

## REVIEW ESSAY

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

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The 1988 Seoul Olympic Games were a watershed event in contemporary global history. The first in fourteen years without a major boycott, these Olympics became a critical avenue for ending the Cold War, for hastening the democratic transition in the Republic of Korea, and for celebrating the arrival of regional East Asia in contemporary world affairs. Richard Pound writes in the first instance, he tells us, out of concern that this epic story not be lost in the rush of subsequent events.

*Five Rings Over Korea* analyzes key diplomatic interventions which helped overcome the geopolitical struggles unleashed by the 1981 award of the Olympic Games to Seoul, contributing to the eventually triumphant Olympic celebration in the South Korean capital in 1988. In the course of framing his story, the author takes note of such crucial factors as Gorbachev's *glasnost* and new Eastern policies, the moderating influence of the Chinese leadership, and the atypically judicious actions of the American government. Against this backdrop of superpower restraint and synergistic pressure on the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, the herculean sacrifices, organizational brilliance, and unprecedented solidarity of the South Korean nation, together with Roh Tae Woo's steady leadership and bold initiatives, are assigned chief credit for the success of the Seoul Olympic Games.

But *Five Rings* focuses on a different actor in this complex matrix of institutions and forces: the International Olympic Committee. The greater part of the book consists of a detailed chronicle of the four and a half years of negotiations between North and South Korea undertaken and stage-managed by the IOC in the person of its president, the Barcelonan diplomat and banker Juan Antonio Samaranch. Mr. Pound's narrative is constructed from internal IOC documents, minutes, and correspondence, and from contemporaneous conversations and after-the-fact interviews with Mr. Samaranch and other IOC operatives whose political expertise brought them to the fore. (The Romanian Alexandru Siperco, the Pakistanian Aswini Kumar, the Senegalese Keba MBaye, and the Chinese He Zhenliang, are notable among them). As the senior IOC member in Canada, a long-time presence in the

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IOC's executive board, and a member of Mr. Samaranch's inner circle, the author has made the most of his privileged access to these materials to compose and sustain an argument about the IOC itself.

As one of the few, and certainly the fullest of insider descriptions of the contemporary IOC's geopolitical engagements, *Five Rings* will stand hereafter as a required touchstone for any serious academic, media, or policy analyst of international sport and politics. While the book's impact on popular discourse about the IOC is harder to predict, Mr. Pound's IOC colleagues must surely be grateful for the counterpoint he has offered to recent scandal-mongering journalism, particularly in Western Europe, which has centered on the organization's commercial and medical policies to the exclusion of its multinational initiatives and diplomatic successes. Mr. Samaranch's reputation has particularly been yellowed by this media campaign, and, though *Five Rings* overlooks the matter, the president is by no means unopposed within an IOC membership subjected to his ever-increasing *dirigisme*. The record of political achievement depicted in this book will surely do more to recolor the image of the IOC president than all of Lausanne's embarrassingly sycophantic publications combined.

Mr. Samaranch is the uncompromised and uncompromising hero, *sub specie diplomaticus*, of the tale *Five Rings* has to tell. Mr. Pound makes no bones about this main argument of his book: anyone who believes that the first duty of the Olympic Movement is to peace and expanded international cooperation, or who appreciates Olympic contributions to Korean and South African political progress, must give credit where credit is due. *Five Rings* aims to demonstrate that without Mr. Samaranch's consummate diplomatic skills, indefatigable energy, high-level network of contacts, and particular leadership style, the IOC would today remain mired in its previous geopolitical ineptitude and inconsequentiality.

In an opening chapter, Mr. Pound summarily reviews IOC responses to the "external" political challenges of past Olympic Games, from Berlin 1936 to the boycotted Olympics of 1976, 1980, and 1984. While rightly contemptuous of a standard media caricature of the IOC as a "moribund, antediluvian collection of aging, rich, and titled men completely unconnected with reality" (p. 63), Mr. Pound serves up some telling anecdotes to show that the "separation of sport and politics" rhetoric of past IOC leaders was generally a fig-leaf for their own political inadequacies. Throughout this period, Mr. Pound writes, ". . . 'political'. . . problems were beyond the ability of a part-time organization having no particular international status; the IOC was not equipped, either organizationally or by disposition, to deal with such issues. Any action by the IOC tended to be in response to a crisis or to someone else's initiative" (p. 18). According to the author, the IOC's reliance on state-level politicians to solve conflicts bearing upon the Games led inevitably to frustration and tragedy.

