

NPR Script

KELLY MCEVERS, HOST:

North Korea and South Korea made a deal today. The North will take part in the Winter Olympics that are being hosted by the South. The games open on February 9. It is the first breakthrough in direct talks between the two Koreas, talks that haven't happened in two years. NPR's Elise Hu reports.

ELISE HU, BYLINE: South Korea is about to host the Winter Olympics for the first time in the country's history. Tickets are sold. Venues are ready. But for a while now, Seoul couldn't be sure how its northern neighbor would behave when all eyes are on the games.

IAN BREMMER: The South Koreans are extremely interested in making sure they go off without a hitch.

HU: Analyst Ian Bremmer who heads the Eurasia Group says that led to an opening for the latest talks.

BREMMER: If you're North Korea, you recognize that you've got the South Koreans over a barrel here because they really want not to have escalation vis-a-vis the United States and North Korea in this point.

HU: Cocooned by cameras and dressed in a black suit, North Korea's lead negotiator and his delegation crossed over the border by foot to walk the hundred yards or so to a conference building for the meeting. Seated across from one another at a long, rectangular table, both sides sounded earnest about improving frosty ties. North Korea's negotiator, Ri Son Gwon, actually compared the relationship to the weather.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

RI SON GWON: (Through interpreter) It wouldn't be an overstatement to say the inter-Korean relationship is more frozen than the natural climate. But despite the cold weather, the people's desire for the improvement of inter-Korean relationship remains unfrozen.

HU: In the talks, North Korea swiftly agreed to send a delegation to the Winter Olympics. The delegation will include athletes, high-level visitors, a press corps and even a cheering squad, which is standard for North Korea's appearances at sporting events.

JOHN DELURY: Yeah, they're a big deal. But I'm not a cheerleading expert, you know?

HU: John Delury is a North Korea watcher and a professor at Seoul's Yonsei University. He says South Korea's main hope is that the scope of conversations widen to security issues. But Delury argues since North Korea feels it is most threatened by the U.S., the U.S. should join in at some point.

DELURY: The Trump administration needs to find a way to use the opportunity of improved inter-Korean relations to get in there and start doing some serious diplomatic work on how do you lower the tensions; how do you convince the North Koreans to agree to some limits and suspension of their program, and what are you going to offer them in return?

HU: For now, the fact the two Koreas are meeting at all helps tamp down tensions that had been ratcheting throughout last year over Pyongyang's improving nuclear and missile capabilities. Not only did the North agree to send a delegation to the Olympics. It also agreed to further talks to focus on easing tensions. And the two sides are reopening another formerly disconnected phone hotline. Ian Bremmer...

BREMMER: Re-establishing the hotline makes the likelihood of sudden military strikes both from the blue or overreacting to any mistakes lower. That's a good thing. You just generally want antagonists talking to each other.

HU: For many in South Korea, the re-establish ties with the North represent a hopeful sign for what's still a dangerous situation. Delury...

DELURY: It reduces a certain set of risks. It doesn't solve core problems but it does reduce risks. So that's a net positive right off the bat.

HU: South Korea's hoping that the future conversations will start the path of solving those core problems. Elise Hu, NPR News, Seoul.