charges of doping overturned would still not be invited to participate. In 2016, Russian athletes in the Paralympics Games and track and field teams were banned from participating in the Rio Olympics.

These measures are blatantly aimed at presenting Russia as an international pariah state. The hypocrisy of the supposed outrage over alleged Russian doping is made clear by the revelations of systematic sexual abuse of adolescent female gymnasts by the USA gymnastics head doctor Larry Nassar. The American media has been dominated for months by reports of this abuse, which was systematically covered up by US Olympic Committee officials who knew of the scandal for over a year before it came to light, yet did nothing. The same Western governments and corporate media who marched in lockstep in support of banning Russia have made no suggestions that the "Stars and Stripes" should be barred from the South Korean Olympics and the singing of the US national anthem forbidden, even though the abuse of American athletes goes far beyond any violations committed in the alleged doping of their Russian counterparts.

This disparity only underscores the fact that the penalization of Russian athletes is not a defense of any supposed integrity of Olympic sport—long tarnished by unending corruption scandals, jingoism and corporate money—but rather part of a ferocious campaign of demonization of Russia to prepare the population for war.

Notwithstanding the official paeans to "peace" at the current Olympics, the world's major capitalist powers are responding with their own military buildup to the

announcement in the latest US National Defense Strategy document that the United States is preparing for "great power" conflict with "revisionist states," principally Russia and China. In the last week, France, Germany, Spain and the US have all announced massive increases in military spending.

As with every Olympics, the reactionary geopolitical and corporate interests behind the 2018 Winter Games contrast with the extraordinary physical prowess, immense talent and genuinely sympathetic character of individual athletes competing in the games. It is not their fault that they are compelled to perform under the crushing weight of militarism, jingoism and commercialism that pervade the Olympics.

Tens of millions of dollars will be made by major corporations that have descended on Korea, including official Olympic partners Coca Cola, General Electric, Dow and Intel, while television networks reap hundreds of millions in ad sales.

For a very small number of competing athletes, victory will mean millions of dollars in product endorsements, while those who fail to make it into the winners' circle return home to face all of the social problems besetting the population at large.

As the character of scandal-scarred Olympic skater Tonya Harding wryly observes in the recently released film "I, Tonya,": "When you come in fourth at the Olympics, you don't get endorsement deals. You get the 6 am shift at Spud City."

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