Mr. Pound associates the historic abandonment of this failed strategy with two decisions taken at the extraordinary 1984 IOC session in Lausanne, held in the aftermath of Los Angeles. The first was not to sanction National Olympic Committees who had boycotted the LA Games. This entailed formal recognition that NOCs are not always politically free to discharge their Olympic duties, as well as the corollary that the IOC, NOCs and other Olympic bodies have positive duties to

actively and continuously engage government entities and state politicians in Olympic affairs. The second decision was to restate in absolute terms the IOC's commitment to Seoul for the Games of 1988. Together these twin resolves launched the IOC into unprecedented diplomatic activism over the next four years.

According to Mr. Pound, a certain "what have we done?" attitude appeared among some IOC members after their 1981 Baden Baden decision for Korea. The Soviet downing of KAL 007 and the DPRK's premeditated murder in Rangoon of fourteen senior ROK government officials within one month of 1983 further awakened members neither previously thoughtful about North/South issues on the Korean peninsula nor informed about their sensitive place in geopolitical dynamics. Crass opportunists within the "Olympic Family," drawing on the basest sort of European Orientalism, were not slow to try to take advantage of the situation. French NOC president Nelson Paillou, in the most infamous of examples, did not shrink from turning a ceremonial speech on an IOC anniversary occasion into a plea to remove the 1988 Games from Seoul to Barcelona (thus leaving the field of contenders for 1992 open for Paris).

While the international political establishment remained preoccupied with the participation of the state socialist countries in Los Angeles, Koreans themselves had long been galvanized by the announcement for Seoul. By the time of the IOC extraordinary session in December 1984, ROK president Chun and sports authorities in the South had issued repeated letters of assurance that Seoul would respect the Olympic Charter in every way and that the absence of diplomatic relations with the socialist countries would present no difficulty. Important steps toward transforming relations with the People's Republic of China were being taken by the ROK government and sports authorities, and the PRC was clearly signalling its intentions of pursuing an independent policy. Three North-South talks at Panmunjon had been held to discuss joint Korean teams and, though unsuccessful, further talks had been publicly proposed. In a revealing motif carried through the rest of the story, Mr. Pound writes that "rumors" of secret North-South negotiations were reaching the IOC. In September 1984, Mr. Samaranch offered to host such meetings in Lausanne and in November, the IOC Executive Board gave its belated approval.

Meanwhile, the suggestion of sharing events between Seoul and Pyongyang as a solution had begun to percolate rapidly through the backstage conversations. In a revelation that will intrigue students of international policy formation, Italian foreign minister Giulio Andreotti is credited with originating the idea in a June conversation with his ROK counterpart. The South Korean government quickly rejected the idea as an invitation for sabotage, and the North was publicly contemptuous while privately sounding out Samaranch about the possibility. By November, the Soviets had picked up the theme of shared games as part of its growing propaganda effort against Seoul.

At the Mexico City ANOC meeting which overwhelmingly declared support for the Seoul Games, Kim Yu Sun, IOC member in the DPRK, asked Samaranch directly if the IOC was prepared to announce that the Games would be held jointly in the North and the South. That same month, Fidel Castro wrote to Samaranch supporting the proposal, which became known to all IOC members at the extraordinary session in Lausanne. Anxious and mixed signals from both the DPRK and the ROK ensued,

as the world press began to report in earnest on the proposal. By July of 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev had become general secretary of the Soviet Communist Party, and Roh Tae Woo had retained the SLOOC chairmanship while setting a clear course for the presidency as new chief of the ruling Democratic Justice Party. Both Korean NOCs had confirmed their willingness to attend an IOC-sponsored meeting in Lausanne. By the time this first face-to-face meeting took place in October, the discussion had escalated to demands and rejections over full "co-hosting" of the Games by the two Koreas. President Samaranch and the IOC had embarked on an unprecedented voyage of high risk/high gain, not only with respect to the Seoul Olympics but to the world prestige and legitimacy of the entire Olympic Movement.

