Background

South Korea will host the 2018 XXIII Winter Games in less than three months. The event will be held in PyeongChang, located about 40 miles from the border with North Korea. An estimated 2,500 athletes from 90 nations will be participating in 102 games, which are expected to attract large crowds, with locals accounting for 70 percent of prospective attendees and foreigners the remaining 30 percent.

Although South Korea is ordinarily a low-risk country for most visitors, the Winter Olympics is taking place at a time of heightened global tensions with North Korea, raising the ire of possible aggression from Pyongyang against its southern neighbour. Historically, the threat of violence at the Olympic Games is not uncommon; Chechen Islamist militants threatened the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia. During the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing, a man wielding a knife killed an American businessman and wounded his wife and their tour guide. But the threat from North Korea is atypical; whereas Russia deployed 40,000 security personnel to protect the Sochi games, South Korea’s threat originates from a heavily militarised and nuclear-armed state that increasingly feels itself under attack internationally. North Korea indeed can carry out a destructive attack, but does it have the intent?

Escalating Tensions Between North Korea and the United States

Sanctions against North Korea have deeply frustrated the regime since they were enforced in 2006. This year, however, has seen many incidents that have escalated tensions with the West. Subsequently, a long standing defence pact between South Korea, Japan, and the US, has worsened regional relations in the Asia Pacific, which could lead to military confrontation.

In July, North Korea successfully tested two inter-continental ballistic missiles for the first time. In August, and again in September following fresh international sanctions, North Korea launched missiles over Hokkaido in Japan, with residents awakening to bomb sirens. Pyongyang continues to conduct nuclear testing despite international sanctions, with its sixth atomic test carried out in September. The regime has released photographs of its military plans to attack the US territory of Guam, to demonstrate its military capabilities. As North Korea has pursued its nuclear program and trialled intercontinental ballistic missiles, US President
Donald Trump’s tactless approach to diplomacy has inflamed the situation and significantly increased hostilities. In a speech to the United Nations, Trump threatened to ‘totally destroy North Korea’ if necessary to protect the US and its allies, and suggested that ‘Rocket Man [Kim Jong-Un] is on a suicide mission for himself and for his regime.’ Although Trump has also stated that war is undesirable, the speech was nevertheless portrayed by North Korea as evidence of a declaration of war by the US on the world stage. In their eyes, any action by North Korea becomes a legitimate act of self-defence.

The US is meanwhile making its presence known in the region, conducting naval and air exercises during recent months. In mid-October, a US navy destroyer sailed near disputed islands in the South China Sea, angering China. The following week, two US bombers flew from Guam to South Korea as part of an air show, and seemingly as a show of force, leading Pyongyang to declare that the Korean peninsula ‘is on the eve of explosion.’

North Korea’s Conduct as a Deterrence Strategy

To date, the escalation between North Korea and the United States has been verbal and limited to political grandstanding. This heated rhetoric is intended to portray the capability and willingness of both states to engage in military confrontation, should the need occur. From North Korea’s perspective, America’s recent history of foreign intervention is a direct threat to its survival. A show of force by the regime should, therefore, be viewed as a deterrence tactic based on the assumption that nuclear-armed states with large armed forces are seldom challenged. For Pyongyang, its nuclear program is similarly defensive and intended as a safeguard against military aggression by other nations. Nevertheless, military intervention cannot be ruled out, and it is also advisable for travellers to register with their relevant government travel agencies to stay informed of worsening relations.

Threat to the Games from North Korea

At the time of writing, the escalation has not resulted in any direct or discernible threat against the Winter Olympics, and visitors are expected to attend the Games safely. In the event of a military confrontation, it seems plausible that Pyongyang would conduct a low scale attack against the South Korean military to create minor disruption and deter visitors. Here, North Korea’s changing behaviour during international sporting events gives some insight to how it may be viewing the Winter Olympics, as well as likely future intentions.

When Seoul hosted the 1988 Summer Olympics, North Korea was initially eager to co-host. Following failed negotiations between the two sides, North Korea sought to sabotage the games and deter athletes and spectators from attending. In November 1987, North Korea blew up a civilian plane flying from Iraq to South Korea, killing all 115 people on board. Such an action would almost certainly not be repeated in the present day. Firstly, aviation security has significantly improved, and regular transport links to South Korea have been hardened with technology and improved intelligence sharing between regional allies. Secondly, the US military has installed anti-missile systems in the south, which are designed to intercept and destroy a missile midway through its flight. More notably, however, the current escalation ensures that North Korea is on a very short leash with extremely low international tolerance for any attack against civilians. Targeting civilians would escalate the crisis and justify a foreign military intervention. Another consideration suggesting that the regime will not seek to attack civilians is that with international opposition against North Korea increasing, the regime has an active interest in maintaining ties with its main ally, China. Beijing is due to host the Winter Olympics in 2022, so any direct action against civilians could adversely affect attendance at the games, which would be highly undesirable for China’s leadership.

