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The Diplomatic Background to the 1966 Soccer World Cup

The 1966 World Cup, held in England, has a key place in English sporting history, as England won it. So far, this has been England's only victory in this important tournament. The final itself—in which England beat West Germany 4-2—has become iconic in English memory with, as John Clarke and Chas Critcher point out, even those born afterwards having a “received memory” of it. Beyond this memorable match, a number of other features of the tournament have entered popular memory. One of these was the surprise team of the tournament, North Korea. This side was largely unknown at the time and qualified by playing only two matches when the bulk of the Asian and African nations walked out of the qualifying stages. Widely touted as makeweights who would lose all their games by huge margins, the North Koreans did well in the group stages and advanced to the quarter-finals. There they took a surprise 3-0 lead over Portugal before collapsing to a 5-3 defeat and making an honorable exit.

An interesting aspect of the North Korean presence in England that is not as widely known as their success on the pitch is the diplomatic background. The United Kingdom did not recognize the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, and when it became clear in November 1965 that a football team under this name was coming to England, the Foreign Office was faced with a dilemma. To allow the team to come to the UK would offend South Korea, among others, and set a precedent for other non-recognized states, particularly East Germany. But to prevent them from coming would be a disastrous public relations exercise, for sport was widely held to be a neutral and apolitical activity in which the government should not interfere. Moreover, as the government had already granted £500,000 to support the event, this form of diplomatic muscle-flexing would have been embarrassing. The Foreign Office and other government departments duly worked with the football authorities to come to a compromise. This allowed the North Koreans entry but limited their opportunities for national display: for example, they had to play under the name of “North Korea” rather than their preferred (and FIFA-recognized) DPRK title, and flag-flying and national anthems were both restricted.

This paper explores this example of sports diplomacy through the papers of the Foreign Office and of the Football Association. Additional material is drawn from memoirs of some of those involved and from the national and footballing press.

The paper is the first academic study of this incident. It helps to develop our understanding of British sports diplomacy of the Cold War period, and provides a good case study of decision-making and responsibility over a sensitive issue.