Over six chapters and 200 pages, Mr. Pound reconstructs in minute detail the complex and multilateral credos, antagonisms, posturings, misunderstandings, interventions, negotiations, and executive actions which produced the four North-South meetings held in Lausanne under IOC sponsorship and supervision. The initiatives and counter-initiatives continued right up until the opening of the Games, with the extraordinary end-result of only seven boycotting countries. Perhaps the author's professional experience as a lawyer is responsible for his appreciation that the diplomat's art lies in the minute scrutiny and careful staging of continuously shifting adversarial situations. In any case, scholars should be grateful that Mr. Pound has resisted any temptation to scrimp on his narrative. No existing text provides more fundamental education both for Olympic analysts unfamiliar with the conduct of international diplomacy and for international relations specialists ignorant of the significance and role of the Olympic Games in their domain. Indeed, appearing amidst the multilateral negotiations over North Korean nuclear policy, *Five Rings* has a topicality beyond its immediate subject matter.

Mr. Samaranch's wisdom, as Mr. Pound interprets it, lay in clear recognition of synergies on the strategic level which in turn permitted flexibility on the tactical level. As long as North and South Korea were kept together at the table, the North's state socialist and anti-American allies were limited in their capacity to undermine the Seoul Games. Since a breakthrough which would bring DPRK participation might always occur, and the IOC was so boldly signalling a willingness to accommodate North Korea, space was opened for states like the PRC to develop an independent policy. At the same time, forces favourable to participation within the USSR and the East European countries were better able to hold off hard-liners within their own state-party-Olympic apparatuses. The DPRK's own initiatives against Seoul were likewise moderated.

The IOC's "historic offer" of considering the staging of some events in the North, that is, of violating a core tenet of its own Charter that Games are awarded to single cities only, made it difficult for critics politically schooled to see the organization as a transnational instrument of Western capitalism and anti-communism. The consternation, real or imagined, that IOC flexibility toward North Korea was believed to be causing the ROK and the Pacific alliance, further loosened the binariness of classical Cold War logic. This strategic policy left the IOC in maximal position to take advantage of the purely contingent outbreak of Gorbachevism which was to ensue.

What I have elsewhere called the “participation mystique” of the Olympic Movement, a commitment to maximal international participation in the Games as its ultimate and absolute value, kept the IOC leadership oriented in line with this strategic geopolitical synergy. Tactically, a clear path of action followed for Mr. Samaranch and his colleagues. The concrete issues in the ebb and flow of negotiations centered on how many and which events were considered for the North, the name of the Games and of their organizing committees, the location of the opening and closing ceremonies and the torch relay, the division of television and rights income, and the opening of the North-South border, at least to the Olympic Family. The art Mr. Samaranch displayed month after month was knowing when to appear to harden the IOC’s positions when the ROK, her allies, and the international sports federations, security forces, and multinational corporations contracted to the Games grew overly nervous. The main challenge was thus deftly met of keeping IOC control of the agenda and not letting the negotiations be high-jacked by either principal or any third party.

Perhaps the chief compass which allowed Mr. Samaranch and his advisers to move so adroitly over such complex terrain was the IOC leadership’s belief from the outset that the negotiations would never lead to an agreement. Mr. Pound is perfectly direct on this point. “The IOC had to appear to be conducting the negotiations in good faith and it did, in fact, conduct them in good faith. The fact that the IOC did not believe that the negotiations could ever result in a mutually satisfactory compromise to share the Games in an equitable fashion between the North and the South was irrelevant in the conduct of the negotiations. Had they been successful, there is no doubt that the IOC would have agreed to the split venue. The IOC also did its best to create conditions that might bring about an agreement, despite its realistic political assessment that it simply would not be possible to get the North Koreans to comply with the myriad responsibilities of a host country of the Olympic Games” (p. 87).

One may wonder a bit whether things really were so crystal clear as far back as 1985, when the largely European IOC leadership and backstage advisers were just beginning to be educated about Korean society and inter-Korean politics. (It was not apparent to this reviewer from conversations with IOC leaders in 1986, for example, that they yet grasped that the border-opening issue alone would prevent any agreement, let alone why.) But stipulating that Mr. Pound’s account is accurate history here and not retrospective aggrandizement, these passages are still likely to raise the hackles of some readers.