For the Winter Olympics, the prospect was again raised that North Korea could field a joint Korean women’s ice hockey team, and could share in hosting some of the events. However, these talks have failed to amount to anything, and in response, the regime is expected to make its presence known in some form. Here, a more likely scenario follows on from North Korea’s behaviour during the 2002 FIFA World Cup, jointly co-hosted by Japan and South Korea. On the same day that South Korea was competing for third place, North Korea intentionally targeted the South
Korean navy. Military action such as this – which does not impact travellers, but does garner attention and distract the host nation – is possible. South Korean military forces are also more likely to bear the brunt of a potential attack, as opposed to foreign actors within South Korea because retaliation against North Korea would be constrained. Such constraint would be far less likely if the regime targeted visiting teams or civilians, especially if the teams are allies of the United States.

North Korea has consistently maintained that it will attack the United States, but only if it is provoked. This approach appears to stand. In September, North Korea delivered an open letter to western embassies, urging governments to ‘discharge their due mission and duty in realising the desire of mankind for international justice and peace with sharp vigilance against the heinous and reckless moves of the Trump administration trying to drive the world into a horrible nuclear disaster.’ The letter is unprecedented and implies that Pyongyang is not seeking war, but will act if it faces a direct threat. It also suggests that the regime is feeling increasingly under pressure, which could make its decision-making more erratic and unpredictable.

Ultimately, a significant security incident is unlikely, although attempts at disrupting the Olympics and using the opportunity to place North Korea centre stage are possible. Such behaviour would be most unsettling in the lead up to the Games as this would deter spectators. However, North Korea is unlikely to target visitors directly and will probably focus its attention on the South Korean military.

Potential for an Islamic State Attack

Although the threat of terrorism is a global problem, especially at international sporting events, the risk to visitors attending the Games is relatively low. To execute an explosive mass casualty attack with the police and intelligence services on high alert would be difficult given the extraordinary security measures at the event. But a vehicle-ramming or blunt force incident would not, especially on the streets leading to the stadium where security may be diffused. South Korea has suffered a string of terror threats since the beginning of the year. Among the cases, nine were bomb threats, four were bioterrorism involving white powders, and the remaining was a case in which a criminal threatened to go on a shooting rampage in Gwanghwamun Square, central Seoul. Homegrown terrorism like the 2013 Boston marathon bombing or the failed suicide attack at Stade de France in Paris in 2015, should not be discounted as the authorities cannot monitor every potential threat to the event.

To protect the games, South Korea is deploying 5,000 armed personnel, more than double the number that was used during the 2002 FIFA World Cup. The PyeongChang Organizing Committee for the 2018 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games has also employed a private security firm to manage X-ray screening for events with 500 staff to carry out screenings. Highlighting that the South Koreans are not solely focused on the threat from North Korea, an inspector with the SWAT team responsible for ensuring safety at the games has explained that security professionals ‘will search Olympic venues to check for bombs, protect athletes and visitors, and guard against any attempts to assassinate key figures.’ Another benefit for South Korea in potentially minimising the scale of a potential attack is its strong gun control laws, which limit lone actors from accessing weapons and carrying out mass casualty attacks.

Government Travel Advice for South Korea

Government travel advisories do not currently see a threat from North Korea against visitors on South Korean soil. The British Government notes that: ‘There remains a threat of further missile or nuclear tests, which could lead to further instability in the region. In the past, these haven’t affected daily life.’ However, given North Korea’s military provocation against South Korea, all travel advisories suggest that foreign citizens stay informed about the situation particularly during US-South Korean military exercises (usually occurring in March and August) which often lead to increased hostility. The security situation could escalate with little warning.

Overall, South Korea is a safe destination for most travellers. The most common risk is non-confrontational petty crime
which occurs most frequently in metropolitan areas, especially in Seoul and Busan. There have been some reports of more serious crimes, namely sexual assault, which the South Korean government has made moves to combat. If spending time in Seoul, visitors should be aware that the districts of Itaewon, Sinchon, Myeongdon, Gangnam and Hongdae present a higher risk of crime due to their hub as entertainment and shopping districts, and a higher prevalence of drug use. In Seoul, most drug-related offences occur in Gangnam and Yongsan districts.

The South Korean police force is competent and responsive. A special ‘Tourist Police’ unit exists specifically to patrol areas popular with tourists and to assist if foreigners fall victim to crime. Their officers are fluent in English. Since the Tourist Police was introduced in 2013, street crimes against tourists and foreigners have dropped. Foreigners who are arrested by the police are also treated with respect and will receive due process. In the event of a significant threat or counter-terrorism operation, a well-trained and well-equipped SWAT team will be deployed.

South Korea is welcoming to foreign visitors and is one of the most pro-American and pro-Western countries in the world. Approximately 28,500 American troops are stationed in the country. Occasionally, anti-American sentiment will arise as a result of actions by American soldiers, but these incidents are isolated. Protests against some American policies may also occur sporadically. Large scale demonstrations also happen more generally and should be avoided as they could turn violent.

The Australian Government notes that you are twice as likely to be killed in a vehicle-related accident in South Korea than in Australia. Speeding and running red lights are common, mainly by buses, taxis and motorcyclists. Taxis often do not have seatbelts. Pedestrians should not expect that vehicles will stop at pedestrian crossings and should be extra vigilant when crossing the road.

Medical care is generally of a high standard. However, treatment can be expensive, and not all doctors speak English. Hospitals usually require confirmation of insurance or a deposit before proceeding with treatment. Visitors should ensure that they hold travel insurance. Before receiving treatment, travellers should ensure that their insurance covers the procedure.