Nowhere in *Five Rings* can one discover very much about what Mr. Samaranch’s, the author’s, or any IOC leader’s private views might have been on the proper moral stance toward the situation of Korean division *per se* (that is, above all for Koreans), much less any consideration of whether IOC political policy should have derived chiefly from such socio-moral facts. The IOC response to such questioning would surely be that the organization does not, cannot, and should *not* take any partisan position on political conflicts (with the exception of South Africa, where apartheid was Olympically redefined as a crime against humanity, not just a local political condition). Moreover, though this would hardly be said openly by Lausanne, any revelation of the personal politico-moral views of Mr. Samaranch and

his kitchen cabinet would be equally destructive in the current *l'état c'est moi* condition of the organization.

Many informed commentators on the current Olympic Movement have judged this reticence to be necessary, wise, and productive, though it has created a void which conspiracy-theorizing British, Scandinavian, and German journalists have been happy to fill in. But more responsible humanistic critics of the IOC will likely take this attitude as further evidence for what the most dedicated among them, John Hoberman, calls the "amoral universalism" of the Olympic Movement: the Games above all, and if they do geopolitical good, it's by accident.

Something else is more bothersome to this reviewer, and perhaps will be to other foreign researchers who worked in South Korea during the period, as well as to Korean protagonists and scholars themselves. Besides the public statements, official negotiating positions, and behind-the-scenes communications of a few elite interlocutors, *Five Rings* takes little real interest in and offers scant knowledge of Korean points of view of the circumstances, events, and negotiations analyzed in the book. This is certainly understandable with respect to North Korean society, culture, and politics, given the difficulty for any Westerners of gaining reliable information. But it is rather curious with respect to South Koreans with whom the IOC leadership, including Mr. Pound, worked so intensively for so many years.

The renaming of the chief negotiators for the two sides as "North Kim" and "South Kim" -- presented as a humorous convenience to readers -- would be less irritating if the author showed any awareness of the Korean system of corporate kin-groups which generates such a paucity, from the Western point of view, of surnames. More to the point, the members of the Korean delegations are listed, with official titles, but it will strike anyone familiar with Korean political practice that the IOC, at least in this account, spent little energy discovering who these persons really were. Mr. Pound makes the point of how extraordinary it was for South Korean political authorities to trust the IOC with negotiating what was (and is) only the most important question of national existence. But he does not pause to wonder whether that trust was really so absolute. Figures like premiers Nakasone of Japan and Zhao Ziyang of China, George Schultz, Frank Carlucci, and James Lilley of the United States, and Mikhail Gorbachev, Edouard Shevardnadze, and Viacheslav Gavrilin of the Soviet Union make cameo appearances in the narrative of *Five Rings*. If Mr. Pound even senses the possibility that the IOC negotiations might have been but one, and not necessarily the most important layer of the diplomatic onion, he does not share such a thought with his readers. Nor does Mr. Samaranch ever voice such a suspicion, in this book or any other context to this reviewer's knowledge, making the subtitle of *Five Rings* perhaps a little ironic.

Another layer in the onion was South Korean public opinion. Broad segments of it did not appreciate the IOC's efforts in the way the organization seems to have thought, given the depth of longing in the South for rapprochement with the North. To a great extent, this was a linguistic and intercultural translation problem. When not only urban students, but small farmers, monks, nurses, and artists complained of the IOC's statements there could not be "co-hosted" Games, they used the Korean term that came to them from press conferences and communiqués, *kong dong che*. But far from the legalistic meanings the IOC negotiators were attaching to the English

term for co-hosting, the Korean expression *kong don che* connotes neighbourly sharing, solidarity, sociability, commensalism. Thus, the IOC was regularly understood to, be saying that these could not be Games of friendly exchange with North Korea!

If *Five Rings Over Korea* may not contain the whole story, it nevertheless makes an inestimable contribution, not only to understanding the recent transformation and achievements of the IOC, but to outlining its future as well. Mr. Samaranch's presidency is in its final years. Both IOC insiders and close observers of the organization fear a succession crisis. Mr. Pound's book makes a powerful case that the IOC will only regress if its new generation of leaders fails to possess the political aptitudes and diplomatic skills required for continued effectiveness on the world stage. Inadvertently, *Five Rings* gives further evidence that future leaders must be able to carefully monitor how state and national security actors may be operating in relation to IOC activities and to develop a more sophisticated capacity for intercultural analysis of the reception of its messages.